André Béteille

Race, caste and ethnic identity [1]

The attempt to view race and caste within the same framework of understanding could take us in two different directions. In the first place, we might consider to what extent systems of stratification based on caste (as in India) and on colour (as in the south of the United States of America) can be regarded as analogous in structure; this is a problem in comparative sociology. In the second place, we might ask how far in India caste distinctions correspond to differences in physical or racial type; this problem is of more special interest to students of Indian society and history.[2]

When American social anthropologists, mainly under the influence of Lloyd Warner, began to study the Deep South of the United States in the thirties, they found it useful to speak of a caste system in representing the cleavages between Negroes and whites in rural and urban communities there.[3] Gunnar Myrdal employed similar terms and categories in his classic study of the American Negro made at about the same time.[4] The metaphor of caste has since then been widely used in describing multiracial societies in other parts of the world, notably South Africa.[5]

There are certain obvious parallels between the Indian caste system and the system of stratification based on colour, whether in the United States South or in South Africa. In studying the United States South both Warner and Myrdal were struck by the rigid distinctions maintained between Negroes and whites which seemed to them to be in marked contrast with the more

1. I am grateful to my colleagues A. Sharma and S. C. Tiwari of the Department of Anthropology and M. S. A. Rao of the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi for much help in the preparation of this article.

2. For an interesting discussion, see: Anthony de Reuck and Julie Knight (eds.), *Caste and Race. Comparative Approaches*, London, 1967.

3. Among the more notable community studies going back to this period are John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, New Haven, 1937 and Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South. A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, Chicago, 1941.

4. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy*, p. 667, 688, New York, 1944.

5. Pierre L. van den Berghe, *Race and Racism. A Comparative Perspective*, New York, 1967, speaks of whites, Africans, Asians and coloureds as constituting the four 'castes' or 'colour-castes' of South African society.

flexible pattern of relations in a class system. Their purpose in labelling as 'caste' the system of stratification based on colour was not so much to explore its similarity with the Indian system as to emphasize its difference from the class system in America and other Western societies.

It might be useful to explore a little further the similarities between the Indian caste system and what I shall call for short the colour-caste system. In both systems the component units are differentiated from each other by clearly defined boundaries. Differences between castes are reinforced by a measure of homogeneity within the caste.

Caste systems may be described as systems of cumulative inequality. Advantages of status tend to be combined with advantages of wealth and power, and those who are socially underprivileged also tend to be at the bottom of the economic and political scales. There are many exceptions to this in the colour-caste system where poor whites co-exist with well-to-do Negroes,[1] but exceptions of the same kind have existed in Indian society for a long time.[2]

In both systems the component units maintain their social identity through strict rules of endogamy. In a class system individuals tend to marry within their own class but there are no prescribed rules which require them to do so. In the United States South marriages between Negroes and whites were strictly forbidden and this is still the case in South Africa. In India the principle of endogamy was in certain areas mitigated by the practice of hypergamy (*anuloma*) by which a man from a higher caste could, under prescribed conditions, marry a girl from a lower caste. It must be emphasized that traditionally the practice of hypergamy was governed by strict rules which recognized the distinctions between castes as well as their hierarchical order; and, as Irawati. Karve has pointed out, it 'is found in certain parts of India among only certain castes and is not a general practice in any region'.[3] Those who define systems of stratification in terms of the rigidity of marriage rules are bound to be struck by the similarity between the Indian and the colour-caste systems.

Closely associated with the rules regulating marriage are certain attitudes towards women characteristic of both types of society. A very high value is placed on the purity of women belonging to the upper strata and they are protected from sexual contamination by men of the lower strata by sanctions of the most stringent kind.[4] On the other hand, there is a strong element of 'sexual exploitation' in the relations between men of the upper strata and women of the lower. Berreman notes that the 'sexual advantages' enjoyed by high caste men in an Indian village studied by him are similar even in their details to those enjoyed by white men in the town studied by Dollard in the United States South.[5]

1. Myrdal, op. cit.
2. André Béteille, *Castes: Old and New. Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification*, p. 3, Bombay, 1969.
3. Irawati Karve, *Hindu Society. An Interpretation*, p. 16, Poona, 1961.
4. For American examples, see the case studies by Dollard and by Davis, Gardner and Gardner cited above; for an Indian case study, see: E. Kathleen Gough, 'Caste in a Tanjore Village', in: E. R. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, p. 49, Cambridge, 1960.
5. Gerald D. Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, p. 243 – 5, Berkeley, 1963.

We might at this stage sum up the characteristics of castes by saying that they are hierarchically ranked groups or categories based on hereditary membership which maintain their social identity by strict rules of endogamy. The fact of hereditary membership is of great importance. It fixes the social status of the individual at birth and prevents his movement from one group or category to another. In spite of many exceptions, these factors combine to fit the social divisions in a caste society into an uncommonly rigid mould.

If I began by considering the similarities between the two types of social stratification, this was not to imply that I consider these to be in some sense more fundamental than their differences. Opinion is sharply divided on the significance to be attached to these similarities and differences,[1] and scholars like Dumont[2] and Leach[3] would consider it misleading to describe systems of stratification based on colour as caste. For them, the institution of caste in the true sense of the term is a unique feature of the pan-Indian civilization.

The differences between the two types of caste system—using the same term for convenience—are obvious enough but it has not proved easy to sum them up in a formula. Some would draw the distinction by saying that one represents a 'cultural model' and the other a 'biological model'.[4] The caste system in India is certainly a cultural phenomenon, but is it adequate to represent the colour-caste system in the United States South (or in South Africa) simply in biological terms? Both Warner[5] and Myrdal[6] had first considered and then rejected the view that the groups they were studying be described as races. A quick look at their argument will throw some light on the complex relations between race, culture and society and help us to probe a little deeper into the subject of our study.

Warner insists that in the stratification system of the Deep South the categories Negro and white are socially and not biologically defined. Persons who are socially defined as Negroes might be biologically classified as white and people who are regarded as Negroes in one society might in another society be viewed as whites.[7] Myrdal's position is similar. He points out, first, that 'the "Negro race" is defined in America by the white people' and, secondly, that 'this definition of the Negro race in the United States is at variance with that held in the rest of the American continent'.[8] What is significant is not merely the presence of physical distinctions but also the manner in which they are socially recognized which is essentially conventional. Neither Negroes nor whites in the United States South can be regarded as races in the strictly biological sense of the term.

1. See de Reuck and Knight (eds.), op. cit.
2. Louis Dumont, 'Caste, Racism and "Stratification": Reflections of a Social Anthropologist', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. 5, 1961, p. 20–43.
3. E. R. Leach, 'Introduction: What Should We Mean by Caste?', in: Leach (ed.), op. cit.
4. S. J. Tambiah presents this opposition as a 'gross simplification' in a discussion reported in de Reuck and Knight (eds.), op. cit., p. 328–9.
5. W. Lloyd Warner, 'Introduction: Deep South—A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class', in: Davis, Gardner and Gardner, op. cit., p. 3–14.
6. Myrdal, op. cit.
7. Warner, op. cit.
8. Myrdal, op. cit., p. 113.

Kingsley Davis sought to characterize the distinction which we are considering as being between 'racial' and 'non-racial' caste systems:

> A non-racial caste system, such as the Hindu, is one in which the criterion of caste status is primarily descent symbolized in purely socio-economic terms; while a racial system is one in which the criterion is primarily physiognomic, usually chromatic, with socio-economic differences implied.[1]

We have just seen why it is not wholly satisfactory to describe the caste system in the United States as racial; and it is not entirely clear that the chromatic differences there are more fundamental than the socio-economic ones as Davis would seem to suggest. Nor is it wholly satisfactory in this context to view 'race' and 'descent' in opposition for in both cases we are concerned with the cultural definition of biological processes.

It is true, none the less, that visible physical differences are much more conspicuous in the colour-caste system than in the Indian. An outsider in the United States South will not have much difficulty in deciding in the majority of cases who belongs to which caste merely from appearance. In India he will find it difficult if not impossible to do this beyond a certain point. But this in itself would not establish the absence of more fundamental genetic differences between castes in Indian society. Indeed their complete absence would be surprising in view of the fact that members of most castes are believed to have practised strict endogamy for countless generations.

Those who emphasize the differences between the Indian and the American systems would base their argument on the uniqueness of Hindu cultural values. In fact, one might distinguish between the 'structural' view of caste which draws attention to broad similarities and the 'cultural' 'view which regards the caste system in India as unique.[2] There is no doubt that in India caste is embedded in a system of religious values which has no counterpart either in the United States South or in South Africa.

Western scholars have been struck by the importance of hierarchy in the Hindu scheme of values.[3] Central to this are the notions of *dharma* and *karma*.[4] These are both complex, philosophical notions and it is difficult to put them in a nutshell. Very briefly, *dharma* implies right conduct in accordance with one's station in life, defined largely by one's caste; *karma* explains—and justifies—one's birth in a particular station in terms of one's actions in a previous life. In other words, moral rules and standards of worth would differ from one caste to another. Most Western observers have been struck by the iniquity of the system, but scholars like Leach would point out that it ensured a measure of material and psychological security to all sections of society, particularly to those at the bottom of the hierarchy.[5]

1. Kingsley Davis, 'Intermarriage in Caste Society', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 43, 1941, p. 386–7.
2. Louis Dumont, 'Caste: A Phenomenon of Social Structure or an Aspect of Indian Culture?', in: de Reuck and Knight (eds.), op. cit., p. 28–38.
3. Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus. Essai sur le Système des Castes*, Paris, 1966.
4. Karve, op. cit.
5. Leach, op. cit.

In contrast to the values of traditional India, the American creed has always placed the highest social value on the equality of men. Thus, the moral environment in which rigid social distinctions exist in America is quite different from the moral environment in India. One may say that the American system is disharmonic; inequalities exist in fact although rejected by the normative order. The traditional Indian system was, by contrast, harmonic; rigid social distinctions not only existed but were generally accepted as legitimate. If this argument is correct, then the two types of system would show very different patterns of tension and conflict.

The values of a society are not easy to describe in an objective way. They are often ambiguous and made up of conflicting elements. It is difficult to believe that hierarchical values were accepted in the same way by all strata of Indian society. Most of what we know about traditional Indian values is based on texts written by people who belonged to the top of the hierarchical system. Perhaps we will never know in quite the same detail how the order of caste was perceived by people at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Berreman, who, unlike most students of Indian society, has studied a village community by living with the lower castes, would contend that there are sharp differences of perspective between the lower and the upper strata.[1] Others also have noted the presence of tensions and conflicts between castes which would not be expected if everyone accepted without question the position assigned to him within the hierarchical order.[2] However, most of these tendencies have been recorded within the past twenty years and their emergence in contemporary India would not contradict the assertion that traditionally the Indian caste system approximated to the harmonic type.

Berreman also rejects the view that the American value system can be defined unambiguously in terms of its emphasis on equality.[3] He quotes Spiro's critique of Myrdal to support his argument:

> The assumption of egalitarian culture norms is untenable unless one adopts an idealist conception of ideal norms which are irrelevant to human behavior and aspirations. Actually discrimination against the Negro is not in violation of southern ideal norms; it is in conformity with them.[4]

There is also the question of the colour-caste system in South Africa. Can we say, perhaps, that here we have a normative order which accepts the existing structure of inequality between groups as legitimate?

1. Berreman, op. cit.
2. André Béteille, 'The Politics of "Non-antagonistic Strata"', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Series, No. III, 1969, p. 17–31. One way in which conflicts between castes were structured in the past was through the opposition between the 'right-hand' and the 'left-hand' castes prevalent in many parts of South India; see J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function, and Origins*, Bombay, 1961.
3. Gerald D. Berreman, 'Caste in Cross-cultural Perspective', in: G. DeVos and H. Wagatsuma (eds.), *Japan's Invisible Race, Caste in Culture and Personality*, p. 297, Berkeley, 1966.
4. ibid.

Differences between the colour-caste system and the Indian system are not confined to the realm of values. There are important differences in the structure and composition of the groups which constitute the two types of system. In the United States South there are only two principal castes, Negroes and whites; in South Africa there are four, Africans, whites, 'coloureds' and Asians.[1] In India the caste system comprises a large number of groups whose mutual relations are of an extremely complex nature.

In India it is not at all uncommon for a single village to have as many as twenty or thirty castes.[2] Each linguistic region in the country has between 200 and 300 castes. Many of these are divided into subcastes which might in turn be further subdivided.[3] If we leave the village and take a larger territorial unit, it becomes impossible even to determine the exact number of castes in it. The distinctions between caste, subcaste and sub-subcaste become blurred. The same caste might be called by different names and different castes by the same name.

There is no single rank order for all the castes and subcastes which applies in every region. Perhaps all that can be said very firmly for the country as a whole is that Brahmins rank at the top and Harijans at the bottom. There is a great deal of ambiguity in the middle region. The different cultivating castes make competing claims to superior status. The Brahmins (like the Harijans) are themselves divided into a number of castes and subcastes whose mutual ranks are by no means easy to determine.[4] All this is not to deny that a certain measure of consensus in regard to caste ranking does exist within the local community.[5] This consensus was probably stronger in the past than it is today.

It can be argued that structurally there is a basic difference between a dichotomous system and a system of gradation in which there are many terms. Once again, the two types of system are likely to display very different patterns of social conflict. Theories of social class and of conflict assign a crucial significance to the dichotomous division of society.[6] Where the contending parties are two in number, the conflict tends to be intense; where they are many, a shifting pattern of coalitions reduces the intensity of conflict. The same theory can be extended to caste. Where the community is divided into Negroes and whites, the conflict is likely to be sharp; where it is divided into twenty or thirty groups, no particular conflict is likely to absorb the energies of the community as a whole.

1. van den Berghe, op. cit.
2. For typical village studies, see: Adrian C. Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India. A Village and its Region*, London, 1960; and André Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Berkeley, 1965.
3. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power . . .*, op. cit.
4. ibid.
5. McKim Marriott, 'Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis', in: Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (eds.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, p. 133–71, Chicago, 1969.
6. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in an Industrial Society*, London, 1959.

In this section we shall try to see if any relationship can be established between caste distinctions and physical differences in the Indian population. It might be said at the outset that if such a relationship exists it is not likely to be either simple or direct. Physical differences are not polarized in India but are spread over a continuum. The population cannot be readily divided into races or even into clearly recognizable physical types. The caste system in its turn is a system of great complexity. It is divided and subdivided into innumerable groups and a consideration of these might provide a convenient point of departure.

The word 'caste' is used in India to refer to groups and categories of very different kinds. Two types of distinctions are particularly important. The first is between *varna* and *jati* and the second is between caste and subcaste. The difference between *varna* and *jati* can be briefly described as the difference between a model or a conceptual scheme on the one hand and a set of real social groups or categories on the other. There are only four *varnas*, which are arranged in a particular order, whereas *jatis* are many and their rank order is both more ambiguous and more flexible.[1] *Jatis* should not be viewed as having grown out of divisions and subdivisions within a set of four original *varnas*. Rather, as Irawati Karve has argued, *varna* and *jati* have coexisted as two different but related systems for at least two thousand years.[2]

The distinction between caste and subcaste is of a different kind. Both are real social divisions, but one is more inclusive than the other. If we take potters or carpenters as examples of castes, we will find that in any given region there are two or three different kinds of potters or of carpenters, differentiated according to technique or provenance or sect or some other less tangible factor. These different divisions we might refer to as subcastes. They are similar in structure to the more inclusive groupings and are generally endogamous. Scholars like Ghurye would maintain that the different types of potters are subcastes, being products of segmentation within the potter caste.[3] Irawati Karve, on the other hand, has argued that the different types of potters are often unrelated and that each should be called a caste and the potters as a whole a 'caste cluster'.[4] Her argument is important in this context because she has tried to support it with anthropometric data.[5]

Sometimes there are several levels of differentiation and not just two. Thus, the Tamil Brahmins are of three main kinds: temple priests, domestic priests for the non-Brahmins, and scholars and landowners. The last are divided into Smartha and Shri Vaishnava. Smartha Brahmins, in their turn, are further subdivided into Vadama, Brihacharanam, Astasahashram and Vattima. The Vadama, finally, are divided into Vadadesha and Chozhadesha

1. M. N. Srinivas, '*Varna* and Caste', in: M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, p. 63–9, Bombay, 1962.
2. Karve, op. cit.
3. G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, London, 1932.
4. Karve, op. cit.
5. I. Karve and K. C. Malhotra, 'A Biological Comparison of Eight Endogamous Groups of the Same Rank', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 9, 1968, p. 109–16.

Vadama.[1] This kind of differentiation makes it useful to view caste as a segmentary or structural system.[2] For even though each segment is endogamous, the social distance between segments is variable. Thus social distance between Vadama and Brihacharanam is smaller than the distance between Vadama and a Shri Vaishnava segment which in turn is smaller than that between any Brahmin segment and any non-Brahmin segment. This way of viewing the system leads us to ask if there is any relationship between social distance and racial distance.

Most anthropologists who have analysed caste from the biological point of view would concede that some physical differences do exist between castes. But they are sharply divided on the significance they attach to these differences. On the whole, earlier scholars emphasized the differences in physical type they observed between castes. Contemporary scholars are more inclined to stress the fact that most castes are more or less heterogeneous in their physical composition and that variations within the caste are sometimes greater than variations between castes.

It is not enough to know that castes differ from each other in their biological make-up. We would like to know in addition whether the extent to which they differ in this regard is related to their social distance. Castes which are socially adjacent might be quite different in their biological composition while those which are at opposite ends of the social scale might show very little difference biologically. To answer this kind of question satisfactorily we will need a great deal of systematic empirical material. The evidence that we now have is scanty and does not all point in the same direction.

The first serious effort to study physical or racial differences between castes in a systematic way was made towards the end of the last century by Sir Herbert Risley.[3] Risley not only believed that such differences existed but argued that they were systematically related to differences of social rank between castes:

> If we take a series of castes in Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, or Madras, and arrange them in the order of the average nasal index so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence.[4]

Risley was also struck by the fact that the upper castes were in general lighter skinned than the lower and drew attention to a number of local proverbs in which this distinction was given recognition.

Risley developed an elaborate theory to explain the social ranking of castes. He argued that the caste system was the outcome of the encounter between two distinct racial groups, one representing a light-skinned narrow-nosed, 'Aryan' type, and the other, a dark-skinned, broad-nosed, 'non-Aryan'

1. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power . . .*, op. cit.
2. ibid.
3. H. H. Risley, *The People of India*, Calcutta, 1908.
4. Risley, op. cit., p. 29.

type. The Aryans, according to the theory, were not only the dominant group but also adopted the practice of hypergamy. This practice led to the formation of a series of intermediate groups whose social rank varied directly with their amount of Aryan blood. Risley sought to support his arguments with anthropometric data. His conclusions were challenged by later scholars who found fault with both his data and his methods.[1]

Ghurye criticized Risley's work but did not reject his argument altogether. He emphasized the importance of regional variations and noted that a caste which ranked very high in one area might closely resemble in its physical features a caste which ranked very low in an adjacent area. He pointed out that in many parts of the country there was no clear relationship of the kind which Risley had sought to demonstrate :

> Outside Hindustan in each of the linguistic areas we find that the physical type of the population is mixed, and does not conform in its gradation to the scale of social precedence of the various castes.[2]

But Ghurye agreed that in the Hindi-speaking area itself there was a close correspondence between the 'physical hierarchy' and the 'social hierarchy'. Here the Brahmins were long headed and narrow nosed and very low castes like the Chamar and the Pasi were broad headed and broad nosed. On the basis of such evidence, Ghurye was prepared to conclude that here, at least, 'restrictions on marriage of a fundamentally endogamous nature were thus racial in origin'.[3]

The most comprehensive single investigation so far carried out is the anthropometric study of Bengal made jointly by an anthropologist, D. N. Majumdar and a statistician, C. R. Rao.[4] The data were collected from a defined cultural region, Bengal, comprising both West Bengal and East Pakistan. Sixty-seven groups were investigated, including Moslems, Christians, a few tribal groups and a large number of Hindu castes. These groups were studied with regard to sixteen basic anthropometric characters and a number of indices derived from them. Some serological data were collected in addition. The anthropometric data were analysed by means of rigorous and sophisticated statistical tests.

In spite of many qualifications, Majumdar concluded that there was some clustering of groups according to their social proximity. The tribal and semi-tribal groups tended to be clustered at one end and at the other end were the higher castes such as Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha.[5] Majumdar pointed out that these data confirmed the observations made by him in two other areas in India, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh :

1. P. C. Mahalanobis, 'A Revision of Risley's Anthropometric Data', *Samkhya*, Vol. I, 1933, p. 76–105; Ghurye, op. cit.
2. Ghurye, op. cit., p. 111.
3. Ghurye, op. cit., p. 107.
4. D. N. Majumdar and C. R. Rao, *Race Elements in Bengal. A Quantitative Study*, Calcutta, 1960.
5. Majumdar and Rao, op. cit., p. 102.

In all the three surveys, it has been found that some correlation exists between the order of social precedence in a state or region, and the ethnic constellations based on anthropometric data.[1]

It must be emphasized, however, that the relationships which emerge from the study by Majumdar and Rao are of a far more complex nature than the one which Risley believed he had established.

Studies made more recently do not all support Majumdar's conclusions. Karve and Malhotra have published the results of a detailed comparison between eight Brahmin 'subcastes' in Maharashtra, taking anthropometric, somatoscopic and serological data into account.[2] Their data show the existence of significant differences among some of the Brahmin 'subcastes'. Comparing their findings with those of other scholars, they conclude that there is no necessary relationship between social distance and physical distance.

> Thus there is no justification for assuming that the distance between the Brahmin 'castes' under investigation is less than the distance between a Brahmin 'caste' and a non-Brahmin 'caste', for some Brahmins are closer to members of other 'castes' than to each other.[3]

It would appear that the more closely we look at the system the less firm we can be about the linkage between caste and race.

The shift from morphological to genetical indicators would seem to confirm the view that the linkage between social and physical distance is tenuous and uncertain. As my last example I shall take a study by Sanghvi and Khanolkar which examines the distribution of seven genetical traits among six endogamous groups in Bombay.[4] Of the six groups, four are Brahmins; one is a high non-Brahmin caste, Chandraseniya Kayashth Prabhu (CKP), ranking next only to the Brahmins; and the other is a cultivating caste, Maratha (MK), belonging to the middle level of the hierarchy. As the authors point out, all these groups have been regarded by earlier anthropologists as being of the same physical type.

The results of the analysis show a rather complex pattern of variations. Some of the Brahmin groups are quite close to each other, and one of them is very similar in its genetical composition to the non-Brahmin Marathas. The Koknasth Brahman (KB) are, on the other hand, quite distinctive in their genetical composition as are also the Chandraseniya Kayasth Prabhu (CKP). Moreover, these two groups are markedly different from each other.

> The magnitude of differences between the groups KB and CKP for each one of the seven genetical characters is more or less similar to that between American whites and American Negroes.[5]

1. Majumdar and Rao, op. cit., p. 103.
2. Karve and Malhotra, op. cit.
3. Karve and Malhotra, op. cit., p. 115.
4. L. D. Sanghvi and V. R. Khanolkar, 'Data Relating to Seven Genetical Characters in Six Endogamous Groups in Bombay', *Annals of Eugenics*, Vol. 15, 1950–51, p. 52–76.
5. Sanghvi and Khanolkar, op. cit., p. 62.

Although the Chandraseniya Kayasth Prabhu are non-Brahmins, they rank very high and might be regarded as being socially proximate to the Koknasth Brahman.

This leads us to a consideration of the social significance of genotypical as opposed to phenotypical differences. Earlier anthropologists such as Risley sought to establish a relationship between the social rank of a caste and the physical appearance of its members. They were encouraged in their pursuit by beliefs widely held in Indian society about the existence of such a relationship.[1] Upper castes are universally believed to be light skinned and narrow nosed and lower castes to be dark skinned and broad nosed. It would now appear that two socially adjacent castes whose members are very similar in their physical appearance might nevertheless be quite different in their genetical composition.

Genetical differences are likely to acquire social significance only if their existence is widely known or if they are reflected in clear differences in physical type. As I have indicated, certain broad differences in appearance exist between castes at opposite ends of the hierarchy in many parts of the country and equally significant are the beliefs and stereotypes regarding these differences which persist in spite of much evidence to the contrary. Beliefs which are technically wrong or inconsistent sometimes assume crucial significance in social life. As Passin has argued:

> The relation of caste to race is not simply a question of whether the groups are in fact racially different, but rather that there seems to be some disposition to attribute racial difference to even the most marginal cues in caste and caste-like situations.[2]

This is particularly true in the Indian context where in some languages the same word is used to denote both caste and race.[3]

What is important in social life is the sense of solidarity which people feel when they belong to the same community and the feeling of distance which separates members who belong to different communities. The sense of community is often based on the feeling that its members have a common origin. This feeling may be vague or it may be consciously formulated in an ideology. It may be strengthened if the community is marked out by distinctive physical features, but this is not a necessary condition for its existence. Sometimes a strong sense of community can exist even in the absence of visible physical indicators. This leads us to a consideration of ethnic groups and identities.

The systematic use of the concept of ethnicity is of relatively recent origin in sociology and social anthropology although the presence of ethnic groups in the United States has been widely discussed for many years.

1. André Béteille, 'Race and Descent as Social Categories in India', *Daedalus*, Vol. 96, 1967, p. 444–63.
2. In a discussion reported in de Reuck and Knight (eds.), op. cit., p. 110–11.
3. Béteille, 'Race and Descent as Social Categories in India', op. cit.

An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture.[1]

As this description suggests, there is no single criterion by which ethnic groups can be defined.

In the United States the term 'ethnic group' came into use to describe immigrants from the differents parts of the world. Examples of these would be the Irish, the Italians and the Poles who settled in the country in successive waves of migration. These groups were not all differentiated by visible physical indicators. Initially there were major differences of language, culture and religion among the groups. As some of these differences began to diminish among second- and third-generation immigrants, it was felt that a culturally homogeneous population would emerge out of the melting pot of American society. But in spite of a high degree of mobility, both horizontal and vertical, and a certain amount of intermarriage between groups, ethnic identities have proved to be remarkably persistent in American society.[2]

The presence of ethnic groups is of course not a unique feature of American society. They exist in all societies where cultural differences are given a particular meaning and are organized in a particular way. Ethnic differentiation has been a conspieuous feature of the so-called plural societies of South and South-East Asia.[3] Sometimes this differentiation is associated with the presence of large groups, such as the Chinese and the Indians in Malaysia, which differ markedly from each other in language, religion and provenance. The coexistence of such disparate groups is likely to generate tensions and conflicts which might, in the extreme case, threaten the integrity of the political framework itself.

Ethnic identities might persist even when ethnic groups are not visibly different or politically organized. In a recent collection of papers Barth and his colleagues have argued persuasively that ethnic identities do not depend for their survival on any particular aggregate of cultural traits.

It is important to recognize that although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences.[4]

Eidheim gives a graphic account of the manner in which an ethnic boundary is maintained between Lapps and Norwegians even in the absence of any readily visible physical or cultural differences between them.[5]

1. H. S. Morris, 'Ethnic Groups', in: David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, 1968, p. 167.
2. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963.
3. J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice. A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, New York, 1956.
4. Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, p. 14, London, 1969.
5. Harald Eidheim, 'When Ethnic Identity is a Social Stigma', in: Barth (ed.), op. cit., p. 39–57.

Ethnic groups are generally endogamous and in that sense they tend to be biologically self-perpetuating.[1] Even in the complete absence of diacritical distinctions endogamy could of course serve to keep ethnic boundaries intact. When all marriages do not take place within the group, ethnic boundaries might still be maintained if intermarriage is governed by the rule of hypergamy; the practice of hypergamy acts as an important boundary maintaining mechanism among certain sections of the hill Rajputs in India.[2] Far from dissolving ethnic boundaries altogether, intermarriage might under certain conditions serve to bring these boundaries into sharper relief.

Thus, the concept of ethnic group is somewhat broader in its scope than that of race. Ethnic differences might be based at least partly on race as in the case of Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia or of Negroes, Indians and whites in the Caribbean. They might also exist in a society which is racially more or less homogeneous as in the case of the Pathans in West Pakistan and Afghanistan or of some of the multi-tribal systems in East Africa.

The caste system, in its turn, may be viewed as a particular case of ethnic differentiation. Whether or not 'racial' differences exist between castes, they are often differentiated from each other culturally, in their dress, diet and rituals. Where even these distinctions are feeble or absent, the boundaries between castes are maintained by the rules of endogamy and hypergamy. However, even if we regard caste as a system of ethnic groups, it is a system in which the different groups are all integrated within a hierarchical order. Ethnic groups are not necessarily arranged in a hierarchy and they are not always integrated within a unitary system.

We notice a close similarity between caste in India and ethnic groups in the United States when we examine the part they play in the political process.[3] In the United States ethnic solidarities are widely used for mobilizing political support and ethnic rivalries have to be taken into account in formulating electoral strategies.[4] In India caste enters into the political process in a number of ways.[5] Caste associations have not only acted as pressure groups but, in at least one area, have transformed themselves into political parties.[6] Rivalries between parties are sometimes heightened when they base their support on mutually antagonistic castes.[7] However, in both India and the United States the relationship between caste or ethnic identity and the political process is complex and ambiguous. The political process brings out not only the cleavages between such groups but also the possibilities of coalitions among them.

1. Barth, op. cit., p. 10.
2. I am indebted for this information to Jonathan P. Parry who has made an intensive study of the hill Rajputs in Kangra district.
3. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition. Political Development in India*, Chicago, 1967; André Béteille, 'Caste and Politics in Tamilnad' in: Béteille, *Castes: Old and New . . .*, op. cit.
4. Glazer and Moynihan, op. cit.
5. Rajni Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1970.
6. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'The Political Role of India's Caste Associations', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. XXXIII, 1960, p. 5–22.
7. Selig S. Harrison, 'Caste and the Andhra Communists', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. L, 1956.

The Harijans provide a particular example of solidarity based on caste or ethnic identity. In the past the barrier of pollution kept them segregated from many areas of social life. These barriers have now been legally abolished but the Harijans retain much of their traditional stigma and continue to be socially and economically underprivileged. But they are now provided with opportunities to organize themselves politically.[1] This has enabled them to gain some advantages but it has also brought them into confrontation with the upper castes whose members are not always in a mood to accept them as equals. The situation of the Harijans in contemporary India—like that of the Negroes in the United States—reveals a paradox. The lessening of cultural distance has in both cases been accompanied not by a decrease but by an increase in tension and conflict.

India has not only a Harijan problem, there is also an Adivasi or tribal problem. Harijans and Adivasis are officially grouped together as the Backward Classes and their separate identity is given constitutional recognition.[2] The tribal people numbered about 30 million at the 1961 census and they constituted over 6 per cent of the Indian population. They are divided into a large number of separate tribes, differing in race, language and culture. They are concentrated in particular areas in the country which tend to be geographically isolated but there is no policy of keeping them in reservations.

The tribal population of India does not belong to any single racial or physical type. The differences between the 'Veddoid' type common among certain tribes in central and south India and the 'Palaeo-Mongoloid' type found in the north-east hill areas might be greater than the differences between the tribal people and their non-tribal neighbours in any particular area. But Fürer-Haimendorf has rightly pointed out that differences of the latter kind also exist[3] and Majumdar's anthropometric data seem to point in the same direction.[4]

After drawing attention to differences in physical type between the tribal and the non-tribal population, Fürer-Haimendorf says:

> It is all the more remarkable that despite racial differences no less fundamental than those found in countries with acute race problems, there have never been any cases of racial tension in India.[5]

One important factor is the very great variety of physical types which has prevented a polarization of the population along racial lines. This does not mean that differences do not exist or are not socially recognized. In fact, tribal solidarity is perhaps being given a new lease of life by democratic politics.

1. Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability*, New York, 1969.
2. André Béteille, 'The Future of the Backward Classes. The Competing Demands of Status and Power', *Perspectives*. Supplement to the *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. XI, 1965, p. 1–39.
3. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, 'The Position of the Tribal Population in Modern India', in: Philip Mason (ed.), *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity*, p. 182–222, London, 1967.
4. Majumdar and Rao, op. cit.
5. Fürer-Haimendorf, op. cit., p. 188.

But the conflict is transferred on to a different plane where the cleavage between tribals and non-tribals becomes one among a number of politically relevant ethnic distinctions.

We have so far considered ethnic differentiation among groups which are hierarchically arranged, for, although the Adivasis are in the strict sense outside the caste system, they are almost everywhere ranked below the caste Hindus. We may now turn to ethnic differentiation between groups which are not hierarchically arranged, such as those based on religion or on language. In some sense these provide the most fundamental cleavages in contemporary Indian society. When one talks about 'national integration' in India one has primarily in mind the problems of holding together the different religious and linguistic communities. While one can distinguish analytically between ethnic identities of different kinds—hierarchical and non-hierarchical—in reality these often tend to become confused.

India has been described as a multi-religious nation. The Hindus are in an overwhelming majority, accounting for around 80 per cent of the population; the Moslems constitute a significant minority with a little more than 10 per cent of the population. There are other religious groups which are of significance in particular regions, such as the Sikhs in the Punjab and the Christians in Kerala. But for the country as a whole the cleavage which has greatest significance is the one between Hindus and Moslems. If there is a 'communal' problem in the country its prototype is the one which grows out of the relations between these two communities.[1]

Hindus and Moslems in India do not belong to separate races. In fact, they are both racially very mixed. This is only to be expected since the majority of Indian Moslems are the descendants of converts from Hinduism. Spear argues that there were two main types of conversion: clan or group conversion as a consequence of which castes such as Rajputs, Jats and Gujjars in north India have Hindu as well as Moslem sections; and mass conversions through which low caste Hindus, particularly in Bengal, embraced Islam.[2] The last point finds confirmation in Majumdar's anthropometric data referred to above; the low caste Namasudras are closer in their physical appearance to the Moslems than they are to the upper caste Hindus.[3]

Hindus and Moslems have coexisted as communities in different parts of India for a millennium. Religious differences have been associated with a host of other differences in ways of life. These differences have not always been the same, but the fact of difference has remained, heightened at times and subdued at others. Hindus and Moslems might not differ in physical type but religious ideology has provided each community with a basis for consciously organizing its identity in opposition to the other. Over the centuries the two communities have borrowed much from each other and during the last few decades they

1. See, for instance, the issue of *Seminar*, No. 24, August 1961, devoted to communalism.
2. Percival Spear, 'The Position of the Muslims. Before and After Partition', in: Mason (ed.), op. cit., p. 33–4.
3. Majumdar and Rao, op. cit., p. 102.

have been exposed to similar forces of change. But this has not erased the boundaries between them. In fact, the pattern of Hindu-Moslem relations in recent Indian history would seem to show that groups might become more conscious of their opposed identities precisely at a time when external differences between them are being reduced.

The population of India is also divided on the basis of language. The divisions of language and religion generally cut across and do not reinforce each other as they do to a large extent in countries like Malaysia and Ceylon. This, in addition to the fact that both linguistic and religious groups are many and not two each, tends to make the conflict between communities diffused rather than polarized.

Over a dozen major languages are spoken in India but there is none which is the mother tongue of a majority of the people. The speakers of the different languages are not randomly distributed throughout the country. Each language has its 'homeland' so that linguistic differences largely coincide with regional differences. The different states which constitute the Union of India are in effect linguistic units. This means that the ethnic identity provided by language has both a cultural basis and a political organization.

Differences between linguistic groups can give rise to two kinds of tensions. At one level are the disputes between the different linguistic states over particular issues, for instance the question of boundaries or the distribution of river water.[1] At another level one encounters the problem of linguistic minorities in practically every state; these problems are likely to be particularly acute in large metropolitan cities like Bombay or Calcutta which attract people from all over the country. Ethnic boundaries based on language are in a way crucial; they restrict communication between people in the literal sense of the term.

Differences of language have in reality very little to do with differences of race although in one important case linguistic differences have been represented in a racial idiom. The different languages of India belong to two major families, the Indo-Aryan languages spoken in the north by about three-quarters of the population and the Dravidian languages spoken in the four southern states by about a quarter of the population. People in the southern states have, particularly since independence, sometimes expressed a fear of domination by the north[2] and a separatist political movement developed there although its influence has been confined almost wholly to one state, Tamilnad.[3] One of the arguments advanced by leaders of this movement was that southern Indians, being Dravidians, had a separate identity in race, language and culture and should free themselves from the domination of the Aryan northern Indians.[4] Tamil separatism has now become subdued and one no longer hears the racial argument very frequently but language barriers are in other respects no less significant than they were before.

1. Selig S. Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decade*, Bombay, 1960.
2. See, for instance, the issue of *Seminar*, No. 23, July 1961, devoted to north and south.
3. Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, 1965.
4. Béteille, 'Race and Descent as Social Categories in India', op. cit.

We have moved a long distance from a consideration of racial differences to differences of quite another kind which are at times expressed in a racial idiom. Ethnic identity must not be thought of as something which defines the character of one group in opposition to another for all time. In India the same individual has a number of different identities according to caste, religion and language and any one of these might become more important than the others, depending upon context and situation. It is not enough to know that boundaries exist between groups, one must also examine the situations under which some boundaries are ignored and others become significant. Thus, in one context Tamil-speaking Hindus and Moslems might unite to defend themselves against 'Aryan' domination; in another context Hindus from both north and south India might regard Moslems as aliens among them.

Although ethnic differences have a bearing on social conflict, a knowledge of the former is not enough to predict the pattern of the latter. In order to understand the scale and intensity of conflicts between ethnic groups we have to take a number of factors into account. These are the objective differences between them, the social awareness of these differences, and the political organization of this awareness.

As we have seen, the objective differences themselves are of many kinds. They may be roughly grouped together as physical or cultural. Cultural differences in turn can be based on religion, language or region. There is no direct relationship between the degree of these differences and the extent to which people are aware of them. Differences of colour might exist to the same degree in two societies and yet people might be acutely aware of them in one society and not in the other. Cultural differences are more difficult to measure. And, in any case, there are no satisfactory criteria by which one can compare the awareness of, say, religious differences with that of linguistic differences.

People might be highly conscious of their differences, whether physical or cultural, without their consciousness acquiring a political form. In traditional Indian society there were not only differences between castes; but people were universally aware of these differences. Yet castes were not always organized into mutually antagonistic groups. They began to organize themselves into associations at a time when people were beginning to feel that caste consciousness would fade away. The course of political conflict remains unpredictable. There is no general theory which can enable us to delineate in exact terms the relationship between cultural differences and their organization into mutually antagonistic groups.

André Béteille is reader in sociology at the University of Delhi and author of Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village *(1965) and of* Castes: Old and New. Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification *(1970). He has previously contributed an article on social stratification in rural India to this* Journal, *Vol. XXI, No. 2.*