Travel Regulations

From the 1880s, as education dispensed in Great Britain commanded for Indians access to new material resources in colonial India, as means for international transportation were modernized and social reforms shook their beliefs regarding pollution, urbanized Hindu elites started questioning the validity of the traditional ban on traveling outside India. Debating whether it justified exclusion from one's caste, they found arguments to support contradictory positions in the treaties on → *dharma* (→ Dharmaśāstras), the Hindu normative literature. The two terms that were then used to designate such a journey both referred to sea voyage: *samudrāyana* (Skt., lit. traveling by sea) and *kālāpānī* (Hind., black waters; Arp, 2000, 224).

A 19th-Century Social Issue

Travel regulations only became a serious social issue from the mid 19th century on. Earlier too, Hindus who had left India, by crossing either the sea or the river Indus, had been aware of these regulations. And those of them who had come back had risked being ostracized from their community for having contracted a serious state of impurity by going abroad – travel regulations, as should be clear from the start, concern only returnees; if in some way they have also affected the different Hindu diasporas, they will be considered here a problem of the Indian society.

A well-known verse that was uttered – according to some, by Rājā Mansiṃha (1550–1614) of Amber, and according to others, by Gurū Gobind Singh (1666–1708) – to encourage troops during a military campaign that required going beyond the Indus, a crossing that could only be made at the pass of Attock (Aṭak), bears witness to an awareness of the ban:

Sabhī bhūmī gopāla kī yā meṃ aṭak kahā
Jāke mana meṃ aṭak hai vohī aṭak rahā.

The whole earth is Gopāla's, where is Aṭak in there?
In whose heart is hesitation (*aṭak*), that is where Aṭak is.

This verse seems also to reflect a distancing from the orthodox (Brahmanical) rules of purity in the name of an all-embracing supreme being whose presence renders the whole earth pure. Quite a different attitude can be surmised from the treatment afforded upon the return of two Brahmans who had been sent as ambassadors to England at the end of the 18th century. They had to undergo a rite of purification that consisted in their crawling through a matrix (*yoni*) made of gold (Wilford, 1801). It is known that such rites symbolizing rebirth were also celebrated when one had lost one's → caste status due to a great pollution (Clémentin-Ojha, 1994; see also → purity and impurity).

Having to serve overseas was one of the recurring grievances of the Indian army and one of the numerous causes of the uprising of 1857. But whereas, during the second half of the 19th century, the ban on foreign travel only gave rise to sporadic problems (Carroll, 1979, 267, 270), between 1880 and 1920, it became a social issue as debated among reformers as widow remarriage or conversion. It generated equally extreme opposite reactions of approval and rejection. At that time, going abroad mostly meant traveling to England by ship. On one hand, people traveled by ship because, since the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869, there were regular liners. On the other hand, people traveled to England because it was the natural destination for those Indians who were desirous to exercise one of the new and lucrative professions generated by the colonial regime (Carroll, 1979; Lahiri, 2000). There, they faced many hardships as they had to adjust to alien life conditions, not to mention the risk of betting one's future on the successful completion of difficult exams. Yet, traveling abroad was seen as one of the means of coping with the modern world (Sen, 2005, 59–60).

Given the traditional ban on crossing the *kālāpānī*, the prospect of the departure of a son for England was a very serious concern for many families. The problem was essentially confined to high-caste Hindus, for whom the fear of pollution was very real, as the majority of the candidates for the journey came from their ranks since they constituted the social elite. As a result, many a young man chose to clandestinely flee his parents' home. But the serious difficulties started with the journey back home. Returnees were ostracized by their community because they were suspected of either having deliberately disregarded their caste duties or having been unable to maintain them. The social boycott meant principally that none would dine with them in their caste and that their prospect of marriage became dim. In most cases, normal contacts with the returnees could only be resumed after they had undergone rites of reparation or expiation (*prāyaścitta*) prescribed by their caste council (*pañcāyat*) or other such instances that regulated the internal affairs of their caste.

The caste council would usually assemble after the return of the traveler. Yet sometimes it did enter into action before his departure. This was the case for Mohandas → Gandhi, for example, whose plan to travel to London in September 1888 was strongly disapproved by his caste fellows (Modh Baniyās). After having done their utmost to discourage him in vain, they convoked an assembly and took the collective decision to ban further social contact with him (Gandhi, 1927). There are many other such examples.

Most caste councils were autonomous bodies whose legitimacy was guaranteed by the consensus of a given community. This shows the highly localized character of the social control; circumscribed to the caste, it did not affect those outside its boundaries (Carroll, 1979, 267). In some cases, caste councils interacted with monastic institutions (*maṭha*) and pronounced their judgment in consultation with a *guru*. This was in particular the case for Brahmans of Maharashtra and South India. Their affiliation with a monastic lineage was constitutive of their caste identity, and it was the abbot's responsibility to maintain the latter. There again the judgments on breaches of conduct varied according to the sanctioning authority. An apt illustration was afforded by the case of some → Smārta Gauḍa Sarasvata Brāhmaṇas of Karnataka (Conlon, 1977). Those affiliated with the monastery of Kavale were treated liberally by the abbot Atmananda Saraswati (1870–1898); when they returned from abroad, they risked no social boycott. By contrast, those affiliated with the monastery of Chitrapur fell under the jurisdiction of Pandurangashram (1858–1915), who followed a stricter policy. At the end of the 1880s, the abbot decreed that contact (*samparka*) should be avoided with members of the caste who had returned from England until the nature of their lapse had been determined. Given the resistance of his disciples, Pandurangashram declared in December 1896 that those who had gone abroad were excommunicated and that those who had been in contact with them had to undergo an expiation (Conlon, 1977, 158). This decision was directed at Gauḍa Sarasvata Brāhmaṇas who were living in Mangalore, Madras, and Bombay. Though they were given to reformist ideas, most finally yielded to their *guru*'s pressure. In March 1898, the abbot celebrated in Mangalore a ceremony of mass expiation, which lasted 12 hours. But in 1911, judging from the remark of the officer in charge of the census operation, the tension generated by the issue of sea voyage had still not abated: the caste, he wrote, was divided between "Londonwalas" and "non-Londonwalas" (Conlon, 1977, 165).

In most cases, expiation for *samudrāyana* consisted in taking a ritual bath in a sacred river and in swallowing the five products of the holy cow (*pañcagavya*, i.e. milk, yoghurt, butter, urine, and cowdung) under the supervision of a priest. It was held an ignominy by most returnees. Some individuals could resist the pressure to expiate, either because they had become independent from their traditional milieu – as was the case with those whose career had taken them to large urban centers – or because they had built at home a strong social position that none could challenge; it was, for example, the case with Motilal Nehru (1861–1931), who visited England for the first time in 1899. But for such people also, the social and emotional costs were very high.

The Interpretation of Śāstras

Why was sea voyage such a severe breach of conduct from the perspective of orthodox high-caste Hindus? Because it brought up the issue of pollution for two major reasons: eating forbidden food and having contact with non-Hindus (*mlecchasamparka*). While these conceptions are undeniably found in the Dharmaśāstras, sea voyage is not in fact their focus of attention (Kane, 1946, 933–938). It is but one instance of activities that entail breaking the rules of one's own caste and falling beyond the pale of *dharma*. The rites of expiation for the returnee are not specific either. Moreover, the treaties on *dharma* confine the question to the *Kalivarjya* section, the list of activities that existed earlier but "must be avoided" during the *kaliyuga* (see → cosmic cycles), the degenerated present era. And finally, it is not treated consistently: while some texts forbid the journey, others permit it on the condition of observing certain rules while at sea. One therefore gets the impression that sea voyage is a marginal issue in the normative literature and that there is no single view on its consequences.

This is the reason why both proponents and opponents of the journey abroad could summon religious authorities (→ *paṇḍit, śāstrin*) to prove their point. Those authorities extended their support in the form of *vyavasthā*s, written declarations by which they had traditionally made known their understanding of correct practice, or in pamphlets. Some of them held that sea voyage was allowed as long as one respected rules about → food and daily rites and avoided close contact with non-Hindus. In 1870, the learned and influential *paṇḍit* Bhattacharya Taranath Tarkavachaspati (1812–1885) of Calcutta Sanskrit College published the *Samudrayānagamanadoṣamīmāṃsā* (Investigation on the Fault of Traveling by Sea; see original and trans. in Arp, 2000) to demonstrate that Hindu life conditions could indeed be maintained outside India. Madhusudana Ojha, the court *paṇḍit* of Madhava Simha II (r. 1880–1922), was of the same view. By following his recommendations, the orthodox ruler of Jaipur crossed the ocean to attend the coronation of King Edward VII (1902), stayed in England for more than two months, and came back, all the time observing the rules governing ritual purity in such a way that he did not have to perform any rite of reparation upon his return (Saksena, 1922). But according to some other *paṇḍit*s, sea voyage was not permissible in any condition. This was, for example, the opinion of the Bengali Sharada Prasada Smrititirtha in his *Bilāt'yatrāpratiṣedha* (Ban on Foreign Travel, 1894; original and trans. in Arp, 2000).

The Sea-Voyage Movement

In order to come to some sort of rule of conduct, in 1892 a "sea-voyage movement" was started in Calcutta, the capital of the British Empire, with the creation of "The Standing Committee on the Hindu Sea Voyage Question" by a learned assembly of religious authorities and other dignitaries belonging to high castes. Two documents were published, *The Full Report of the Proceedings of the Sobha Bazar Meeting* and *The Hindu Sea Voyage Movement in Bengal* (both reproduced in Arp, 2000). Both declared that traveling abroad was eminently desirable and compatible with the full respect of Hindu traditions. Their authors endeavored to expose the fallacy and lack of consistency of the objections raised by the more orthodox authorities. However, given the flexibility of Hindu scriptures, which leaves them open to a variety of interpretations, they were unable to come to an agreement about the eschatological implications of such a journey. Two positions regarding the effects of expiation on sin emerged from their report. According to one, "the sin can be expiated, but… the person who commits the sin cannot again associate with his caste-fellows," but according to the other, while it is impossible to forgive the sin, "the performance of expiatory ceremonies would allow the offender to mix socially with his caste-fellows" (*The Full Report…*, 7, quoted by Lahiri, 2000, 24). The difference is of no little concern if one keeps in mind that for pious Hindus an expiated sin is erased from the karmic slate, whereas a non-expiated sin might have serious karmic consequences (see *MaSm.* 11.48, 53). While none denied that sea travel could be a source of pollution, all agreed that it was not traveling at sea per se that was the cause of impurity, but the behavior of the traveler. What was at stake therefore was how to maintain an orthodox Hindu lifestyle aboard a ship or in foreign countries.

Crossing Limits

Those who were favorable to sea voyage usually belonged to milieus advocating modernization. In the 19th century, movements committed to economic and political progress sprung up to advocate reform of Indian society in line with the British model. But even those who insisted on keeping Indian roots did not totally reject the sea-voyage change. The → Arya Samajist, for example, who favored a return to vedic practices, did not oppose it because it was not forbidden by the Veda. Besides trying to show that foreign travel was not opposing the religious scriptures, the proponents of foreign travel pointed to the numerous social advantages it could offer. As early as 1871, on his return from Europe, Satyendranath Tagore (1842–1923), the elder brother of Rabindranath → Tagore, had thus advocated foreign travel in these terms:

> It is only when we see a state of society completely different from our own and far more improved and civilised, not only see it, but are influenced by it, that we begin to realize our own shortcomings by contrast. (quoted by Lahiri, 2000, 23)

Later advocates of foreign travel also stroked the nationalist cord. In this respect, the feeling prevailed in some communities that by being less progressive than others in this matter, they ran the risk of being left behind.

While the prestige of going abroad was indeed great (Lahiri, 2000, 37), many arguments also revolved around the danger of Westernization. The travelers who returned from England were accused of aping English ways. They were not only accused of this but also envied because they had career opportunities that were out of reach for others. In many controversies around returnees, in fact, one catches sight of intense rivalries among different social groups, which suggests that the issue at stake had little to do with fear of pollution and was more of a sociological nature. Yet these two dimensions probably collided in the mind of those whose high social status depended on a lifestyle implying strict adhesion to norms of purity and who saw their position being challenged by a class of individuals possessing foreign diplomas and a mastery of English language and ways.

Crossing the ocean not only implied going beyond the limit of correct behavior that Hindus had hitherto considered as impassable, but also reflected new ways of considering the spatial limits of Hinduism. From the point of view of the opponents to sea voyage, India was a religious space possessing limits that one should not cross. Their India was Bhārata, a conception constructed with materials taken from ancient texts. At the same time, it was inseparable from the political context – colonialism and the development of nationalism. In Sanskrit normative literature, Bhārata(varṣa) – a socialized territory circumscribed by natural landmarks (mountains and oceans) that have varied according to texts and periods – referred to the land of acts (*karmabhūmi*). It was there, and there alone, that men could accomplish the prescribed rites and observances (→ *karman*), in a fruitful manner. During the British colonial period, when for the first time in their history Hindus were exposed to cartographic representations of Indian territory, Bhārata was invested with a modern meaning, differing from the one it had in precolonial conceptions. It became this India that has existed since the most ancient past (vedic) and whose "true nationals" were the descendants of "the most ancient inhabitants" (the Aryans [*āryas*]). One therefore observed an articulation between an imaginary territory and a singular historical national entity, territorially well delimited, which corresponded to India, in other words, to a country (*deśa*; Goswami, 2004). Such was the conception of the spatial frame outside of which one could not be considered a good Hindu in the years 1880–1920. For the proponents of sea voyage, by contrast, one could be a good Hindu in the whole world, wherever one happened to be, as long as one drew a sort of magic circle around oneself (no commensality, no close contact with non-Hindus). Thus the issue of foreign travel illustrates the evolution of the mental representation of the geographical space within which Hindus deem it possible to obey their religious precepts.

Conclusion

Traveling regulations have a long history in India when one considers the evidence of the Dharmaśāstras. But they were never accorded a major place in this literature. Historically too, they do not seem to have generated large-scale problems for a long time. It is only at the end of the 19th century that they became a social issue. And they remained a major social issue up to the 1920s, that is, as long as going abroad generated an intense social competition, as long as questions of pollution and purity remained meaningful, and as long as religious authorities kept their legitimacy. Then, as more and more individuals resisted them, traveling regulations became obsolete. However, the problem they raised has not entirely disappeared. Today still, one hears about cases of priests or chiefs of monasteries being dismissed from their function for having crossed the *kālāpānī*. The religious dimension of travel regulations seems to have superseded their social dimension.

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