

Hierarchy and Autonomy

- Krishna Gandhi

Let us consider the caste system in India. Each caste has a separate identity, with its own distinct customs, occupations, festivals and even gods. Their daily experiences over long periods of time have endowed them with a corpus of knowledge, their Lok Vidya, that has helped them survive and flourish. It would not be incorrect if we term them semi-autonomous communities: not fully autonomous but interdependent on each other because of their need to cooperate in the productive activities and social life of traditional village communities. Not without some justification, the traditional village communities have been described as village republics. They were autonomous, that is, without outside intervention, through collective decision making, the resources available in the village were put to use to meet the basic needs of the members of the village community. But the same cannot be said of caste communities, the constituent parts of the village community.

We do not know when the organisation of the village community through its constituent occupational castes started in India. It must be a very ancient system of social organisation, if not as old as settled agriculture (10,000 years ago), at least from the times of Harappan civilization (5000 years ago). It would not have been rigid and hierarchical in the beginning. Pre-Aryan civilizations like the Tamil civilization dating back to 5th century BC do mention broad occupational castes like rulers, traders and agriculturists. Mention is also of specific occupational castes like goldsmith. But there is no mention of caste hierarchies and untouchability in the early Sangam literature. In fact, those engaged in agriculture were accorded respect, unlike what

happened later in post Aryan period when agriculturists were tagged as shudras occupying the lowest rung in the varna system. Some historians link, on the basis of recent linguistic and archaeological studies, the ancient Tamil civilization to Dravidian/Harappan civilization. Whatever that be, it will be safe to surmise that hierarchies among occupational castes did not arise until after Aryans came.

Hierarchy invariably has been based on racial superiority. DNA studies have proved beyond doubt that around 2000 BC there was an influx of nomadic pastoral tribes from Central Asia into Northwest India. Upto 17% of the DNA of the present-day Brahmins of north India consists of DNA elements of the people of Central Asia. A period of drought spanning over 200 years from 2000 to 1800 BC, spread over the whole of Eurasia was the principal cause of such a large-scale migration. Geological evidence has accumulated in support of such a premise.

This long period of drought brought about a decline of the Harappan civilization. Whatever remained of the urban settlements were destroyed by the Aryans when they came. But in the rural hinterlands the remnants of the Harappan civilization continued to exist. The invading Aryans may have intermingled with the native populations and a definite mixing of the DNAs took place. This mixing may not have been even. And some sections especially the priestly class (Brahmins) who retained more of the Aryan (central Asian) DNA, arrogated to themselves racial and occupational superiority. This may have started the hierarchical varna system of hierarchical order of castes based on racial purity. Over millennia, the self-appointed guardians of this varna system ascribed to mythical Manu, the Brahmins, devised a rigid hierarchy of castes with untouchability also introduced to

reinforce hierarchy. Descriptions of 19th century Kerala throw light on the levels to which such a hierarchical system of castes and subcastes can descend and degenerate. The Namboodiri Brahmins at the top of the hierarchy dominated the caste system although they constituted a tiny fraction of the population. It is said that they started arriving in Kerala during the reign of the Kadamba dynasty around 4th century AD and were granted large tracts of lands. They saw to it that their lands did not fragment under their patrilineal system by allowing only the eldest son to marry a Namboodiri woman. The younger sons had to satisfy their sexual needs by visiting women of Nair households under a system of temporary alliances (sambandham), with no responsibility towards their children born out of such relationships. Namboodiri women were denied the right to marry anyone of lower caste and this resulted in most of them forced live as spinsters. These Namboodiri landlords sublet their lands to the relatively higher up castes down the ladder (Nairs) who in turn sublet to lower status hardworking Ezhavas or made the lowest rung castes like the Pulayas and Parayas with serf like status work on them. It is said that even the Kshatriya kings were afraid of the Namboodiri Brahmins, as they had exclusive knowledge of the shastras, Ayurveda and many arts. Sanskrit language was their exclusive domain. They determined the rules governing social interactions among castes and in case of disputes among castes, their verdict was final. Rules of hierarchy was imposed on all spheres of social activity. Various degrees of untouchability (impurity by sharing meals, by touch, by distance of approach, breath of same air, even by sight) were practised. Only the Namboodiris were allowed the privilege of using umbrellas when it rained.

Sufficient to say that there was no autonomy for the lower castes. The lower in rank, the lesser the autonomy enjoyed by the caste. Not only serfdom, but slavery also was prevalent. Certain lowest ranked castes were termed slave castes and they occupied a significant part (more than 10%) of the population.

To conclude, while occupational castes may have evolved from ancient times along with settled agriculture, there was no caste hierarchy in the pre-Aryan historical period (before 10th century BC in north India and before the start of the common era in the south). Dignity of labour was practised. Autonomy or semi autonomy of the castes was prevalent. The caste panchayat used to decide on matters pertaining to the caste, while the village panchayat decided on matters related to the village as a whole.

But this nonhierarchical system of semi- autonomous castes became a rigid hierarchical varna system under Aryan influence. Racial purity of the priestly class of Aryan origin (brahmins) may have been the starting point. Without doubt, their monopoly over Sanskrit and codified knowledge gave them enormous power. They used this power to entrench themselves and to create the hierarchical varna framework wherein the various occupational castes were incorporated. They determined the rules of interaction of one caste with another and were the self-appointed final arbiters of disputes among castes. While Kerala may have been an extreme case, rigid caste hierarchy was propagated and enforced throughout India to varying degrees by the priestly brahmin class.

What lessons do we draw from this understanding of India's history, in imagining and creating a new social order that will lead to the emancipation of the human spirit from the deadweight of hierarchy?

1. Ideas of racial superiority of any caste or community must be resolutely fought against.
2. The exclusive use of a language by any class or community (Sanskrit in the past, English today) will end up being a weapon used to create hierarchies.
3. Codified knowledge and the processes of creation of the same must not remain the exclusive right or privilege of any class or community. In the past the priestly class (brahmins) monopolised this sphere of human activity. Today, the corporations, the universities, the research laboratories manned by specialists, scientists and experts are monopolising codified knowledge.

Even so, the ultimate question needs to be answered, which is, can human society function effectively without hierarchies of power? Because some diehards would argue that humans cannot progress without some class or community assuming the power to rule over others. Is it really so? Historical evidence points in the opposite direction. Societies and humans were at their creative best when hierarchies were fought, shaken, loosened, or destroyed. The European renaissance was brought about when the hold of rigid church and papacy over society was broken, and a fresh wave of enquiry and experimentation swept through Europe.

Similarly, when colonies fought foreign rule and achieved independence human creativity rose to new heights there. So, there is absolutely no substance in the argument that authority, hierarchy, centralised power are essential or even desirable for human progress. But how do we visualise a nonhierarchical society? Perhaps the villages of the Sangam era could provide us an answer.

However, one thing is certain: The road to swaraj or even autonomy is not that of hierarchy.

Response from GSRK:

I share some of my immediate reactions to Gandhi's write up on hierarchy and autonomy

First, it appears he is following the very familiar trope of varna, caste and hierarchy. That once upon a time, during pre-Aryan days, Indian society was nonhierarchical and more autonomous. And then came the Aryans, with their varna system, with Brahmins conspiring to keep the village communities under the ideology of caste hierarchy. In my view there is no logical connection between hierarchy and autonomy. Villages that had castes and with untouchability practices were also perhaps 'autonomous' if we look at how they governed themselves. Dharampal's Chengalpattu villages were relatively more autonomous but not free from hierarchy of castes and statuses. In fact, most pre-modern societies can be shown to be autonomous in comparison to modern industrial societies but they were also more hierarchical than industrial societies.

A larger point is, why is hierarchy to be condemned if it is shown that all human societies are hierarchical by 'nature' and it is the ideology of Western modernity that has given a bad name to hierarchy. Dumont's classic 'Homo Hierarchicus' has amply demonstrated what I am trying to argue.

There is nothing wrong in aspiring to create a society based on the principle of 'autonomy' as much as it is legitimate to think of equality as a great virtue. But why should autonomy be considered impossible in a hierarchical society? On the contrary, whatever little empirical evidence we have of Indian villages of pre-British times shows that caste hierarchy and village 'autonomy' had very peaceful coexistence!

Further comments from GSRK (16 Sep 2021):

While there was some useful discussion on this yesterday, it was not obviously conclusive. I present some more of my thoughts on the question of autonomy and hierarchy.

I don't really get Budhey's contention that both cannot be together. Most of the instances of autonomy in the real world appear to have no problem in keeping company with hierarchy. I had given the example of family throughout history. But a more appropriate example is our jati system itself. Each jati is not only autonomous regarding its rituals, practices etc but jealously guards its autonomy from any interference from other 'superior' jatis, and from the state. But the jati system is also considered as a paradigm example of hierarchy.

Girish was very correct in drawing attention to the segmentary state of the Chola and the Vijayanagar empires. Burton Stein's work on 'Peasant State and Society in South India' must be taken seriously to understand the relative autonomy enjoyed by peasant communities. The frequent confrontations that our farmers have with the State may be seen as some expression of this urge for autonomy even as their demands are also about prices and subsidies.

Therefore, it appears autonomy can and does exist comfortably with hierarchy in most cases.

Budhey is right about some hierarchies being only ritualistic. In fact, the entire caste system can be seen as a hierarchy of ritual statuses. But then we run into problem once the dimension of power is factored in. Dumont's point about hierarchy based on the notion of purity-impurity has been challenged precisely on the question of power. But there are many instances of ritual hierarchies. Our own constitution places the President only as a ritual head of the State, with no power to override the advice of the Cabinet. His being the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces is similarly a ritual status. The

British Monarch or the other Monarchs in several other countries is again very ritualistic power / hierarchy.

One thing I haven't been able to understand is the repeated mention of 'autonomy of autonomies' by almost everyone. What does it mean? Is it that there should be autonomy within autonomy? Or does it amount to saying that 'everything' has to be autonomous. That is, autonomy cannot be limited by time, place, etc? Obviously, everything in this universe cannot be autonomous. Life is interdependent, the predator needs the prey. One cannot conceive of the individual without first positing a society.

To talk of autonomy of the individual is to fall into the trap of the uniqueness of the individual soul, which is a Christian notion and Western idea, hardly sustainable in Indian culture. There have been arguments that the very notion of the individual is alien to Indian culture. It is said that what we have are individuals and not individuals. I am told there is no word for the individual in most Indian languages.