

*INDIA*

DUNDES, ALAN. *Two Tales of Crow and Sparrow: A Freudian Folkloristic Essay on Caste and Untouchability*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997. xii + 162 pages. Bibliography. Hardcover n.p.; ISBN 0-8476-8456-3. Paper US\$17.95; ISBN 0-8476-8457-1.

Caste and untouchability have puzzled Indologists, anthropologists, and others interested in India for centuries. A lot has been written on this subject, but the present book is a novel one. It gives new insights to the problem of untouchability that other scholars have ignored or overlooked. With the belief that a folktale is a native construction that can be a valuable mirror of the society in which it exists, the author takes up the analysis of two separate and distinct Indic folktales, both involving the characters of a crow and a sparrow. The author suggests that there may be a logical or psychological connection between the narratives in the tales and child-rearing techniques in India with special reference to toilet training and the long-standing tradition of untouchability. This analysis is an attempt to explain the unconscious underlying folk belief complex that has led to untouchability.

The book is divided into fifteen subtopics such as caste, untouchability, tales of Crow and Sparrow, analysis of the tales, etc. The main thrust of the book consists in the content analysis of the folktales in the light of Freudian theory and its implications on the origin of caste and untouchability.

A short summary of the book can highlight its importance. After explaining the nature of caste and untouchability in detail, the author narrates the two folktales of Crow and Sparrow vividly, in a picturesque manner. In the first tale, the poor crow, despite going to a lot of trouble, never does get to eat a communal meal with sparrow, because crow is never able to wash itself clean. In retrospect, one can see that the tale is truly an accurate folk model of the caste-untouchability system. A crow can never be clean enough to share a meal with a sparrow any more than an untouchable can ever be clean enough to share a meal with a Brahmin. The tale makes perfect cultural sense after all. The contrast between the clean sparrow

Brahmin and dirty crow. Untouchable is explicit with respect to caste and untouchability.

The second tale also gives us another important clue as to the underlying basis of caste and untouchability. In this tale, crow seeks shelter with sparrow. With some reluctance, sparrow finally admits crow to her home, which leads to a transformation of food into feces inside the house. A crow is associated in India with "unclean eater," "scavenger," and "the impure." Crow is therefore an appropriate analogical figure in India because it is associated with feces and pollution. Similarly, the untouchables' social position is related to their association with feces. Crow's association with excrement in the folktale is a cultural representation of the untouchable, who is impure due to his association with excrement.

From the above observations, the author asks what could be the origin of untouchability. If the four Varna castes are said to have a bodily origin, can we assume that the untouchables may also have come from the body of primordial man? And if so, what part of the body might that be?

According to Alan Dundes there is enough reason to believe that there may once have been a fifth Varna caste. This proposition is further confirmed from an empirically observable folk tendency to regard the untouchables as a fifth caste—a tendency marked by the use of the term *panchamas*, meaning "fifth." It is supposed that the Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra have originated from the head, shoulder, thigh and feet respectively of the Primordial Man, while the untouchables are considered to have originated from the Anus. The body metaphorical paradigm confirms the association of untouchables with feces. According to the author it is the "fear of feces," that lies at the very heart of the entire caste system in India.

Most Indologists and anthropologists tend to speak of pollution or impurity as the underlying impetus for caste untouchability, but they utterly fail to explain the origin of pollution or impurity. If pollution makes someone or something untouchable, what is it that makes someone or something polluting? It is the human excrement that is the ultimate pollutant. Hence the author proposes an excremental origin of caste and untouchability. Thus, the Freudian concept of anal fixation could explain caste and untouchability in India.

This anal fixation of the Indian personality is also related to toilet training practices in India. The Indian child enjoys extreme indulgence in toilet training. But after the age of five, strict norms of purity and pollution are imposed on the child. The trauma arising from such a marked discontinuity could well result in a cathexis or fixation on anality. Alan Dundes attributes some of the intriguing cultural phenomena, such as worship of the cow and the sati system, to the above fixation that results from toilet training and the attitudes related to left-overs.

One may wonder, could not these folktales be of recent origin so that they cannot possibly explain the age long social system of caste and untouchability? To counter this argument, the author takes recourse to marginal survivals of the Gypsies. Gypsies are supposed to have migrated to other parts of the world from India, to be the marginal survivals of ancient Indian customs. According to comparative folklorists, immigrant groups often retain in their folklore particular items that have long since disappeared from the original homeland of the immigrants. Many remarkable parallels in Gypsy cultures to the Indian pollution complex exist. In Gypsy cultures we find the same concern as in India with keeping the mouth and the anus totally separate. The author argues that the Gypsy parallels to the Indian pollution complex could not be just a matter of coincidence. The Gypsy concept of defilement, as a marginal survival, according to the author, cannot be of recent invention.

The book gives new insights for the understanding of caste and untouchability in India. The author is very logical in his argument and thorough with the ethnological material on caste and untouchability in India. All the same, the proposition of the author linking

untouchability to feces and anal fixation is only hypothetical and subject to verification. However logical the explanations might be, they are only an intellectual conjecture. Finding an origin of any social phenomena is always an intriguing one. The author overstates the physical and psychological factors, and overlooks the racial, social, and political dimensions that, according to some scholars, played a vital role in the origin and continuance of caste and untouchability.

Many of the agricultural and tribal societies in the world have similar toilet training patterns as that of India; but these societies have not developed the same notions of purity and pollution as the Hindus have. Hence, one must look for multiple causal factors instead of a single cause. I am afraid the author's argument may wind up like those of early anthropologists like E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, and H. Morgan, who tried with mere reasonable speculation to trace the origin of religion to a predominantly monocausal factor.

Despite the above observations, it needs to be said that there is hardly any such work relating caste and untouchability to the unconscious underlying folk belief complex in India. This is, therefore, a unique scholarly work in the field of caste and untouchability.

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