The Sikhs and caste: a study of the Sikh community in Leeds and Bradford


Abstract

This thesis examines the persistence of caste among the Sikh community in Leeds and, to some extent, in the neighbouring city of Bradford. The notion that the Sikhs are a casteless brotherhood is challenged in the context of a brief discussion of the Indian caste system, the function of caste in Punjabi society, and a comprehensive review of the writings by Sikh and non-Sikh authors concerning caste practices among the Sikhs. The data for this study were collected by means of participant observation during the years 1980-1984. Their analysis demonstrates that caste continues to exist among Sikh migrants despite its rejection by the Sikh gurus. The Sikh community in Leeds and Bradford is found to be comprised of several caste groups such as Jats, Ramgarhias, Bhatras, Jhrs, Julahas and others. The significance of the arrival of Sikh families and children from India and East Africa is examined in order to understand the rapid development of caste-based gurdwaras and associations in Britain. A detailed study of two Sikh castes, i.e. the Ramgarhias and the Ravidasis, highlights that members of these caste groups take great pride in their caste identity manifested in the establishment of their own biradari institutions in Britain. The practice of caste endogamy and exogamy by the Sikhs is examined by analysing what role arranged marriage plays in perpetuating caste consciousness and caste solidarity. The capacity of caste for adaptation is demonstrated through the powers of the institution of biradari to modify traditional rules of got exogamy for the smooth functioning of the institution of arranged marriage in Britain. Analysis of the life-cycle rituals provides new insights into the workings of caste, religion and the kinship system among the Sikhs. The role of the Sikh holy men is discussed to understand the quest for a living guru among the Sikhs. Comments are made on the role played by the gurdwaras in perpetuating Punjabi cultural traditions among Sikh migrants, including the teaching of Punjabi to Sikh children. A detailed examination of the existence and practices of caste institutions among the Sikhs in Leeds and Bradford leads to the conclusion that caste differences will persist in the internal organisation of the Sikhs in Britain.

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