

HINDU RELIGIOUS VALUES AND ECONOMIC RETARDATION AMONG THE INDIAN PLANTATION WORKERS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA: A MYTH OR REALITY?

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In a recent article V. Selvaratnam (1985: 256 – 77), a sociologist, has argued that norms relating to caste and certain Hindu religious doctrines have been exploited to the capitalist interests of the European investors in the plantation industry of Peninsular Malaysia. What is of particular interest is his contention that certain Hindu doctrines such as *karma* (rewards resulting from previous births), *dharma* (performance of duty according to one's station in this life) and *samsara* (rebirth) have significantly influenced the 'thought processes' and 'action patterns' of the Indian plantation workers and have thus curtailed their upward mobility as against the urban middle class Indians. In this brief article I wish to examine the validity of this argument and hope to demonstrate that (1) the assumption that the Hindu doctrines of *karma*, *dharma* and *samsara* have been responsible for the backwardness of the Indian plantation workers is not supported by any serious field research and a proper understanding of Hinduism and its place amongst the various social groups in the Indian society and, (2) the assumption is factually misleading and the approach itself is tainted by ethnocentric and/or class bias.

Let us first recount briefly here Selvaratnam's argument.

He writes: "For the majority of South Indian workers within the plantation milieu who are Hindus, religious beliefs and practices play an extremely important function. It essentially provides a normative and value system which governs the daily life of the South Indian workers. One of the core belief system that has been imbibed into their daily life is the twin and closely interrelated and complementary Hindu doctrines of Karma and Dharma. According to the doctrine of Karma, the Hindu believes in transmigration and rebirth, i.e., an individual is neither born nor dies only once. Instead he or she experiences a chain of births and deaths. These births and deaths depend on one's Karma or the sum total of all the deeds in his or her previous births. In other words, one's birth and status in the present society is predetermined on the basis of one's totality of deeds and actions in the previous birth. *Therefore, this doctrine has fundamentally imbibed into the mental-make-up of the South Indian workers a value system of acquiescence, that verges into the phenomenon of fatalism.*" He then goes on to say that the Indian worker attributes his

misfortunes to the effect of *karma* and so believes his present position as being predetermined, i.e., because of his sins in his previous births. He then claims that "in keeping with the doctrine he emphasizes that the only way to his happiness is to find ways and means to attain salvation, i.e., *moksha*." (Emphasis added). Consequently, "the worker's world view is that he has to accept his present occupational and economic status and live with it hoping for better fortunes in the future" because in the present life he is not a 'master of his own fate'.

Finally, he concludes: "As a result they (the workers) continue to face low levels of aspirations and motivations and thus the achievement phenomenon is basically in opposition to the aspirations, motivation and achievements of urban middle class Indians. . . .".

Analysis:

To start with, following the foot-steps of Weber (also see Kapp 1963) with regard to his view of Asian/Indian religions, the writer takes a textual view and interpretation of the Hindu doctrines of *karma*, *dharma* and *samsara* with little weightage to their actual understanding, adherence and the contexts in which they are used. As several writers have recently pointed out (cf. Singer 1972: 272 – 366; Srinivas 1973: 273 – 86; Morris 1967: 588 – 607), these metaphysical ideas are found in the highly sophisticated texts of Hinduism, especially those based on Sankara's *advaita* (monist) philosophy which are totally alien and unknown to the vast majority of the plantation workers whose ancestors have come from the lower rungs of the non-literate and semi-literate peasant society. Srinivas, in fact, doubts as to what percentage of people in the lowest rungs are even aware of ideas relating to the doctrines (1973: 280). Another writer of popular Hinduism, too, expresses a similar view. He writes: "On the other hand, in some areas where Brahmanical influence is not operative and among classes which have no Brahmans to minister to them, belief in *karma* cannot be said to be operative" (O'Malley 1935: 31).

He then goes on to say that in parts of Madras "the idea that virtue will be rewarded and wickedness punished in some future state is hardly to be found as part of the religion of a large section of the population, while even the hope of heaven and fear of hell have very little vogue except among Brahmans and the higher castes". If this is the case in India, it is even more so amongst Indians in the plantation communities, especially the present generation who have grown in totally a different environment, i.e., far removed from the main-stream Indian society and the influence of orthodox Hinduism to any significant extent. Till today there has been no proper apparatus to provide formal instruction of Hinduism through which a

broad understanding of the Great Tradition Hindu ideas could have been disseminated. No doubt ideas concerning *karma*, *dharma*, *samsara*, *pavam* (sin) *punyam* (merit) are known to many but understanding and application of these ideas amongst them in specific situations varies significantly. There is very little deep-rooted convictions about them and they also do not form the subject of serious discussion in day to day life. Wiebe expresses this situation clearly as follows:

Even the best informed among the Pudthukuchi Indians know little more than that *dharma* has something to dowith doing things to help others's *karma* to the doing of good and bad things and the receiving of good and bad in turn, (1978:146).

Theirs is a religion of pragmatism (see Mandelbaum 1964), based on non-Sanskritic/Village Hinduism with an admixture of Sanskritic/higher Hinduism (See Srinivas 1952). They worship certain female village deities like *Mariamman* and *Kaliamman* and certain male guaridan deities. (See Rajoo 1975). These deities are worshipped as and when a need arises and for very mundane reasons such as curing diseases, averting a misfortune and warding off evil spirits. Therefore to claim that these deities are worshipped for attaining salvation will be grossly misleading. It is true that they also worship Sanskritic Gods and Goddesses like Ganesa, Subrahmanya, Laksmi and Sarasvati by keeping pictographs of them at homes but, again, these are worshipped for general welfare and prosperity (as their mythologically constructed functional roles would indicate) of the family and not to as "ways and means to attain salvation". There is nothing in their ritual activities which illustrate this. Kolenda, an anthropologist, in her study of the place of the theroy of *karma* and rebirth among the Sweepers caste in North India has found a similar situation. She concludes: "It should be clear, however, that the goal of this Sweeper religion is not salvation or a better next life; it is concerned with preventing or relieving misfortunes in this world (Kolenda: 1964: 79). Therefore to suggest that the Indian workers 'strive towards final liberation' in order to escape from the misery of life in the plantation is fallacious. (It must, however, be stressed, that more than half of the plantation workers belong to the non-Brahmin middle-ranking clean castes).

Returning to the understanding of *karma* or *viti* among the Indian workers and the way it may be used in different contexts. Selvaratnam cites the belief in *viti* as being used among the workers to rationalise their persistent poverty. Consequently, it lowers their aspirations, motivation and achievement in contrast with the urban middle class Indians. On the contrary,

this is not the only belief found among the workers. For instance, there is also the belief in and emphasis on *mati* (wisdom/intelligence). Thus, just as there is the proverb *vitiyai yārālum vellā muṭiyātu* (No one can overcome fate), there is also the other proverb, also popularly known, i.e., *Vitiyai matiyāl vellā muṭiyum* (You can overcome your fate by your wisdom/intelligence). Besides, there are several similar folklore and proverbial sayings which stress hardwork, initiative, etc. which have come in simple Tamil texts such as *Ātti Cūṭi*, *Ulaka Nithi*, *Koṇṇai Veṇṭaṅ*, *Tirukkuraḷ*, *Nālaṭiyār* and so forth. The *Tirukkuraḷ* even says that one becomes a Brahmin but by his actions (meaning that not by birth).

Obviously, as Srinivas has emphasized elsewhere in discussing the same topic in another context, i.e., on Weber's view of Hinduism (1973: 279), there seems an element of arbitrariness and subjectivism in the selection of ideas to explain a particular issue, i.e., the low-economic status and non-achievement among the plantation Indian workers in Peninsular Malaysia. The writer even draws support to postulate his hypothesis from others who have studied the plantation Indians (Marimuthu 1978, Ramasamy 1984). This approach, apparently, has been taken on the basis of the hypothesis (modernisation model) of Weber (1930, 1958 also see Kapp 1963) whose underlying theme has been that the cultures and values of communities such as the Malaysian Indian plantation workers need to be substituted by a new set of cultural values – an approach which has been criticized as having its inherent weakness and being ethnocentric or Eurocentric.

Portrayal of plantation communities as unchanging entities:

To lump all or the majority of the Indian plantation workers as having low motivation because of their negative religious world-view (which is said to have worked as a complementary process to the "closed" plantation system) would seem rather a subjective interpretation of a particular social situation.

On the contrary, within the plantation social milieu there have been cases where individual families which have moved up in the educational and socio-economic ladder. In the past very often such families appear to have been from those immigrants who have held small quantities of agricultural land in their native villages in South India (and thus have been their own masters to some extent), especially from certain middle-ranking castes like the Vellala, Reddi and Nayar castes. However, now with the increase in literacy, the opening up of modern communication networks (e.g. exposure through mass media), the democratisation and the widening of opportunities, there is a slow but definite trend among all categories (castes) of

plantation workers to follow suit in this direction. The success of it however depends, again, on the scale of the economic growth of the country as a whole and the opportunities extended by way of distribution.

Structural factors:

The Indian plantation workers have all along been concerned with upward mobility as much as the urban middle class Indians. But, obviously, the two have been placed under different structural conditions. Citing Goffman (1961) and Jain (1970) Selvaratnam has aptly conceptualised plantations as "total institutions" and "total societies". Low levels of education and economic status, lack of economic security, lack of other forms of skills and know-how to take up alternative jobs, ignorance of the outside world, the 'hire and fire' policy of the employers, fear of victimisation, etc. left no alternative choice but to submit to extreme authoritarianism amongst the workers. But the majority of these workers were already accustomed to such manipulation and exploitation even in South India under the rigid caste system. (For a vivid description on this, see Sadhu 1969: 39-41).

In Malaya they were continued to be despised (duped as "coolies" with a derogatory connotation) and neglected in general, both by the planters and the 'better of' "Indians". Stenson puts their plight succinctly in the following words:

In the eyes of the Malays, the British and Chinese, the Tamils were on the lowest rung of the scale, excepting only perhaps the aboriginal Sakai. Bare-footed, loin-cloth wearing, betel-chewing, smelly "Ramasamy" was despised by all, except perhaps the European planting fraternity, who regarded him with a mixture of affection and disdain (Stenson 1980: 29).

Because of their helplessness, they had to remain docile and subservient. Although their aspirations were high and they desired to educate their children so that they could escape from the life of "slavery" in the plantation for good, yet they were unable to translate these aspirations into reality as the avenues for change were almost beyond the reach of the majority. They have little benefitted from community-based institutions except perhaps by the Central Indian Association of Malaya in the pre-World War II period and the National Union of plantation Workers in the past. But the role of even these institutions have been meagre to bring about any major change. Under such conditions it is no surprise that the majority of the poor plantation workers could not adhere to such values as planning, thrift, savings and deferred gratifications.

As 'proletarians' their interpersonal relations have been anchored typically in 'amoral familism' – an extension of their pre-migration peasant way of life. Low literacy/education and economic status have been antithetical to organised activities. In the past all their activities have been closely watched and supervised by the management so that activities which may hinder capitalist interests could be systematically eliminated. Even the Asian staff (clerks, conductors and supervisors) have been more co-operative with the employers, otherwise their own interest was to be at stake. Living under such constant threats, naturally the workers had to rely on outside help for any form of organised activities. It is because of their structural conditions that they needed to be mobilised "from above". Yet in this very process, as Lloyed observes, leaders who come "from above" present themselves as "sympathetic to the demands of the poor, avowedly seek to help them and, to some extent, attempt to identify with them. Yet their activities lead to no marked structural change" (Lloyed 1979: 106) in the proletarian segments of the society.

Therefore, appropriately, the problem of the Indian plantation workers must be understood in terms of structural factors. Instead, to suggest that the Indian workers take a fatalistic view as a result of their encapsulated position would seem analytically wrong and an over-simplification of facts. *karma* may be attributed *situationally* to one's failure but the belief itself does not hinder their initiative and efforts. It is used frequently only in extremely difficult situations. Very often it would seem a way of letting out one's frustrations rather than an expression of any serious religious conviction. Even if one were to attach religious significance it is primarily an attempt to derive a certain degree of peace and solace. But that does not lead to a situation of inaction (on the basis that one's position has been predetermined). In fact, if properly understood, the theory of *karma* also means the performance of one's duty in the best possible manner. If this normative value is used by one group to exploit another group because of the powerlessness of the latter then does it mean that the latter have accepted their position because they believe that it is their *karma*?

Studies have shown that lower castes nowhere now accept that their caste status has been predetermined as dictated by their *karma*. This has also been amply demonstrated by the anti-caste, anti-Brahminical Hindu Dravidian Movement (Tiravitar Kalakam), both in South India (Tamilnadu, in particular) and among South Indians in Peninsular Malaysia, including plantations. The Dravidian Movement is indeed largely a Movement of the backward classes with its ideology based on populism.

On the other hand, the adoption of Sanskritic Hinduism (or textual Hinduism) has also been found to be associated with an improvement in

one's educational and socio-economic status. Srinivas has demonstrated this process by using the theory of Sanskritization (1956). The process denotes the adoption of Sanskritic Hindu elements including belief in *karma*, *dharma* and *samsara* (which indeed form some of the central doctrines or dogmas of Sanskritic Hinduism), selectively, by groups (lower non-Brahmin castes, Harijans ('Untouchables') and tribes) as they move up in the socio-economic ladder. Studies by Hardgrave (1969) and Epstein (1964) made in South India, too, support this finding. My own studies of (see for instance, Rajoo 1975, also Lee and Rajoo 1984) lower class Hindus in Peninsular Malaysia also show a similar process. Thus, it is clear that the Hindu dogmas discussed here need not necessarily lead to a fatalistic view of life amongst the Indian plantation workers (see also Morris op.cit).

CONCLUSION: The subject of this paper has been to examine the suggestion that beliefs in certain Hindu dogmas such as *karma*, *dharma* and transmigration of souls have reinforced the lowly position and non-achievement among Indian plantation workers in Peninsular Malaysia. It has been shown in the preceding discussion that there is less evidence to support this statement and that it is factors like lack of opportunities and deprivation rather than these dogmas which have retarded upward mobility among these Indians.

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Nilai-nilai agama Hindu dan kemuduran ekonomi di kalangan pekerja-pekerja India ladang di Semenanjung Malaysia.

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Menurut satu pendekatan sosiologi/anthropologi, kepercayaan-kepercayaan Hindu seperti *karma* (kesan-kesan perbuatan), *dharma* (keadilan) dan lahir semula serta nilai-nilai organisasi sosial yang tradisional (kasta) telah menghalang pembangunan dan kemajuan masyarakat pekerja India di ladang-ladang berbanding dengan kelas pertengahan India di bandar-bandar di Semenanjung Malaysia. Pendekatan ini mempunyai kaitan rapat dengan pendekatan Max Weber, seorang ahli sosiologi Barat yang terkemuka,

mengenai kesan-kesan agama Hindu dan sistem sosial yang tradisional terhadap pembangunan masyarakat India pada keseluruhannya.

Menurut pendekatan ini, kepercayaan-kepercayaan yang disebutkan di atas telah banyak mempengaruhi proses-proses fikiran dan pola-pola kelakuan pekerja-pekerja ladang. Menurut kepercayaan dalam *karma* seseorang di dunia ini mengalami kesusahan dan kesedihan atau kegembiraan berdasarkan kepada perbuatannya (dosa atau pahala) dalam kelahirannya dahulu. Kalaulah seseorang sentiasa mengalami kesusahan di dunia ini, ianya dianggap sebagai akibat dari dosanya. Dia tidak akan dapat kebebasan dari kesusahannya di dunia ini, tetapi hanya selepas kematiannya. Dalam konteks inilah kepercayaan mengenai lahir semula mendapat justifikasi. Kelahiran dalam sesuatu kasta bawahan juga dikaitkan dengan kepercayaan ini.

Kedudukan pekerja-pekerja India di ladang-ladang digambarkan sebagai yang tidak mempunyai pembangunan dan kemajuan. Mereka sentiasa mengalami kesusahan dan tekanan. Oleh itu, tidak ada sifat-sifat seperti cita-cita dan motivasi yang tinggi di kalangan mereka. Alam mereka adalah alam yang tertutup. Dengan keadaan se-demikian, pekerja-pekerja itu dikatakan berusaha untuk mendapat kebebasan dari dunia ini supaya mendapat kegembiraan yang tidak diperolehi di ladang-ladang atau pun di luar dari itu. Mereka juga dikatakan terpaksa membuat sedemikian kerana kesusahan mereka telah diakibatkan dari dosa mereka.

Artikel ini membicarakan bahawa pandangan tersebut di atas tidaklah begitu tepat dan satu-satu pendekatan yang membayangkan interpretasi subjektif. Terutama sekali, pekerja-pekerja India tidak dapat peluang untuk mempelajari tentang agama Hindu secara formal. Oleh itu, pengetahuan tentang kepercayaan-kepercayaan seperti *karma*, *dharma* dan lahir semula tidaklah begitu mendalam. Agama mereka merupakan lebih berorientasikan kepada Hinduisme rakyat atau 'folk' manakala kepercayaan-kepercayaan berkenaan adalah ditegaskan kuat dalam Hinduisme Orthodox atau Sanskritik dan dalam sistem falsafah Hindu. Pekerja-pekerja ladang tidak mempunyai pendedahan penuh kepada aspek-aspek Hinduisme ini. Lagipun, tuntutan bahawa masyarakat ladang merupakan statis juga tidaklah benar. Pekerja-pekerja ladang mempunyai cita-cita yang tinggi untuk memperbaiki taraf sosio-ekonomi mereka. Cita-cita ini telah menyebabkan segolongan daripada mereka berusaha sedaya upaya dan mencapai kemajuan. Oleh itu, adalah wajar kalau kita lihat kemunduran pekerja-pekerja ladang dari segi faktor-faktor 'struktural' yang menghadkan peluang-peluang.