

## The Brahmin's debates can't bring down the Brahmins

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**Abstract:** *This article is about how caste undergoes conceptual transformation in academic and popular discourses from a structure of hierarchical stratification organised by the brahmins to a set of mere pre-modern cultural practices with no link to material realities. Brahmin supremacy sustains itself by converting the hierarchy of unequally placed groups in the caste system into a horizontal social space of equal individuals with sublated differences. The brahmin mobilises this transformation through his unaltered leadership position in society and the active collaboration of individuals from the oppressed groups.*

A couple of years ago, a poster was floating around in social media, announcing a talk by three Brahmin individuals well known in the fields of academics, media and publishing. The title of the conference says, 'The problem of caste among Brahmins' (Dialogics 4, 2020). All three panelists are Brahmins, and the program is facilitated by a Dalit.

What does it mean? It could mean a) there's caste among Brahmins, just like there's caste among Madigas or Yadavs or Julahas in India, or b) caste is there among any social group in the world—be they Arabs or Lithuanians or Icelanders or c) or caste is a superstition, a belief system which needs to be reformed..



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Do any of those three options tell us what is caste? The first option tells us the Brahmins are no different than Madigas or Yadavs or Julahas in India. All of them are prone to bad luck or disease or poverty or infertility etc. which they think is caste. But the implicit suggestion is that, unlike all the others, the Brahmins are progressive because they're discussing caste among themselves, probably deliberating on methods to eradicate it or lessen it etc.

The second option says similar things. That caste is a worldwide phenomenon, it's a global disease or bad behavior or poverty etc. There is nothing uniquely Indian about it, but the Brahmins are progressive because they're discussing caste among themselves, probably deliberating on methods to eradicate it or lessen it etc.

The third option says, caste is something like belief in purity-pollution, worship of cows and snakes etc. Again, the Brahmins are dealing with it progressively, while others are not. Specially, the OBCs because it's a Dalit who is organizing this meet of the Brahmins.

A few Brahmins discussing 'caste among brahmins', without any of the sense of reflexivity which they keep demanding of all others in academia, is quite amusing.

The three discussants were S Anand, Anupama Rao and Satish Deshpande: together, they've probably produced more papers, lectures, articles, books, more 'knowledge' than all the articulate Dalits and OBCs in India, in recent history. That's how Brahmin power works: they can define caste, describe it and also monitor and prescribe methods of resistance to it.

That's not your garden variety hegemony or dominance. It should be recognized truthfully as supremacy. And it doesn't need anyone's consent, for one, nor any blackshirts or brownshirts to coerce the population to fall in line. Because there are always collaborators jumping up in every corner of the 'public sphere'—constituted by Brahmin dominated modern institutions—extending their eager hands.

Over the last one century, in the age of newsprint and the internet at least, the Brahmins have never made any bones about their belief that they're unique, special, separate from others, superior. Although, unlike earlier in history, they didn't talk down from their *agraharams*, in *firman*s to the Bahujans, their purpose hasn't essentially changed. The tone might have become more suave now, less coarse, their purpose remains the same: teaching the Bahujans the superiority of Brahmins.

If these Brahmins are discussing caste in the year 2020, what were their parents and grandparents discussing? Unlike the OBCs, and Dalits, the Brahmins were visible in the national media even back then. The following is a tiny compilation of news articles related to Brahmins, from around the time when the Indian republic was taking birth, that throws light on how they stuck to their supremacist purpose, despite new challenges.

On March 6, 1930, the *Times of India* carried the following headline:

‘Brahmin Iron Grip. Nashik Reprisals’. The correspondent writes about the persecution of Mahars for their claim of equality and entry into Kalaram temple (*Brahmin Iron Grip*, 1930).

A curious insight about the Brahmins' relationship with Kings comes to life in the news report of a Brahmin losing his caste in Nepal. One Sri Krishna Bhatta, 48 year old Brahmin lost his caste but gained goods worth \$42, 000. “The hitherto poor Brahmin -highest Hindu caste– took over the fortune according to custom from the late king Tribhuvana of Nepal. He lost his caste because he also took over any evil spirits haunting the dead king.” The article is dated May 25, 1955 (*Brahmin Loses*, 1955).

These questions were posed in *The Brahmin Problem: How do the Brahmins constitute themselves into the ruling social class in the absence of kinship relations, common language, territory, culture and other legacies? What is the role of the Brahmin supremacist thought in enabling the Brahmin to become the ruling class?* (Ramdas, 2015)

Look at a couple of news articles about Brahmin conferences given coverage in the Times of India and paraphrased here:

In the year 1937, an article titled ‘Chitpavan Brahmin Conference - New Branches’ in which the *Times* correspondent reported on the **third** annual session of the All India Chitpavan Brahmin Vidyarthi Sahayak Mandal at Ratnagiri. The president was one Mr. N G Chafekar, retired sub-judge. The conference sanctioned new branches at Berar, Central India and Central provinces and requested the Chitpavan Sangh at Bombay city to start a branch in Bombay (*Chitpawan Brahmin*, 1937).

Another news report in the year 1955 is headlined as ‘Brahmin conference’. The Brahan Maharashtra Shukla Yajurvedia Maddadin Brahmin Sammelan met on December 29. In case this is presumed to be a small sect of Brahmins meeting, the news article reports that it was a joint meeting of the organization’s executive council and central control board. About 1000 delegates participated in it; it also had a women’s wing led by one Saraswatibai Bhade of Sholapur. The president D. D Panchawadkar in his address to the conference told them that the Maddadin Brahmins had made great strides in the last 20 years. Please note that this is about Maddadin Brahmins (*Brahmin Conference*, 1955).

Endogamy as a sacred principle for the Brahmins, being upheld by the court as the rights of the master race is captured in the news report dated April 4th 1933, TOI. The Second Presidency Magistrate delivered judgment on a prosecution case related to the complainant one Mr Subrmania Iyer who had advertised in a newspaper for a Brahmin girl for marriage. The accused, R V Seshagiri Rao. a leading advocate responded to the advertisement saying his wife’s sister’s daughter, a Brahmin girl was available. The complainant on written assurance from the accused married the girl only to discover a few months later that she was not a Brahmin and was a girl

belonging to the dancing caste. A protracted trial concluded that Mr Iyer was cheated by Rao and fined him (*Bridegroom's Surprise*, 1933).

*The Boston Globe* published a review of the book by Santha Rama Rau, by her classmate at Wellesley College. The book's title - *Home to India*. The book appears to be biographical, the author left India for Europe at the age of 16, returned to India and stayed for 2 years and details of the stay are the subject matter. "The daughter of a Brahmin family, she soon discovers the traditional limitations that the Indian society places on her life, although a bit resentful at first, she realizes the significance of the century-old pattern and help feeling pride in it. As Ms Rama Rau seeks a place in India, a country standing on the threshold of a new era, bridging the ideologies of the West and East, she recognizes her personal responsibility." The article title "Westernized Brahmin Views India" conveys a lot more about her responsibility. *The Boston Globe*, May 31, 1945 (*Westernized Brahmin*, 1945)

The responsibility of the three Brahmins discussing caste in 2020 is just the same. They have subverted the critiques against caste into a level ground and are being progressive and coolly supremacist—all at the same time.

The handful of articles cited here give evidence not just of the Brahmins' control over liberal 'democracy' and its farcical debates, but also their enormous capacities for domesticating all dissent.

This is how caste undergoes conceptual transformation in academic and popular discourses from a structure of hierarchical stratification organised by the brahmins to a set of mere pre-modern cultural practices with no link to material realities. Brahmin supremacy sustains itself by converting the hierarchy of unequally placed groups in the caste system into a horizontal social space of equal individuals with sublated differences. The brahmin mobilises this transformation through his unaltered leadership position in society and the active collaboration of individuals from the oppressed groups.

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