GHOSTS, GREED AND SIN: THE OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE BENARES FUNERAL PRIESTS

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The sociology of India has tended to equate status with purity, purity with the Brahman and the Brahman with the priest; and to oppose him to the ascetic. The data presented here will not easily fit into such a picture. Not only does the 'good' Brahman model himself on the world-renouncer, but the status of the priest is irremediably compromised by his calling. So far from being a paragon of purity he is an absorber of the sins of his patrons, which are transmitted through their gifts. The perfect Brahman could theoretically 'digest' these sins without jeopardy to himself; but the paradox is that he is precisely the one who spurns the priesthood. Those who accept priestly offerings are liable to a ghastly death and an even worse fate beyond it. The situation described here also casts doubt on many general propositions about the nature of jajmani relations.

This article represents a preliminary report on fieldwork with various groups of sacred specialists who make their living on the burning ghats of Benares. In the first section I outline the division of labour between these different types of specialist. The next two sections focus on one particular occupational group—the Funeral Priests. The second section describes their apparently anomalous status as impure and highly inauspicious Brahmans, who by virtue of their work are identified with and are regarded as physical embodiments of the marginal and malevolent ghosts they serve. The third section deals with a further but related aspect of their identity: the apparent cupidity which typifies their dealings with mourners. I try to show how their reputation for rapacity is related to, and is to some extent a product of, the way in which rights to preside over the mortuary rituals are allocated within the community. We shall see that what the individual owns is not (as in the most commonly reported variant of the so-called 'jajmani system') a fixed clientele, but rather certain times when he has a monopolistic right to officiate.

The final section deals with the offerings made to all the various kinds of Brahman specialist mentioned in the first section. Briefly, the acceptance of these offerings is financially essential to the priest and spiritually essential to the donor, but their receipt subverts the Brahman's status and thus his worthiness to receive them. The data here bear on Dumont's theory of caste. According to this theory, the principle of purity is represented by the Brahman; and in many passages Dumont writes as if the category of Brahman is par excellence represented by the priest. We thus have an equation between priesthood and
purity which are opposed by kingship and power. The Brahman is also seen in opposition to the ascetic as the man-in-the-world to the world renouncer. 'The Brahmans, as priests superior to all other men, are settled in the world comfortably enough' (Dumont 1970: 42, my emphasis). My data cast doubt on both the propositions contained in this statement. That is, Dumont's picture of the complacent domesticity of the Brahman householder must be qualified by the recognition that the Brahman and renouncer share in a common ideal of independence from the material and social order. Nor is the Brahman's priesthood the basis of his superiority. The priest's status is highly equivocal; and he is seen not so much as the acme of purity as an absorber of sin. Just as the low caste specialists remove the biological impurities of their patrons, so the Brahman priest removes their spiritual impurity by taking their sins upon himself through the act of accepting their gifts. In theory he is able to destroy these sins and thus maintain his own status (virtually) unimpaired. But as the priest himself sees it, the actuality is quite different. Since he cannot really 'digest' the sins he accepts, so far from being a paragon of purity, he regards himself as a cess-pit for the wickedness of the cosmos. The consequence of this accumulation of sins is that he faces the prospect of a lingering death from the rotting effects of leprosy, or even—in the case of certain particularly 'indigestible' kinds of offering—an immediate demise.

I emphasise that these remarks apply to the entire range of priestly occupations followed by the Brahmans of Benares, and not just to the Funeral Priests; and I note that such notions recall the set of ideas which underlie the Vedic sacrifice. As Heesterman (1959; 1962; 1964; 1978) shows, the sacrificer is reborn at the sacrifice by transferring to the priest—through the medium of his gifts—the odium of his own death and impurity. Seen in this light, all priestly Brahmans are tainted by death, and the Funeral Priests are merely a particular (and perhaps extreme) case. Rather than sacerdotal purity being, as Dumont (1979: 16) claims, 'the essential feature of Brahmanic preeminence', the remarkable feature is rather that the Brahmans are pre-eminent despite their association with priesthood (cf. Marriott 1969: 1171).

Death, 'liberation' and the division of mortuary labour

Kashi is the pious Hindu's name for Benares, the sacred city of Siva—the Great Ascetic and Destroyer of the Universe. It is here—at the city's main cremation ground—that Siva and Parvati created the universe at the beginning of time; and here that the corpse of the universe burns at the end of time. Only Kashi survives.

This association with death and its transcendence is the hallmark of the religious life of the city. By Siva's grace, those who die in Kashi are said to attain mukti or moksh. Both these terms may loosely be translated as 'liberation'. But what different people imagine that such a death will liberate them from varies enormously. For some it is an extinction of the individual soul in union with the universal spirit; some define it as 'freedom from coming and going'
(i.e. rebirth) and foresee a permanent and sybaritic residence in heaven, while others anticipate an opulent contentment in a future life on earth.

But however ‘liberation’ is thought of, death in Kashi is undoubtedly regarded by vast numbers of pious Hindus as a shortcut to better things. As a result, many old people move to Benares for Kashi-vas (‘residence in Kashi’) to live out what remains of their lives. Others are brought on their death-beds to reap ‘the profit of Kashi’ (Kashi-labh) and are provided for in a series of hospices, such as the The Profit of Kashi Liberation Mansion, funded by a charitable foundation set up by one of India’s leading capitalist families. Large numbers of corpses of those who have not been fortunate or deserving enough to die in the city are brought for cremation on the ghats, often from very considerable distances. My records include cases in which the body was carried from London, Nepal and Madras. They travel by cycle-rickshaw, taxi, lorry, bus and—in exceptional cases—by air. Several of the nearby towns have bus companies which specialise in the transport of corpses. From Jaunpur, for example, there is the 'Last Rites Mail', the 'Heaven Express’ and the more prosaically named ‘Corpse Waggon’.

In the present context the term ghat refers to a defined segment of river frontage between 30 and 200 yards in length. Most ghats have been constructed to form series of stone terraces and stairs running down into the sacred water of the Ganges. Two of them—Manikarnika and Harish Chandra—are burning ghats. Manikarnika is the best patronised and is the focus of many important religious activities apart from cremation. Not all corpses are cremated. World renouncers, small children, victims of certain diseases such as smallpox, cholera and leprosy, and indigent low-caste people whose families cannot afford the cost of a cremation, are weighted down and immersed in the river. The boat from which the immersion is carried out can be hired from any ghat, though in practice the majority still favour the two cremation ghats. I calculate that in the year ending on 30 April 1977 there was an average of about eighty corpses a day disposed of in Benares—sixty-two of these at Manikarnika ghat and twelve at Harish Chandra. Of those which came to the two burning ghats, 37.5 per cent. were brought from outside district Benares, 34.4 per cent. from rural areas within the district and only 28.1 per cent. from within the city.

An even greater number of people take the ashes of a deceased relative to immerse in the Ganges at Benares, for it is popularly held that the deceased will reside in heaven for as long as his mortal remains are sanctified by Ganges water. Others send the ashes by parcel post to their hereditary Pilgrimage Priest (or even occasionally care of the City’s Chief Postmaster). At certain seasons large numbers of villagers from the surrounding countryside come, accompanied by a spirit medium, to the sacred tank of Pisach Mochan to lay the spirits of the malevolent dead to rest. Upwards of a million pilgrims visit Benares during the course of an average year. Although many of them have not come in direct connexion with a recent or anticipated death, one of the rituals they are almost sure to perform during their visit is pinda dan—the offering of rice (or flour) balls to their deceased ancestors. The pilgrims are drawn from all over the Hindu world and people from every part of India have settled in the city. As a result, its population of around half a million is
remarkably heterogeneous. The main kinds of occupational specialists concerned with the corpse and soul of the deceased, and the purification of the mourners, are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Occupational specialists with a role at death.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational category</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>General caste category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. PANDA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tirth-purohit</td>
<td>pilgrimage priest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gumasta</td>
<td>agent of <em>tirth-purohit</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghatiya</td>
<td>supervises bathers; performs minor rituals on the ghats</td>
<td>BRAHMAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshi-Bhandar</td>
<td>pilgrim guide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple Priests</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. KARM KANDI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. KARM KANDI</td>
<td>specialist ritual technician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. MAHABRAHMAN</td>
<td>funeral priest</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. MAHABAPPA</td>
<td>funeral priest to Mahabrahmans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. NAU</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>middle order, clean caste</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>barber; funeral priest to low castes boatman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. MALLAH</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>spirit medium</td>
<td>not caste specific but generally low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. OJHA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>funeral attendant</td>
<td>UNTOUCHABLE</td>
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<td><strong>8. DOM</strong></td>
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At death the soul becomes a disembodied ghost or *pret*, a marginal state dangerous both to itself and to the survivors. The purpose of the rituals of the first ten days is to reconstruct a body for this ethereal spirit. On the twelfth day after death a rite is performed which enables the deceased to rejoin his ancestors and to become an ancestor (or *pitr*) himself. A ball of rice representing the departed is cut into three by the chief mourner and is merged with three other rice balls which represent the deceased's father, father's father and father's father's father. In many parts of orthodox Hindu India this *pret/pitr* distinction corresponds to a division of labour between the specialists who preside over the rituals associated with the two stages.

In Benares it is in theory the Mahabrahman Funeral Priest who handles all the rituals up to the point where the marginal soul is converted into an ancestor, and who accepts the prestations associated with this function. At the point of transition the rituals (and their associated gifts) are taken over by the deceased's hereditary household priest (*kul-purohit*) in the case of city people, or by their hereditary pilgrimage priest (*tirth-purohit*) in the case of outsiders who have stayed in Benares to perform the mortuary rituals. The position may be schematically represented thus:
In actual fact the rites of the well-to-do are likely to be directed throughout by a karm kandi (a specialist Brahman ritual technician), though the Mahabraham takes the gifts offered in the name of the pret and the purohit takes those offered in the name of the pitr.

A separate caste group—the Mahabappas—are the funeral priests to the Funeral Priests; while the Barber performs this function for the lowest and most polluting castes. But even in high-caste mortuary rituals the Barber has a crucial role. At various stages he tounsres the mourners and may even tounure the corpse itself (for sin is said to reside in the hair); and he works in a menial capacity throughout. The Barbers who have rights on Manikarnika also shave large numbers of bathers and pilgrims who visit the ghat. In addition some have a profitable sideline selling hair to dealers from Calcutta and Bombay who export it to the west for the manufacture of wigs.

If the mortuary rituals are not adequately performed the soul of the deceased is never assimilated to the ancestors but is stuck as a wandering ghost who is a constant menace to its surviving kin. Those who have died an 'untimely' or accidental death (akal mritu) are also assigned to the category of the malevolent dead. Two kinds of specialists are involved in laying such spirits to rest—the ojha (a spirit medium, generally of low caste), and the Temple Priest of the sacred tank of Pisach Mochan.

The Boatmen (Mallahs) also have a key place in the division of labour concerned with the disposal of the dead. They ferry the corpses of those who are not cremated, and the ashes of those that are, into the middle of the river. They also transport vast numbers of pilgrims and make a substantial supplementary income sifting the river-mud on the particular patch in which they have rights for the coins offered into the Ganges by the pious. The untouchable Doms are funeral attendants who build and supervise the pyre; and who provide the sacred fire which is used for the cremation and without which—it is often said—there is no 'liberation'.

Being more heterogeneous, the pandas are more difficult to characterise. Pre-eminent amongst them is the tirth-purohit who is the hereditary pilgrimage priest of certain castes from a specific area of India, and who looks after both the spiritual and material needs of his jajman during their visit. At its broadest the category may also be held to include the gumasta who is his agent (and who meets pilgrims at the railway or bus stations, picks up parties of pilgrims from nearby religious centres like Gaya and Allahabad, and visits their home areas with a view to cajoling them into visiting Benares or into fulfilling the rash promises of gifts they made last time they were there); the ghatiya (who sits on the banks of the Ganges on a wooden platform shaded by a leaf umbrella, watches over the clothes and valuables of the bathers and presides over the offerings they make to the ancestors), and the Joshi-Bhandars (a separate

<table>
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<tr>
<th>State of departed soul</th>
<th>Specialist</th>
<th>Normal duration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disembodied ghost (pret)</td>
<td>Mahabraham</td>
<td>Rituals of the first 11 days after death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancestral spirit (pitr)</td>
<td>purohit</td>
<td>Rituals subsequent to the 11th day after death</td>
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endogamous group of small-time freelance pilgrim guides). The Temple Priests who own rights in the major temples of the city also rate as *pandas*.

Pilgrim traffic is very big business in Benares and is the focus of considerable extremely violent competition between rival groups of *pandas*. Fights break out at the station and on the *ghats*; deaths result, and several of Benares’s biggest *pandas* find it expedient to act as patron to one of the city’s many wrestling schools from which they recruit their strong-arm men. Although most intense in the *panda* case, such competition is to some extent characteristic of all the different groups I have mentioned. In addition to these groups a number of tourist-touts, ascetics, beggars, temple priests, hostel managers, sellers of shrouds and other mortuary paraphernalia, shabby mendicants in the uniform of the state constabulary, wood merchants, hewers and carriers of wood and vendors of tea, betel-nut and sacred pictures also derive an income from Manikarnika *ghat*.

*The Funeral Priests as 'ghosts'*

I turn now to a more detailed consideration of the rights of one particular group of sacred specialists: the Funeral Priests. I have already noted that they are responsible for the rituals addressed to the marginal *pret*-ghost; while a different kind of Brahman specialist handles the ancestral *pitr*. But the rituals themselves go further than this to posit an identity between the specialist and the soul he serves. That is, the specialist himself becomes the *pret* or *pitr* (as the case may be). He is worshipped as the deceased, is dressed in his clothes, is made to wear his spectacles or clutch his walking stick, and is fed his favourite foods. If the deceased was a woman, then a female Mahabrahman should (theoretically) be worshipped and presented with a woman’s clothing, cosmetics and jewellery. At a rite which marks the end of the period of the most intense pollution the chief mourner, and then the other male mourners, are tonsured by the Barber. But before even the chief mourner, the Mahabrahman should be shaved as if he—as the *pret* itself—were the one most deeply polluted by the death. Nor is all this merely a matter of the Mahabrahman *impersonating* the deceased. It is also a matter of making him *consubstantial* with the deceased. This is most clearly illustrated by the case of Nepali royal and aristocratic mortuary rites at which the Funeral Priest is fed some of the deceased’s ground-up bone, and is then laden down with gifts and banished from the kingdom. But the same idea is also present in the notion that what the Mahabrahmans really eat at the final meal which precedes their departure are the shredded intestines of the deceased which have been scattered on to their plates by the messengers of death (*yamdut*).

I stress that the Mahabrahmans are regarded as *bona fide* Brahmans—albeit as ‘*pret* Brahmans’. When in the early days of the British Raj a Funeral Priest was sentenced to death for murder, the learned Pandits advised the High Court that his execution would constitute Brahminicide and the sentence was commuted. But despite their unequivocal status as Brahmans they are treated much like Untouchables in many contexts. I have heard them described by the Hindi word *achhut* which means just that; and no fastidious person of clean
caste will dine with them. In theory, they should live outside the village and to the south of it—that is, in the direction of death. The Mahabrahmans themselves explain that they participate in the sutak (or death pollution) which afflicts their jajman (patrons); and that since they have many jajman they are—as it were—in a permanent state of death pollution.

The exclusion to which the Mahabrahman is subjected is not simply a consequence of his being regarded as impure (ashuddh)—like a Sweeper, a mourner, or a menstruating woman. It is also a question of his being regarded as inauspicious (ashubh or amangal)—like a widow. These are not the same thing. The difference can be illustrated by noting that it is auspicious to see the face of a Sweeper woman as one is embarking on some new enterprise, although physical contact with her is always unambiguously polluting. By contrast, it is at any time inauspicious to set eyes on a Mahabrahman; and if you chance to see one first thing in the morning then somebody in your house may die. You should not even say their name in the morning. Nor may a Mahabrahman come to your door. 'Nobody', as the proverb has it, 'should have the ill-fortune that a Mahabrahman cross his threshold'.

He is somebody to be kept at bay; somebody at whom—in the custom of certain localities—to throw stones as he departs at the end of the mortuary rituals lest he be encouraged to return. Salt should not be put in the food he is served for salt sets up a relationship with the eater.

The Mahabrahman, then, is regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt. He is said to have no 'lustre' in his face; and the stereotype contrasts his fabulous wealth with the squalor of his demeanour and life-style. But having said all this, I should note that the discrimination to which he is actually subjected does not strike me as being quite so harsh as the theory prescribes; and that in practice the situation is much more ambivalent. He is after all a Brahman; although undeniably an ill-omened one.

The rites of the first eleven days after death are addressed to the pret, and are conducted on the ghats or on the bank of some sacred tank. The Mahabrahman who officiates at these rites will only come to the house of his jajman if he is summoned on the day of the cremation to preside over the offering of five rice balls made between the door of the house and the funeral pyre. On the following day he directs the hanging of the water-pot which serves as a home for the pret in the branches of a sacred pipal tree; and he subsequently accompanies the jajman there on daily expeditions to offer water and a lighted lamp. He also conducts the offering of one rice ball each day, each of which creates a different part of a new body for the deceased. This body is completed and given life on the tenth day. On the eleventh day the pret is fed and is now ready to become an ancestor. The Mahabrahman's duties are at an end. He is worshipped, fed, given gifts and departs having smashed the water-pot-dwelling of the pret.

According to the Hindu almanac there are twenty-seven nakshatras (or lunar mansions) which follow each other in regular sequence, each lasting for about a day. The same nakshatra is thus repeated after approximately twenty-eight days. Panchak is a block of five consecutive nakshatras in each cycle during which it is particularly dangerous to experience a death in the family,
for unless the appropriate ritual precautions are taken the deceased will claim the lives of five of his kinsmen. The Mahabrahman performs the rite of 'pacifying the panchak' (panchak shanti). In cases of 'untimely death' he superintends—on the eleventh day—the additional rite of narayani bali which has the object of preventing the embittered soul from remaining in pret form; and he also performs putla vidhan—at which an elaborate effigy of the deceased is constructed and then cremated—for those whose corpses were either lost or immersed in the Ganges.

This inventory constitutes the maximum degree of elaboration of the Mahabrahman's duties. In the majority of cases there is no question of panchak shanti, Narayani bali or putla vidhan. Of the standard repertoire, the Mahabrahman would only expect to perform the full complement for an important jajman from whom he expects a munificent offering. For an ordinary corpse his services are attenuated. In many cases they amount to no more than accepting the offerings with more or less bad grace; attending the rituals of the tenth and eleventh days, and scrambling through them with much surreptitious editing when the financial pickings look slim. My description requires two further qualifications. The first is that some of the middle-ranking castes dispense with the rituals of the eleventh day and bid the Mahabrahman farewell on the tenth; while in certain exceptional circumstances the rites are telescoped into a three-day period. The second qualification is that I have spoken of the Mahabrahman as 'conducting' or 'presiding over' the rituals when in fact—as I pointed out earlier—the ritual direction is often in the hands of a specialist karm kandi, and the Mahabrahman is merely there to ratify the proceedings and to accept the gifts. In fact it is an open secret on the ghat that most Mahabrhmans are simply not competent to pronounce the Sanskrit in a way acceptable to the ancestors or to get the complicated ritual sequences right; and that only village hicks and city cynics are likely to be satisfied with their half-hearted endeavours.

From one point of view, the presence of the Mahabrahman is, however, absolutely essential. He confers salvation, and allows the souls to 'swim across' to the other world. For the successful conclusion of the rites he must be satisfied with the gifts he is offered. 'His belly must be full' and he must ungrudgingly bestow his blessing. Without it the deceased will remain in the limbo of pret to plague his family with misfortune and further bereavement. His curse is greatly feared—a fact which the Mahabrahman often exploits with veiled threats designed to encourage a tight-fisted jajman to loosen his purse-strings.

But this is only one side of the coin. The other is provided by the doctrine that all who die in Benares are granted 'liberation'. Whatever 'liberation' is imagined to be, there is near unanimity that all who die in Kashi get it—whether they be saint or sinner, Brahman or Untouchable. Clearly such a notion radically devalues the significance of the sacerdotal function of the Brahman, since the rites at which he officiates become an irrelevance to the salvation prospects of his potential patrons. This conclusion is in fact drawn by many of the sacred specialists themselves, who will on occasion concede—or even volunteer—that in Kashi the mortuary rituals are merely outward forms, and inconsequential to the fate of the deceased's soul. It is hardly necessary to
add that it is the set of ideas which stress his indispensability that the Mahabrahman endeavours to reinforce in the mourners; and—although the existence of a contrary view may aggravate the acerbity of their interaction and tempt the latter to economise—the measure of the Mahabrahman’s triumph is that hardly anybody is prepared to do without his services.

Before his departure the Mahabrahman accepts the gift of sajja dan which consists, or should consist, of a year’s supply of grain and other comestibles, cooking utensils, household furniture, bedding, clothes, cosmetics, toilet articles and a lump sum in cash—in fact all the standard requirements of daily life. (In practice, a small cash payment is often given in lieu of many of these items.) The idea is that the offerings are received by the deceased in the next world. The way in which this transfer is effected was often explained to me by analogy with sending a money order. Just as it is not the actual rupees deposited in Benares which will be handed across the counter in London, but their sterling equivalent, so it is with sajja dan. But clearly what lends the idea of this transfer an additional authority is the theory that the Mahabrahman actually is the deceased at the moment the gift is handed over.12

Avarice and the allocation of rights
The power to bless or curse puts the Mahabrahman in a position of considerable strength when it comes to negotiating the size of the offering. What allows him to exploit this strength to the full is the fact that he owns exclusive rights, not to a fixed clientele, but to a certain number of days in the year when he has a claim to all city corpses, or alternatively to all corpses from the surrounding countryside. What this means is that the relationship between the specialist and the mourners is confined to this one occasion, for the odds are that next time somebody in the family dies a different Funeral Priest will preside over the rituals. The system thus helps to maintain the anonymity of the specialist, which—given their reluctance to sustain any long-term relationship with him—is acceptable enough to the bereaved. But what is less acceptable is that this very anonymity tempts the specialist to extract what he can from a patron he can never expect to see again. In other words, it is the essentially short-term nature of the transaction, coupled with the fact that on his day he has a theoretically complete monopoly, which encourages the Mahabrahman to push for every last penny.

At the time when the sajja dan is given, the jajman finds himself confronted by the right-holder and an echoing chorus of his supporters and servants. In the negotiations which follow they relentlessly press for the entire range of prescribed gifts (which not even the richest jajman can be expected to provide). The mourners know the Funeral Priests’ reputation for avarice and may start by offering substantially less than they expect to be obliged to give. As a result the Funeral Priests become increasingly insistent and the atmosphere increasingly acrimonious. This or that gift has not been provided; this or that is of poor quality, the cash is too little and do they really imagine that salvation is to be had at such a paltry price? 'What, now that you have taken everything
else, will you have my penis?' asks a chief mourner beside himself with indignation. The Mahabrahman wryly reminds him that his gift will be received by the pret, in this case the chief mourner's own daughter. At such times it is as if the Mahabrahman is taking it out on the bereaved for the contempt in which he is held by society at large.

Roughly fifty Mahabrahman households resident in the city own days on the ghat. In addition about twenty-five Mahabrahman households from outside Benares have such rights. In fact most of the city families have migrated in from the surrounding countryside within the last two or three generations; and many of them still have a house, a bit of land and possibly even jajmani rights in their areas of origin.

In addition to these local Mahabrahmans a handful of Funeral Priests from other parts of India have settled in the city and serve their own regional communities. For the Bengalis there is an Agardhani Funeral Priest. Jajman from Maharashtra, Gujerat and parts of Andhra are served by a Maharashtrian; while two families of Punjabi funerary specialists have successfully claimed the right to conduct mortuary rituals for Khatris and Aroras resident in Benares, though the local Mahabrahmans bitterly resent them as interlopers. The rituals performed within the city by clean caste jajman from all other areas of north India are presided over by the local Mahabrahmans. In fact the latter are not always wholly averse to officiating for Untouchables if the temptation is sufficient and if complete discretion is assured.

No matter on which ghat they are cremated (or immersed), the right to perform the mortuary rituals for city corpses up until the eleventh day belongs to the Mahabrahman who has pari on the day on which the corpse is brought to the ghat. Rights to jajman from the hundred or so villages around the city which fall within the traditional jurisdiction of the city Mahabrahmans go to the owner of pachchh on that day. Pari rights, then, are to all city corpses; pachchh rights to all those from the surrounding countryside. Jajman from outside the radius of pachchh do not fall within the scope of the Benares Funeral Priests unless they stay in the city to perform the tenth and eleventh day rituals, in which event they are claimed by the pari-holder. But even when this is not the case, he may still derive some income from them by presiding over the offerings made at the pyre on the day of cremation. In total, the pari owner may acquire ten or twelve jajman who will offer him sajja dan ten or eleven days later,13 and earn up to Rs. 150 (about £10)14 from offerings made at the pyre.

The crucial thing that determines whether a corpse falls into pari or pachchh or neither is the place where the rituals are held. The physical boundary between pari and pachchh is clear and unambiguous. But even so there is some scope for competition between the holders of the two different kinds of right, for there are several locations where—for example—one side of the tank beside which the rituals are regularly celebrated falls into pari while the other side belongs to pachchh. Not surprisingly each of the right-owners tries to ensure that the rituals are held in his territory. Only occasionally does it happen that the same individual owns both kinds of right on the same day.

The Mahabrahmans explain the evolution of the system of pachchh and pari
rights by reference to a model of five founding ancestors. Four of these were the original right-holders who were continually at each other's throats over claims to jajman. The other was an outsider who was called in to arbitrate and who produced a judgement of Solomon from which the present system is derived and by which he himself acquired a one-fifth share. As far as city corpses are concerned, his ruling was that each of the five should take one day in turn. In pachchh each took a whole (15-day) fortnight consecutively.\textsuperscript{15}

Over time these shares became increasingly fragmented by inheritance, sales and mortgages. In the 'original' pachchh cycle, the 15-day share of each ancestor would have started again two and a half months after the beginning of his previous turn. At present, not only are all the days in the fortnight likely to belong to different individuals, but some of them will participate only in every third or fourth cycle. As illustrated in fig. 1, the two heirs of a man with the right to a single day in the two-and-a-half month cycle will each take a turn at five-monthly intervals, and each of their heirs at ten-monthly intervals.

![Generation Pachchh Pari Diagram](image)

**FIGURE 1.**

While originally every pari came up after six days, today the pari with the shortest cycle recurs after forty days. However, most paris recur less frequently—the one with the longest span repeating itself only after eighty-two months. The commonest types of pari are those which cycle at intervals of forty days, eighty days, four months, five months and twelve days, eight months, ten months and twenty-four days, sixteen months, twenty months and twenty-one months.\textsuperscript{16} All are subdivisions of a basic forty-day unit. This
is again illustrated by fig. 1. The forty-day pari of the lone individual in
generation 1 becomes two eighty-day paris in generation 2; four five-month
and twelve-day paris in generation 3, and eight ten-month and twenty-four
day paris in generation 4.\(^{17}\)

The rules for working out when a particular pari will recur, and an
explanation of these rules, is provided as an appendix. All that need detain us
here is that the mechanics of the system are such that occasionally a pari-holder
miscalculates, or more likely forgets to show up on the ghat on the day of his
pari\(^ {18}\) (though he will usually have realised his error by the time of the crucial
tenth and eleventh day rituals). In such an eventuality, Bihari Maharaj—the
richest and most powerful pari-holder whose servants remain on Manikarnika
ghat 24 hours a day—takes charge of all the jajman; and when the rightful
owner eventually turns up reimburses him with a proportion of the takings.
In each year there are one or two paris which remain regularly unclaimed, and
for all intents and purposes Bihari has made these into his own property.

The proof that a Mahabrahman actually owns the pari he claims is the
record book (bahi) he maintains. Each time he enjoys the pari he enters the date,
the type of pari, the name of the ancestor to whose share it originally belonged,
and a list of the jajman he served. This record is used to calculate his next pari,
and to prove his right to it, should it be challenged. These documents are kept
under great security for should a record book fall into the wrong hands it
could be copied and used to usurp the rights of the proper owner. Because
there is no general access to record books, and because of the number of
shareholders and the sheer complexity of the system, nobody had anything like
a complete picture of whose rights come up when, and even those who are on
the ghat every day do not generally know whose pari it is tomorrow.

A single individual is likely to own a combination of different types of pari:
forty-day, eighty-day and so on. Some of these will be his exclusive possession
while others will be held in partnership. Cremation goes on throughout the
night at Manikarnika ghat, and pari runs from sunrise on one day to sunrise on
the next. The day itself is never subdivided between shareholders into smaller
units of time.

Within the Mahabrahman community pari rights are very unevenly
distributed. Bihari Maharaj has rights to some seventy-five days a year while
his brother and another man between them account for a further fifty-five
days.\(^ {19}\) In other words, a third of the year is owned by just three individuals.
As a rule of thumb one can say that the distribution of rights to village jajman
as part of the pachchh cycle mirrors the distribution of pari. In other words, an
individual who owns ten paris in the year will also own about ten days of
pachchh. One significant difference between pachchh and pari is that in pari the
right-holder claims the saija dan offered on behalf of all corpses brought to the
ghats on the day of his pari regardless of whether the offering is made after
three, ten or eleven days. But in pachchh he only takes the offerings made on the
tenth day after he had rights. In other words, what matters to the owner of
pachchh is not when the corpse was cremated but when the gifts are to be
offered. Any gift offered on the tenth day is his, regardless of the timing of the
disposal of the corpse.
The fact that he must collect from all his jajman on the same day creates a problem for the right-holder. Since pachchh covers a wide area and communications are difficult, it is often physically impossible to attend on more than one jajman in person. Other members of the family may, of course, be called on if they are available. But even between them they are unlikely to be able to cover the ground. In most cases the solution which has to be adopted is to delegate some jajman to one or more unsupervised employees. But not without reason, most right-holders place little faith in the latter's scrupulousness when it comes to disgorging offerings, the details of which the owner cannot know. Furthermore, pachchh requires much trudging about the countryside for uncertain rewards. When the right-holder eventually gets there, he may even find that some interloper has arrived before him, completed the rituals and disappeared with the offerings. Even if the sajja dan comes up to expectations, there is the problem of getting it home, and he may find himself forced to sell many items in the village for a fraction of their true value. For all these reasons the owner of pachchh will often be glad to sell his rights in specific jajman from the more remote villages to a rural Mahabrahman from nearer at hand.

In both pachchh and pari the right-holder needs the help of several karinda-servants in order to be able to attend to all his jajman, and to muster a suitably imposing backing at the time of negotiating the offerings. About twenty Mahabrahmans work more or less regularly as karindas, most of them for several different employers. On the day of the pari they may be on the ghat for twenty-four hours, collecting information about prospective jajman and presiding over offerings at the pyre. On subsequent days they attend, and may direct, the rituals. For all this, they receive a fraction of the total offerings made to the right-holder, plus various minor payments from the particular jajman they serve. Details are given in table 2. Their earnings, however, are generally derisory and they themselves insist that if they did not regularly cheat their employers they could not make ends meet. What feeds their resentment of the situation is that they are regarded as the dregs of Mahabrahman society, are employed by kinsmen who are inclined to treat them as servants, and bear the brunt of the tense negotiations and of impersonating the ghost; while—as we shall see—their employers try to foist them off with all the spiritual consequences of accepting the offerings but keep the material substance to themselves.

Table 2. Remuneration of the Karindas.

A. Basic rate:
   i on pari —4 annas (c. 2p) per jajman + 6 paisa per one old rupee (i.e. 6/64) on all cash offered (except where this is given in lieu of named items). In the offerings of jajman from Hardoi and Sitapur districts who perform all the rituals on the day of the cremation itself, the karinda is entitled to only 2 paisa per Rs 1 (i.e. 2/64).
   ii on pachchh—25 per cent. share in all offerings except grains (which are generally considered to be the most valuable item given by rural jajman).

These payments are made after the deduction of the Barber’s share, and are split equally between all the karindas who worked for the pari-holder regardless of which particular jajman they served.
B. ADDITIONAL PERQUISITES:

1. 25 per cent. share of all cash offered at the pyre.
2. Earnest money of nyautani or nimantran paid on the day of cremation to signify the jajman's recognition of the Mahabrahman's rights. This is generally less than Rs. 1.
3. vedi ki dakshina—small coins offered onto each rice ball given in the name of the deceased.
4. ghanti phurai—money for breaking the water-pot-dwelling of the pret.
5. varni dhoti—a loin cloth offered at the time of sajja dan.
6. food before the Mahabrahman's departure.
7. money for breaking the strip of white cloth (uttiri) worn across the chief mourner's body by people of certain castes and localities.

These offerings go to those karindas who actually performed the service.

The Barber also has a claim to share in the proceeds of both pachchh and pari. In pari he gets two annas in the rupee (1.25 per cent.) on all cash offerings and in pachchh 25 per cent. of everything except grains. It is generally through the family Barber that the Mahabrahmans form an estimate of the financial capacity of the mourners, and of their intentions with regard to the offerings, and thus gauge the level at which to pitch their demands. It may also be through him that they come to know of the jajman at all. Indeed some Barbers regularly enter into collusion with the karindas to defraud the pari-owners by withholding information about a death.

The income from pachchh and pari is quite unpredictable. Several turns running may yield only the most impoverished jajman. But there is always the chance that once in a while the pari-holder may enjoy the windfall of a Maharaja, or a Marwari businessman. It is every Mahabrahman's fantasy that sooner or later he will be the lucky one to repeat the experience of Bindra Maharaj who received somewhere between £3,000 and £4,000 when the Raja of Sarguja died in his pari. Indeed the attitude of the pari-holder is that of the next-time-lucky gambler; while the reaction of the one who hits the jackpot is to 'spend, spend, spend'. The notion that the money is tainted and will be eaten by white ants if you try to put it by, becomes justification for a prodigal expenditure on wine and women. Those who wait for their number to come up may not do so passively. While naturally somewhat reticent about their own practice, some Mahabrahmans allege that other members of the community are not above resorting to various magical procedures which ensure the demise of a man of substance on the day of their pari.

Although it appears to the outsider that the Funeral Priest must be making an extremely opulent living, this impression is largely illusory. After the karindas and Barbers have taken their cut, the proceeds from the pari may be shared between several partners, none of whom may have rights again for the next two or three months. Despite the most delicate of sensibilities, in such circumstances the Mahabrahman with a few paris is constrained to bear hard upon his jajman if he is to maintain his family at even a modest level. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the right-holders and their karindas have an interest in maximising different offerings. Each will devote most of his energy to raising the bid on the offerings to which he has an exclusive right, so that as soon as the jajman has satisfied one he is confronted by the importunate demands of the other. Since he knows nothing of the way in which shares are apportioned or of the Mahabrahman's domestic economy, he not unnaturally
concludes that the community’s reputation for venality is in no way exaggerated—a judgement in which, it must be said, many Mahabrahmans themselves concur.

Though I cannot develop the point in the present context, it will I think be clear that the data I have presented are at odds with much that has been written in general terms about the nature of jajmani relations. The situation under discussion is characterised neither by stable long-term ties between patrons and specialists (Wiser 1936; Leach 1960); nor by payments fixed at the level of the specialist’s minimum subsistence needs (Epstein 1967); nor as Beidelman (1959) would have it, by the exploitation of the specialists by their patrons (the reverse would be nearer the mark). As the Mahabrahmans themselves see it, its essence is rather that it curbs a tendency towards an anarchic and financially damaging competition within the caste, and allows the specialist to confront his jajman with the confidence provided by a (theoretically) complete monopoly.

In fact, however, the economy of a significant proportion of Mahabrahman households is not entirely or even mainly dependent on their jajmani rights. Amongst those with other occupations are, for example, a successful coal merchant, a wholesaler of metal buttons, a clerk, a driver, a tailor and a betelnut seller, as well as several with more or less illicit side-lines. Though they have not gone so far as to divest themselves of their rights, one or two families with substantial incomes from other sources claim not to accept any of the proceeds of pari; and are certainly never to be seen on the ghats. The work itself is demeaning; but more importantly the gifts are dangerous.

The accumulation of sin

Most Mahabrahmans would like to abandon the priesthood. The fact that few, if any, of them will ever be able to do so is a product of material circumstances that force them to subordinate their scruples about the profession to the needs of their families. But the spiritual price they pay for their domesticity is high. Precisely this dilemma faces all the various groups of Brahman priestly specialists, for the acceptance of dan—the gifts made to the Brahman—is a perilous matter. To be sure, the dan associated with death is particularly noxious. But as every Benares Brahman would agree, all dan is debilitating. In this concluding section I turn to the reasons why this should be so. I stress that my observations here relate to the whole range of priestly specialists represented in the city and not just to the Mahabrahmans.

Most of these specialists importune their jajman for offerings in much the same way as the Funeral Priests. But this mercenary practice flatly contradicts the whole ideology of dan. True dan is given from the heart and not under any kind of duress, and is proportional to the donor’s capacity to give. My informants clearly recognise that dan is actually given for all sorts of pragmatic reasons associated with the donor’s spiritual bank balance. But they are equally clear that such dan is bad dan, and that good dan is an unmotivated and disinterested gift for which no return whatever is expected. In fact the best dan of all is the gupt dan or ‘secret’ dan of money thrown into the Ganges.

Though only the most doctrinally sophisticated of the pilgrims would be aware of the risks he incurs, the sacred specialists themselves insist that dan must
be given to a Brahman of unimpeachable character for 'by worshipping the unworshipful famine results'.24 The recipient must be a 'worthy vessel' (supatr); and if the jajman is unwise enough to bestow his charity on an 'unworthy vessel' (kupatr) he becomes responsible for the latter's sins. If, for example, the Brahman spends the cash you give him on a prostitute or a bottle of liquor, the sin is yours as well as his. This is so even though you are quite ignorant of his true character. Clearly the jajman—if he did but know it—is in an impossible position. On the one hand it is highly meritorious to give dan in a place of pilgrimage, but on the other hand he cannot possibly know whether the recipient is worthy or just a rogue. The real catch, however, is that if he is prepared to accept your gifts then he is almost certainly not worthy to receive them.

This ties in with the ideal of the ascetic Brahman who shuns the material world; lives by gleaning the fields after the untouchable women; refuses grain in dan if he has sufficient for the day; solicits provisions from a maximum of three houses and before eating immerses them in the Ganges to render them tasteless.25 He is said to be like the black bee who gathers pollen from the flower without leaving any trace that he has been there. Though I have never met such a paragon the ideal is not without its influence on daily life. Its most striking result is that even the richest pandas recognise that it is bad business practice to flaunt their sometimes considerable wealth and find that it pays to cultivate an image of frugal simplicity.

On the one hand, then, the good Brahman should spurn the munificent offerings of his patrons for they bind him to the material world. But on the other hand, the rituals will come to an end and the cosmic balance will be disturbed if he does so. Hence the highest scriptural authorities make the acceptance of dan one of the six sacred duties of the Brahman and many myths recount how the gods created the Brahmans precisely because they needed them to accept their offerings.

But as all the Brahman specialists see it, dan is bad not just because it subverts their ideal ascetic independence, but more importantly because the acceptance of dan involves the acceptance of the sins of the donor. The theory is that they should be able to 'digest' these sins.27 Notionally, an essential qualification for doing so is that the priest has passed through the sacred-thread and marriage ceremonies, and it is said that one who takes dan before this stage will go mad as a result. But by itself this is not enough. The correct and meticulous performance of the daily rituals appropriate to the Brahman is also essential; as is the repeated recitation of various sacred formulae and the punctilious observance of other rituals of expiation. But above all the Brahman rids himself of the sins he accepts from his jajman by giving away with an increment the dan he has received to a number of other Brahmans. He should split it up as small as possible, add to it, and get rid of it as fast as possible.

In fact, however, the specialists regard all this as an impossible ideal. Economic necessity, combined with a well-developed streak of acquisitiveness, inhibits them from such prodigality. Furthermore, few of them actually do the immensely time-consuming daily rituals they are supposed to, and most of them admit that they do not know the proper Sanskrit formulae nor the
correct ritual procedure. As a result, they see themselves as perpetually accumulating the sin they accept with dan; and many of them live in what I can only describe as a perpetual state of moral crisis. As they see it, the perfect Brahman is 'like the philosopher's stone which turns base metals into gold'; while they themselves have become a kind of cess-pit for the sins of the Hindu world. It is hardly surprising, then, that those who have any choice in the matter are likely to renounce their priestly calling and move into some other occupation; or that most will fervently deny that their sons are destined for the profession.

Those with a large financial stake on the ghats often try to evade the problem by a piece of special pleading. At the time when the dan is handed over, the donor offers water, kusha grass and sesame seed from his right hand into the right hand of the recipient. This is known as sankalp and announces, in the witness of the gods, the binding resolution to make such and such a gift to such and such a Brahman at this particular time and place for this particular purpose. What the panda or Mahabrahman of substance claims is that by directing the jajman to offer the sankalp into the hand of his servant, he himself evades the responsibility for the sins. The servant takes the sins and he takes the offerings. Most people, however, see this as a piece of pure casuistry and argue that it is the intention which counts and that 'the sin is in the money'.

The consequences of accepting dan which you can only imperfectly digest are dire. The sin turns your body black and you will eventually contract leprosy and rot. It is said that the descent lines of those in priestly occupations never run for more than three generations and that such people have no 'lustre' on their faces. Every dan received shortens the Brahman's life, and when the Funeral Priest has served a thousand jajman he will surely die. But death is no release from his burden. Thus the terrible sufferings of the fearful demon encountered by the sage Balmiki at the Pisch Mochan tank were the result of his former incarnation as a Brahman who accepted dan in a place of pilgrimage. Some kinds of dan are said to be particularly 'hard', 'heavy' or 'indigestible' and may lead to an immediate end. But no dan is good dan and the best Brahman is one who steers well clear of the priestly calling.

A story which is frequently told on Manikarnika ghat relates how a wealthy jajman once proposed to donate a golden effigy on the banks of the Ganges. But no Brahman could be induced to accept the gift, for every time a potential recipient approached, the effigy raised one finger in warning. Eventually some paragon was found who, when the effigy raised its finger, responded by raising three of his own—thus signifying that he unfailingly performed all three of the daily sandhya rituals required of a Brahman. At this, the effigy's protests ceased and the donation was made. But no sooner done than the Brahman's whole body turned black. When he broke the effigy into pieces, and gave it away to other Brahmins, half his body was restored to its normal colour. The other half was only restored after lengthy expiatory rituals and the distribution of his entire property. But even after all this the thumb of his right hand remained ineradicably black. The moral seems clear that even the Brahman who fastidiously strives after the ideal can never entirely rid himself of the taint of dan.
Such notions would appear to be foreshadowed in the theology of Vedic sacrifice. As Heesterman shows, the sacrificer is reborn and triumphs over death by transferring the burden of death and impurity to the priest through his gifts. These gifts represent parts of the jajman's body, 'so that partaking of the offerings, as the priest is required to do, and accepting (the donations) amounts to man-eating or partaking of a corpse. . . .' (Heesterman 1962: 25). During the course of the ritual the two change places. At the outset, the sacrificer is loaded with death and impurity which, through the medium of his gifts, he off-loads onto the priest whose qualities he appropriates. He is reborn and proclaimed a Brahman. According to this theory, then, there is a sense in which it is not just the Mahabrahmans, but all priestly Brahmans who take upon themselves the onus of death.

Heesterman's discussion of the textual theory of sacrifice would also seem to be relevant to a different aspect of the data presented here. In a forthcoming paper (Parry n.d.), I follow Lévi (1898), Levin (1930) and Das (1977: 120–6) in arguing that a 'good' death is conceptualised as a sacrificial offering of the self to the gods. Now the identification of the Mahabrahman with the marginal ghost is perhaps to be seen as part of this pattern. Since the sacrificer is the dead man himself, and since the mechanism of the sacrifice involves a switch of roles between the priest and the sacrificer, the priest becomes the pret.

Such considerations, too, have a bearing on why the whole theory of dan has the appearance of contradicting Mauss's notion that every prestation evokes a counter-prestation. Nothing is returned precisely because the gift is—as it were—its own counter-prestation, for it relieves the donor of death, impurity and sin. It is, in a very literal way, a part of his self projected into the recipient and—as we have seen—the donor incurs responsibility for the recipient's use of it.

Even when abandoned by the giver it still forms part of him . . . one gives away what is in reality part of one's own nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence. To keep the thing is dangerous . . . it retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. The thing given is not inert (Mauss 1966: 9, 10).

These words, which Mauss wrote with the Maori case in mind, might with equal justice have been written of the situation I have described.

This situation is clearly riddled with paradoxes. On the one hand the Brahman is constrained to accept dan in order to feed his family, but on the other its acceptance diminishes his spiritual standing. What we have here, then, is another play on the contradiction familiar to students of Hinduism between the paths of the householder and the ascetic, between living in the world and renouncing it (cf. O'Flaherty 1973). To put the matter slightly differently, the dilemma is that the worthy recipient is the Brahman who approximates his behaviour to that of the ascetic. But the notion that the acceptance of dan will drive him demented unless he is married requires him to adopt the opposed role of householder. Moreover, if the world were indeed composed of ascetic Brahmans who refused to accept all offerings over and above their immediate subsistence needs, rituals would grind to a halt and the progressive degeneration of the universe would be greatly accelerated.
From the point of view of the individual Brahman, one of the principal ways in which he vindicates his spirituality (both in his own eyes and in those of society) is precisely by his capacity to attract the dan of the pious. Munificent offerings are thus a demonstration of his worth; yet equally their acceptance demonstrates his lack of it unless they are quickly and ostentatiously recycled with increment. By a further twist, the way out of the whole dilemma is, of course, the receipt of a dan so valuable that it enables him to renounce the priesthood and his dependence on donations.

The final paradox is that while it is only through the unqualified transcendence of the Brahman that the jajman can approach the gods, the latter's offering puts that transcendence in jeopardy. It is this which leads Heesterman (1971) to argue that the complementarity between the priest and the king, which Dumont (1970) stresses, embodies the contradiction that the priest is irremediably degraded by the transaction and thus loses his absolute superiority. Dumont's rejoinder (1971) that the king's gifts only render the priest inferior in relation to other Brahmans, and result in a fall within and not of or from the category, is surely correct. But it does not dispose of the fact that the priest is so compromised by his calling that it will not do to offer him as the prime representative of Brahmanic status, or to equate priesthood with purity. Nor is it any less misleading to represent the Brahmanical and ascetic ideals as straightforwardly opposed, as the man-in-the-world is opposed to the world-renouncer.

APPENDIX

RECKONING PARI

Table 3. The rules for calculating pari.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ‘pari’</th>
<th>Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 40 day pari</td>
<td>recurs after 41 days. The day of the week will be the sixth day after the day of the last pari (counting from that day)—e.g. if the last pari was on Friday the next will be on Wednesday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 80 day pari</td>
<td>recurs after 82 days. The day of the week will be the eleventh day after the day of the last pari—e.g. if the last was on Friday the next is on Monday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 4 month pari</td>
<td>recurs after 4 months and 1 day on the day of the week after the day of the last pari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 5 months and 12 days</td>
<td>recurs after 5 months and 12 days on the day of the week before the day of the last pari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 8 month pari</td>
<td>recurs after 8 months and 2 days on the day of the week two days after the day of the last pari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 10 months and 24 days</td>
<td>recurs after 10 months and 24 days on the sixth day of the week after the day of the last pari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 16 month pari</td>
<td>recurs after 16 months and 4 days on the fifth day of the week after the last pari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 20 month pari</td>
<td>recurs after 20 months and 5 days on the sixth day of the week after the last pari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 21 month pari</td>
<td>recurs after 21 months and 20 days on the day of the week which falls 11 days after the day of the last pari.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The months in the system are lunar months (of approximately thirty days each). The days are week-days. Each formula consists of two rules: a number (of days and/or months) rule and a day of the week rule. In a forty-day pari, for example, the number rule states that the pari will recur after forty-one days; while the day rule states that it will be on the sixth day of the week after the day of your last pari. Now in the case of a forty-day pari, the day rule is redundant in that the right number always produces the right day. But in other cases there is a discrepancy in that the date given by the number rule does not necessarily fall on the right day of the week. In this case the day rule always overrides the number rule such that you claim your pari on the correct day of the week immediately preceding the date provided by the number rule. All this may sound rather complicated but the basic principle is really very simple. In effect, the rules merely determine that a given pari will recur at exactly the same intervals as a forty-day pari on every second, third, fourth or n\textsuperscript{th} cycle. To see this, compare fig. 1 (on p. 98) with table 4. The table shows how the forty-day pari of individual A in the senior generation of the figure would recur throughout the year if it is first enjoyed on Friday the first day of the first month. But if the pari has been subdivided into two eighty-day shares, the rules ensure that A's son B will claim precisely the same days as A would have claimed in every alternate cycle. By the same token, the five-month and twelve-day pari of C in generation 3 will come up in exactly the same way as A’s forty-day pari would have cycled every fourth time round. Every pari thus recurs as if it were a forty-day pari which—so to speak—passes on every so many deals; and the consequence of this is that when a pari is subdivided it does not throw the whole system out of gear.

By the time we get to the extreme case of a pari with an eighty-two months cycle we have clearly moved a long way from the model of five original ancestors, each taking every sixth day. What, then, is the relevance of this model? At first sight, very little. There is a good deal of vagueness about how the original shareholders were related to each other, and even more about how they relate to present-day kinship groups. The majority are quite indifferent to these matters, but generally suppose that all the original descent lines are now extinct. But despite this apparent lack of concern to fit the present with the past, the five ancestor model is in fact crucial to the operation of the system in that it acts as a mnemonic device for cross-checking the day on which your pari should occur. Every pari belongs to the kunt, or 'stake', or one of the five named ancestors; and these stakes follow each other in regular sequence, such that if today's pari is in the stake of ancestor A, then tomorrow's will be in the stake of B, the next day's of C and so on until we are back again with A on the sixth day. If tomorrow I should have a twenty-one month pari in the stake of D, I can confirm my calculation by making sure that today's pari is in C, yesterday's in B or the day before's in A.

**Table 4.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>A in Gen. 1</th>
<th>B in Gen. 2</th>
<th>C in Gen. 3</th>
<th>D in Gen. 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fri.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td>80 days of B</td>
<td>5 months and 12 days of C</td>
<td>10 months and 24 days of D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td>80 days of B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thurs.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td>80 days of B</td>
<td>5 months and 12 days of C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tues.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td>80 days of B</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fri.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>40 day pari of A</td>
<td>80 days of B</td>
<td>5 months and 12 days of C</td>
<td>10 months and 24 days of D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The fact that I have simplified the situation by assuming that every lunar month corresponds to 30 week-days does not affect the concurrence I am concerned to demonstrate.
NOTES

This article is based on fieldwork carried out between September 1976 and November 1977 (supported by the Social Science Research Council), and in August 1978 (supported by the London School of Economics and Political Science). I gratefully record a particular debt to Shri Virendra Singh for his language instruction and research assistance; and to my old friend Om Prakash Sharma. Earlier versions of the paper were presented in seminars at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics, the Universities of Manchester and Oxford, and at the 1979 meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists. Special thanks are due to André Béteille, Maurice Bloch, Richard Burghart, Chris Fuller, Audrey Hayley, Mark Hobart, Peter Loizos, Jock Stirrat and Simon Weightman for their valuable comments.

1 Similarly, Bouglé (1971: 53) equates priesthood with preeminence and locates (pp. 58–60) 'the decisive reason' for the Brahman varna's superiority and 'the deep source of its privileges' in the role of its priestly representatives at the sacrifice.

2 No reliable figures exist, and an accurate estimate is difficult to form. Because of the vast numbers of pilgrims stopping over in Benares on their way to or from the month-long Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1977 was atypical. According to their press release, the Municipal Council were expecting somewhere between 3 and 3.5 million pilgrims during that month alone; and in the event this was generally considered to have been an under-estimate.

3 Cf. Vidyarthi (1961: 47) who, writing of Bihar, reports that on the eleventh day after death the Mahabrahman 'is said to be possessed by the spirit of the dead. The statements that he makes are believed to be coming from the dead'.

4 The practice is well-known to the Benares Funeral Priests, and I have heard it said that they were required to perform this service for Nepali patrons in the past.

5 After the cremation of King Tribhuvana in 1955, the Mahabrahman lived in the palace for thirteen days, 'sleeping in the King's bed, smoking the King's cigarettes, waited upon and taking what he wished of the King's possessions. The royal kitchens prepared what he desired, but the food was deliberately contaminated by a paste made from the bone of the King's forehead'. At the end of this period he received Rs. 10,000 in 'alms' and gifts worth a further Rs. 200,000 including two elephants and a richly comparisoned horse. Mounted on one of the elephants he left for exile in India. 'The people of Katmandu and Thankot lined the road to stone him and to jeer ...' (Leuchtag 1958: 236).

The Kathmandu daily, Rising Nepal, records that on the eleventh day after the death of King Mahendra in 1972, the Funeral Priest—having eaten some ground-up bone mixed in food to which the late king was particularly partial—was mounted on a decorated elephant and escorted out of the city; the idea being 'to drive him away'. In keeping with the spirit of the times he was, however, allowed to return after three days.

6 Cf. Babb (1975: 96–7) on death rituals in Chattisgarh. Here the Mahabrahman is 'presented with a quantity of khir (boiled rice with milk), which is sometimes spread in the shape of a human figure on a brass platter. This is then eaten by the Mahabrahman ... As he eats the khir he cries out from time to time that he cannot continue, that the khir has changed to blood. At each interruption the family of the deceased must give him some money to induce him to continue'.

7 Literally the term 'Mahabrahman' means 'great Brahman'. The community are alternatively known as Mahapatras—'great vessels' or 'greatly deserving ones'. The Funeral Priests' own gloss on such euphemisms is that—notwithstanding the foolish opinions of the ignorant and unlettered—they must indeed be the greatest of Brahmans for it is they who were given the duty of accepting the most important and dangerous of offerings. In popular parlance, however, a number of less flattering epithets are applied to them. They are 'pret Brahman's or katkaha, a term which seems to be related to the standard Hindi kattla ('trouble', 'obstacle') and katu ('bad', 'twisted'). In Bihar the Funeral Priest is known as 'thorn' (kantha); in Kangra as 'bad-faced' (bur mohen), while in the area around Jaipur he is merely 'the bad Brahman'.

8 Ke ka bhagya hoyen Mahabrahman duari par aye.

9 Mahabrahman weddings and other life-cycle rituals are presided over by a 'purer' Brahman. One Mahabrahman is a seller of betel-nut (which many Benares people chew addictively) in a quarter of the city where many must be aware of his caste; while another runs a tea-shop on the main road which passes through his village. In neither case has the stigma of Mahabrahman status proved incompatible with such an enterprise.

10 In practice, however, some days are generally missed out and the offerings are made up for on subsequent occasions. In the extreme (though not uncommon) case, all ten rice balls are offered at the tenth day ritual.

11 I elaborate on this point in a forthcoming paper 'Death and cosmogony in Kashi'.

Precisely the same applies to a second sajja dan made to the purohit on the twelfth day.

This, in my experience, is as large a number as he may reasonably expect. The arithmetic is that out of an average of seventy-four corpses which are brought each day to the two cremation ghats where he or his servants keep a watch, only about twenty-two (30 per cent.) are from within the city area, and thus his potential clients. Of these about half are likely to be excluded because they are Untouchables or world renouncers, jajman of the Bengali, Maharashtrian or Punjabi Funeral Priests, or because they have been surreptitiously siphoned off by a member of his own community (probably by one of his own employees), or are completely indigent.

This figure is roughly equivalent to the maximum possible monthly earnings of a daily-labourer, and is appreciably higher than the monthly wage of a domestic servant.

The lunar month is divided into a dark and a bright fortnight of approximately fifteen days each. The term pachchh is a corruption of the standard Hindi word for a fortnight.

The cost of a pari is directly proportional to the number of days in the year on which it yields rights. A ten-month and twenty-four-day pari, which comes up once a year, sells for around Rs. 600 (about £40). A forty-day pari, which generally recurs eight times a year, would cost in the region of £320. Except in the direst need, however, hardly anybody is prepared to sell; though mortgages are far more common.

In theory it would seem that any multiple of forty should be possible. I am unable to account for the fact that certain permutations (e.g. a 200-day pari representing a one-fifth division of the basic unit) do not seem to occur.

This is much less likely to happen with pachchh, for—unlike pari—pachchh rights always recur on a particular date in the month. If you have pachchh on the first day of the bright fortnight of one month, you will go on having it on the same day at two and a half, five, seven and a half or ten monthly intervals (depending on the extent of subdivision).

When Bihari's father came to Benares as a young man from his village in Jaunpur district, he did not apparently own any pari at all. I estimate that this must have been between eighty and ninety years ago. The family's meteoric rise from rags to riches appears to be the fruit of the series of highly irregular unions he contracted with rich widows, combined with a somewhat factious and violent disposition.

The greatest scope for chicanery is provided by jajman who come into Benares from outside in order to perform the tenth or eleventh day rituals—often because they can ill afford to feed the hordes of people who will attend if they conduct them at home. The karindas pick them up, perform the rituals and pack them off before the pari-holder learns of their existence.

One other family of prestigious middle-class professionals have recently, in fact, got rid of their rights, sold all their property in Benares, and now pass as 'pure' Brahmins in Lucknow.

Though dan always implies a dakshina, the two terms are not synonymous here. The essential dakshina is that it is a supplement to dan, generally in the form of cash representing a small fraction of the value of the principal donation. The idea is that it makes up for any lingering feeling on the part of the recipient that the dan is deficient. The dakshina is said to 'consecrate' the dan; and without it dan 'bears no fruit'. In the famous legend of Raja Harish Chandra, it was in order to provide a dakshina that, having been tricked into giving away all his material possessions in a dream, the righteous king was forced to sell his wife and son into slavery and himself become the servant of the cremation ghat Dom in Benares.

Much of the contemporary theory I outline is clearly present in the texts: see, for example, Kane (1941), Gonda (1975), The Laws of Manu, and Heesterman (1959; 1962; 1964; 1971). At least some Tamil Brahmans entertain similar, though perhaps less elaborated, notions (Subramaniam 1974: 82–3, 86, 135–6).

Apujya ko pujne se durbikhsh para hai. As Gonda (1975: 142), paraphrasing Manu, puts it: 'the gifts offered to a Brahman who has not studied the Veda or who is avaricious and deceitful are fruitless and cause in the hereafter misery to both the giver and the recipient.' According to the Caru dismissed goes to hell; while the recipient not only condemns himself but also 101 generations of his forebears to such a fate.

Cf. Heesterman (1964) who notes that 'the highest Brahmin is the strorita who does not accept gifts' (p. 20) and that 'the preeminence of the Brahmin is not based on his priesthood but on his being the exponent of the values of renunciation' (p. 31).

The terms pap and dosh are used in this context. But the most common term here is the Sanskritised Hindi word prayashchitt. In literary usage this normally has the sense of 'expiation' or 'atonement' performed by the sinner. But in the colloquial usage of the Benares sacred specialists it unquestionably has the additional sense of 'sin' and is used interchangeably with pap and dosh.
There thus appear to be obvious parallels between the Mahabrahman and the 'sin-eater' of seventeenth century England. The manner was that when the Corps was brought out of the house and laid on the Bier; a Loaf of bread was brought out, and delivered to the Sinne-eater over the corps, as also a Mazar-bowle of maple... full of beer... and sixpence in money, in consideration whereof he took upon him... all the Sinnes of the Defunct, and freed him (or her) from walking after they were dead' (Aubrey 1881: 31; see also Hopkins 1973: 720).

There is also the adage that 'the priesthood lasts two generations; the wealth three' (do pushp panditī; tin pushī daulat).

For example, dan given to rid the donor of the evil influence of the planet Mars is especially dangerous. Even worse is tula dan where the jajman is weighed against some valuable substance which is then given to the Brahman. Such dan is said to be particularly objectionable because the donation includes an equivalent of the donor's bone marrow and excrement.

Seen in this light one of the essential characteristics of dan is that it involves an exchange of bodily substance. This idea is perhaps reflected in the Benares Brahman's use of the term in their euphemism for sexual intercourse—'rati dan' ('the gift of passion').

A rather similar paradox confronts the hermit monks of Ceylon (Obeyesekere 1968: 37). The more they endeavour to escape the world by retreating into the forest, the greater the reputation they acquire for sanctity, and the more they find themselves the recipients of the devotions and offerings of the pious.

REFERENCES


