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Contemporary relevance of *jajmani* relations in rural India

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ABSTRACT

Jajmani is claimed to be a traditional Indian institution which institutionalized non-contractual, inter-familial and inter-generational reciprocity between landowning and other services providing castes[1] in rural India. Though it took care of some livelihood needs of service caste people it also involved their subservience and exploitation. Based on an ethnographic field study of a village in north India this research study looks closely at the changes happening in *jajmani* but also simultaneously tries to learn a few important principles about the form and substance of development for the future of mankind. Though *jajmani* is going to be history soon, it can be instructive in offering the idea of the importance of local/vernacular spaces in organizing social and economic lives of rural communities while imagining a less hegemonised community and world for human living.

1. Introduction

Jajmani [2]is usually understood as a traditional Indian institution in which upper caste farming households had been associated with service castes living in the vicinity which provided varied services depending upon their caste's occupations. These used to be non-contractual, mostly non-monetised and inter-generational relationships across families in villages. These relationships are not so common now due to many changes happening in rural and urban economy. Despite that I found a good number of service caste households associating with *jajmani* relationships[3] in 2004-05 in a north Indian village. I also found 4 households which substantially subsisted on *jajmani* relations. This article is however not about rehabilitating the idea of *jajmani* relations in academic writings in face of criticism against it [such as by (Mayer, 1993), (Fuller, 1989), and Lerche (1993) discussed later in the article] in the last two to three decades. This article is rather an attempt to understand *jajmani* in contemporary settings and learn a few important principles from it for the future of development on this planet. The aim is to explore *jajmani* as an institution which afforded at least some degree of social security to some rural households in an otherwise subservient and exploitative relationship for the future of mankind.

The social order in Indian villages is in a state of flux. It is yet to be benefited in any significant manner by modern forms of social securities while some traditional forms are on the wane. This is the most appropriate time to look both at traditional and contemporary forms of community based social securities and develop new ones as state cannot ever replace family and community in human history. In this article I try to analyse *jajmani* relations, which was once considered fairly widespread and enabling a good number of people meet some requirements of their subsistence. I also very briefly discuss other social practices which contribute towards meeting requirements of secure sustenance in a north Indian village. An assessment of *jajmani* can be insightful for conceptualization of alternatives to development. This is largely because post-developmental approaches are looking out for alternatives to development that can go beyond modernistic solutions. These modernistic solutions are essentially rooted in the discourse of globalization, integration of the global economy and capitalism. On that course peoples' genuine interests and choices are, on many occasions, subjugated by the current economic forces. In its wake post-development approaches have the aim of liberating their life-worlds and have stated or unstated aspirations for emulating some part of tradition as desirable ways of moving ahead (Norberg-Hodge,

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[1] Caste is a form of social stratification typical to Indian subcontinent. It is a hierarchical arrangement of different endogamous social groups based on the principle of pollution and purity. In Weberian terms it is a status group.

[2] It is understood to be a longstanding practice of reciprocity between landowning families and service caste people. Of late, it has been said to be of recent origin and equated to an invented tradition.

[3] I avoid calling it a system in view of criticisms of *jajmani* being called a system in academic writings in the last two to three decades.

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1991; Rist, 1997; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997; Mckibben, 2007). The nostalgia for community, yearning for autonomy of local economy and society from pervasive, overarching and on many occasions cannibalizing global influences & better control over our own resources & lives are some of the features development thinkers now look forward to as ideas and principles to borrow from tradition. *Jajmani* can be a very important institution to learn from in that case.

2. A view of literature on *jajmani* relations

The supposed moral economy underlying *jajmani* has both been praised and criticized. Many writers such as Charles Metcalfe and Sir Thomas Munro had inferred that a significant part of production system of any village in past had been limited to the village itself and its vicinity. Charles Metcalfe had even talked of Indian villages as 'little republics,' autonomous and autarchic, conducting most of their economic affairs within themselves (Srinivas, 2002). This view was perpetuated by many other writers such as Henry Maine and Karl Marx (Srinivas, 2002). It has however been discussed and contradicted by other scholars who have averred that Indian villages were always part of larger civilization. Trade across villages and regions was commonly found. Salt, sugar, iron, betel leaves, areca nuts and tobacoo were traded across the length and breadth of the country, the case of self-sufficiency of Indian villages had been overstated (Srinivas, 2002).

Villagers however still met most of their needs through a local system of production in the vicinity of a group of villages. Only for a few items they depended on long-distance trade for meeting their needs. And this local production system of villages was greatly ensured, it had been claimed, in past through *jajmani* relations-a network of caste relations with an obligation to meet one another needs. The most authoritative work on *jajmani* has been by Wiser (1936). For quite some time his ideas exercised a great influence before they began to be critically evaluated by Beidelman (1959) and Berreman (1963) and questioned by authors such as Fuller (1989), Mayer (1993), Lerche (1993) etc.

Raymond Firth (1960)referring to Malinowski's contribution to economic anthropology says that economic themes embedded in social system were dealt by him not as being a separate class of phenomenon but as something that has been constitutive of the system itself. In the same spirit *jajmani* relations had been understood to be constitutive of the caste system itself. But within it there had been a class of activities which were ceremonial in nature apart from those which were expressly economic and utilitarian. Some scholars have given more importance to ritual and religious roles while others have valued both economic and religious activities. The economic aspect of functioning of *jajmani* was relatively neglected before Wiser brought it out. In the foreword to 'The Hindu Jajmani System,' the book by Wiser, Oscar Lewis says, 'In focusing upon economic aspects of the caste system, Wiser has done pioneer work; for despite the abundant literature on caste, its economic aspects have been relatively neglected. An awareness of the relationship between caste and economy seems to be missing even in such a standard book as J. H. Hutton's Caste in India (Oxford University Press) in the revised edition of which (1951) there is no reference to the *Jajmani* system or to Wiser's work (Lewis, 1936: xii).'

Wiser's work is considered a contribution to the existing body of knowledge in that sense. It tries to outline how different groups interact with one another in the process of production and exchange of services. In definition of *Jajmani* he stresses reciprocity between *jajman* and *kamin (service caste person)*. This he finds as stabilizing and integrating aspect of the system. Referring to Malinowski, Firth again posits forcefully, 'Malinowski demonstrated with great force that a group or society does not hang together from any mystical impulse of unity, it continues to exist because in general each person feels that in return for what he gives to other people, he receives a corresponding service (Firth, 1960: 218).'

Jajmani has been able to institutionalize this relationship of give and take in most elaborate form through the idiom of caste system. Dumont (1980) outlines the main features of *jajmani* as i) use of hereditary personal relationships to express division of labour, 2) system of prestations and counter-prestations 3) repayment is in kind and spread over the whole year i.e. during harvest time, festivals and major family ceremonies of *jajman*. He adds that *jajmani* relationships are usually between those who hold land and those who do not. Those who hold land are usually the dominant castes. They enjoy the economic power because they have the means of production. Dumont (1980) says that 'Dominants and dependents live under the sway of a system of ideas in which the 'power' aspect we have isolated is in fact encompassed. The essential idea, from the present point of view, is the orientation towards the whole, which, even if unconscious, determines the minutest attitudes because it governs specialization and interdependence.. ..... This view of an ordered whole, in which each is assigned his place is fundamentally religious (Dumont, 1980: 107).'

Hierarchy is the dominant principle for Dumont around which caste system and *jajmani* relations are built. For Pocock (1962) *jajmani* relations pertain to religious services only but for Dumont it has been sufficiently broadened to include religious and non-religious services. Wiser more or less presents *jajmani* as a symmetrical system. Except the lowest caste everyone gets opportunity to assume the roles of *jajman* and *kamin*. Brahmins are also employed as service caste for domestic ceremonies. Harold Gould (1987) also studied *jajmani* in an Uttar Pradesh[4] (UP) village. He calls it a widespread feature of the peasant village culture of India. He says that Indian village is not unlike peasant agriculture villages in any other part of the world. They have a group of families who live in the midst of their farmlands. In such societies, technology is usually simple and productivity low. He also says that life revolves around subsistence in such societies. Gould (1987) says that the world of Indian peasants is filled with kinship values and a major part of human life is spent within corporate family and its extension. It in turn strengthens traditional village. Social relationships are either around consanguinal or affinal ties and relationships across families, castes and villages are also partly patterned on the lines of *jajmani* exchanges across households, he says. Families of clean castes are usually patrons while unclean castes are *purjans*, providers of services. Landowning, wealth and power controlling high castes provide a structurally fixed share of their agricultural produce along with many considerations against craft, menial and labour services (Gould, 1987). The latter absorb the onus of ritual contamination and perform and facilitate ritual purity of the upper caste. The relationship of a *jajman* to a *purjan* is structured in such a manner as the relationship of father and son and he should respect and defend his *jajman* (Gould, 1987). It is a form of patron-client relationship which binds them together and enables them to meet one another's need, a specific manifestation of a type of social relationship found in other societies and cultures.[5] Gould (1987) divides all castes in *jajmani* system into four

[4] It is a northern state in the republic of India.

[5] Wolf (1966) discusses the nature of relationship between patron and client while attempting to understand informal structures and relationships that play a critical role in maintenance of any system. Patron plays more in tangible terms and receives in return in intangibles. He points out that client pays back mainly in three ways-one in form of demonstration of esteem, the other in form of information of different sorts about others and the third in form of both promise of political support as well as actual support. *Jajmani* functions broadly in similar ways. But in *jajmani* clients also contribute in tangible ways i.e. by providing services or by putting in labour.