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, Jhirs, 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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Members of a Sikh community in Bradford have applied for a judicial review to challenge plans for a halal meat plant next door to their local temple. Bradford council planners approved a new meat processing plant at food firm Fears Meats on Leeds Road in August. But the decision angered worshippers at the Guru Gobind Singh Gurdwara as many of them are strict vegetarians. At Bradford council's area planning panel meeting on 13 August, councillors heard that more than 200 members of the local Sikh community had lodged formal objections to the plans. They said the proximity of the gurdwara's kitchen to the proposed meat plant "undermined the sanctity of worship": Jatinder Singh, a regular at the temple, said it was "deeply offensive" and people felt hurt. The Sikh Council UK (SCUK) declared that 'caste allegiances were on their way out in the UK' and demanded a Sunset Clause which essentially renders the caste legislation as temporary for a period of ten years, since the credence of the SCUK is that caste will have absolutely no significance for subsequent generations of British Sikhs. Caste endogamy remains the norm. The study shows that casteism is powerfully embedded in the collective consciousness. Through this study, I demonstrate that the Sikh communities are grouped and classified in complex ways, and their history cannot be fully understood without the reference to the continued operation of the caste system. Note that Sahajdhari Sikhs are the Sikhs who have not formally received Sikh baptism but who have complete faith in Sikhism. In the earlier Hindu society, the titles of Singh and Kaur or Kanwar were only meant to be used by Rajputs or Kshatriyas. During the earlier stages of Sikh militarization, the Sixth Guru and his successors tried their best to inspire Hindu Rajputs into performing their traditional function of defending the weak against oppression. All of the Sikh Gurus were born in Khati caste. Guru Nanak's father Mahta Kalu was also a shopkeeper and he tried his best to make his son follow his caste profession of shopkeeping. But Guru Nanak rejected his tutoring and became a man of spirit.