

On “Caste” and “Untouchability” in the Robidas Community, Lalpur Village, Bangladesh

Urmee Priya Das¹

¹ Jagannath University, Bangladesh



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Caste discrimination remains one of the most severe forms and forgotten violations of human rights of the twenty-first century. In Bangladesh, caste hierarchy and purity operate through the practice of “untouchability”. In this article, I focus on the Robidas community of Lalpur village, under the Brahmanbaria district, who are regarded as “untouchables” and given limited access to social life. They face discrimination and racial prejudice in almost all spheres of life, given their descent which is said to absolutely determine their inferiority. Now, because of their illiteracy, economic insolvency, and caste identity, the Robidas are bound to continue working in their associated “traditional occupations”. Here, I will explore the social construction of Robidas’ identity and livelihood and how they have maintained religious, social, and group boundaries. With this, I will also address other relevant issues such as the lived experience of being a Robidas and how higher caste people (the Brahmin) have kept the Robidas apart for so long in the name of religion.

INTRODUCTION

Caste has been defined as a “system of birth-ascribed stratification, sociocultural pluralism, and hierarchical interaction” (Berreman, 1967, p. 70; Subedi, 2013), and, among anthropologists, caste has largely been imagined to be a (Pan-)Indian phenomenon (e.g., Dumont & Pocock, 1957; Dumont, 1970; Leach, 2008/1967; Mayer, 1960; Marriott, 1976). The caste system as a hierarchical manifestation of religious and/or social status is considered to be a common phenomenon throughout South Asia, exclusively found among those who follow Sanātana Dharma (an endonym for Hinduism). Those at the bottom of society—i.e., the “untouchables”, the “Harijans”, or, as termed by Ambedkar (1948), the “Dalit”—are stigmatised, ritually and occupationally polluted, and despised (Subedi, 2013). Mahatma Gandhi bestowed them with the euphemistic name, *Harijan*, meaning “children of God” (Asaduzzaman, 2001, p. 3). According to Dumont (1970), it is not possible to explain the nature of the caste system without acknowledging the fundamental antagonism between (religious) purity and pollution that defines many of the principles in Hinduism.

Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, following a nine-month bloody war with Pakistan (van Schendel, 2009). Bangladesh’s liberation war was more than just a struggle for independence waged by Bangladeshi nationalists; religion was a major motivator. The Pakistani government longed to convert Bangladeshis into model Muslims by “alienating them from their Hindu roots” (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2017, p. 1). According to the 1974 census, Hindus were the dominant non-Muslim group, accounting for 13.5% of the Bangladeshi population, before being reduced to 8.54% in 2011 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022, p. 65). Today, Hindus remain the second largest religious group (~13.1 million), accounting for 7.95% of the total population (ibid.). Dalits (viz. “untouchables”), on the other hand, make up 1% of Bangladesh’s total population (Chowdhury, 2009, p. 1). Bangladeshi Hindus are traditionally divided into upper, lower, and scheduled

castes, hierarchically ordered as follows: Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaishya (traders and merchants), and the lowest caste, Shudra. The last of these include traditional serfs, craftsmen, agricultural labourers, and outcasts who perform degradable manual labour (Mohanty, 2004). However, “untouchables” or “Dalits” lie outside this hierarchy, i.e., remaining separate from the *Varna* system. In Bangladesh, “untouchables” are identified mainly with their traditional occupations “such as fishermen, sweepers, barbers, washermen, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, oil-pressers, boatmen, weavers, butchers, hunters, sawyers, gardeners, tailors, drum beaters etc” (Islam & Parvez, 2013, p. 12).

The caste hierarchy in Bangladesh operates through the practice of “untouchability” with the main ideologies of impurity and inequality being intergenerationally transferred among descendants. According to the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement and other organisations (2013, p. 2), around 5.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh faced caste-based discrimination, characterising “untouchables” as deficient and powerless. This rhetoric is often used to justify exploitation and violence against “untouchables” (or “Dalits”).

FIELDWORK

This article focuses on the Robidas community in Lalpur village, found in the eastern Bangladeshi district of Brahmanbaria (a Brahmin-dominated district). Specifically, Lalpur is one of the Union Parishad of Ashuganj Upazila under the Brahmanbaria district (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2013) and the Robidas community is located in the northern part of the Lalpur Bazar on the banks of the river Meghna. Many Robidas are located in the most inhospitable areas on the outskirts of the village. Lalpur village also upholds the Hindu caste system, recognising categories of Brahmins, Vaishyas, Shudras, with the Robidas community being identified as Dalit and often referred to as “Muchi”, “Chamar”, or “untouchables”.

During my research, I used both primary and secondary data collection. I was able to interview 60 Hindu people (aged between 25 and 80)—25 Brahmin, and 35 Robidas—in the Lalpur community between December 2019 and March 2020. I conducted all research in my mother tongue and the dominant language of my interlocutors, *Bangla* [Bengali]. These interviews consisted of both structured and unstructured questions. I find it important to note that when my interlocutors were being questioned, they first turned to one another to construct conjoined and congruent responses. However, I often persisted that individual responses were given to avoid corroboration and other influences on responses. Religion, as a subject matter, was a sensitive topic within the village (and, arguably, Bangladesh more generally). Namely, my interlocutors became visibly awkward and hesitant when discussing issues such as the Hindu caste system and other religious issues, aligning these problems with “the government” or “private organisations”. After explaining the reasons and objectives of my research, however, they felt free to communicate. As well as secondary literature (including data collection books, reports, and documents), I engaged with several qualitative studies that focused on Robidas daily life, social interactions with their own community and with Brahmins, perceived social status, and religious undertakings. These studies included 5 focus group discussions with the Robidas; 20 in-depth interviews with 10 Robidas cobblers and 10 Brahmin priests; and 40 key informant interviews with 25 Robidas and 15 Brahmins.

Whilst there are many writings on the caste system in India, there are few ethnographic engagements with the religious dogma of Hindu caste system in Bangladesh. There is even less research on the visible and invisible boundaries between the Robidas and the Brahmin community. Thus, this article aims to understand the lived experiences of “untouchability” among the Robidas community in relation to a religious orthodoxy. I turn to discuss the following areas of social life in which the Robidas are discriminated against by the upper castes: (1) marriage strategies; (2) religious worship; (3) food habits; (4) occupation; and (5) entering the Brahmin house.

MARRIAGE STRATEGIES

Brahmins are imagined as being the highest caste people by all in the village. According to Brahmins, high caste people should not marry people of lower caste; indeed, they could not begin to imagine a marriage between their son/daughter and someone from the Robidas community. Relations were to be kept endogamous (on the marriage between different *jaat* groups, see Asaduzzaman, 2001, pp. 28, 71–98). Thus, Brahmin are to only marry another Brahmin, as inferred by many in their reading of religious texts, including the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Vedas*. Outlining this explicitly, one Brahmin interlocutor stated that:

Brahmins do not marry between other castes, it is common in our Hindu religion that whichever caste he belongs to, he has to marry within that caste. This is what our religion says. (Personal communication, 2020)

The Robidas also think that they have to get married according to the rules of their religion or their caste. For the Robidas, too, it is not right to marry outside one’s caste. However, there are some differences between the Brahmins and Robidas communities in marrying within the same *gotra* [lineage]. Brahmin have 49 *gotras* in their caste, but they do not allow within-*gotra* marriage in their caste (*ibid.*, p. 76). For example, a Brahmin interlocutor opined that:

Brahmins do not marry within their *gotra* and think *gotra* means blood relatives/relations. And if there is a blood relationship between them, then, they can never get married. So, marriage in the same *gotra* among Brahmins is by no means reasonable. However, among the Brahmins, for those who belong to other *gotras* then the marriage can take place. (Personal communication, 2020)

On the other hand, in the Robidas community, one does not get married unless they belong to the same *gotra*. They can only marry into the same caste and same tribe, considering this to be a religious rule. Thus, the

Robidas community is endogamous in its relationship norms, both in caste and *gotra*. On this, one Robidas stated: “In our religion, it is said that we’ll have to get married in our *gotra*” (personal communication, 2020).

Though inter-caste marriage occurs in all areas of Bangladesh, only a few of them are socially accepted and violation of caste boundaries via marriage usually results in the village *panchayat* (*council*) arranging punishment for the accused persons (Asaduzzaman, 2001, p. 35). The same situation is found in the Lalpur village. One Robidas interlocutor elucidated that:

If someone gets married to another caste, people of society criticise and judge them, speak harshly to them, and compel them to lead a miserable life. The influential village members, as well as the chairman, try to solve this problem. Most people prefer to negotiate the matter with the village *panchayat* (with the help of members and chairman) to avoid isolation from their group. (Personal communication, 2020)

In this case, both must neither marry someone from another caste. However, for the Robidas, marrying someone from *another gotra* is a prohibited act, and for Brahmin, *within-gotra* marriage is also considered a religious rule-breaking act.

RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

Participating in social events like *puja* (a worship ritual), Dalits face various forms of discrimination and negligence by traditional Hindus. In some areas, they are not allowed inside the temple, whilst in other regions, “Dalits” may take part in social ceremonies like *puja* where they are tacitly accepted but retain their lower status. According to Naher and Hasan (2016), in some areas of Bangladesh such as Shetabganj and Dinajpur, “untouchables” are not accepted by the influential Hindu group (i.e., Brahmins) and are therefore required to arrange their own worship. This is similar in Lalpur village. The Brahmins of Lalpur village feel that the Robidas community does not conduct their *puja* properly, accusing them of only completing it partially, for example. On the other hand, as a Robidas interlocutor (personal communication, 2020) told me, “the Brahmins do not like us and that is why they do not come to our house to perform religious worship”.

According to Mayer (1960), the communal hierarchy is based on the theory that pollution is transmitted through indirect contact with less pure individuals, even through “polluted” objects via touch or even by mere presence (also see Asaduzzaman, 2001, pp. 40–41). In the case of sacrificing animals in Kali *puja*, we can see differences between the two castes. One of the Brahmin interlocutors informed me:

Anyone can give the sacrifice but we can’t give it. Brahmins never sacrifice. The Brahmins do all the worship and rules before the sacrifice but the sacrifice is done by the Chamars [Robidas] or someone else. (Personal communication, 2020)

However, a 58-year-old Robidas interlocutor claimed that:

When it comes to sacrificing something on the behalf of worship or devotion, Brahmins think that we [Robidas] sacrifice animals only to feed ourselves. Otherwise, we do not follow the rules of worship properly. But that’s not right. We sacrifice animals because we have these rules in our religion. (Personal communication, 2020)

On the other hand, when it comes to wearing *janeu* [the sacred thread], the Brahmin and Robidas communities have two perspectives. According to Kancha I. Shepherd (2019), “the spiritual symbols for the top three *varnas* such as the “*janeu* (sacred thread) can’t be worn by all Hindus”, especially untouchables. In Lalpur, Brahmins think that as a result of the so-called “virtue of one hundred births”, they are solely entitled to theological practices, such as *puja*. It is for this reason that they imagine themselves as being the only appropriate worshippers in the temple. On this point, a Robidas interlocutor stated that:

Only Brahmins can wear *janeu*. They are Brahmins by birth, they do all the

puja, and we are people of other castes; we are not Brahmins by birth so we cannot wear *janeu*. In our area, the priests perform *puja*, for this reason only Brahmins can wear *janeu*. (Personal communication, 2020)

In this case, we can see that the power one Brahmin holds in this life is believed to be destined by religious deity, for the virtue of their previous birth. According to Brahmin informants, this also serves to justify their view that the Robidas are born in a much lower caste due to their previous life's "heinous deeds". Such preconceived notions of the Robidas result in the Brahmin's discrimination toward the Robidas, looking down on them and attempting to disqualify the Robidas from engaging in religious practices. It is clear, however, that both communities understand their own and each other's practices differently, with various consequences.

FOOD HABITS

According to Rina Nayar (1976), there were 5 "Hindu Food Taboos":

1. The Cooking Taboo – which lays down rules regarding who may cook the food a man eats.
2. The Commensal Taboo – which lays down rules regarding in whose company a man may eat.
3. The Food Taboo – which lays down rules regarding from whom a man may accept different categories of food.
4. The Eating Taboo – which lays down rules regarding observance of proper rituals at a meal.
5. The Smoking Taboo – which lays down rules regarding in whose company a man may smoke. (1976, p. 57)

Nayar continues to explain that "[those] who are more particular about maintaining these taboos and thus their purity are said to rank higher than those who are less so" (ibid.). In this regard, Brahmin always consider themselves superior especially as they see the Robidas as low, abstaining from eating religious foods and instead eating everything that is forbidden, particularly those listed in Hindu religious books (e.g., dead cows and pigs). Brahmins thus render the Robidas as unclean. Whilst I discussed the topic with a Brahmin priest, he drew a vertical ladder to rank the four castes. He put his Brahmin caste at the top and the Robidas community at the lowest, "untouchable" level. On this, one Brahmin priest on separate occasions stated:

We don't eat pork but they eat both pork and dead cows, and they don't obey our Hindu religious rules and regulations properly ... They don't care what they eat, they eat cows and pigs, they eat everything alive and dead. In our religion, eating pork and cow is forbidden. They are also eating it, so it is unclean. (Personal communication, 2020)

According to Robidas interlocutors, pigs are such an essential feature of their marriage ceremonies that it is said no marriage can take place without the pig. In addition to this, pigs are generally perceived by Brahmins as disgusting and unclean. Whilst some Brahmins think that the Robidas eat dead cows, a Robidas interlocutor (aged 34) retorted:

We eat pigs because our religion has rules for eating pigs. But we do not eat dead cows. Since we work with leather, Brahmins think that we also eat cows. This is their complete misconception about us. (Personal communication, 2020)

Another Robidas interlocutor replied: "We aren't Chamar [a term used by Brahmin to describe the Robidas], we don't know why they consider us unclean Chamar. We are cleaner than they are" (personal communication, 2020).

According to Ambedkar (1948, pp. 86–89), there was a time when the Brahmins and non-Brahmins both ate "flesh" and "beef". However, Brahmins were said to abandon beef-eating, starting "cow worship" instead. For the "untouchables", on the other hand, the dead cow's skin, bones, flesh, etc. remained economic resources, and thus they continued the practice of beef-eating against the will of Brahmins (ibid.). Indeed, the strange food superstitions of the aristocracy have been the hallmark

of Hindu practices around the world for many centuries. In this way, the perceived purity ratio of food often matches the perceived status of the caste.

OCCUPATION

A caste system is also a division of society based on occupation and family lineage. Edmund Leach (2008/1967, pp. 10–12) was perhaps strongest on the point of "traditional occupation" being the defining feature of caste classification. According to Joshi (2017), the Hindu caste system (*Varna*) recognises four distinct classes and applies a strict code of conduct to each class. More than this, so-called traditional occupations are ascribed to each caste. These can also be found in documents from the Vedic period where they are elaborated within ancient legal texts such as the *Manu Smriti* (ibid.). As previously mentioned, these are the Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaishya (traders and merchants), Shudras (the lowest who cannot study the *Vedas* or even listen to sacred mantras and are to serve the other three castes), and finally the Chandalas/Dalits ("untouchables").

It can be said that certain occupations are associated with certain castes because only members of these castes were allowed to practise them and a person's caste status is ultimately determined by their birth situation (unless expelled from their caste for religious offences). Similar views of intrinsic impurity of occupation with similar enactments of—as Moffatt (2017/1979) terms it in his study of "untouchables" in Endavur, South India—the "right" and "duty" of castes are evident in Lalpur village. According to the Brahmins, only they can be associated with the priestly profession, whilst the Robidas community are to be associated with the profession of shoemaking (a long-held tradition, no less). Moreover, their association with dead animals—particularly the cow—has sanctioned their permanently polluted and polluting condition. Take the following statement by an interlocutor from the Robidas community:

We do shoe work because our ancestors did it and we respect this work. But they think sewing shoes is the smallest kind of work and that's why they neglect us. (Personal communication, 2020)

A Robidas' occupation and workplace, as well as their general lifestyle, were to be understood as—and expected to be—silent aspects of their identity. Whilst they may live close to their folk (from their own caste group), the Robidas nonetheless remains socially isolated with their physical environment (especially ghettos), being generally very dirty and muddy due to a lack of proper drainage, insufficient living space, pig lavatories, and so on. Take the following statement from a Brahmin priest:

I've seen them as unclean since I was a child; now that I'm 40 or 45, I still see them as unclean ... It can be said that uncleanliness has been practised from generation to generation. Even their parents and grandparents were raised in this manner; they picked up the habit from their surroundings or from within. Their living quarters and clothes were and still are filthy. So, I think uncleanness has come down to them physically, environmentally, and hereditarily. (Personal communication, 2020)

However, according to Naher and Hasan (2016), the main reason for constructing the "Dalit" as "untouchable" is the "unclean" and "dirty" work they do and their association to the "unclean" animals they raise. By creating and naturalising these prejudices against the Robidas, social exclusion is often "justified as 'natural' and therefore, the real causes of their vulnerability remain unexplained and unquestioned" (ibid., p. 19).

ENTERING THE BRAHMIN HOUSE

During my fieldwork, it became clear that Brahmins were indeed imagined as belonging to the upper class or upper caste whilst the Robidas community were imagined to belong to the lowest caste or "untouchable" group. Normally, members of Brahmin society would not enter the Robidas locality. Accordingly, outside the Robidas' locality and specifically because of their surroundings, the Robidas encounter a social environment in which their participation or admission is limited. In Lalpur village, the Robidas cannot participate in nor are they ever

invited to any ceremonies in Brahmin houses. In contrast, a member of the Robidas community may invite a Brahmin; although, the Brahmin is very unlikely to accept the invitation and ever enter the Robidas' house. As one Brahmin recounted: "the Robidas are very unclean; they are unclean by nature; they eat cows and pigs, so we do not like to eat at their place" (personal communication, 2020).

As Rina Nayar elucidates, the Brahmins "have the greatest number of prescriptive and proscriptive rules governing their communal behaviour": for example, since there is no higher caste than them and food from lower castes belong to a "ritually prohibited category", they may only accept "*jhutha*" [touched] food from their own caste (Nayar, 1976, p. 59; see also Nadel, 1954, p. 16, as cited in Asaduzzaman, 2001, p. 127). She goes on to explain that "[the] superior position of the Brahmins is further strengthened by the fact that any kind of food, even *jhutha* food if offered by them, will be accepted by members of all other castes" (*ibid.*, p. 60). Again, the Robidas are not welcomed into Brahmin houses. One Robidas informed me: "If I wish, I can go to the Brahmins' courtyard, but they will not allow me to enter their room or house" (personal communication, 2020). On this point, one Brahmin priest replied:

Entering the house depends on how clean you are. ... If you enter someone's house covered in dirt, it feels bad to you, and we have temples in our house, so we are very clean ... We have religious rules to stay clean, so we like to stay clean. (Personal communication, 2020)

Another Brahmin informant added:

We do not allow them [Robidas] to come into our house because they are unclean ... because they are really dirty, their work is dirty, and whatever they do is dirty, so we don't let them into our house. (Personal communication, 2020)

Brahmins do not accept food and water from the Robidas either. Thus, as discussed, members of the Brahmin caste avoid direct and even indirect contact with them because Brahmins think that the Robidas are "untouchable", thus rendering them an unclean Dalit group. One Brahmin informant said:

I have never personally eaten at their house. Because they are unclean and eat dead cows and pork, they are not similar to us. That's why I've never eaten at their house. (Personal communication, 2020)

With these particular eating habits, and cognisant of what Brahmins think of them, the Robidas often are reluctant to invite a Brahmin to dine with them or to any of their religious or family functions. Indeed, there is no Brahmin among the Robidas, nor is there any particular person or group that replicates the role of the Brahmin (e.g., priesthood) and hence identifies themselves as a group of religious specialists. The Robidas often mentioned that "they can perform their *puja*, and they do not require any Brahmin to perform their *puja*" (anonymous interlocutor, personal communication).

Here, a Brahmin priest reminded:

The Robidas do not perform any religious *puja* properly; I have doubts about whether they perform all religious worship or not ... For example, a few days ago, Lakshmi *puja* ended, but I did not see them doing Lakshmi *puja*. (Personal communication, 2020)

On the occasions of feasts, however, Nayar (1976, p. 71) explains that whilst "untouchables" may never be formally invited, they nonetheless attend—although, they are sure to avoid sitting near high castes "for fear of pollution and in accordance with the commensal rules."

When the Brahmins were asked whether they supported this caste

system or not, they answered that, as Hindus, they must support this caste system. According to them, what is given in Hindu religious texts is the greatest of all. Since the Hindu religion says that Brahmins will be at the top and the Robidas will be at the bottom, everyone should accept that. One of the Robidas informants, on the other hand, replied:

Everyone from the upper castes has kept us below. No social event or other social activity invites us that much. They discriminate against us; they neglect us because we work as shoemakers, so how can we support the caste system? (Personal communication, 2020)

"Dalits" and "untouchables", as we have seen in the case of the Robidas in Lalpur village, are constructed as "others" in general. This "otherness" acquires isolated meaning and significance in the socio-political and economic landscape of Bangladesh and has arguably led to various weaknesses, exclusions, and injustices (Islam & Parvez, 2013). In this context, it is easy to see why the Brahmin society usually maintains a rigid boundary against the Robidas, confirming their social construction of the Robidas as "untouchable" or being rooted in the lowest rank of the village. Beyond physical appearances, the Robidas community is perceived as being symbolically "filthy" due to the physical conditions in which they live, their pork and dead cow eating habits, their traditional occupation, and so on. While the higher caste (the Brahmins) believes that the caste system is destined to be such by God and ought to be respected by all, the Robidas community believes that the caste system is merely a means of being exploited.

CONCLUSION

Caste, as succinctly put by Waughray (2013), is "distinguished from other forms of social stratification based on the inherited status by its religious underpinnings in orthodox Hinduism and by the concept of 'untouchability'" (p. 1). Moreover, some are "considered intrinsically, permanently, and irredeemably polluted" (*ibid.*), too. The caste system separates the Hindus by making boundaries "touchable" and "untouchable". As with the ethnography I have provided, the Robidas community is regarded as "untouchable", and they are restricted in many facets of their social lives. Since social exclusion and one's inferiority or superiority is understood to be "naturally" inherited, so-called "untouchables" were (and still are) met with a kind of racial prejudice which, in turn and cyclically, is further judged on consequent illiteracy, economic insecurity, and caste identity. Due to their powerlessness and the prevailing caste system, these deprived communities are subjected to a particular imagination and active discrimination. Overall, I have hoped to engage and better understand the social construction of the Robidas community's identity and livelihoods whilst paying close attention to how they have maintained their religious, social, and group boundaries.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

The ethnographic fieldwork conducted in this study in Lalpur village, Bangladesh, was first presented and approved to an ethics board in the Department of Anthropology, Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Prof. Dr. Shanzida Farhana, Chairman).

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Interdisciplinary Commentary

BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

An evolutionary perspective on intracommunity religious discrimination

David Leon Greisen Miedzianogora
University of Copenhagen

Das shows that “untouchability” continues to reproduce hierarchical caste systems in parts of South Asia, such as for the Robidas community in Lalpur, Bangladesh. This phenomenon, a fundamentally hierarchical, religious form of discrimination within a community, may not be recent but may instead have deep evolutionary roots. Here, I argue that intracommunity religious discrimination likely first appeared 110–50 kya in large, hierarchical forager communities following the emergence of religious behaviour and shamanism. Such an evolutionary perspective highlights not just the universality of intracommunity religious discrimination, but also invites considerations about the ways that this behaviour emerges and functions in different contexts, leading to a more nuanced understanding of its specific instances.

Introduction

The Hindu caste system is intrinsically linked to the concept of “untouchability” whereby the lowest caste (the Dalits) is excluded from the religious community due to the inherited status of its members as “impure”, in polar opposition to the “pure” status of the highest caste (the Brahmins). Indeed, Dumont (1970) argues that this pure/impure dichotomy is integral to the caste system’s operation. As the author demonstrates, this is still the case in some parts of South Asia, such as for the Robidas community in Lalpur, Bangladesh. Importantly, Das shows that the discrimination faced by the Robidas community is justified on religious grounds, a product of Vedic scripture interpretation.

Similar forms of intracommunity religious discrimination have been observed across all the major religions of the Indian subcontinent (Jodhka & Shah, 2010) and their roots have been traced to at least as far back as the transition to agricultural societies in South Asia (Klass, 1980), although likely emerged even earlier. Here, I consider the behaviour from an evolutionary perspective by drawing on archaeological, fossil, and ethnographic records to argue that intracommunity religious discrimination originated at least 50 kya in hierarchical forager societies following the emergence of religious behaviour and shamanism. Recognising the evolutionary roots of such behaviour complements studies on its manifestation in contemporary communities by highlighting its nuanced history and allowing for a deeper recognition of how it manifests itself in specific historical and contemporary cases.

Inequality and discrimination in human evolution

A common model used to explain social organisation during human evolution is the nomadic-egalitarian model which assumes that humans evolved as members of small, nomadic foraging societies organised along egalitarian lines (e.g., Boehm, 1999). According to this model, it was with the advent of agriculture that complex societies and inequality emerged in marked contrast to the largely egalitarian lifeways that characterised hominin behaviour throughout the Pleistocene (see recently Fry et al., 2020).

However, far from all non-agricultural societies were egalitarian, small, or mobile. The Natufian complex existed prior to the agricultural

transition in the Levant and largely subsisted by foraging, yet the presence of special buildings and bodily decorations for only a fraction of known burials (8%) indicate differences in the status of individuals within the society (see Price & Bar-Yosef, 2010). Archaeologist Brian Hayden (2012) has furthermore argued that a range of material evidence from Neanderthal sites indicates an incipient social hierarchy further back in the Pleistocene. This includes the existence of prestige items; the limited amount of burials, which may suggest that only some members of groups were deemed worthy of such veneration; head deformation in some buried individuals as a further marker of elite status; the occupation of hard-to-reach sites such as Galérie Schoepflin, which could not have supported a full band as a domestic site and would therefore have had another—possibly ritual—function (for a critical engagement on this, see Spikins et al., 2017); and the low frequency of evidence for elderly care. The latter is based on the relative lack—not complete absence—of fossils from old individuals, which could be taken to suggest that those that do show up in the fossil record were cared for exceptionally even after becoming infirm, unlike the majority of Neanderthals. Indeed, the ethnographic and archaeological records are full of examples of hierarchical non-agrarian societies throughout the Holocene and into the Pleistocene, as recently demonstrated by Singh and Glowacki (2022). Thus, the nomadic-egalitarian model is inconsistent with the evidence and needs to be revised.

In an attempt to move beyond the simple nomadic-egalitarian model, Singh and Glowacki (*ibid.*) argued that inequality tends to occur when foragers inhabit resource-dense areas. Such areas often have easy access to marine resources for subsistence and produce large and (semi-) sedentary societies based on resource control and social hierarchy (Smith & Coddling, 2021). The earliest systematic exploitation of these environments happened at least 110 kya in South Africa (Marean, 2014), although marine-based subsistence began at least 164 kya and perhaps even earlier (Marean et al., 2007). To account for these patterns in human evolution, Singh and Glowacki (2022) proposed a “diverse histories model” of human socio-political evolution, which posits that egalitarianism was not the rule during the Pleistocene but one of several possible political strategies that were adopted by foraging societies to meet changing environmental circumstances.

Indeed, hierarchical societies are the norm amongst our close ape relatives (Boehm, 1999; Gruber & Clay, 2016; de Waal, 2007). The most parsimonious explanation proposed by anthropologists for this contrast in social systems between foragers and our closest living relatives is that the egalitarian behaviour amongst foragers evolved independently (Boehm, 1999). However, if the “diverse histories model” is true, hierarchical social structuring would have persisted alongside egalitarianism as a legitimate political strategy throughout human evolution.

Origins of religious behaviour

The earliest archaeological evidence of ritual behaviour might be up to 700 kya (Goren-Inbar, 1986), but there is no conclusive evidence of decidedly religious behaviour until the emergence of the Neolithic (Pettitt, 2011). However, Dunbar (2003) has argued that the fossil record can be used to determine the earliest possible emergence of religion in hominins by working from the assumption that there is a direct relation between the size of the frontal lobe in hominins and their achieved level of theory of mind (ToM: the ability to attribute different states of mind to external actors at increasing reflexivity, i.e., level 1: I believe; level 2: I believe that you think; etc.). According to Dunbar (2022), religion in its modern form requires level 5 ToM as well as linguistic capacity for expressing this level of intentionality. The first time that hominins with a frontal lobe big enough to support Dunbar’s criteria for level 5 ToM appear in the fossil record is with the emergence of anatomically modern humans ~200 kya. Hence the capacity for religion would be a phenomenon unique to our species.

This conclusion can be elaborated further by looking at the findings

from a study by Peoples and colleagues (2016) which quantified the evolutionary history of religious behaviour from the ethnographic record. Based on seven traits and phylogenetic reconstruction of character states, the study showed that animism likely emerged early in the hominin lineage, followed by the belief in an afterlife and shamanism, which were present as modern humans dispersed out of Africa 50–60 kya (Bergström et al., 2021). Shamans are important religious leaders in some modern forager societies using their exclusive, supernatural knowledge to benefit followers as well as control community members through fear (Garfield et al., 2020). Based on the similarity of the underlying mental and social capacities of contemporary and early modern humans as well as the assumption that forager societies are representative of the archaeological record, it may be inferred that shamans could have filled the same role in the Upper Palaeolithic that they do today.

These different lines of evidence provide a workable hypothesis which suggests that religious behaviour evolved 200–50 kya with shamans emerging as important new leaders in human societies. Considering that hierarchical societies were likely present at least 110 kya, it is conceivable that some Pleistocene societies may have emerged with shamans at the top as religious leaders whose position of power was sustained by the juxtaposition of a lower group kept at the bottom. This could well have been justified on religious grounds, similar to the way that the author

shows that Bangladeshi Dalits are kept subordinate by the Brahmin class.

The issue remains to conclusively identify such behaviour archaeologically. However, by combining archaeological, fossil, and ethnographic evidence, it is possible to propose a scenario by which intragroup religious discrimination could have emerged during at least the Upper Pleistocene and possibly earlier, suggesting that such behaviour has deep evolutionary roots intrinsically linked to our species. (For methodological considerations on studying religion anthropologically, see Chidichimo, 2022.)

Conclusion

As the author discusses, discrimination against Hindu Dalits is still a pertinent issue in several parts of Asia, including for the Robidas community in Lalpur, Bangladesh. This form of discrimination against community members on religious grounds has been observed across South Asia and traced to the Neolithic transition, but here I suggest that the human behaviours needed to sustain such a practice may have evolved by at least 50 kya. Consequently, intragroup religious discrimination may not have first emerged during the Neolithic, but likely has deep, evolutionary roots. This opens up considerations about the different ways that such behaviour emerged and functioned in specific cases in the recent and deep past, which may constructively contribute to a deeper understanding of its current practice in Hindu societies and beyond.

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