

KULKE, ECKEHARD

The Parsees in India. A Minority as Agent of Social Change

(Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut. Studien zu Entwicklung und Politik, Nr. 3)

München: Weltforum Verlag, 1974; 300 pp.

The author, who concluded his studies of political science and sociology at the Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg, has worked for many years on India. He has had ample opportunity to carry out research in the field. In the present book he deals with an extremely important minority for the modernization of India. Its origin and preservation have to be seen against the background of the caste system. This has, precisely because of its extreme and today shocking stressing of human inequality, the ability to integrate even large foreign groups permanently while preserving their individuality. The Parsees, too, i.e. the descendants of those supporters of the national Iranian state church who preferred to flee from Islamization (which nevertheless took place very much more gradually than is generally assumed) benefited from this. After their emigration to Gujerat they lived there for about a thousand years free from persecution and were able, as a result, to preserve those traditions, only later set down in writing, which today form the most important object of Iranian studies.

The relatively stable community of the Parsees acquired an undreamed-of opportunity from the 16th century onwards. European powers which ousted the natives from overseas trade and set up their bases on the west coast of India got used to using the Parsees as neutral agents and mediators. The latter turned out to be so useful that they finally collaborated with the Portuguese, French, Dutch and English. When the British took Bombay from the Portuguese (1661) and set up there their main harbour for the whole of western India, this system experienced its extreme intensification. The Parsees of Gujarat streamed into this city in order to become profitably active for the Europeans.

The Parsees were by no means the only element in the population of India to enter into such a close symbiosis with the new masters. They nevertheless occupied a special position inasmuch as they did not become subject to any conflicts in relation to loyalty. Iran was more their spiritual home, India merely being the host country. The Parsees could therefore also be appointed to responsible posts in the administration. Above all, however, they very soon took over unreservedly and on a wide basis Western education, which initially was merely a condition for their activity as mediators. It was something in which not merely the intellect, but also the feelings were involved. Even girls were sent to school long before Hindus or even Moslems agreed

to this. The advantage in education in turn brought success in commerce, science and politics, so that today the Parsees – basically a very small group of only 100,000 people – can with pride say that “the community still provides or provided India’s largest industrial concern, the largest (now nationalized) private bank in India, such important politicians as Masani and Mody, journalists like Karaka and Karanja, the highest Indian military officer (Field Marshal General Manekshaw), India’s most important nuclear physicist – just to name some of the most prominent Parsees who give the community the feeling of being at the top in any field in which Parsees become active” (p. 267–268).

Although the Parsees have from the start willingly acted on all levels in Indian internal politics, in particular local politics, their real home nevertheless remained the British Empire. This is stressed by the astounding fact that Parsees have been elected on three occasions to the British parliament by British voters.

One would thus have assumed that the independence of India would have threatened their position severely. This did not, however, happen. There was no resentment against the Parsees, and they immediately adapted themselves to the new situation. If their position is threatened today, then it is for quite different reasons which are very familiar to us as Europeans, i.e. they have become westernized to the extent that they have only a small number of children. Moreover, they are not prepared to accept positions not corresponding to their ideas of an élite status, and therefore have a high unemployment rate. The community is felt to be a sort of social insurance, a situation which clearly cannot persist for ever.

We see on the whole that the Parsees in fact represent the model of a community which was both capable of and prepared for upward social mobility. It knew how to make the best of changing situations without giving rise to reactions of hatred on the part of its neighbours. This corresponds fairly accurately to the ideal of those research-workers who have devoted themselves to “social engineering”, and aim at a development which allows for the preservation of the ethical values of the various groups.

It is understandable that Kulke as a sociologist should in the final chapters of his book examine whether the current explanations of this striking preparedness for positive social change apply here.

He first of all investigates whether the factor of marginality has to be taken into consideration, the various variations of this concept being taken into account. Kulke also considers the institutional requirements within the British colonial administration and investigates the “opportunity structure”. It becomes clear that the relatively undifferentiated initial state of the Parsee community was favourable to their driving force.

Curiously, their own school system, which was still being built up in the 19th century in order to escape from the attempts at missionary work by the English, is now having a retarding effect. It is paid for by the rich members of the community, but not used for their own children, and has therefore become somewhat ossified.

Following in the footsteps of Max Weber, Kulke concerns himself with the system of values. He finds that the religion of the Parsees does not demand any kind of asceticism and considers the devotion to worldly activities to be a positive act in the general struggle against evil. These are premises which are almost as favourable as those inherent in Calvinism. The remarkable success can however only be explained if the interaction of these various motivations is taken into account.

A number of points would have emerged even more clearly if the author had also made a comparison with other successful minorities, for example the Ismaelians. This does not, however, impair the benefit the reader can derive from this book. It represents a very positive contribution to the social history of India and that of minority problems.

Professor Dr. Karl Jettmar