ON ROYALTY, CASTE AND TEMPLES IN SRI LANKA AND SOUTH INDIA

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One can trace the sources of legitimacy for most political systems in the West from Roman law through the medieval period up to modern constitutions. A similar enterprise for the “Orient” still awaits the intrepid scholar. It was easy enough to dismiss this question in the nineteenth century with high disdain by claiming that the “Orient” had no history. Even such critical writers as Hegel and Marx wrote in this vein and the legacy of ignorance comes down to our day. Most writers on the subject were simply unaware of the enormous historical evidence and the large scope for analysis afforded by Asian societies. There has been an explosion in self-awareness, interest in history, and in the political structures of the past since the second world war. This has made the subject of non-western theories of the polity both available and highly significant.

One important region for which a certain amount of material has been available for a long time but which has not been seriously considered from the point of view of political legitimacy is traditional Hindu India. The available materials in Sanskrit and various Indian languages have daunted the non-philological specialist, and the successive layers of British rule in India and Muslim rule in North India have made the approach to the earlier pre-Muslim Hindu conceptions of the state, political authority, kingship, religion, caste and worship, much more obscure and controversial.

What were the political functions of caste in the Hindu state? What was the relationship between royal authority and caste obligations? What were the political functions of the enormous temples and temple rituals if these were not related to the legitimation of political authority, for instance, in South India? These questions still await detailed answers.

Louis Dumont, who is always interesting and important even when he is quite wrong, has made some provocative observations on the subject. He has written exclusively on caste and the ideology of hierarchy and pollution, without seriously confronting the problems of political organization and legitimacy. His theory of caste turns around Indo-European conceptions of royal adn priestly power (Dumont 1970). He assumes the subordination of royal power to the spiritual power of the Brahmin and derives “the caste system” from an essentially religious conception of the division of duties between different orders of mankind. This general conception of a unique, historically situated ideological paradigm of a society is what he is willing to call a caste system. It is for this reason that he argues against the facile comparison of Indian civilization with other societies on the basis of mere social organization or social stratification.

He is on strong grounds in arguing that the ideology of Indian Civilization is different and unique and has to be understood in its intimate particularity, especially in connection with the concern about purity and pollution. The institution of caste cannot be compared with the colour based stratification of United States, since Indian caste is based on a special ideology, very different from racism. The key to Dumont’s argument is to be found in his categorical distinction between the sacerdotal and secular functions, that is, in the concepts of Brahmin and Ksatriya. The caste concept is a conception of hierarchy of purity and pollution, and Brahmin represents the apex of the hierarchy in conceptual and social terms. He may be a sacrificer or counselor to
Ksatriya kings, but he, in his person, represents the scale of ultimate values, religious purity, on which the entire philosophy of Hindu society rests. It would follow from this that the king alone cannot legitimately control the caste system without the assistance of the Brahmin.

This is an attractive formulation, related to Georges Dumézil’s conceptions, and even to medieval Christian ideas of the division of authority between the Church and the kings and the laymen. But it has severe shortcomings when it is applied to caste, and is probably inaccurate for South India and Sri Lanka. When I first read Homo Hierarchicus, I could not understand why Dumont, while admitting caste for Muslims and even Christians in India, would not accept caste for Sri Lanka, where, not to belabor a point, its presence as a social institution and political force is universally accepted. Why does Dumont attempt to deny what has been obvious to everyone?

I believe Dumont has to take so obstinate a position since the acceptance of caste in Sri Lanka does serious damage to the intellectual edifice that he has built up in Homo Hierarchicus on the basis of the Brahmin/Ksatriya distinction, and the claim that only the Brahmin represents the apex of the hierarchy and that one cannot speak of a caste system without the Brahmin. If we can demonstrate that there is a caste system in Sri Lanka, that the king who controls the caste system is merged into the gods, that the palace is a temple and that this connection between royalty and divinity is not primarily Buddhist, but also obtains for the kings and temples of South India, then it is clear that Dumont’s theory will have to be seriously re-examined.

It is my contention that the institution of caste is more effectively analyzed as an aspect of the formation of the state. The caste institution must be regarded as part of the political ideology of the state in India and in Sri Lanka. The fact that there are Brahmins involved in sacerdotal functions in some states, not in others, is a good indication that the political ideology of the state does not necessitate a recognition of the superiority of Brahmins over the king, or a strict religious/secular distinction between priesthood and kingship. On the contrary, there is much evidence to show that the Hindu king, far from being a secular ruler, was in fact thought of as a god.

Dumont has modified his position regarding caste in Sri Lanka in the second edition of Homo Hierarchicus (Dumont 1970:216), but this has made the original argument regarding the necessary connection between Brahmins and caste even more tenuous. Let us recall that there are Brahmins neither in Buddhist Sinhalese caste society, nor in the Hindu Tamil caste society in Sri Lanka. Brahmins are also rare for much of Tamil South India. How are we to conceptualize a caste system without Brahmins? My argument is that these are not simply truncated pyramids which have no pure and priestly groups at the top, but that the traditional political theory in any case turned around land tenure and “feudal” service (rajakariya) and did not necessarily have Brahmins at its apex. Such service was demanded by royal authority among both Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese. The religious justification for the system came from the merging of the temple and the palace, from the king being god and god being king. In other words far from the king being a secular ruler, we have the king ritualized as a god. Indeed, it seems to me that this is the only effective explanation for the extraordinary elaboration of temples and temple land tenures for South India and Sri Lanka. The vast and overwhelming temples, their mysterious rites, their secret cores, their intricate land tenures, their jealously-held privileges were part of the mystification and ritualization of divine kingship. This appears to be true both for Buddhist and Hindu temples in South India and Sri Lanka.

Let us consider some examples. I will first provide some examples from Sri Lanka and then turn to South India. We are fortunate to have many original sources and excellent secondary studies to form a very clear picture of the traditional Sinhalese kingdom, which existed during the Portuguese, British and Dutch occupations of the
coast of Sri Lanka. The Kandyan Kingdom existed until 1815, when it was finally occupied by the British. The situation has been much less clear for South Indian Hindu kingdoms. They were caught between Muslim sultans from the North and European powers holding the coasts in the crucial sixteenth to eighteenth centuries before the advent of British rule. It is difficult to write with accuracy about Hindu conceptions of the state for North India in the past, since after 1000 A.D. and for the next four or five centuries, the region is dominated by an entirely different conception of the state and society, represented by Islam. The effects of such a long period of Islamic rule on so political a matter as the conception of caste and the organization of society can hardly be underestimated and awaits serious study.

The material from Sri Lanka can be examined with greater confidence. Caste was the basic political, economic and social structure of the kingdom. It was as if you built the kingdom with bricks and the bricks were castes. One has to recall the importance of agriculture, which was organized on a feudal service tenure arrangement. Much of the usable land in the kingdom was held in tenure by particular families, and castes. The structure of land-based caste service can be seen to this day in the organization of temple lands in the Kandyan regions (Evers 1972, Seneviratne 1978). The organization of all cultivable lands (particularly rice-producing land) on the basis of caste services meant that the organization and hierarchy of authority in the realm was firmly based on agriculture in an orderly and effective fashion.

We may note in comparative fashion here that Mamluk Egypt, the Ottoman realms, as well as Seljuk and Safavid Persia were similarly organized in feudal service tenures based on land until the nineteenth century. The differences between these states and Kandy is partly one of size and ecology, and partly one of caste ideology. Even though service tenures and taxation systems based on agriculture had similarities, the courts of the Middle Eastern states were not organized around the minutely-ordained caste duties, which are so striking a feature of the Sinhalese court. It is the precision of these duties referred to by the special term rajakariya in Sinhalese, which invites the comparison between the palace and the temple in Sri Lanka and South India and which is entirely absent in the Islamic examples. Indeed, the land registers (leham miti) were given a prominent place in the annual Perahara pageant, as if to underline the fundamental role played by the service tenure (rajakariya) system in the structure of the polity. A symbolic register is carried, even today at the very head of the pageant by a functionary entitled “the Officer of the Front” (peramuneral), riding an elephant, and attended by traditional insignia (Seneviratne 1978:108).

We have many excellent descriptions of the Sinhalese caste system and how it operated at the level of temples in the Kandyan state (Pieris, 1956). They delineate with precision the centrality of the institution of caste for the political organization of the Kandyan state. It could be argued that so far the association of land tenure and caste service merely indicates a secular structure far from the religious preoccupations of India. This is hardly the case. It is true that the Sinhalese are Buddhists and that this makes a difference, but Sinhalese castes, though Buddhist, can generally be identified in service terms one-to-one with Hindu Tamil castes, so that the basic services such as those of the drummers, washermen, potters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths and others, can not only be recognized across the two cultures, but they can actually be utilized by the Sinhalese or Tamils interchangeably in those areas where the two cultures meet. A Sinhalese can use a Tamil barber or washerman, and vice versa (McGilvray, 1974).

However, the relationship between the caste order of society (and the traditional polity) and the realm of the gods is clearly in evidence in the rituals of the devalae (that is, shrines dedicated to deities). There is some ambiguity in the relationship of
Buddhist temples (vihare) to caste, and this runs through the system so that even at its apex the national temple dedicated to the Buddha in Kandy is treated like a devale for the purposes of caste and political structure (Seneviratne, 1978:91). Thus for instance, the temple of Lankatilaka described by H. D. Evers has a most elaborate structure in terms of its lands, service tenures and caste, which range from mundane duties such as building toilets for temple officials, to fetching elephants for the processions and offering lights and chanting Buddhist liturgies (Evers, 1972:88-90). The precise description of service and caste and ritual is one of the most complete and invites comparison with the structures of the Temple of the Tooth provided by H. L. Seneviratne (1978). Evers writes: “The ritual (tevava and nanumura) was identical in the vihara, the devale and royal palace . . . it was performed in an established sequence before the Buddha, the gods and the king” (Evers, 1972:66). The officiants treat the god of the temple like a king. The ritual of the god consists of bathing, dressing, eating, and sleeping. These intimate duties have to be performed daily to keep the god “alive”. Human society is organized in the service of the gods and the gods protect and take care of order and justice in the realm of the people. This intricate and intimate description of the relationship between gods and men is expressed in the gentle formula:

May the rains fall in time, which is the cause of a bountiful crop. May the world be happy and the king be righteous. May the gods and Naga of great supernatural power of sky and earth share this merit and ever protect the world and the Teaching (Seneviratne, 1978:94).

Seneviratne devotes brilliant pages to his description of the relationship between the king and society, the gods and the people. He notes significantly that the maintenance of caste order was vital for the orderly functioning of the polity. So much so that:

. . . a king whose caste duty is to rule, to provide good government, to protect, to bring peace and prosperity . . . is indispensable . . . only a man of royal caste could perform them to perfection in a ritual sense. A non-ksatriya king was not acceptable to the Sinhalese as king. Towards the end of the Sinhalese monarchy, the Sinhalese allowed their throne to pass into the hands of the hated Tamils, and let it stay with them, rather than support the claims of Kandyan chiefs who were of goyigama (farmer caste) (Seneviratne, 1978:95-96).

Having made a case for the caste system as an effective device for the organization of the polity, let us observe that this concept was ritualized and legitimized with reference to the gods and their temples. One could take a religious attitude and say that life and death, as well as the entire paraphernalia of society and polity are nothing but maya (illusion), nothing but a passing metaphor representing an instant in the will of the gods. Or one could take a materialist outlook and claim that here is an agricultural society, structured in caste principles, being ritualized and legitimized with reference to the temple and the gods. Both conceptions are true in some ultimate sense and indeed, fit together. The association between the divine conception of the polity and the political conception of the divine is expressed with remarkable clarity in the rituals concerned with gods and royalty. The historians Nicholas and Paranavitana also echo these points:

The divinity of the king is accepted in the literary works and expounded in some of the inscriptions. The Galpola inscription of Nissankamalla echoes the Manusmrti in declaring that though kings appear in human form, they are divinities, and must, therefore, be regarded as gods (Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961:247-261).

It is clear that the major rituals and temples concern the gods being served like kings.
In Kataragama, the famous and mysterious jungle shrine in Southeast Sri Lanka, the god comes on a visit to his human consort, Valliymma, with whom he has a secret love affair. Apart from the fact that the loving god is taken in two processions every night to visit his beloved, and is then returned to his own temple for the night, the rituals consist of the basics of the worship. He is served by his priests (non-Brahmin), he is bathed, dressed, offered food offerings which are returned to the worshippers, and offered lights by dancing girls and then taken to bed and put to sleep. The mythology of the love affair, the temporary jungle shrine, the annual pilgrimages to the distant site, all indicate that the connection between the god Kataragama (Muragan or Skanda) and Valli, is of an extraordinary nature as befits a powerful god, who comes so close to humankind as to fall in love with a simple jungle girl. Other rituals described by H. D. Evers for the Lankatilaka temple repeat this basic theme of the god being served as a king by his worshippers. Indeed, the inner sanctum of a devale in Sinhalese is a (mligava) palace (Seneviratne, 1978:92).

It is simple to observe that high status people are treated with deference and servitude by the population at large. Service is a metaphor of offering civility and deference to authority, which many observers have noted about the relations between the castes in India and Sri Lanka. The treatment of the king in Kandyan society was clearly part of the same ritual idiom. The king was powerful as a god. H. L. Seneviratne quotes with precision:

The chiefs never approach the king without prostrating themselves before him; and, in addressing him Devo (god) was an expression they commonly used (Davy, 1821:158).

He takes on him all ceremonies of Honor which they shew unto their Gods; making his account that as he is now their King, so hereafter he shall become one of their Gods. And the people did call him God (Knox, 1681:69).

There is much more to be written about the nature of the polity and the symbols of legitimacy of kingship for Buddhist Sri Lanka. Seneviratne writes evocatively of the central importance of the Dalada (the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Lord Buddha), which is seen as a palpable symbol of sovereignty and legitimacy for the Sinhalese polity to this day. The association between the palace and temple was a major pillar on which the Kandyan state rested. I cannot go into the question of the two important royal monasteries Asgiriya and Malwatte, which are found near the capital and are described by Seneviratne. We may note with Biardeau (1976), however, that the formulation of the dependence of the ascetics on the king, who maintains law and order in the Hindu conception, is directly applicable to the Buddhist monks and the Kandyan king as well.

Is the case of Sri Lanka merely an aberration? Are we merely dealing with a Hinduized Buddhist kingdom in which the purity of the Indo-European sacred/secular distinction has been lost? Whatever the situation for North India before the Muslim period, evidence is accumulating to indicate that South Indian temples present a very similar picture to that of Sri Lanka. Consider the observation of Appadurai, whose work demonstrates these points we have made above with clarity:

Both high level philosophical treatments and popular behavior provide evidence that the deity (in the temple) is considered fully corporeal, sentient and intelligent ... All South Indian ethnographic evidence ... suggests that the deity is conceived to be the paradigmatic sovereign. The Tamil word koyil means both temple and royal palace ... deities ... is indistinguishable from the paraphernalia of human kings: conches, palaguins, umbrellas, elephants, fly whisks ... The language of service is the idiom of bonded servitude (atimai) and the deity is referred to explicitly in terms that indicate universal lordship and sovereignty (iraivau, svami, perumal) (Appadurai, 1981).
Appadurai is also explicit in the relationship between the King and the Temple: The kingly role of protection stands in a delicate relationship to the temple, for the king cannot rule the temple. He himself is the servant (cevarti) of the deity and . . . the human agent of the divine sovereignty enshrined in the deity (Appadurai, 1981:50).

In a charming footnote he observes that the kings of Vijayanagar handed over their kingdom to the deity Virupaksa at Hampi and subsequently ruled their kingdom on his (i.e. the deity’s behalf) and similarly for the Gajapati rulers of Orissa. Apparently, “around A.D. 1750, the Maharaja of Travancore . . . surrendered his kingdom to the deity Sri Padmarihavasami”. After Indian independence in 1947 he refused to take an oath as head of the integrated states of Travancore-Cochin because he had been ruling on behalf of, and as a servant of, the deity (Appadurai, 1981:50).

The sovereign deity is the paradigm of royal authority . . . human kings share in this paradigmatic royalty. By being the greatest servant of the sovereign deity, the human king sustains and displays his rule over men (Appadurai, 1981:51).

There appear to be differences in the details of the puja performed in South Indian temples as described by Diehl (1956), referred to by Appadurai (1981:22), but the basic pattern of “adoration” appears to be similar. The deity is honored, bathed, dressed, perfumed, given food offerings and sacrifice, entertained with music and dancing.

In the famous Sri Minakshi temple studied by Carol Breckenridge and Chris Fuller, it appears that the daily puja is similar except that every evening the deity, Shiva, after bathing and food and the offering of oil lamps and camphor lights, is then taken to bed next to his consort. In this instance, he is represented by a pair of feet, whereas his consort, Minakshi, is represented by her own figurine of about 30 cm. In the morning, the deity is awakened and taken back to his shrine.

The treatment of the deity as a king in the South Indian context needs no further emphasis. The king, too, partakes of this proximity to the gods. The intimacy of the ritual and divine aspect of the social order, and the political implications of the worship of the deities and the structure and endowment of the large temples is well-defined.

The position of caste in the service tenure aspect of the temples is not so clearly to be seen in South India as in the Kandyan Kingdom, but the endowment of temples with land, the connection between land tenure and service, at least for the smaller, more rural temples, suggests that ideas similar to Sri Lanka are at work in South India.

After this brief sojourn in the realm of temple rituals in South India and Sri Lanka, we may return again to our original context. It is difficult to accept the formulation offered by Dumont:

In order to decide whether one can speak of a caste system in a society, one must ask: are status and power completely dissociated, can one find the equivalent of the Brahmin/Ksatriya relationship? (Dumont, 1970).

On this formulation, we could not speak of a “caste system” even for much of Tamil South India nor Sri Lanka.

Biardeau, too, who writes on the Ksatriya ruler, who has to protect the world, who has to stay in the world and not move into forest hermitages, so that the ascetics may be able to practice their tapas in full serenity, recoils from the assumption that the Ksatriya kings are “secular” rulers (Biardeau, 1976:86, especially note 1).

Quite to the contrary, the kings are deified both among Tamils and among Buddhist Sinhalese. There do not appear to be basic differences in the conception of political legitimacy between South Indian kingdoms and Sri Lanka. In both cases we are dealing with political structures which are highly adapted to the social, economic,
military conditions in which these states existed. Given the nature of agrarian economy, land tenure and feudal service linked to caste provided an excellent base on which to build political authority. The temples and the gods ritualized, legitimized, and gave meaning to life lived within these remarkable boundaries. The ritual, the precision of structure, the intensity of hierarchical power was clearly displayed at the Royal Temples at the apex of the system. The rituals of the Kandyan Kingdom, so meaningfully analyzed by H. L. Seneviratne, are not only important for our understanding of the Kandyan polity, but throw light upon the Royal Temples of South India. Much more analytic and historical work needs to be done in this field, but it is at least clear that caste systems in South India and Sri Lanka are very similar. They are by no means dependent upon the presence of the Brahmin in or on the hierarchy. The existence of fully-organized caste systems without Brahmins may provide food for thought for theorists and Indianists alike. To give Louis Dumont his due, I would agree with him that the ideas of political legitimacy are still critical in the formation of the state in South India and Sri Lanka. Caste is not merely a convenient way to organize the agrarian economy. It appears to be a political and divine tool, useful to kings and gods and not a monopoly of the Brahmins. This close association between “medieval” political ideologies and caste, must sensitize us to the problems of social order and the ideological contradictions involved in the modern constitutional polities of India and Sri Lanka, where all men and women are now “born equal”.

NOTES

1. There are, however, some doubts here. There is some evidence that colour could be a part of the caste concept. There are certainly other features of a more political nature, as indicated below.
2. I would like to correct a youthful mistake I made in the assessment of this book in a review in Man in 1956. Pieris has brought together a vast amount of information on the Kandyan Kingdom according to the original sources, which provides a vivid description of the functioning of the kingdom in detail. I had hoped at the time that he might also have provided further discussions on the questions of political structure, power and legitimacy, but he evidently thought that the facts would speak for themselves. There have been no further comprehensive studies of this aspect of the Kandyan state, and Pieris’ book remains one of our major sources.
3. He was being served by a German svami, who had been a wandering ascetic in India and Sri Lanka in 1955.
4. The so-called fly whisks mentioned in this quotation are ubiquitous in rituals in South India and Sri Lanka, are probably horsetail standards, which are a symbol of sovereignty in Central Asia and are found as far west as the Ottoman Turks.

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