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The Needle and the Sword: Boatmen, Priests and the Ritual Economy of Varanasi

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Varanasi, situated on the banks of the sacred River Ganges, is one of the holiest cities in India and a primary centre of pilgrimage in the subcontinent. The city stretches approximately seven kilometres along the river on its western bank. The riverfront is adorned with more than eighty ghats (landing areas with steps down the bank) from southernmost Assi ghat to Raj ghat in the north. Multitudes of pilgrims come to the ghats to bathe in the sacred river, which is said by Hindus to remove all sins past and present. The river is also worshiped as a mother goddess known as *Ganga Ma*.

The local population worship *Ganga Ma* during life cycle events. At these times, the everyday riverboat turns into a sacred deity; and the boatman becomes an essential ritual specialist assisting the locals in the conduct of life-cycle rituals. In this paper I examine a post-wedding river ritual wherein a seemingly mundane activity like boating is turned seamlessly into a sacral event. The first part of the paper describes this process. The second part reflects on it in the light of the Subaltern Studies approach and some recent interpretations offered by prominent anthropologists. Specifically, here I seek to re-examine the influential organising ideas of domination and hierarchy with attention to how the subaltern boatmen ingeniously subvert their assigned position as 'the dominated', thereby interrupting the traditional priestly order. It will be shown how the hard dichotomies of great/little tradition, subaltern/elite, dominant/dominated, contestation/co-operation, become more fluid when examined in the context of daily interactions at the grassroots level.

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Further, I try to suggest a more dynamic view than the ones offered in these conventional approaches for understanding caste claims on lucrative ritual practices and the allocation of valued sacred space in Varanasi, by showing how the boatmen's appropriation of Hindu textual tradition and symbols of domination enables them to construct for themselves a cohesive identity and place in the Hindu social hierarchy—one that reinforces their role as ritual specialists and furthers their social and economic interests. I ground this argument in a searching examination of indigenous categories and a careful analysis of the views of people who have engaged in post-wedding rituals, known as *Ganga Pujaiya*. Finally, I will consider the strategies which enable the traditional boatmen to maintain their monopoly over the ever-growing business of boating on the river.

The Study of Indian Civilisation and Peasant Society

Anthropological studies of Hindu civilisation have drawn considerably upon research done in the early 1950s on village India, the primary aim of which was to analyse and explain the process of social change in Indian society. The two most influential theories which emerged from this fertile period were Srinivas' concept of Sanskritisation and Redfield's model of Great and Little Traditions, which posited the existence of an overarching Sanskritic tradition associated with certain pan-Indian beliefs, practices, myths, deities and pilgrimage centres. Both theories have been widely criticised,¹ not least because empirically it is difficult to determine what constitutes a 'great tradition'.² Nonetheless, as I will show in this paper, pan-Hindu beliefs, symbols and myths continue to figure on a discursive level. They play a prominent part within the indigenous framework where local actors employ such symbols and myths to assert their rights in everyday practice, creatively resisting domination and subordination. In the case I present, the boatmen refer to such pan-Hindu texts and myths as a source of authority for their claim to respectable social status and, more importantly, to affirm their legitimacy to conduct rituals in the sacred space of the ghats, often considered the exclusive jurisdiction of Brahmin priests.³

¹ The concept of Sanskritisation has been subject to much debate. For our purpose it is worth mentioning David Hardiman's criticism of the concept, in which he points out that low castes' selective appropriation of higher caste values, symbols and modes of behaviour must be contextualised within a historical framework acknowledging the dynamic nature of the caste system, which is always informed by power relations. D. Hardiman, 'Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922–3', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.196–230.

² C.J Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp.25–7.

³ Redfield's model came under scrutiny from various scholars across different disciplines. It seems that the model was especially problematic for anthropologists, as it was said to reduce local practices to the determination of the static, text-based, authoritative great tradition. See, for example, R. Lukens-Bull, 'Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam', in *Marburg Journal of Religion*, Vol.4, no.2, pp.1–10

Nevertheless, the strategy of looking at peasant life and the local arena as an entry point into understanding Indian society has remained. In the early 1980s the Subaltern Studies project was launched and peasant society continued to be the focus of inquiry.⁴ This time, however, the idea of writing history from below provided both a framework and motivating force for re-examining the 'inadequacy of elitist historiography'.⁵ According to Partha Chatterjee, this critical reading of historical records offered access into the ways in which power and knowledge was exerted over the oppressed, as well as insight into the subaltern consciousness.⁶ The aim was to uncover the voice of the subalterns as 'the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of this [Indian] nationalism'.⁷ To do so, the Subaltern Studies project highlighted conflict and subaltern 'resistance to elite domination'.⁸ The project sought a careful de-construction of the elite grand narratives that was attentive to oral histories, myths, rumours and ritual practices, which it conceived as spaces where the subaltern voice could be heard and recognised, independent of elite domination.⁹ Thus, the Subaltern Studies project focused on the experience, consciousness and historical agency of marginalised people at the grassroots of society.

However, the obsessive emphasis of the project on conflict, power relations and a separate subaltern sphere has not escaped criticism.¹⁰ Indeed it is suggested that some members of the Subaltern Studies collective were given to a dichotomous view of subaltern/elite relations, bordering on the essentialist and ahistorical.¹¹

[www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/lukensbull.html, accessed 15 Mar. 2005]; and P. van der Veer, *Gods On Earth: Religious Experience and Identity in Ayodhya* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp.53–4.

⁴ The Subaltern Studies project is a complex and varied one. In this paper I am mainly concerned with the early volumes of the project, which were almost entirely dedicated to examining peasant struggles and resistance.

⁵ R. Guha, 'On Some Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.3.

⁶ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.171.

⁷ Guha, 'On Some Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India', p.3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁹ See, for example, D. Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras 1876–8', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.62–115; Hardiman, 'Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat'; and G. Pandey, 'Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c.1888–1917', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.60–129.

¹⁰ The debate around these issues has been well drawn out in the recent publication of two edited books: see N. Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000); and D. Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2002).

¹¹ See, for example, D. Gupta, 'On Altering Ego in Peasant History: Paradoxes of the Ethnic Option', in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.13, no.1 (1985), pp.5–24; and R. O' Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', in D. Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2002), pp.135–86.

For example, in his engaging analysis of the Santal rebellion of 1855, project founder Ranajit Guha argues that both colonial and nationalist historiography explain subaltern insurgency in a way that ‘amounts to an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history and incorporates the latter as only a contingent element in another history with another subject’.¹² He then goes on to argue that such misleading accounts served to conceal what was the actual essence of subaltern mentality—its religiosity.¹³ By uncovering religion as the true and authentic characteristic of the peasant consciousness and resistance, Guha is able to fulfil his stated aim and invest the subaltern with an agency of his own, rather than simply accept elite discourse which, he suggests, represented the rebels as either irrational fanatics or mere passive followers of a secularised leadership.¹⁴ In trying to redress the balance and give voice to underprivileged and hitherto voiceless groups, however, and by declaring religion as the underlying meaning behind subaltern political will, Guha himself reproduces an essentialised or ‘ethicized’ (to use Gupta’s term)¹⁵ view of peasant society. Representing elite historiography as biased and contrived implies that the popular domain is the sole repository of what is authentic and original.¹⁶ In fact, subaltern narratives and identities are equally mediated and constructed; all we can do is attempt to bring to light such constructions and uncover the meanings behind the everyday practices and beliefs of the subordinated groups in society.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of the conditions of Calcutta jute mill workers—while it clearly illuminated the mechanisms and techniques of power and domination exercised by Bengali managerial elites and the colonial state over Calcutta’s migrant ex-peasant work force—lacks an equally sophisticated examination of the peasant workers’ culture, religious practices and actions. Instead, Chakrabarty briefly tells the reader that the working class was characterised by ‘a pre-capitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other primordial loyalties’.¹⁸ This uncritical characterisation of subaltern culture as based on fixed categories (such as ‘community’ or ‘religion’) seems to overlook the possibility of heterogeneity, change and conflict within the subaltern

¹² R. Guha, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁵ Gupta, ‘On Altering the Ego in Peasant History’, pp.9–10.

¹⁶ T.B. Hansen, ‘Inside the Romanticist Episteme’, in *Thesis Eleven*, No.48 (1997), p.27.

¹⁷ This was later recognised by members of the Subaltern Studies group itself; see, for example, G. Pandey, ‘Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories’, in N. Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000), pp.281–99.

¹⁸ D. Chakrabarty, ‘Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890–1940’, in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.308.

group itself.¹⁹ Moreover, by simply abstracting the category of subaltern from the complexity of social relations, we are once again restricted by the limitations of structural dichotomies,²⁰ as peasant cultural identity remains distinct and timeless. In fact, 'primordial' bonds and other cultural systems are never static; rather they are informed by dynamic social processes, generated both within and outside communities—a dimension that other contributors of the Subaltern Studies collective have been more careful to explore.²¹

It is against this background that I propose to examine the boatmen's role as ritual specialists. I will try to show how religion, rituals, and oral histories are embedded in the everyday lives and interactions of the people who practice and articulate them. Underpinning this discussion, as we shall see, is a presumption that values and religious perceptions are always shared, at least to a degree, with others, and as such are influenced and shaped by wider socio-economic and political changes taking place in society. While I will draw freely on the insights of the Subaltern Studies approach and its critiques to provide a more nuanced analysis of the boatmen's experiences, aspirations, beliefs and perceptions—which are all products of a complex relationship with their environment²²—I intend on the basis of my reconstruction of the boatmen's *own world of meaningful action* to offer a critical re-assessment of the Subaltern schema and other sociological frameworks.

The Setting: Varanasi

There are roughly two thousand boatmen and seven hundred and fifty boats along the seven kilometre stretch of the western bank of the River Ganges in Varanasi.

¹⁹ O' Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject', pp.164–6.

²⁰ While the Subaltern Studies project has generated rich insights into the nature of subaltern resistance and elite domination, an analysis that relies on such dichotomies (i.e. elite/subaltern, coloniser/colonised) may ultimately limit, as Cooper observes, 'the search for precise ways in which power is deployed and ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected, and appropriated'. See F. Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History', in D. Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2002), p.258.

²¹ See, for example, S. Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.1–61; Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness'; and G. Pandey, "'Encountering Calamities": The History of a North India Qasba in the Nineteenth Century', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.231–70.

²² The article is based on two ethnographic research field trips conducted between 2001 and 2003 over a period of eleven and a half months in total. The research focused on the boatmen of Varanasi and their social and physical environment. On my first field trip my main area of investigation was Assi ghat, while on the next I expanded the area of investigation to include other major ghats along the riverfront. Along with participant observation, I collected oral histories and written documentation, such as press releases, lawsuits and archival material from the colonial period. The stories and quotations in this article are based on extensive notes taken during conversations with people involved in the rituals described. The names have been changed.

According to the boatmen there, only those belonging to the Mallah caste are allowed to work as boatmen on the river and to take passengers for profit. However, not all Mallahs are boatmen.²³ The majority of Mallahs work in other manual occupations, such as building, painting, sari weaving and other small industries. Although most of those Mallahs who do work as boatmen are primarily concerned with taking passengers, others work as fishermen and in agriculture on the eastern side of the river. Therefore, what determines a person's occupation as a boatman is not only his caste, but also a host of other factors, the most important being family relations and ancestral rights to operate a boat on a specific ghat. On every ghat resident boatmen, known as *ghatwars*, have hereditary rights to take passengers from that specific ghat. These *ghatwars* often employ 'workers' or 'drivers' (*mallahis*) to assist them in the work of taking passengers and maintaining their boats. This internal division within the community will be addressed later in the discussion. For now it is important to note that a significant part of the boatmen's work also involves conducting rituals for local Hindus, who come to the riverscape specifically for this purpose. These rituals are conducted alongside those performed by Brahmin priests on the ghats.

Hinduism and Rituals

Hinduism is often described as a way of life. Not only do rituals and ceremonies underpin important periods in life, such as marriage, birth, childhood and death, they permeate daily routines like eating and bathing. The most common daily rituals, *pujas* (worship of deities), are often performed with practical aims in mind, such as achieving economic success, recovering from illness, purging pollution, removing one's sins and avoiding harmful elements that afflict people. Many of these daily rituals are performed more elaborately during important life-cycle events such as the transition from childhood to adulthood and—often closely connected with the latter—marriage.

In Hindu culture marriage is a cherished sacrament. Appropriately, it is celebrated by an elaborate series of rituals that may occur over a long period of time. In Varanasi most wedding ceremonies are followed by a post-wedding ritual called *Ganga Pujaiya*, which generally occurs a day after the main festivities and culminates on the riverscape.

The latter ceremony begins with a procession in which the newlyweds and members of their family stop at various local shrines to worship local protector deities of the

²³ The Mallah caste (*jati*) is considered to be relatively low in the caste hierarchy; the caste is also known by the names of Nishad, Manjhi and Khevat, all of which are used interchangeably by the boatmen themselves.

neighbourhood. On reaching the riverfront, the party performs a *puja* to the holy river to receive *Ganga Ma*'s blessing for the newlyweds. This ritual is generally conducted by a resident Brahmin priest (*panda*) from the ghat. The *panda* instructs the mother of the groom in the performance of the ritual and then utters a series of Sanskrit *mantras* to sanctify it. On completion, the priest receives a *dakshina* or fee for his services.

Sometimes *Ganga Pujaiya* rituals in Varanasi are followed by another for *Ganga Ma*. This happens when a *manauti* or vow of propitiation to *Ganga Ma* has been made by the mother of the groom. A mother who seeks a successful marriage for her son may pledge to *Ganga Ma* that when her son marries she will perform an offering for her. This, I have been told, is also intended to secure *Ganga Ma*'s blessing for the marriage. A long ritual garland (*ar par ka mala*)²⁴ is offered as propitiation when the wish has been fulfilled.²⁵ The ritual occurs in three stages and at three locations. The first stage is performed on the ghat close to the river, the second on the barren eastern side of the river and the final stage in midstream. Significantly, it is the boatmen who conduct this post-marital ritual—not the Brahmin priests. In the particular ceremony described here, my informant (also the owner of the boat) had three other boatmen working as assistants. In this instance an older boatman known as Babaji performed the ceremony. As his nickname indicates, his appearance resembles that of a Baba or holy man (*sadhu*). Babaji is often employed on such occasions due to his devout appearance: long white beard and maroon loincloth.

The family performing the ceremony consisted of the mother who had made the *manauti*, her son and daughter-in-law, and six close family members, including a barber's wife.²⁶ Besides the groom, all the participants were women.

The first stage of the ritual, performed on the riverfront (or ghat), involved the consecration of the boat and the long ritual garland. Here Babaji assumed a role similar to that of a priest, serving as an intermediary between deity (in this case the boat) and worshipper. Babaji carefully instructed the mother how to make offerings to the prow (*sikah*) of the boat and the ritual garland. The ritual procedure and items used, such as turmeric paste, vermilion, marigolds and camphor, resembled the general manner in which any *puja* is performed for a deity. By the end of the

²⁴ My transliterations represent the dialect form spoken in Banaras, generally referred to by locals as Banarasi Boli, or Bhojpuri. Thus, the word for a boat which is *nav* is pronounced as *naw*, so that the 'v' sound is commonly replaced by 'w'. In addition, Bhojpuri follows the eastern Hindi tendency to regard all nouns as being masculine; for this reason we find boatmen commonly say '*ar par ka malla*', rather than '*ar par ki mala*'.

²⁵ A *manauti* may also be made for the success of a business or the birth of a son. In the latter, along with the offering of a ritual garland, the son is also symbolically offered to *Ganga Ma*.

²⁶ A barber's wife is another ritual specialist who assists in many family-related ceremonies.

worship the boat looked like a fitting place of worship. Each member of the family was then instructed to perform *pranam* (gesture of respect or salutation) to the boat.

I asked the young owner of the boat why people behave toward the boat in such a way and he replied: 'One must treat the boat as a house of worship. To touch the boat with the forehead and hands is the same as one would do when going up the steps of a temple. This is because the boat is seen as a step to *Ganga Ma*: the boat is like a god, and only with a boat can you cross the river'. Later, another boatman expanded, saying that the boat is the goddess *Tarini Ma* and by performing *pranam* to the boat one touches the feet of God. I asked him if everyone who performs *Pujaiya* in Varanasi does so and he replied: 'Everyone, regardless of caste must touch the feet of *Ganga Ma* and *Tarini Ma*'.²⁷ He pointed out that this worship ensures the safe sailing of the boat across the river.

The common word for boat is *naw*, whereas in the ritual context it is referred to as the goddess *Tarini Ma*. The name derives from the word *taran*, which is defined in the dictionary thus: 'crossing over (as a river) and deliverance by crossing (the ocean of birth and rebirth), or a title of the Supreme Being'.²⁸ This notion of 'crossing the river' is a common metaphor in Hinduism; it represents the ubiquitous human journey through life and into the afterlife. The boat that carries the deceased across the ocean of creation to the point of rebirth is recurrent in devotional songs, myth and literature.

After performing *pranam* the mother was asked by Babaji to offer Rs101 to the boat and garland respectively.²⁹ At this point the mother refused vehemently and a heated discussion developed. At length Babaji offered to lower the sum to Rs101 in total. After further negotiation the mother finally agreed to pay Rs61, which Babaji grudgingly accepted.

The party then boarded the boat and was carried to the other side of the river. Here a similar ritual sequence to the one conducted on the ghat was performed. This time, though, instead of worshipping the boat, three river goddesses—Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati—were worshipped. When the ritual activities performed by the mother were completed, Babaji unexpectedly recited a Sanskrit *mantra*. The boatmen do not usually do this, as *mantras* are widely believed to be the privileged domain of Brahmin priests. Nonetheless some boatmen, like Babaji, do sometimes recite

²⁷ I should emphasise that boatmen also conduct such rituals for Brahmins.

²⁸ R.S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.440.

²⁹ It is considered auspicious to offer a sum ending in the figure one.

them.³⁰ Although no one could explain the precise meaning of the *mantra* to me (not even the ghat priests), it was said to be essential for the completion of the ritual and to bestow good luck. It seems that such recitations are employed to demonstrate and confirm the 'ritual authority' of the boatmen as skilful and competent religious specialists. And Babaji's ritual authority indeed seemed to be confirmed here, as the worshippers touched his feet with reverence, calling him *maharaj* (a title commonly used when referring to a Brahmin priest). However this extra performance came at a price. After completing his recitation, Babaji requested an additional payment, arguing that, as priests received *dakshina* from worshippers, so should the Khevats (boatmen).

Although the core price for the ritual had been negotiated at the outset, Babaji asked for additional sums of money to be offered after each phase. This is a familiar technique employed by both the boatmen and Brahmin priests in Varanasi to exact as much money as possible from worshippers. However, it is also considered the priests'/ritual specialists' right (*haq*) to ask for this money as payment for their services.

The mother then asked Babaji to bless the newlyweds. Babaji placed a flower garland around their necks and applied a *tilak* (red dot) to their foreheads. The newlyweds then touched his feet. Babaji asked the bride to extend her garment forward so he could symbolically 'fill her lap' (*goda barhai*) and thus be blessed with a male child. He did this by filling the lap of the bride with sanctified food (*prasad*). Next, Babaji instructed the newlyweds to ask forgiveness from *Ganga Ma* for their sins and to protect them from any evil. The family then re-embarked and the party set off.

The final stage of the ceremony was performed in midstream where the boatmen instructed the mother to throw money into the river as propitiatory offering (*nichawar*), which is said to ward off trouble for the participants in the ritual. While the mother of the groom was throwing coins to *Ganga Ma* the boatmen shouted '*Ganga Ma ki jai*' ('Hail *Ganga Ma*') and all the participants replied in unison '*Jai*'. The boat then ceremoniously circled three times and headed back to the ghat.³¹ With the ceremony completed the newlyweds and the family headed up the steps of the ghat, and the owner of the boat distributed the earnings to those boatmen who had participated in the *Ganga Pujaiya*.

³⁰ Babaji told me that he had learned this *mantra* from wedding invitations. Other boatmen told me they learned it by watching Brahmin priests.

³¹ According to the boatmen the meaning of circling the boat three times is similar to the ritual circumambulation of a temple or deity (*parikrama*).

The Needle and the Sword: Conceptualising the Role of Ritual Specialists

When I asked a Brahmin priest how the boatmen, given their low-caste status, are permitted to conduct *Ganga Pujaiya* rituals he said with poise: 'When you need a needle you cannot use a sword'.

One way in which this saying can be interpreted is in line with the formulations of David Mandelbaum and Lawrence Babb regarding the role and place of ritual specialists in Hindu society.³² According to them the role of the ritual specialist is consistent with a view of Hindu religion as two-fold. The first level is pan-Indian in its jurisdiction, associated with the higher, scriptural traditions and concerned with its sanctioning of social order. The second is local and oriented to the pragmatic needs of individuals.³³ Accordingly, ritual specialists complement each other by operating in their respective domains.

Babb's observations are especially useful for understanding aspects related to the local shrines and deities in Varanasi. For him the local deities fit into a purported structure underlying the Hindu religious system—based on foundational concepts like purity and pollution. The local protector deities worshipped en route to the River Ganges in neighbourhood shrines during the post-wedding ceremony are non-scriptural gods. These deities, Babb argues, are lower level deities (protectors) and are worshipped 'in the contexts of childbearing and marriage' because they are more accessible and more involved in human affairs, and have the capacity to ward off any harmful elements that can afflict newlyweds in this time of transition.³⁴ As inferior gods in the hierarchical pantheon they demand a lesser degree of purity; hence there is no need for a priest.

Similarly, it could be argued that the boatmen are low-caste ritual specialists who deal with minor deities (such as the boat in the form of the deity *Tarini Ma*) and officiate rituals that serve the practical needs of the local population with respect to marriage and for other domestic concerns such as birth and child-rearing, illness, and economic livelihood. According to this interpretation, insofar as the boatmen perform priestly roles their activities are confined to local settings, and do not amount to higher or proper priestly functions.³⁵ Some of the details of the

³² D. Mandelbaum, 'Transcendental and Pragmatic Aspects of Religion', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol.69 (1966), pp.1174–91; and L. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

³³ Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, pp.212–3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.243–5.

³⁵ For a similar analysis of rituals and ritual specialists in Varanasi which employs the great/little tradition model, see M.J. Katz, *The Children of Assi: The Transference of Religious Traditions and Communal Inclusion in Banaras*

Ganga Pujaiya, as discussed later, may reinforce this interpretation—for instance its optional nature; the pivotal involvement of women; and the apparent acceptance by the local Brahmin priests of the boatmen's ritual aspirations.

In the case of the *Ganga Pujaiya* ritual the priest's enigmatic statement quoted above seems to reinforce the idea proposed by Mandelbaum and Babb: it suggests that Brahmin priests see themselves as 'sword-wielders', 'above' the performance of local, minor rituals requiring only the manipulation of a 'needle'. Or to put it another way, it implies that the role of ritual specialist was imparted or granted to the boatmen by the high-caste priests. If this interpretation is correct, ritual serves to reproduce social hierarchy and labour relations and thus maintain the unswerving social order.

Babb's analysis echoes the structural and functional distinctions commonly made by orientalist and anthropologists alike. Caste is central, and the society revolves around religious principles of purity and pollution.³⁶ As Babb puts it, there is a divine hierarchy. In this view, overriding social structure determines the activities, behaviour and values of groups and individuals. All political and economic activities are subordinated to the ancient dominating religious structure, which maintains the hegemonic Brahminical order.

On the face of it, this line of argument is borne out by an analysis of the *Ganga Pujaiya* ritual process in the manner of Victor Turner.³⁷ We may see the boatmen assuming only a momentary priestly role in a 'liminal phase' of the wider wedding ritual. After this liminal phase, the normal hierarchical social order resumes. This interpretation, however, begs the questions of how the boatmen themselves interpret and negotiate their role; and how they are perceived by those using their services. For those involved, is *Ganga Pujaiya* a minor part of the marriage ceremony—or a central one? In the post-liminal phase is there an acceptance by the boatmen of a return to the ordained hierarchy?

(Göteborg: Department of Religious Studies, 1993); and L.P. Vidyarthi, M. Jha and B.N. Saraswati, *The Sacred Complex of Kashi* (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1979).

³⁶ This structuralist view of Hindu society has been advocated most prominently by Dumont's analysis of caste in India. See L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System and Its Implications* (London: Paladin, 1972). Dumont has been criticised for using structural abstractions that prioritise the stable and unchanging religious sphere over the ever-changing economic and political ones. For a critique of Dumont's argument, see, for example, N. Dirks, 'Reading Culture: Anthropology and the Textualisation of India', in V. Daniel and J.M. Peck (eds), *Culture/Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp.275–95; D. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), pp.54–85; and M. Searle-Chatterjee and S. Ursula, 'Introduction', in M. Searle-Chatterjee and S. Ursula (eds), *Contextualising Caste: Post-Dumontian Approaches* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.1–24.

³⁷ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969).

Our study shows that, for the mother at least, the *Ganga Pujaiya* is an important religious ritual. She believes that both the religious vow and subsequent ritual will influence her life, her son's marriage and future grandchildren.³⁸ As a result, the boatmen are viewed by her as important actors, indeed, as primary ritual specialists within the compass of the ceremony.

For the boatmen the ritual is a way of gaining recognition for their unique role on the riverscape. Secondly, it is a means to gain control over a ritual space, often considered the domain of Brahmins. This is significant because the boatmen believe their role as ritual specialists has been granted to them not by Brahminical sanctioning, but by virtue of their caste, occupation and relationship with *Ganga Ma*. Moreover, their claims and assertions are not designed to simply emulate Brahminical practices and support claims for higher status, as assumed under the logic of Sanskritisation. Rather, these assertions are products of historical dynamics and ongoing politics within the boatman community as well as outside it over crucial resources. By firmly establishing their position as ritual specialists on the riverscape, the boatmen register their claim over physical space that is valuable beyond the ritual context.

The boatmen employ pan-Hindu symbols and myths as a resource because they intuitively understand that these constitute 'the single most important evaluative norm within Hinduism'.³⁹ Moreover, the boatmen have their own interpretations and emphasis within that tradition. They do not merely wish to take a place made ready for them, as it were, by the Hindu religious elite. Rather, they bolster their claim for control over sacred space, and pursue their quest for a more secure livelihood, on the basis of a version of Hinduism that is theirs, and in some measure shared with others—for example, the locals performing the ritual.

The Ritual Performance

Ritual and myth serve as the indigenous framework within which such claims over sacred space and secure livelihood are made. The success of the boatmen's claims to act as ritual specialists is, in part, dependent on the acceptance of such claims by

³⁸ The fact that the participants in these rituals are mostly women could also suggest a gender division that corresponds to certain religious practices associated with tradition, family welfare and the domestic sphere. However I would argue, following Hancock, that by simply assigning life-cycle rituals to the traditional, domestic sphere, we are reproducing similar dichotomising tropes (i.e. modernity/tradition, public/domestic) that limit further exploration into the concrete alternative meaning that such ritual performances hold for the participants. See M. Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

³⁹ Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, p.27.

other actors, such as those performing the rituals (i.e. newlyweds) and Brahmin priests. The ritual described in the first part of the paper offers an account of how the local community recognise the boatmen in their priestly roles within a ritual context, but there are limits to this recognition. On several occasions when asked to explain the difference between boatmen and priests in the *Ganga Pujaiya* ritual, people said that 'boatmen cannot chant the *mantras*'. This response derives from the common notion that chanting *mantras* is the exclusive mandate of the priests. According to the ancient Vedic tradition, low *shudra* castes are barred from reading and chanting *mantras*. However, in the local ritual context the boatmen defy such authoritative injunctions.

As seen earlier, Babaji chanted *mantras* and blessed the participants in the post-wedding ceremony. His conduct of the ritual followed a prescribed order starting with the consecration of the boat (*Tarini Ma*), which assured the participants of his authority and knowledge. His use of *mantras* and blessing the bride indicate that the boatman's role is not merely one of assistant or ritual associate, but that of officiating priest. Indeed, Babaji faithfully (though perhaps with a hint of irony) imitates the Brahmin priests by using similar gestures and Sanskritic language (for example *dakshina*).

There are several ways that one may interpret Babaji's actions, all of them inevitably coloured by the anthropologist's position in relation to the 'subjects' in the field, and his or her intellectual and professional orientation.⁴⁰ For example, from a Subaltern Studies perspective, one could read Babaji's ritual performance not only as an imitation of priestly gestures, but also as public subversion and violation of priestly authority. However, this would reduce the discussion to the binary opposition between the dominant priest and subordinate boatman, disregarding the mixed intentions of the participants involved and the internal dynamics that exist within the subaltern category itself.⁴¹ As mentioned earlier, there are power relations and internal differences within the boatman community itself—for example between the hereditary boatman residents of the ghats (*ghatwars*) and their employees (*mallahis*). In this context, Babaji's ritual performance may be seen as an implicit assertion of his primacy over other casual workers, who may be younger and stronger in rowing the boats, but are not as qualified as he is in ritual conduct.

The emphasis on power relations, however, should not be abstracted from the cultural and symbolic dimensions evident in the ritual performance. It may well

⁴⁰ M. Thapan, 'Rethinking Anthropology Anew', in M. Thapan (ed.), *Anthropological Journeys: Reflections on Fieldwork* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998), p.6.

⁴¹ For a similar argument, see S. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.37 (1995), pp.173–93.

be that by acting as an authoritative and competent ritual specialist Babaji is not trying to imitate a Brahmin priest, but rather attempting to dispel some of the common stereotypical ideas associated with the boatman community, such as that it is composed of low-caste 'criminal types', only interested in the money of the worshippers.⁴² At the same time, I am convinced that Babaji believes, as he told me in a conversation, that by mediating *Ganga Ma* for the worshippers, he is fulfilling and enacting his god-given right, privilege and duty (*haq*) to conduct rituals as a member of the boatman caste. The following section will examine how the boatmen invoke caste identity, myth and other cultural symbols to enforce and assert their rights to conduct rituals and maintain control over sacred space.

Myth, Caste and Identity

Caste is an important identity marker used by the boatmen to distinguish themselves from others and assert their role as ritual specialists. Boatmen often cite the story of Khevat from the epic *Ramayana* as a turning-point for their caste within the social structure of Hindu society.⁴³ In this well-known episode, Lord Rama (God incarnate), his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, recently banished into exile, arrive at the bank of the River Ganges. Lord Rama calls Khevat, asking him to ferry them across to the other side. To Rama's surprise Khevat initially refuses, demanding that Rama first allow him to wash the god-king's feet—a stipulation he justifies by cleverly citing a previous episode in Rama's travels in which the Lord touched a stone with his holy feet and turned it into a woman.⁴⁴ What if Lord Rama touches his boat and it turns into a woman, Khevat asks? He will lose his livelihood. Rama concedes and Khevat washes the Lord's feet. Khevat then drinks the sacred water.⁴⁵ At the sight of Khevat washing God's feet, all the gods of the Hindu pantheon shower flowers on the blessed boatman. Upon arriving at the other side Sita goes to pay the boatman his fee. The latter refuses, arguing that 'they are from the same caste/community and he cannot accept money from another boatman'; that Lord Rama's calling is similar to his own as he is responsible for carrying people across the river of life (*bahavasagar*) to the far shore of liberation (*moksha*).

The boatmen cite this story as the dawning of a new age for their boatman community. 'Prior to Khevat meeting Lord Ram we were considered a very low

⁴² Interestingly, some boatmen emphasised the difference between themselves and the *pandas* who have a notorious name in Varanasi for their immoral behaviour and dishonest practices. See, for example, E.B. Havell, *Benares the Sacred City: Sketches of Hindu Life and Religion* (Delhi: Book Faith, rpr. 2000 [1905]); and R.R. Mehrotra, 'Sociology of Secret Languages', in R.P.B. Singh (ed.), *Banaras (Varanasi): Cosmic Order, Sacred City, Hindu Traditions* (Varanasi: Tara Book Agency, 1993), pp.197–214.

⁴³ Khevat, in this case a name, is also a term for a boatman/rower that derives from the verb *khenā*—to row.

⁴⁴ The episode refers to a woman (Ahilya) who was cursed by a sage and turned into a stone until she was restored to her human form by the touch of Rama's feet.

⁴⁵ In Hinduism washing the feet of God is considered a highly meritorious activity.

caste. Wherever we sat down afterwards people would dig out the clay'.⁴⁶ This suggests that their very presence was considered polluting for some castes and that after this pivotal point in their caste history boatmen were then honoured by society. Further, the myth shows the boatman as a devoted, generous servant of the Lord himself. The tactic of associating one's caste with a deity from time immemorial or from a mythical age to elevate its social status is of course a fairly common one in Hindu society.⁴⁷ The important point to note here is that among Varanasi boatmen such pan-Hindu symbols and beliefs have become not just a means of social legitimation, but a way of explaining and defending their intrusion into the Brahminical world of ritual.

Relationship with *Ganga Ma*

Another justification employed by the boatmen in support of their right to conduct rituals is their intimate association with *Ganga Ma*. *Ganga Ma* is an iconic symbol of Hindu civilisation and national identity. As a river goddess, *Ganga Ma* embodies the universal qualities of virtue, high morality and purity, and she is venerated throughout the subcontinent.⁴⁸ She has also been used as a symbol of unity in independent India. In her discussion of the association between rivers, femininity and motherhood, Feldhaus suggests that rivers are commonly perceived by Hindus as places of fecundity, both in material and cultural terms.⁴⁹ In our case, the River Ganges is also perceived as a mother who provides for all her children. Not surprisingly, therefore, the vows and rituals performed to Mother Ganga are often directed at shoring up family prosperity and welfare. Thus, we find that the offerings made in return for Mother Ganga's generosity and protection are usually ones seen as appropriate for a 'mother', such as saris and golden earrings (and even the symbolic sacrificing of children, as we shall see below). What is important to emphasise, though, is that the boatmen regard their relationship with Mother Ganga as unique and exclusive: that is, the River Ganga is perceived as their mother and provider not simply in ritual circumstances, but as part of their everyday encounters with the river. The river directly provides their food (fish and agricultural produce) and is their major source of livelihood (ferrying passengers).

⁴⁶ Numerous murals depict this episode on community houses, caste temples and some ghat walls. It also figures in well-known devotional songs and popular television series, for example in Sagar's *Ramayana*, which is based on Tulsi Das' version of the epic (CE 1547–1623) and referred to in the Oscar-nominated film, *Lagaan*.

⁴⁷ This method was particularly common under British rule and the introduction of the census. See for example, I. Ahmad, 'Caste Mobility Movements in North India', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.8, no.2 (1971), pp.164–91; and M.N. Srinivas, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ See, for example, D. Eck, *Banaras City of Light* (London: Penguin, 1983); and D. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁴⁹ A. Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

As such, the boatmen conceive their spiritual role (as her sons) in gendered and reciprocal terms. They believe they have been chosen to protect, guard and serve Mother Ganga. A brief examination of another life-cycle ritual associated with the Ganges will further illustrate how the boatmen perceive their role in society and the ritual economy of Varanasi.

*Bachcha Khudana*⁵⁰ is a ritual in which a young child (usually a boy) is offered to the river in an act of propitiation for Mother Ganga's help in the survival and well-being of the child as if he was her own.⁵¹ The ritual involves throwing the child into midstream and his retrieval by a boatman. Thereafter the boatman returns the child to his family and receives credit in monetary and status terms. Apart from indicating a family's immense trust, faith and confidence in the boatmen, this ritual serves to reinforce the boatmen's own sense of place and identity. Boatmen regard the performance of this ritual as their *haq*;⁵² that is, they have a moral obligation, duty and responsibility to perform the ritual for the child, his family and Mother Ganga by virtue of their social/ritual identity. Such considerations also figure in what boatmen generally see as the demeaning aspects of their work—rituals associated with death—which involve the immersion of corpses and ashes into the River Ganga.⁵³

In Hinduism any association with death is polluting and carries social stigmas. Although the majority of bodies to be cremated in Varanasi are taken to the main cremation ghats, occasionally dead bodies are brought to other ghats for immersion.⁵⁴ Interestingly, despite the fact that boatmen often say that it is their *haq* (duty) to perform these tasks, in practice many boatmen, especially the more powerful *ghatwars*, avoid dealing with corpses personally, delegating the task to their workers (*mallahis*). Others completely renounce their rights, preferring not to earn from such a stigmatised activity.⁵⁵ In this way the more powerful *ghatwars* are able to assert a 'moral' and social supremacy over the weaker members of their community and present a 'cleaner' image, both to the rest of the community and to the outside world.

⁵⁰ Literally, the term means 'causing the child to jump'.

⁵¹ Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood*, pp.122–6.

⁵² The term *haq* covers a range of meanings that vary according to context, including duty, privilege, right, authority, jurisdiction and obligation. In this case one meaning is related to the notion of 'property', as the child is considered the 'rightful possession' of the boatmen once he has been offered to the river.

⁵³ For a more detailed examination of these rituals, see A. Doron, 'Sons of the Ganga: The Boatmen and the Riverscape of Varanasi', unpublished PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2005.

⁵⁴ For a discussion on death in Varanasi, see J.P. Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁵ For an interesting analysis regarding the morality of exchange in India, see J.P. Parry, 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', in M. Bloch and J. Parry (eds), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.64–93.

Competition among the *ghatwars* has been fuelled, too, by changes in the city's riverscape economy, particularly by its rapidly-growing tourist and pilgrimage industry. This has resulted in some boatmen becoming more prosperous than others, which in turn has enabled them to relinquish their rights to conduct death rituals. However, the economic changes taking place in the riverfront economy also mean that many boatmen feel less secure about the future of their livelihood. In this context, their assertion that to ply boats on the river is a 'god-given' right by virtue of their inherent connection to Mother Ganga is easily understood. Such claims are a way for the boatmen to gain broad social recognition and justify their maintaining a monopoly over river transportation and the more lucrative and respectable rituals associated with the Ganges, such as the *Ganga Pujaiya*.

The boatmen use the name *Gangaputras* (sons of the Ganga) to further declare themselves as a particularly privileged group of people closely associated with the river. The name *Gangaputras*, however, is a contested one. Brahmin priests who live on the riverbank in Varanasi also claim this name and refuse to acknowledge the boatmen's claim to this title.⁵⁶ The boatmen often say that they are the original *Gangaputras* and have been since time immemorial. The name also figures in their caste journals as one of the numerous names of the Mallah/Nishad caste. This can be interpreted not only as overt contestation of priestly authority in Varanasi, but as reclaiming their lost and suppressed origins and rights, which according to several boatmen have been deliberately hidden by Brahmin priests and the authorities over the years.

One interview I conducted with a Brahmin (not a priest) and his wife after a *Ganga Pujaiya* ritual attests to the important role of the boatmen in the ceremonies.

Q: Are the Mallahs like pandits (priests)?

A: Yes, during particular times when they do *Pujaiya* for the boat, they are the *karndar* (steers-men and boatmen) and the *khevia* (a rower, boatman) of *Gangaji*.

Q: How is it that the boatmen can bless a bride with a child and apply *tilak*?

A: Because they are the *karndar* of Ganga and live on the bank, they are considered the biggest devotees of *Gangaji*. That is the reason we ask the boatmen to give us *prasad* and bless us and to 'fill the lap' of a bride

⁵⁶ While Parry has rightly pointed out the ambivalent nature of Brahminical superiority and authority within the ritual economy of Varanasi, it is important to emphasise that the city remains a Brahminical stronghold. As such the priestly community, however heterogenous, is by and large economically, politically and ritually superior to the boatmen. For a detailed account of the political rivalries among the various priestly groups in Varanasi, see Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp.97–109.

and ensure further happiness in the family.

Q: So are they *Gangaputras*?

A: No they are not, they try to prove it and force people to believe it, but to us Brahmins they will never say they are *Gangaputras* because we know they are not. But to those who don't know the truth, that is what they claim, and they prove it by referring to the *Ramayana* and the story of Khevat to show their importance and then they can ask for more *dakshina*.

From this account we can see the complexity of social interaction reflecting the ambiguous nature of social hierarchy. It is also evident that the boatmen do not operate in an autonomous subaltern domain separate from that of the priests. The fact that both Brahmins and boatmen share the same social space, and operate with similar gestures and *mantras*, 'should suggest that the subaltern self [is] constantly in the process of production, mediated through symbols and processes both internal and external to the subaltern's moral and physical domain'.⁵⁷ In other words, the subversion of Brahminical authority is premised upon shared history and cultural codes, which are instrumental in the negotiation of power.

Competing over Ritual Space

To assure me that they legitimately operate as priests, the boatmen frequently cited the example of the *Shitla Ma* (Goddess of Smallpox) temple, about twenty-five kilometres outside Varanasi along the river. The goddess, *Shitla Ma*, is associated with common afflictions such as disease and human misfortune. Her worship is less elaborate and often involves witchcraft and other folklore practices. The practices in the temple of *Shitla Ma* confirm this assertion, but closer examination reveals other economic and political facets to the worship of the goddess. According to the lore of the boatmen/fishermen of the area, the image of the goddess that now adorns the temple was fished out of the water by their caste ancestors. Initially it was installed in a small shrine on the riverbank. However it seems that the goddess was not happy with this arrangement, for she appeared to the boatmen in their dreams and demanded that they build a proper temple for her.⁵⁸ The boatmen duly followed the godly injunction and the temple soon became a central place of worship for pilgrims from all over the district—which traffic brought a lot of money and offerings in kind to the boatman community. Not surprisingly the Brahmin priests of the area soon began to challenge the boatmen's right to officiate worship at the sacred site. But

⁵⁷ K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Schools and Scholars: Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project', in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol.8, no.4 (1995), p.405.

⁵⁸ See R.P.B. Singh and P.S. Rana, *Banaras Region. A Spiritual & Cultural Guide* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2002), pp.269–72.

the boatmen refused to give way and not long ago there was a violent confrontation in which several boatmen and priests were killed. The matter is currently in court, but for now, the boatmen have been granted the sole right to perform rituals at the temple.

Apart from demonstrating how low-caste/class peasants have challenged and resisted Brahminical domination, this incident offers other important insights. First, the ritual performance acts as a legitimising device for the Mallahs; secondly, it shows that legitimacy derives not only from the classic (pan-Hindu) religious traditions, but also from the state; and finally, that caste/class conflicts are not caused by 'religious' or 'cultural' or 'economic' factors acting in isolation, but by all three *interacting* dynamically.

Indigenous Categories and Contested Pasts

In his seminal article on temple politics in south India, Arjun Appadurai dispenses with sociological constructs and proposes an examination of an indigenous set of norms 'within which the charters of specific subgroups are constructed, defended and mutually evaluated'.⁵⁹ Just as Appadurai argues in relation to the south Indian temple, we have seen that there are different sources (textual and non-textual) that groups refer to when seeking to justify their authority and credibility for the charter in question. It is true that the authority of the classic religious canon is imperative. However, documents reaffirming a group's authority, antiquity and legitimacy are not limited to the religious authority. In fact, more recent legal documentation from the colonial and postcolonial period is also of great importance to all parties involved in conflicts over ritual space and struggles for livelihood.

In our case it is difficult to trace exactly how and when the boatmen gained official recognition as ritual specialists in Varanasi. Nevertheless it appears that in seeking legal authority for their rights, the boatmen have followed a strikingly similar pattern to that of Brahmin and other higher-caste groups during the colonial period. In colonial writings there is clear evidence of competition among Brahmin groups over rights to conduct rituals and take shares in the offerings made by pilgrims on the ghats. The Benares District *Gazetteer* mentions the *Gangaputras* as the most prominent group, noting that on several occasions they were challenged in the courts with respect to their monopoly over ritual rights on the ghats.⁶⁰ This is especially significant since formal recognition in places like the 'census, gazetteers, reports...came to represent the power of official discourse

⁵⁹ A. Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource', in *Man* (n.s.), Vol.18 (1981), p.204.

⁶⁰ H.R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer. Vol. XXVI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1909), pp.69–71.

to name and fix the status of caste groups in local mindsets'.⁶¹ Yet this colonial documentation does not mention the boatmen as one of the groups vying for control over the sacred space of the river or their role in the ritual economy of Varanasi. In fact, as late as 1931 the boatmen were classified officially as a criminal caste,⁶² which inevitably damaged their credibility and limited their access to official institutions.⁶³ This may be one of the reason why the boatmen's voices hardly figure in colonial records. Other reasons may include the fact that colonial perceptions of Indian society relied heavily on the views of Brahmin scholars whom the British saw as the actual guardians of religious knowledge and practice in India,⁶⁴ and the fact that Brahmin priests were the main custodians of the family genealogical records (*jajmans*) that served as 'hard' evidence for caste claims in courts of law.

Although the boatmen state that it is their god-given right and privilege to conduct rituals on the riverscape, they add that these 'immemorial' rights have also been recognised and ratified by the government and, more recently, by the courts; and they claim that Ashish Manjhi, one of the most powerful and wealthy boatmen in Varanasi who operates 25 boats on the main ghat, has the papers to prove it. This latter claim, at least, is true. In 1968 the chief civil court of Varanasi ruled in Manjhi's favour in a case brought by him against the ghat priests. This decision set a precedent by formally recognising the boatmen's rights as ritual specialists. Further, the court settlement, while awarding the priests from the ghat the right to pocket any items and money offered to them by worshippers on the ghat, granted to Manjhi (and by implication his brother boatmen) all items designed for the worship of *Ganga Ma* (i.e. the river).⁶⁵ These rights are not yet set in stone. Nonetheless, as one lawyer told me, the very fact that a boatman has managed to produce a series of documents dating from the mid twentieth century and stamped by the court's approval is valuable. It serves as a formal recognition of their customary rights to ply boats on the river and conduct rituals on the ghat and may provide the basis to refute possible challenges from ghat priests in the future. Moreover, these documents have also been useful in preventing boatmen—a conflicted and fractious group—from attempting to encroach on

⁶¹ V. Das, 'Social Sciences and the Publics', in V. Das (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.10.

⁶² A.C. Turner (ed.), 'Report', Vol.XVIII, Part 1, *Census of India, 1931, United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. (Allahabad: Government Press), p. 631.

⁶³ For a detailed examination of the Mallahs and the British census, see J.S. Tiwary, 'Caste and the Colonial State: Mallahs in the Census', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.35, no.3 (2001), pp.319–54.

⁶⁴ B. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, rpr. 1998 [1987]), pp.142–3.

⁶⁵ 'The State v. Mata Prasad', Suit no.323 (1968), The Court of Civil Judge, Varanasi.

one another's territory. This is important as disputes over territory and passenger distribution occur often.⁶⁶

Unlike the violent case concerning the *Shitla Ma* temple, here a boatman managed to establish his rights as a ritual specialist by reaching a negotiated settlement in court. The fact that conflict was resolved and the position of boatmen subjugation mitigated enabled a certain level of cooperation between boatmen and ghat priests.

During my time in Varanasi I did not see or hear of any disputes regarding *Ganga Pujaiya* on any of the major ghats in Varanasi. In fact, there appears to be a degree of co-operation between the 'dominated' and the 'dominant'. On the major ghats the priests and boatmen share an elaborate secret language designed to communicate information regarding the economic status of pilgrims which allows them to maximise their asking price.⁶⁷ Crossing the river costs on average between Rs30 and Rs50 per trip, whereas for ritual services the fees charged can exceed Rs800, a total that does not include the offerings of gold earrings and other precious items that are routinely made to the river goddess—which begs the question of why the customers tolerate these hefty exactions.⁶⁸ There are several reasons. First, the *Ganga Pujaiya* is an auspicious occasion (a life-cycle event) where the newlyweds and their families are expected to provide generous payment to those serving them. Second, as we have seen, ritual boating is different from everyday boating as it empowers the boatmen to make certain claims over offerings made by the family and to use 'priestly' techniques for drawing money. Finally, on some ghats, there is a different system of passenger distribution for rituals, which eliminates competition from other boatmen and allows boating prices to be very high. One could also argue, as do some locals, that the boatmen charge a high price for rituals simply because they can, and they can because their role as ritual specialists is socially and legally recognised.

The Varanasi boatmen are watchful of anyone attempting to encroach upon their livelihood. The so-called 'dominated' needle remains sharp. According to the authorities, anyone can ply a boat and carry passengers on the Ganges provided he has a

⁶⁶ One example is a court case where the plaintiff, a boatman from Shitla ghat, asserted his customary rights to conduct rituals and ply boats from the ghat to the exclusion of other competing boatmen. See Suit no.146 (1949), Court of Additional Civil Judge, Banaras.

⁶⁷ For an in-depth examination of the secret language of the pandas of Varanasi, see Mehrotra, 'Sociology of Secret Languages'. For a discussion of pilgrimage and tourism in Varanasi, see A. Doron, 'Encountering the "Other": Pilgrims, Tourists and Boatmen in the City of Varanasi', in *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol.16, no.2 (2005), pp.157–8.

⁶⁸ During high season the average weekly income of a boatman working on one of the major ghats may range between Rs400 and Rs600.

licence to do so.⁶⁹ Yet by restricting the trade to caste members possessing hereditary rights of access to the river, the boatmen have managed to repel repeated attempts from both outsiders and caste insiders to impinge on their livelihood.⁷⁰ Thus while caste is quickly brought to the fore when the boatmen need to reassert their role as ritual specialists against the priests, occupational identity becomes more prominent when disputes take place within the boatman community itself.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed how rituals conducted by the boatmen of Varanasi serve to empower the boatmen and interrupt priestly authority and, at the same time, reinforce their rights to ply boats on the river and operate as ritual specialists. My conclusion is that the structural–functionalist and Subaltern Studies paradigms are useful, but limited for understanding daily life and social interactions in that they rely on dichotomising and reified categories that inhibit nuance and meaningful analysis such as I have tried to bring to bear on the discourse and practices of the Varanasi boatmen, their clients and others engaged in the world of the ghats.

According to the structural–functionalist paradigm each person has an assigned role that serves to stabilise and ensure the harmonious and integrated social order. From this perspective the priest's maxim concerning the respective roles of the 'needles' and 'swords' in the ritual context is reinforced. The Brahmin priest (the sword) is perceived as representing the pure and authoritative traditions in Hinduism, performing important rituals, whereas the low-caste boatman (the needle) operates locally, performing rituals that are seen as mere superstitious practices. This implies that both the ritual and the boatmen are insignificant in the larger picture of order and integration. In fact, as I have demonstrated, for the mothers and families who perform the *Ganga Pujaiya* the ritual is highly important. Moreover, the role of the boatmen as capable navigators who mediate *Ganga Ma* for the devotees is a vital one.

The Subaltern Studies emphasis on locating agency and experience among the subaltern groups is useful for examining how the boatmen contest priestly authority and undermine its morality. However in this case study I have sought to demonstrate that the boatmen should not be viewed as simply dispossessed subalterns operating in an independent domain and resisting Brahminical domination. My examination of the

⁶⁹ Licences are issued annually by the Municipal Corporation of Varanasi for a fee ranging between Rs80 and Rs350, depending on the size and type of boat.

⁷⁰ Recently commercial boats have tried to earn money from the expanding pilgrimage/tourist business. However, the boatman community has succeeded, to a large extent, in preventing such efforts. I cannot expand in this paper on the various strategies employed by boatmen to maintain their monopoly on the river.

ritual practices involving boatmen, priests and other local actors shows that power relations exist both within and outside the boatman community. Thus, one finds that within the river economy boatmen are both dominated and dominant. They may contest Brahminical order and authority, yet at the same time may imitate it and draw their strategic positioning from it. Boatmen continually construct their identity by selectively drawing from a variety of sources to empower themselves in relation to others. Moreover, claims over rights and control of sacred space do come from 'below'.

Finally, although the examples cited above indicate moments of resistance and subversion of Brahminical authority, arguably they also serve to mitigate conflict. The boatmen manage to sustain a good relationship and reduce tensions with Brahmin priests precisely because they have successfully employed the past in its many forms and established their credibility as ritual specialists with authority and control over specific sacred spaces on the ghats.

The realities of social life and daily interaction within the local community suggest that agency and the plurality of context produce dynamic, multiple and overlapping identities. Other everyday practices can promote both unity and conflict between different groups and within them. None of the individuals and groups discussed above operates independently of each other. All form part of, and inform, the complex religious, social and economic network that is the city of Varanasi.