

Western India in Historical Transition

Western India in Historical Transition:
Seventeenth and Early Twentieth Century
by Hiroyuki Kotani
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The existence of a large number of medieval Marathi sources, and the extensive documentation of government policy and court decisions in Bombay during colonial times, provide the historian of western India with abundant resources for writing a long-term history. Not many regions of India are so favourably placed. Hiroyuki Kotani has used this source material to elaborate upon socio-political developments in late medieval and colonial Deccan, a subject to which scholars like Hiroshi Fukazawa, Frank Perlin and Andre Wink, amongst others, have also contributed immensely.

Western India in Historical Transition is primarily a collection of articles: nine have been presented on earlier occasions and three prepared specifically for the book. The author chooses to call these articles 'chapters'. But the self-contained nature of each of these 'chapters' seems to leave them as they originally were—as independent articles. Their inclusion in a single volume is perhaps justified by the fact that almost all these articles elaborate upon the structure and functioning of the *vatan* and caste systems in western India or the ideological role of king and state in maintaining social order. Two articles, however, deal with the formation (and transformation) of the 'Hindu' identity during colonial times. Furthermore, an attempt is made to give the collection an appearance of an integrated book by arranging it in three sequential parts: (i) Social Relationship and Party Rights (5 articles); (ii) Discrimination and Privilege (3 articles); and (iii) Rituals, Ideologies and Identities (4 articles).

The first article of Part One sets the ground by describing the nature and

operation of the *vatan* system during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By representing *vatan* as a 'feudal social relationship' (p. 3) the author makes out a case for a feudal late medieval Deccan society because of his 'expanded concept of feudalism' (p. 37). The actual functioning and gradual transformation of the *vatan* system finds further elaboration in the second and third chapters. It is by now well known that the land rights of the peasants and their responsibility towards the village community not only constituted the larger *vatan* system but were also contained within it. Changes in this system occurred because colonial rulers, in their interaction with it, were guided by their familiarity with 'private landed property in the modern sense' and the concept of the 'freedom of contract'. Gradual changes in peasant rights broke down 'the communal structure of the villages based on the *vatan* system' (p. 49) and created 'more direct or contractual relations between service providers and peasants' (p. 61). However, one significant exception in this regard was the Mahar *vatan* that continued into independent India.

All social relations, ranging from those between individuals and village groups up to the level of the larger caste *panchayats*, were contained within the all-encompassing caste system. The fourth and fifth articles of Part One explore exactly this aspect of western Indian society. Features and functions differentiating the role of rural and urban caste organisations are pointed out by the author, and perhaps the most important of these was that 'urban castes in eighteenth and nineteenth century

Gujarat acted as a sort of corporate body or juristic person, while rural caste in the Deccan constituted a part of the rural communal structure' (p. 83). Whatever the urban-rural differences, it became quite evident to the British that caste organisations could form one of the effective means of governance. For this reason, they allowed considerable autonomy to such bodies, and the official policy of encouraging 'caste autonomy' aimed at using the 'autonomous potentiality to maintain societal order inherent in castes into the colonial ruling system' (p. 86). This policy of 'caste autonomy' says the author, lent 'even greater vitality to the caste under British colonial rule than it used to enjoy under former governments' (p. 108).

The second part of the book focuses on the issues of 'discrimination and privilege'. These represent the two most significant features of caste and *vatan* systems. Ati-Shudras in late medieval Deccan occupied an ambivalent socio-political position. While this position gave them a low status within the caste structure, it also entrusted to them—periodically and in certain exigencies—important ritual and political functions (in the ceremony of *santi* and in boundary disputes) that were, in many ways, irreplaceable. Two of the articles in this part of the book dwell upon the prolonged contest over the role, rights and functional aspects of the Mahar and Joshi *vatan*s. By its very nature there were two sides to the *vatan* system. Kotani refers to these as 'the public aspect (relation between *vatan* and state) and the private aspect (relation between *vatan* and peasant)' (p. 137). Elsewhere, however, he seems to use two

different terms to define the non-official aspect of *vatandari*, i.e. the 'holistic relationship between *vatandars* and the village community' and the 'dyadic relationship between respective *vatandars* and the *yajmanas*' (p. 182). In short, what the author seeks to emphasise through these sometimes complicated distinctions is the essentially unequal and discriminatory nature of *vatandari* relationships. The administrative considerations and inter-caste conflict that resulted in the abolition of the Joshi *vatan* under British rule, and the continuation of the Mahar *vatan* into independent India, are discussed and illustrated in detail.

The last part of the book titled 'Rituals, Ideologies and Identities' deals with two questions. The first is the ideological justification of the system and of the methods that sustained the larger system within which the *vatandari* operated. The second is the evolution of a 'Hindu' social identity under colonial rule and the positioning of such an identity in opposition to the conceptual identification of the British as 'cow-slaughterers'. Insofar as the first question is concerned, the author argues that local society enjoyed a high degree of ritual autonomy from the king. The latter's role, argues Kotani, 'was "secular" or impersonal, having no relevance to the religion of the king himself' (p. 217). Even the occasional state intervention in caste matters is not to be seen as an issue of religion. Similarly, the predominant ideology in the Deccan during the late medieval period, it is argued, was not one of pollution-purification or auspiciousness-inauspiciousness but that of *dosa* (sin) and *prayascitta* (penance). A system of governance based on the latter ideas could be implemented by the state and social institutions through the 'physical power of compulsion as *sarkardanda* and *jatidanda*' (p. 236).

Several developments during the

colonial period resulted in the formation of a 'Hindu' identity. The author suggests that the formation of a legal system during the early years of British rule resulted in the creation of the 'unified, standardized and homogenised "Hindu"'. To such a 'Hindu', he says, 'corresponded the Brahmanical, textual and normative "Hinduism". . . in total disregard for the religious diversity and complexity that actually existed on the Indian subcontinent' (p. 251). It is Kotani's contention that while in the late nineteenth century, the 'Hindu' cow-protector was positioned against the conceptual Christian or British cow-slaughterer, the latter position came later to be filled by the Muslim (p. 268). It was this ideology and identity formation that, according to the author, led in the 1920s, to people of different religions of Indian origin being 'lumped together as Hindu in opposition to Christian and Muslim' (p. 269).

The extensive (though occasionally repetitive) use of contemporary judicial records and local sources makes for fairly logical propositions and convincing arguments. All chapters are supported by fascinatingly detailed information about particular villages and even individuals. For a scholar flooded with such information, however, there also exists the danger of being overwhelmed by the predilections of his sources. Village-specific information, and the local disputes it refers to, might possibly have pushed the author towards underestimating the role of larger, region-wide factors—factors that underpin social processes but do not surface in court records as litigants with apparent caste allegiances and legally recognisable vested interests.

Local society might, indeed, have enjoyed a fair degree of ritual autonomy as Kotani suggests. But this does not necessarily mean that kingship failed to ideologically 'permeate down to the

village level' (p. 217). Kotani has simultaneously argued that *dosa-prayascitta* was the dominant and functional ideology in the Deccan. It was an ideology that frequently required the Maratha rulers to function as 'ritual kings' and imposers of *rajadanda* even in local disputes. If this was the case, it is difficult to envisage that this occasional but functional intervention by the king even in village communities would have been completely devoid of ritual implications or potential.

Undeniably, *vatandari* gave to Deccan society certain characteristics of its own. Yet it seems evident that it was a vigorous variant of the hierarchical and ubiquitous caste system. Moreover, many of the terms that the *vatan* system used were derived from Persian—the official language of the Mughal Empire. If this system exhibited a vibrant local autonomy, it does not logically follow that it was insulated from external influence or even control. It would be wrong to assume that colonial rule was the first extraneous factor to have impacted upon the functioning of the *vatan* system.

Despite the thematic arrangement of chapters and the attempt to provide systematic, inter-connected information about social change in the Deccan, *Western India in Historical Transition* is not a single integrated book. It is a collection of well-argued and interesting articles. Hiroyuki Kotani has touched upon several very significant issues that unfortunately cannot all be exhaustively dealt with in this book. Most importantly, his articles on identity formation are new and welcome contributions to a contentious subject that is increasingly attracting the attention of social scientists in South Asia.

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