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## **Priest, Priesthood and Social Change among the Brahmins of Dakshina Kannada Chandrashekara Mayya**

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### **Abstract**

*Priest and priesthood are considered as one of the prime occupation among the Brahmins communities in India. There are number of restriction are associated with this occupation. Restriction have found in connection with inter caste relation and type of services education and marital relations. These restrictions are gradually become weak in the present context. The factors is responsible for these changes are the modernization and urbanization. They have brought major changes among the priests and priest occupation.*

***Key words: Priest, priesthood, Brahmins, modernization, urbanization.***

**Introduction:** The practice of priest and priesthood as occupation has been found among all religion. But the form of practices is differ from religion to religion, group to group and also it differ from time to time. Particularly in India, which has been multi cultured and diversified on the basis of caste and religion, language and region. In these society, the term priest and priesthood, plays major role. In India caste system has been practicing from time immemorial. As per the theories of caste system debated by the scholars caste system is purely based on the concept of purity and pollutions. These concepts of purity and pollutions are based on beliefs, customs and traditions of the people. In broader society we can see this classification very clearly between caste groups. It lead to segregation of people even among the Brahmins in general and Brahmas priest in particular.

**Meaning of Priest and priesthood:** Priesthood is kind of system where in which the priets have undergo the various process of priest ship. This system moulds the young aspirants to attain the office of a priest. Throughout the long history of religion, the priesthood has been taken an initiative in maintain its religious integrity. It mediates and maintains a state of equilibrium between the sacred and the profane aspects of human society. It has been taken a major role and has exercised a stabilizing influence on social structures and on cultic organizations. A priest is ritual expert learned in a special knowledge of the technique of worship. He is accepted as a religious and spiritual leader. He is considered as a member of the institution that regulates the relationship between the divine or sacred and the profane

realms through the various rituals of a particular religion, the priest is the accepted as religious and spiritual leader in his society.

**Origin of priesthood:** The Important question is that why this religious institution came it origin and plays a major role in influencing and control the entire society. The generally accepted answer for this is, priesthood is owe its origin to the universal need of mediation of superhuman assistance, felt by humankind in the struggle of life. Man is have desire to get the blessing of the superhuman force all his routine. Same time he has strong belief that these needs of human beings fulfilled with help of the God It is the institution of priesthood played significant role and establish in fulfilling religious need of its members.

It is belived that there are two phases of origin of priesthood Weber (1963).The first phase is the natural priesthood and the other phase is the professional or regular priesthood. There are indications to affirm that originally everyone invoked the gods each for oneself. In the early times, worship was confined to the deified members of the kindred, and later to those of tribes. Then the heads of families or tribes most spontaneously performed the priestly role because they as the oldest and most experienced members of the family stood closest to the ancestors. When powers of nature also began to be worshipped and the group of worshippers extended beyond a family, the regular priesthood was initiated. As everyone is not equally proficient in Mediation, the expertise of professionals, supposed to possess greater knowledge and power is sought to secure better results.

**Narayanan (2005)** made an attempt to explain about how the concept the priest is interpreted in the different context. There are number of meanings and many functions associated with the idea of priesthood among Hindus. He tries to explain the concept following senses. Firstly it has been the simplest translation for the word Brahmin. Second, it could refer to the priest, known as the purohita, who comes home to conduct the domestic rituals and sacraments Third, it could mean the person who does the arati and conducts rituals in the temples and other public places of worship. Fourth, some of the functions attributed to the western sense of priesthood.

**Priest in Vedic period:** Ancient texts describing community-oriented Vedic yajna rituals mention four to five types of priests:

1. The hotar : The Hotri recites invocations and linies drawn from the Rig-Veda.
2. The adhvaryu: The Adhvaryu is the priest's assistant and is in charge of the physical details of the ritual like measuring the ground, building the altar explained in the Yajurveda. The adhvaryu offers oblations.
3. The udgatar: The Udgatri is the chanter of hymns set to melodies and music (sāman) drawn from the Samaveda. The udgatar, like the hotar, chants the introductory, accompanying and benediction hymns
4. The Brahmin: The Brahmin recites from the Atharveda
5. The ritvij : The Ritvij is the chief operating priest.

The scholar like Willard G. Oxtoby ((1995) classifies the professional priesthood into two forms like the hereditary and the Vocational priesthood. In the case of hereditary priesthood, it is the privilege of a particular family or tribal group to perform religious rites. However in the case of Vocational priesthood recruits its candidates from the pool of its promising young members, on the basis of devotional, intellectual and moral qualities. The professional priest are having their own distinguished qualities like special costumes, long hair, separate language and also abide by some ascetic restrictions regarding food and sexual aspects At present the priesthood became almost institutionalized and where there are need of initiation rites and training assumed essential part of it.

**Priest and Priesthood among the Brahmins of India:** The following discussion shows the relation between the Brahmins in India and the profession of priesthood. In Indian context the Brahmin are the highest of the four Hindu castes, made up of priests and scholars of Vedic literature The traditional occupation of Brahmin is to concern themselves with the spiritual guidance of the people, conduct rites at marriages, births, deaths and other auspicious occasions. Brahmins are also identified by names such as Pandit, Purohit, Pujari and Shastri. The Brahmin people due to their privileged priestly position are sought by others for religious guidance. They are also considered as custodians of Hinduism they worship deities on a larger scale. There are regional variations in relation to the prominence of a particular deity.

**Role of Priests:** In Indian context priest plays an important role in every walks of life. They perform multi dimensional roles. In general he acts as well wishers, counselors, prayer, social doctor so on. Similarly in the words of Bhattacharya (1975) the traditional society there are people who are expert in interpreting the wishes of gods and practicing magical arts and able to won the confidence of people and attained a certain pre-eminence and formed a special class. Among these group certain classes who have attached with the priestly functions those ministering in famous temples and idol or sanctuaries and the people who special skill of miracles are become a priest who in fact belong to part of the regular priesthood.

However in the process of change the rituals are lost their simplicity and priesthood becomes an indivisible part of the society. It is very much common in all society, priestly functions are performed by either heads or leaders of society like head of the family, the chieftain in the clan or tribe, the king in the nation or people. But when society is become more and more complex, functions are become specialized certain traditional cultic functions of the group leaders are associated with special individuals or professional groups resulted in emergence of professional magicians, diviners even in the highly differentiated primitive communities. These functions of these leaders are referred as semi priestly functions in the society. With the increase of complexity and social and cultural conditions there arise professional differentiation resulted in growth of professional priesthood in the society.

**Priesthood in present context:** Hindu priesthood in the twentieth century still retains many features of the past, including the hereditary jajmani relationship, the location of Brahman priestly sub castes near the top of the caste hierarchy a strong emphasis on purity and consecrated ritual status, a hierarchical organization as well as a sectarian one, and a bewildering range of specialization from every caste group, But the priests from a wide range of Brahman and non Brahman castes who are found in the great holy centers and engage as patrons the incoming pilgrims. The village or urban Brahman purohita and his non Brahman counterpart may find themselves jacks-of-all-trades, called upon to recite mantras, perform or advise on life-cycle rites, inaugurate a new house, provide horoscopes, sanction marital arrangements, advise on illnesses, counteract the evil eye, arbitrate disputes, perform accounting, or administer the age-old ritual attentions to the images in the household shrine.

**Objectives:**

1. To Study the inter caste relations and services of priests
2. The educational aspirations of priests on their children.
3. The problem of marriage among the priests

**Methodology:** The major concern of the paper is to explore the changes that have taken place among the Brahmins priests of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi district. Priestship is one of the traditional occupations among Brahmins of both the district and also analyse problems that Brahmin priests face as being priests and the major educational aspiration of the Brahmin priest in the present context. The structured interview schedule is prepared and data have been collected from 60 priests chosen from temples and villages as sample

**Inter caste service:** In both the districts, Dakshina Kannada and Udupi are known for their caste solidarity. We find a close association between different caste groups. This nature is found even among the Brahmin priests and the other caste groups of the districts. Each caste group comes in contact with other groups on number of occasions like performing poojas and in other socio-cultural situations. Here in this part the researcher tries to analyse the kind of relation and services offered by the Brahmin priests to the other caste groups in the districts. Here the priest is considered as Guru, advisor and guide on different occasions. Their opinion is sought by the people on almost all important occasions like marriage, birth, death, cultivation of land, house construction, wedding and on other occasions.

**Table 1. Nature of inter caste services**

Sl.No.	Variables	Other backward castes		SCs & STs	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Marriage	35 (58.34)	25 (41.66)	26 (43.34)	34 (56.66)
2	House warming	60 (100)	-	35 (58.34)	25 (41.66)
3	Life cycle service	34 (56.66)	26 (43.34)	23 (38.33)	37 (61.67)
4	Festivals services	60 (100)	-	35 (58.34)	25 (41.66)

Note: Figures in the brackets indicate percentages.

The interaction of Brahmin priests with other caste people vary from the priest to priest. It mainly depends on the type of services the Brahmin priests offered and also the kinds of services the other cast people required from the priests. The interaction and services of the priests are also differ from the temple and general priest in both districts. In the case of temple priest their service limited to the temple and within temple premises. Only during some important religious occasions like festivals and other religious occasions they have been invited to offer services to the outside temple. But the general priests are giving their services in the villages.

The above table indicates the different types of religious service offered by the priests in the both the districts. Out of 60 respondents 35 (58.34) percent of priests are giving marriage service to the all other backward class. Another 25 (41.66) percent said that we are not giving such service to them. As far as SCs and STs concerned 26 (43.34) percentage of them are ready to give such service to these groups and 34 (56.66) percent of them have told that we are not giving such services. Regarding house warming services 35 (58.34) percent of them have told that we are giving services to the SCs and STs and 25 (41.66) percent of them are not offer such services. Regarding life cycle services given to the other backward classes 34 (56.66) percent of respondents have told that we ready to give such services and another 26 (43.34) percent of the respondents told that we are not offer such religious services. Regarding life cycle services given to the scheduled cast and scheduled tribes 23 (38.33) percent of respondents have told that we arrange such services in the temples premises where we are working as a priests. Another 37 (61.67) respondents have told that we are not giving such services. The reason they stated is restriction imposed form their own caste members and temple authorities. When the respondents are asked their opinion about giving festival services for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe people of 35(58.34) them have told that we are ready to give religious services like Vehicle pooja and Laxmi pooja. Another 25 (41.66) percent of them told we do not giving any such religious services to them. Even though in the traditional societies these services were restricted to the other caste people above study shows that now. Few of Brahmin priest are ready to offer such services.

**The educational aspirations of respondents:** The education is consider as an important factor which leads the social mobility in an individual. There are differences in education level of parents and the children. As far as the opinion of the Brahmin priest is considered majority of the parents wants their children should get modern education along with the religious education In the preset context, when the respondent are asked about the aspiration about their children education They revealed about job oriented education like doctors, engineers and technical education.

**Table 2. Aspiration of respondents about their children education**

Sl.No.	Variables	Respondents	Percentage
1	Graduation in any subjects	19	31.66
2	Post graduation in any subjects	10	16.66

3	Technical courses	21	35
4	Medicine	05	8.34
5	We cannot say anything about their future,	05	8.34
	<b>Total</b>	60	100

Source: Field survey

When the respondents are asked about their children education, majority of them have aspired, their children should acquire modern education like technical, medicine and etc. Few of them have said, that our children should get graduation or post graduation in any disciplines. It is told by some of the respondents that, general education is very important in this modern world, people respects modern education is more than religious education. They consider both religious education and formal education is very much important Thus they want to send their children to formal education.

The above table show the deference's of opinion priests about their children education. Out of 60 respondents 19 (31.66) percent of priests have told that their children study any graduation. Another 10 (16.66) percent of them desire our children to study post graduation in any discipline. Among them majority 21(35) percent of the respondents aspired their children should have modern education including professional technical education including engineering, diplomas etc 8.34 percent have aspired their children should get medical education. However another group 05 (8.34) percent of them have not particular about their education. The above discussion shows the nature of aspirations of the respondents about their education.

**Opinion of the Respondents on Marriage:** Hindu marriage is considered as religious sacrament. It is based on socio-cultural background of the Hindu religion. But this institution itself is suffering from problems. Among the Brahmin priest this problem is found among both temple and general priest. This lead of problem of late marriage and forced bachelorship

Here in the case of present study of out of 60 temple priests and village priests 23 (38.33) percent of them are spinster or bachelors. Majority of them 37 (61.67) percent of them are married. Among bachelors some are even the above 35 years of age. The reason they stated for their unmarried condition are the economic uncertainty, low profile of job, social recognition of priest occupation education and employment of Brahmin girls , kind of respect to the girls fathers and other factors.

**Table 3. Respondent's opinion about solutions to late marriage**

Sl.No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	Independent of son	11	18.34
2	Respecting the occupation	15	25.00
3	Change in attitude of people	22	36.66
4	Inter group marriage	12	20.00
	<b>Total</b>	60	100

**Sources:** Field survey

As institution of marriage among the Brahmin priests is suffering from various problems in both the districts. However the problem is become serious one and disturbs entire society. During the field study respondents have asked to suggest solutions to overcome from the problem. The data presented in the table reveals that, among 60 respondents a significant proportion 22 (36.66) percent have told that the attitude of people regarding the priests and priest occupations need to be change. The priest occupations have perceived in the traditional Indian society is different from the present time. Because there are number of religious restriction are imposed to priest in the traditional society. Priests have expected to obey these restrictions in their daily routine. But at present there are changes have been observed. Another 15 (25.0) percent of the respondents is of the opinion that priest occupation has to be respected both by the priests and the members of society. It is revealed some of the respondents that among the members of their own community priest occupation is less respected. However the 11 (18.34) percent of the respondents are of the opinion that independent of the son is another solution for late marriage. Here among the Brahmins of Dakshinna Kannada and Udupi district some people are still live in joint family system. But these structure is not accepted in the present conditions, especially by the educated girls. Thus the girls and girls family want to their life partner to remain independent from their parents control. Another 12(20.00) percent of respondents are of opinion of going for inter-group marriage. The main reason for these is non availability of girls from their own group and according to their level of education.

**Conclusion:** It is clear from the above discussion is that as a traditional occupation priest and priesthood has influenced by changing factors and situations of society. All societies move towards the process of modernization, urbanization. The impact of these process are found among the all most all types of occupations. No country or no occupation is exceptional to it. The occupation of Brahmins priests have also influenced by these situations. The traditional rigidity of occupation is gradually losing in the modern context. Here in the case of Brahmin priest those who working both in temples and villages are also influenced and adopted to the changing needs of the society. This nature can be seen more among the younger generation priests in comparison to thy older generation. The major changes can be observed in different aspects like inter caste services, education of their children and the institution of marriage.

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