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ABSTRACT

Anyone familiar with current internal political problems in India cannot remain sanguine about the passivity of her oppressed ethnic minorities, be they defined by caste, religion, or heritage; nor can anyone be, who looks at the long history of religious conversion and reform in India, for every success along these lines in the past 2500 years has depended largely upon the promise of ethnic emancipation. A survey of case histories of low caste households and villages lead to the following conclusions. Stigmatized ethnic identity is experienced as oppression. It is a human day-by-day experience of degradation and exploitation, not simply an abstract concept. People resent that identity and that experience regardless of the rationalizations offered for it. People continually attempt to resist, escape, alleviate, or change that identity and that experience, even in the most unlikely circumstances--including the remote villages and urban slums of India. No account of ethnic stratification or stigmatized identity makes sense if it does not to these facts. How people respond to stigmatized ethnic identity depends upon their definitions of themselves, others, and the situations in which they interact. Not consensus on the legitmacy of systems of oppression but agreement on who has the power, and when and under what circumstances and with what effect it is likely to be used, enables them to continue. [This document has been reproduced from the best copy available.] (Author/JM)

Self, Situation and Escape from Stigmatized Ethnic Identity*

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This paper comprises essentially an extended footnote to one given two years ago at these meetings entitled "Social Categories and Social Interaction in Urban India" (Berreman, 1972a). It is inspired by two empirical generalizations based on my fieldwork in rural and urban India, and my reading in the literature on other systems of birth-ascribed stratification. I will take the time-saving liberty of quoting from myself: First: "A comparison of the realities of caste attitudes and interaction in India and the United States [and other ethnically stratified societies] suggests that no group of people is content to be low in a caste hierarchy--to live a life of inherited deprivation and subjection--regardless of the rationalizations offered them by their superiors or constructed by themselves" (Berreman, 1960:127); and "That people remain in an inferior position, . . . does not mean that they do so willingly, or that they believe it is justified, or that they would not do anything in their power to change it, given the opportunity" (ibid). That is, they don't like it.

Second: "Caste systems are living environments to those who comprise them. Yet there is a tendency among those who study and analyze them to idealize or intellectualize caste, and in the process to squeeze the life out of it. Caste is people, and especially people interacting in characteristic ways and thinking in characteristic ways. Thus, in addition to being a structure, a caste system is a pattern of human relationships and it is a state of mind" (Berreman, 1967a:58). That is, it's for real.

Also, I am giving this paper to combat the still-prevalent notion that systems of birth-ascribed stratification are (or may be), as Cox has insisted for India, "nonconflictive," "nonpathological," and "static," without "aspiration and progressiveness" (Cox: 1945:360). There is considerable debate--and even more undebated assumption--about the extent to which

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stigmatized groups within systems of birth-ascribed social ranking, accept the definition of themselves advocated by others. I intend to show by reference to mundane examples from India, how people in such groups consistently attempt to escape the implications of their inborn stigma--the most persuasive evidence possible that they do not concur in it.

When I speak of "ethnic identity," I follow Shibutani and Kwan (1965:572) who say: "An ethnic group consists of people who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of common ancestry, real or fictitious, and are so regarded by others." The identity may be either claimed, accorded, or both.

When I speak of "stigmatized Ethnic identity," I mean ethnic identity which "deeply discredits" the individual in society (Goffman, 1963; cf., Eidheim, 1969)--which ascribes to him as a result of his birth, intrinsic unworthiness relative to others in his society. But it must not be overlooked that such stigma is not simply or even primarily a matter of attitudes and beliefs--it is also behavior and experience. Stigmatized ethnic identity implies deprivation, denigration, subjugation and exploitation--in short, oppression. Any system of birth-ascribed stratification--of ethnic stratification--includes by definition one or more stigmatized groups. Such status is universally resented and struggled against, not simply because it is inherently unjust (a value some would regard as ethnocentric), but because people in such statuses seem always to share at least two things: (1) the experience of seeing and comprehending the ways of life and the privileges of their social superiors; (2) the empathetic understanding that, as people, they are themselves fundamentally similar to and substitutable for their social superiors--the ability to see themselves in the place of their social superiors, enjoying the advantages they enjoy if only circumstances were somewhat different. As a consequence, stigmatized ethnic identity is experienced as oppression (or "relative deprivation" if one prefers jargon to reality), and its consequences are resisted. This accounts for the universality of mobility and emancipation efforts in such groups.

The literature increasingly, but not consistently, looks beyond the myths, rationalizations and shibboliths purveyed by elites to record that experience and that resistance. The instance of the black experience in America is perhaps best documented. There are accounts of spectacular challenges to slavery as exemplified by the rebellions led by Gabriel (Mullin, 1970), Nat Turner (Aptheker, 1966; Styron, 1967; Clarke, 1968), and Denmark Vesey (Starobin, 1971). There are the equally telling examples of routine but determined and effective resistance to that same oppressive institution recorded by Raymond and Alice Bauer in their article on "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery" (1942), by Kenneth Stampp (1956) and others (cf. Scott, 1962). Post-Slavery emancipation and separation

movements, including those of the present, are increasingly widely known, written about, and to some extent even understood. More recently, analagous movements among Chicanos, Native Americans and Asians have come to public and scholarly attention in this country, as has that of women (a category whose comparability to ethnic groups in stratification I have discussed elsewhere but will not attempt to discuss here, cf. Berreman, 1972b). Less widely known in America, but surprisingly well-documented, is the tumultuous, courageous but discouraging history of Burakumin emancipation in Japan, comprising a remarkable parallel to black emancipation in America (cf. Totten and Nagatsuma, 1966; Nagatsuma, 1966), and the recent history of the Hutu rebellion against the dominant Tutsi, in Rwanda and Burundi, successful in the former and effectively suppressed in the latter (cf. Maquet, 1961; Berreman, 1972b, 1972c).

This paper is comparative in intent, but the examples will be drawn from India. India is often erroneously thought to contradict generalizations about the ubiquity of resistance to oppression. The claim is made that there people accept or even endorse their oppression. I will show that they do not by reference to examples which are characteristic rather than atypical responses to caste oppression. Anyone familiar with current internal political problems in India cannot remain sanguine about the passivity of her oppressed ethnic minorities, be they defined by caste, religion, region or heritage, nor can anyone be who looks at the long history of religious conversion and reform in India, for every success along these lines in the past 2500 years has depended largely upon the promise of ethnic emancipation. Although the stability of India's caste system is widely extolled, surely the most studied social process in India is "Sanskritization" --status emulation--one whose sole aim is escape from the consequences of stigmatized--hence oppressed--identity and status. This process is virtually or actually universal among India's low castes (cf. Srinivas, 1962, 1966; Silverberg, 1968). No low caste group that I have known or heard about is without a claim to higher status than that accorded their members by society; none are without some effort, however sporadic or ineffective, to realize that claim. And the claim, rarely successful, is not realized by emulation alone; it requires power to back it up (Berreman, 1967b).

The most universal of all escapes from stigmatized identity--in India and elsewhere--is the attempt to shed that identity, either through dissimulation (passing) or through movement to places or milieux where it is wholly or largely irrelevant. This phenomenon is well-documented for many societies with birth-ascribed status differentiation (cf. DeVos and Nagatsuma, 1966; 245-252; Isaacs, 1964).

Because in ethnically stratified societies there is often a disparity between accorded identity and claimed or

desired identity, and because there are a variety of identities (not all of them ethnic) which inhere in a person, there is a continual tension surrounding the matter of identity in interpersonal relations. I studied this in some detail in a North Indian city in 1968-69 (Berreman, 1972a), where every individual is identifiable by caste, religion, region, language, occupation, life-style and other criteria. I found that the most stigmatized identity that can be detected generally takes precedence in social relations. In any situation, therefore, people continually try to convey to others the most favorable identity for themselves that they can muster and they continually try to detect in others the most stigmatized identity which can be accorded them. And those on each end of the interaction hope to act accordingly. In rural villages there is little hope of concealing or managing ethnic identity, for people are too well known to one another to be able to dissimulate or conceal, and relationships are too total to allow fragmentation of identities. In the relative anonymity of cities, there is considerable opportunity to do so, for in many situations one's multiple identities are unknown or irrelevant.

Of course, most people accommodate to their stigma and disadvantage without conspicuous resistance. My point is that this does not reflect agreement or endorsement, but rather an accommodation to the realities of the distribution of power, the nature of sanctions, and the opportunities for change. Every opportunity is taken to utilize any crack in the wall of oppression to mitigate it or escape it. The most ingenious and persistent mechanisms imaginable are utilized to manipulate the system and to avoid the worst of its consequences. This is now widely recognized with reference to the position of blacks in America. It is not widely recognized for stigmatized, low-status groups in India. But it is as true there, for the system is as repressive with as few redeeming qualities.

Having known a few untouchables rather well in India, and having known many rather slightly, I would like to recount how they coped with their untouchability. The examples are not spectacular (how many slaves led revolts, after all) but they are effective means to mitigate the effects of stigmatized status.

I lived in Sirkanda, an isolated sub-Himalayan village of less than 400 persons, for a year in 1957-58 and I visited off and on in 1968-69. There ten per cent of the people, comprising seven households, were untouchable, and I knew them well. None was content with his lot; none thought it justified by nature, religion, philosophy or fate, though most thought it unalterable. All sought to escape the worst of its consequences: deprivation, denigration and humiliation.

I knew best two brothers, Patū and Sibba, who were heads of the blacksmith households.

Patū was regarded by high caste people as indolent, dull, sullen, inept and inefficient. His lackadaisical, languid manner was attributed with considerable accuracy to the fact that he was almost constantly stoned on hashish--the only villager to use it on any but a most casual basis. As a consequence of his behavior, Patū was unable to secure the more desirable (prosperous) high-caste patrons. At the same time, he was exempted from many of the pressures and expectations exerted by such people on those who work for them, and his transgressions were excused with a degree of condescending amusement or impatient resignation which would not have been evoked by a more responsible worker. He avoided casual interaction with his superiors by being inaccessible to them, either physically, by remaining in his house on the periphery of the village, or psychically by remaining stoned. He supplemented his meagre income by distilling illicit liquor--a risky undertaking shared by another untouchable but by no high caste people (who were his customers), for they had adequate income without risking the harassment or punishment at official hands which might result from this illegal occupation.

Sibba, his brother, was quite different. Outgoing, lively, witty, intelligent, and assertive, he lived in the center of the village and was an omnipresent participant or observer in virtually every discussion, controversy, ceremony or party in the village. He was the obligatory untouchable member of the village council where, as in more informal situations, his opinions were never formally solicited or attended to but were in fact of great weight in decisions made. His were the most desirable patrons. His work, though objectively in no wise superior to that of Patū, was most in demand. Yet he was the most articulately resentful of his status of any untouchable in the village. He contended with that status with humor, wile and audacity, taking great pleasure in outwitting and manipulating his caste superiors in words and deeds, often without their knowledge. He and other untouchables enjoyed retailing accounts of his mastery of the double entendre, and of the casual but barbed remark eliciting a rueful double-take from his slower-witted patrons, puzzled as to his intent and whether to laugh or be angry. He had occasion to laugh behind their backs at their expense as often as they to laugh at the witticisms for which he was renowned. He was adept at manipulating situations so that others did his bidding (and sometimes his work) under the impression that they were in control. He threaded his way through the interstices of the social situation to do the least work for the most reward possible. He was clearly subordinate in status, he was controlled and oppressed by his social superiors, but he got away with far more through his wit, social aptitude and courage than any other untouchable, and came out with the grudging admiration even of those who regarded him as uppity. He was tolerated because he was clever enough not to make fateful transgressions and to play something of the role of jester. He literally survived by his wits.

Four of the seven households of untouchables were of the drummer caste, who made their living by tailoring and basket-making as well as by drumming. They were considerably better off financially than blacksmiths. Unlike the latter, several of them owned sufficient land to supplement their income by farming. Their number in the region far exceeded that of blacksmiths, and they frequently repaired to places (villages) or events (ceremonies, parties, conversation groups, etc.) dominated by their fellows, where interaction with high castes was avoided or minimized. In general they were the most reclusive or "clannish" caste in the village. One, like Patū, distilled illicit liquor. Another was a part-time diviner, and a third was a full-time sorcerer and curer whose clientele mostly resided outside of Sirkanda. Such religious roles entail significant supernatural risk and social sacrifices, and are rarely filled by high caste people. To quote a previous observation of my own, "The vast majority of [these practitioners] come from the depressed castes. [They] afford people who would otherwise spend their lives deferring to others a role in which they can hope to acquire not only prestige and economic well being, but a large measure of influence in the lives of others and especially in the lives of their caste superiors who otherwise exert authority over them. . . . [These] Religious roles . . . exempt those who play them from the full implications of their caste status. . . ." (Berreman, 1964:62). This will become even clearer in the case of Sibba's son, to be described below.

On the whole, drummers (like the remaining untouchable household comprising a barber) accommodated to their status by doing as they had to do to avoid the wrath of their caste superiors--interacting with them as little as possible, contending with them as rarely as possible, complaining about their abuses behind their backs, and among themselves lamenting the failure of other castes to recognize their own claims to higher status than that conventionally accorded them.

Shoemakers were the lowest of the low in the region, suffering a combination of extreme ritual impurity and alien origin (for they had come quite recently from the culturally distinct Punjab hills to the west). None lived in Sirkanda; few lived in any village. They studiously avoided intimate or prolonged contact with high castes by giving them a wide berth--settling away from village sites; in isolated places where they farmed homesteads obtained from fleeing Muslims at the time of partition, or along well-traveled trails where they made and repaired shoes for passersby. They came to villages to do their defiling tasks (including removal of dead animals) only on temporary call. All other castes despised them. They responded by isolating themselves.

Ten years after my initial research in Sirkanda, I returned. Among the surprisingly few conspicuous changes which

had occurred, were the fortunes of three young untouchable men whom I had known in their youth. These changes occurred in the context of considerable dissatisfaction with village life. For example, seven high-caste young men had opted to leave the village for the sophistication and remuneration of urban or military employment. But for untouchables this had not been possible because they lacked the education, contacts and money to make this transition successfully. Moreover, what they sought to escape was less the rural environment than the oppression inherent in it.

The three young untouchable men I knew had taken three routes away from the implications of their stigmatized ethnic identity.

One, Dubbu, was of drummer caste and had been Sirkanda's principal tailor. He had simply moved out of Sirkanda to a village a few miles away comprised almost entirely of people of his own caste. One of his explicit motives was to escape the day-to-day tension and denigration at the hands of high-caste villagers. He still returned in his occupational role, but found social and psychological refuge in a village of his equals.

The second, Bishnū, was of blacksmith caste--Patū's son. I had been told that in the intervening years he had gone crazy. I first saw him one day in a small mountain marketplace several miles from Sirkanda, unkempt, ragged and hirsute, but I recognized his grey eyes and acquiline nose as those of the thirteen-year-old I had known ten years before. He had recognized and covertly watched me, so I struck up a conversation, and thereafter talked with him several times. He had severed all ties to the village, and now made his meagre living collecting wood and other forest products for sale in the market. He lived wherever he wished, moving from place to place unencumbered and accountable to no one. He had become a social deviant, but in no sense that I or my assistant could detect, was he mentally deranged. He rejoiced in his freedom from the constraints of untouchable life in a small and tightly bounded village. He had escaped his birth-ascribed status at the cost of economic security, family life and stability--a price he was willing to pay for freedom. No sanctions were brought against him because his was regarded as a malady brought on by fate rather than choice.

The third was Bishnū's cousin Kalmū, son of Sibba the blacksmith. His story is spectacular and too complex to detail here. I have done so in the Epilogue to the new edition of my ethnographic book Hindus of the Himalayas (Berreman, 1971). Suffice it to say here that after losing to illness his beloved wife and two young children, he was visited by a deity which used him as a vehicle for the performance of a number of impressive miracles, whereupon he became a phenomenally

successful shaman (bākī) attracting clients and supplicants from the plains as well as the mountains and as far away as the Punjab and Delhi. I came to know him well, spending much of my time in Sirkanda with him or with his father, learning as much as I could about his new role, how it came about, how it changed, and how others responded to it. He made it very clear that a major benefit was escape from the role of untouchable blacksmith. This was seconded by his father and other caste-fellows who took considerable empathetic satisfaction from his unusual fortune and his unique power. Had his wife and children not perished, it is likely Kalmū would have continued on the course he had begun, accommodating to traditional expectations in order to support them and derive the rewards of family life. Having lost his family, he was unwilling to compromise again, and by a combination of fortune, skill and insight he carved out a new role free of most of the deprivation society expected him to bear--an exalted, awe-inspiring figure, central to religion and supernaturalism in the entire region, rewarded with money and food as well as respect and deference--but required to abstain from many worldly pursuits in order to retain this status. As in the case of his cousin, his new status was regarded as involuntary--the consequence of divine forces. He had not opted out, he had been selected out, and so had not challenged the system. But he had escaped.

Sirkanda is a small and isolated village with only thirty-eight untouchables. Most of them are women and children unable to do much about their status. Of the men, most accommodate in ways which reinforce the stereotypes held about them, but which minimize the demands made upon them, the sanctions applied and the retributions exacted. They are thought to be lazy, unreliable, dishonest, easy-going, improvident, sullen, devoted to music, liquor and sex, and to some extent they act accordingly. But that so many should explicitly seek escape from the consequences of their caste identity, and that others should take such vicarious pleasure in those escapes is testimony to the pervasive resentment they feel toward that status and its consequences. These are ordinary people, responding not to outside agitation or example, but to their individual experiences of stigmatized ethnic identity and birth-ascribed oppression--identity and oppression which are taken for granted and regarded as right, proper and inevitable by those who inflict them and by many of those who chronicle and analyze them, but not by those who suffer them.

In the city of Dehra Dun where I studied social categories and social interaction in 1968-69, responses to oppression were more varied as anonymity and casual relationships provided opportunities to escape it. Passing, especially in the fleeting context of impersonal, and stereotyped interaction was common among those who had escaped from their traditional occupational roles and residential neighborhoods, if only temporarily. Individual mobility to caste-free occupations and

middle-class status was common, especially among the financially and educationally fortunate. Group efforts at economic and social enhancement were common--sometimes but not always along caste or other ethnic lines. I will here illustrate some of the points I am making simply by contrasting two large castes of untouchables in Dehra Dun--Sweepers and Shoemakers--with respect to their responses to their stigmatized ethnicity.

Sweepers were relatively assertive, self-confident, optimistic, and united. Shoemakers were demoralized, despondent, submissive, sullen and fractionated. Yet both were highly and almost equally stigmatized and denigrated in status. The reasons for the differences were not far to seek.

Shoemakers were numerous, and their traditional craft was declining as commercial shoe manufacturers out-produced and undersold the artisans. They were therefore economically extremely depressed and vulnerable, with far too many artisans for the market and little in the way of viable alternative employment opportunities. They originated in two distinct regions of North India, and the regional groups felt little in common with one another despite the fact that other groups in the city were unaware of the division. Most of them were so poor as to have to devote all of their efforts to securing the next meal, with no opportunity for long-range planning or social action. A few had moved into wage labor and entrepreneurial activity of various sorts (mainly limestone quarrying) with considerable success, but they had done so on their own and had in the process disassociated themselves from most of their caste-fellows. Very few had become educated; very few were seeking education for their children. They had no resources with which to gain access to institutions in the society which might benefit them. They had no entre into the legal or administrative worlds which could provide them with some of the benefits reserved for untouchables. They were, in short, an unhappy, discouraged, poverty-stricken, and almost resigned group.

Sweepers, by contrast, were almost fully employed. They performed a vital service for the community: comprising its sewer and street-cleaning system. No one else would do their defiling work. The municipality hired them and they in turn had formed an effective union complete with legal counsel. They had negotiated contracts, secured fringe benefits, and held up the threat of paralyzing strikes to back their negotiations. Virtually every household had a municipal employee in its number, and in addition, most families contracted work with private households and businesses, so that most had a double income. They seemed to have gained self-confidence from the fact of their bargaining power in addition to the relative security of their livelihood. They were aggressive, self-confident, optimistic, and aware of their rights. Many of them were educating their offspring, taking advantage of compensatory privileges for untouchables. A surprising number claimed to

have relatives in military or civil service, in law or education, and in other caste-free white-collar occupations. They remained depressed and exploited, to be sure, but they were aware and active in making use of the mechanisms by which to mitigate or escape the worst consequences of their deprivation. They remained ritually untouchable and were reviled for their inborn status and their degraded occupation, but they had manufactured self-respect in this context, and out of this had grown the ability and willingness to assert themselves for the rights and opportunities they regarded as theirs.

In villages of the region, by contrast, sweepers and shoemakers were equally poverty-stricken, equally depressed, equally under the thumb of the high-caste land owners. It has been the combination of traditional status, occupation, and the conditions and requirements of urban life which has so conspicuously differentiated the outlook and experience of sweepers and shoemakers in the city. As a result, their definitions of themselves and of the situations in which they find themselves have diverged in ways crucial to their social, psychological and economic well-being.

Conclusion

What do I conclude from these rather disparate remarks to justify the title of this paper?

First, that stigmatized ethnic identity is experienced as oppression. It is a human day-to-day experience of degradation and exploitation, not simply an abstract concept.

Second, that people resent that identity and that experience regardless of the rationalizations offered for it.

Third, that people continually attempt to resist, escape, alleviate or change that identity and that experience, even in the most unlikely circumstances (including the remote villages and urban slums of India).

No account of ethnic stratification or stigmatized identity makes sense if it does not attend to these facts.

Fourth, how people respond to stigmatized ethnic identity depends upon their definitions of themselves, others and the situations in which they interact. If they regard themselves as incapable of initiating or successfully carrying through escape or change, they may resign themselves to resentful acquiescence. If they believe that they are unified and that through unified action change can be brought about, they are likely to attempt it by whatever means seem feasible. If they think that they can escape individually by passing or leaving or acquiring an urban life-style, they may do so, or they

may seek other individual--perhaps supernatural--means of evading the worst consequences of their identity. If they believe a balance of power has been altered--through acquisition of money, education, electoral or other political resources, through sympathetic legislation or influential allies--people may and characteristically do assert themselves even when they have long appeared to be resigned to their stigma and oppression. People may also come to a subjective decision that the status quo is simply no longer tolerable regardless of the chances of changing it, and rise up individually or collectively to oppose it.

It is not consensus on the legitimacy of systems of oppression which enables them to continue, but agreement on who has the power, and when and under what circumstances and with what effect it is likely to be used. This is entirely a matter of definition of the situation. People cease to get along in stratified societies when <u>this</u> crucial agreement changes or is challenged. Then, regardless of the situation as others might define it, those within regard it as changed, and overt conflict to achieve or prevent redistribution of power and privilege is likely to occur as we have seen recently in America, India, Japan, Rwanda, Burundi and other ethnically stratified societies.

Whether resistance to stigmatized ethnic identity be subtle or spectacular, covert or overt, effective or disastrous, continuous or sporadic, it is an intrinsic and inescapable feature of systems incorporating such identity. In the short run, such resistance may be humanly expensive; in the long run it is the humanist's only hope, for if vested interest, power and rationalization could combine to convince as well as to oppress, oppression might last forever. But it does not. Oppressors always have a tiger by the tail and eventually they lose their grip. To understand this, one must know the oppressed, for they and not their superiors, harbor the impetus for change. Too many anthropologists, including (perhaps especially) those who work in India, have relied for their understandings of ethnic stratification on elite sources. (A conspicuous recent example is that of Dumont, 1970; cf. Berreman, 1972d). As a result, they are as surprised and confused as the elites themselves when the oppressed assert themselves. They have made the mistake of assuming that elites represent their societies, that myths are reality, that rationalizations are shared beliefs, that privilege is inevitable, that acquiescence is endorsement, that a balance of power is consensus. It will be an heroic accomplishment if scholars are able to sustain these illusions in the world of changing ethnic and political relations that is emerging today.

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