

ACCEPTED VERSION

Peter Mayer

The Jainmani System

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The Jajmani System

Introduction

Definition

The *jajmani* system refers to hereditary patron-client ties between members of land-owning castes and members of other castes who provide them with services throughout the year.

Prakash Tandon in his autobiography *Punjabi Century* provided a clear, untechnical description of what those relations entailed:

We had a family barber, whose father before him had been our family's barber, and so the barber's family and ours were indissolubly bound. Good or bad we could not get rid of him, nor could he refuse to serve us, unless we went to live in another place and adopted a local barber family. But whenever we returned to our home town the old barber was there, and there was no changing him. (Tandon, 1968, p. 79):

William Wiser, who gave what is usually regarded as the first formal description of the *jajmani* system in 1936, offered this account of the obligations of a village carpenter:

The carpenter during the sowing season must remove and sharpen the plough point once or twice a week. During the harvest he must keep sickles sharp and renew handles as often as demanded. He must be ready to repair a cart whenever called upon by a customer, or to make minor repairs on the customer's house. In exchange he receives at each harvest, twenty-eight pounds of grain, for every plough owned by his client. (Wiser, 1958 [1936], pp. xvii–xviii):

Peter Mayer, by contrast, placed emphasis not on the obligations but on the value as property for a client such as Tandon's barber:

the irreducible essence of the *jajmani* relationship is the exclusive property right possessed by a member of an artisan or servant caste to serve a specific patron family. (Mayer, 1993, p. 360)

Pauline Kolenda offered a more formal description of the *jajmani* system:

[T]he *jajmani* system is a system of distribution in Indian villages whereby high-caste landowning families called *jajmans* are provided services and products by various lower castes such as carpenters, potters, blacksmiths, watercarriers, sweepers, and laundrymen. Purely ritual services may be provided by Brahman priests and various sectarian castes, and almost all serving castes have ceremonial and ritual duties at their *jajman*'s births, marriages, funerals, and at some of the religious festivals.

The landowning *jajmans* pay the serving castes in kind, with grain, clothing, sugar, fodder, and animal products like butter and milk. Payment may amount to a little of everything produced on the land, in the pastures and in the kitchen. Sometimes land is granted to servants, especially as charity to Brahman priests. In this system, the middle and lower castes either subscribe to each other's services in return for compensations and payments, or exchange services with one another. (Kolenda, 1963, pp. 11–12)

This reciprocity was particularly stressed by Wiser:

Each [caste] serves the others. Each in turn is master. Each in turn is servant. Each has his own clientele comprising members of different castes which is his "*jajmani*" or "*birt*". This system of interrelatedness in service within the

Hindu community is called the Hindu “Jajmani system” (Wiser, 1958 [1936],

p. xxi):-

In the terminology found in Karimpur, the village studied by Wiser, the patron of a specialist was called a *jajman*, the specialist was a *kam-wala*, a *kam karne-wala* or elsewhere a *kamin* (all mean ‘worker’). The word *jajman* is derived from the Sanskrit *yajman*, the person who employs a Brahman to perform religious ceremonies (Wilson, 1968 [1855], p. 226). The Brahman who performed the ceremony was referred to as the *jackak* or sacrificer (Nesfield, 1885, p. 71). In many villages, the term *jajman* referred only to the patron of a Brahman. In other villages, such as that studied by Wiser, the term *jajman* was extended to any patron in a similar patron-client relationship.

Explorations of the *jajmani* system in Indian villages, especially in the 1950s to 1970s, gave important insight into the nature of the economic relationships between castes. A common feature of many studies was the enumeration of the different castes in a village and a detailed accounting for the payments made to different caste specialists at harvest time from the grain heap (e.g. Mann, 1917; Wiser, 1958 [1936]; Lewis, 1958; Gould, 1964; Caldwell, 1991).

In Wiser’s seminal account of Karimpur¹ in the early 1930s, the *jajmani* system had several distinctive elements: the system was of great antiquity, perhaps over 2000 years old; it was a ‘system’; relationships within the system were essentially harmonious; because all served all, they were reciprocal and essentially the same; and, finally, with minor variations, the *jajmani* system could be found in all parts of India. In an influential article, Simon Commander identified five assumptions made by Wiser and others (Commander, 1983, pp. 286–288). In addition to its great antiquity and a harmony embedded in the very nature of the caste system, Commander noted that there is an assumption that *jajmani* operates in largely self-sufficient villages; that village property is relatively equally distributed amongst a

small-holding peasantry; that the economic rationality of *jajmani* is 'wholly disconnected from that of a market nature' (Commander, 1983, p. 297); that status and hierarchy, rather than contract, govern the distribution of rewards; and that labour is largely immobile.

As village studies emerged in the 1960s and 70s, all of the features identified by Wisner came to be questioned by different scholars and Commander himself questioned each of the assumptions he identified.

Major ~~debates~~ Debates

Complementary ~~interdependence~~ Interdependence?

One of the most fundamental disagreements among students of the *jajmani* system concerns its involvement with the very structure of caste itself. Wisner, as we have seen, reported that *jajmani* relations included all castes in his village. David Pocock disagreed, arguing that the essence of 'true specialization' in *jajmani* relations arises from the basic opposition of purity and impurity and only by extension of this idea can other castes be said to be 'specialized' (Pocock, 1962, p. 82). Thus the relation between a Brahman and a client is part of *jajmani*, but relations with artisans or unskilled labourers are not.²

Louis Dumont greatly expanded this line of analysis to the entire village economy:

It has become common practice to apply the term 'the *jajmani* system' to the prestations [payments in money or services] and counter-prestations by which the castes as a whole are bound together in the village, and which is more or less universal in India. To a large extent it is a question of natural as opposed to monetary economy. It is also a question of the closed economy of the Indian village in which essential goods and especially services are found, or used to be found, either on the spot or in the immediate vicinity. (Dumont, 1972, pp. 138-139).

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[The essence of *jajmani* is] interdependence. While directly religious prestations and 'economic' prestations are mingled together, this takes place within the prescribed order, the religious order. The needs of each are conceived to be different, depending on caste, on hierarchy, but this fact should not disguise the entire system's *orientation towards the whole* [emphasis in original]. Thus, . . . distribution on the threshing floor is essentially different from a market in that it takes place in virtue of the fact that everyone is interdependent. (Dumont, 1972, p. 147)-

[T]he *jajmani* system . . . eludes what we call economics because it is founded on an implicit reference to the whole, which, in its nature, is religious or, if one prefers, a matter of ultimate values. (Dumont, 1972, p. 148)-

There are several important issues and assertions in Dumont's argument which will be discussed below; for the moment, the most important point to note is his assertion that *jajmani* relations emerge directly from the very encompassing or totalizing nature of the caste system itself (Dumont, 1972, p. 148) <editors: insert a cross-reference to Dumont here?>. Chris Fuller observes:

It is in Dumont's analysis, more than anyone else's, that the contrast between holistic interdependence, said to characterise *jajmani*, and individualist exclusive rights, characteristic of capitalist market systems, is most subtly developed into a comparison of opposed value systems. (Fuller, 1989, p. 55)

A 'system' System'?

Wiser described *jajmani* as a 'system', and Dumont enlarged it from a system of economic relationships to a manifestation of the caste system as a whole. Miller, too, on the basis of fieldwork with potters in Malwa argued that there is a system along the lines suggested by Dumont and that, making appropriate adjustments for local differences, that it is an India-

wide system (Miller, 1986). We have seen that Pocock challenged this, seeking to restrict usage to a narrower conception of what constitute religious services. Commander, reviewing historical evidence from the 19th century, concluded that, apart from the Brahman-jajman relationship, there was no persuasive evidence that that was a 'system' 'flowing from the Hindu theory of the social order' (Commander, 1983, p. 310) or evident even at the micro-level (Commander, 1983, fn. 105). This point was made even more emphatically by Chris Fuller in an influential review article:

In my opinion, it is now time that the notion of a jajmani system, with its distinctive functionalist overtones, was abandoned once and for all..... these relationships and payments cannot all be subsumed within a single analytical category and they do not, even when taken together, define or constitute an integrated system. (Fuller, 1989, p. 41):

Sumit Guha made a particularly compelling argument against the existence of a system which emerges directly from the opposition of purity and impurity underlying the caste system in Dumont's influential analysis. Evidence from *The Committee on the Customary Rights to Scavenging* in 1966 found relations indistinguishable from *jajmani* which existed between households and the Untouchable [= Scheduled Caste, = Dalit] families which cleaned their dry latrines-one of the most-polluting activities (Guha, 2004, p. 89). Yet, these relations only existed in the western and central parts of Uttar Pradesh and other locations in central western India.

The status of human faeces in the purity-pollution schema must be obvious. If *jajmani* was an institution designed to cope with this (and other) polluting substances, it should have been present almost everywhere. But contrary to Dumont's belief that *jajmani* was 'more or less universal' in India, the

Committee found the 'old form' (or what anthropological literature described as *jajmani*) did not extend even to eastern Uttar Pradesh. (Guha, 2004, p. 89)

Essentially ~~religious~~ Religious or ~~economic~~ Economic? Harmonious or Exploitative?

In the accounts of Wiser and Dumond, there is an essential village harmony in *jajmani* relations because they are subsumed by the totality of the caste system and offer basic subsistence to all castes. Both, as we have seen, argued that because *jajmani* relations were traditional, payments were largely fixed in amounts of grain and involved reciprocity, that they should be understood as being outside of individualistic market relationships. Orenstein, who studied a village in Maharashtra, also argued that the *baluta* system he found in operation there 'prevent[s] power from dominating interpersonal relations and thus to increase the feasibility of village solidarity' (Orenstein, 1962, p. 311).

By contrast, Sumit Guha cites 18th century evidence from Maharashtra to show that well before British rule, conflicts over wages were common. '[C]onflict was always present, and recurred as individuals felt that they could exploit some fresh advantage' (Guha, 2004, p. 94).

Other scholars have questioned whether there is integrated harmony in *jajmani* relations. Susan Wadley, summing up her re-study of Karimpur, the village first studied by Wiser, observed: "At the outset, we must recognize that the network of mutual obligations and dependencies related to *jajmani* and large landlords was based on exploitation of those who did not have primary tenancy rights" (Wadley, 1994, p. 251). Biedelman drew attention to the very unequal power relationships between land-owning *jajmans* and their dependent *kamins* (Beidelman, 1959, pp. 31-50). The former wielded potential and actual coercive control over the latter.

A *jajman* may coerce other castes as tenants or laborers; he may coerce them by his control of farm implements and oxen, carts, seed, food, pasture, forage, and sometimes even housesites and wells. (Beidelman, 1959, p. 74)

The near-total control which patrons exerted over their clients is well-illustrated by Ram Manohar Vikas et al. who studied a village in Bihar.

[*Kamins*] had to get approvals from landlords before entering into economic transactions with others. The *Jajmani* system was so dominant that low castes had to either run away from the village or lose their lives if they violated this principle. Even the low caste artisans had to sell their produce through patron landlords, who acted as middlemen between producers and traders. (Vikas, Varman, and Belk, 2015, p. 478)

Nor were *jajmans* always constrained by existing religious restrictions on some activities. Biedelman cites examples in which services which were once deemed to be the religious monopolies of certain castes were taken over by their *jajmans* following disputes. When barbers protesting a reduction in traditional payments in one village refused to shave their *jajmans*, the latter bought safety razors and began to shave themselves. In a similar dispute, *jajmans* began to perform their own carpentry and blacksmithing. Yet others undertook night watchman duties, performed services such as drumming at ceremonies when Untouchable castes refused, and so forth (Beidelman, 1959, p. 67).

Henry Orenstein rejected the view that *jajmani* relations were exploitative. He studied *baluta* villages near Poona in Maharashtra and concluded that most payments allowed the service providers to make a profit when compared to market rates. Only the barber incurred a loss and might thus be considered to have been exploited by his patrons (Orenstein, 1962, p. 310). “The nature of the *baluta* payment gives reason to view the system as contributing to village cohesion, and it provides some insight into the social asymmetry contained by the

village” (Orenstein, 1962, p. 313). Orenstein himself notes that *balutedars* did not consider themselves to have a one-to-one relationship with individual landholders but rather “to the village as a whole” (Orenstein, 1962, p. 314). On that basis, there are grounds for questioning whether *jajmani* relations were involved.

The significance of *jajmani* payments in kind from the grain-heap has also been contested. While there is recognition that payment in kind offered security, especially in hard times, there is ample evidence of *jajmans* seeking to reduce payments when market conditions would make it advantageous to put the share of their clients onto the market. Commander in particular argues that it is immaterial whether a wage is paid in kind or in cash; in either case there is a labour market which is uncompetitive and where wages are set by the relative strengths of *jajmans* and *kamins* (Commander, 1983, p. 305).

Geographic ~~distribution~~ Distribution

Wiser believed that *jajmani* or its near equivalent existed in all parts of India (Wiser, 1958 [1936], p. ix) as did Dumont (Dumont, p. 144). Others, taking as their point of departure Hiroshi Fukazawa’s detailed description of village servants in 18th century Maharashtra, questioned whether the one-to-one relationship between *jajman* and *kamin* was indeed found all over India (e.g. Commander, 1983; Fuller, 1989; Guha, 2004). In the *baluta* system, as described by Fukazawa, service castes were servants of the entire village and were compensated by the whole, often by grants of village land.

Of the records I have consulted there is none which indicates that the *baluta*-servants in the Maharashtrian villages were employed by specific families in the village. Rather all of them show that they were servants of the village as a whole (Fukazawa, 1972, p. 25).

Those who looked at economic relations in south Indian villages usually reported that *jajmani* relations did not exist. In a village in Andhra Pradesh, Dirk Bronger reported that patrons in

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the village were regularly re-distributed by clients every 5–8 years to ensure a more equal distribution of income (Bronger, 1975, p. 29).³ Edward Harper described what he termed the ‘Malnad system’ which he found in Karnataka. In that system, most labourers were employed on short-term contracts for cash payments: ‘the employer-employee relationship is characterized by intense bargaining and by instability of ties’ (Harper, 1959, p. 767, also see Benson, 1976). There were, however, also some attached workers, tied to landlords by debt bondage (Harper, 1959, pp. 767–768, c.f. attached labourers in the Kaveri Delta Mayer, 2006). Another to survey south Indian agricultural relations was Mayer who found that in pre-colonial ~~Tamilnadu~~ Tamil Nadu cultivation was undertaken ‘by hereditary classes of untouchable slaves and by hereditary share-croppers’ (Mayer, 1993, p. 362). Like Fukazawa, Mayer found that village servants were precisely that: servants of entire villages, not individual patrons (Mayer, 1993, pp. 363–364).

Origin, age ~~Age of jajmani~~ Jajmani

Wiser believed that the origins of the *jajmani* system which he studied in the early 1930s could be traced far back in pre-history:

[it is] a system which is very similar to or identical with the religio-socio-economic plan of occupations outlined two thousand years ago by Hindu philosophers and lawmakers [such as Manu]. (Wiser, 1958 [1936], pp. 1–2).

Dumont, as we have seen, considered *jajmani* to be inseparable from the essential hierarchical principle on which the caste system was founded, perhaps 2,800 years ago (Dumont, 1972, p. 74).

Other authors have questioned whether we have evidence that the system is of such antiquity. Kathleen Gough argued that British colonialism had forcibly introduced a ‘generalised capitalist market system’ which wrought a ‘profound and revolutionary change’ in the existing society.

[T]he *jajmani* system as a legal system was abolished whenever and wherever the British introduced the capitalist form of land ownership, even though some of its customary features persisted in areas of subsistence cultivation right up to the period of Independence. (Gough, 1960, p. 88)

Fuller argued that the historical evidence shows that the British rule did not introduce a major change in economic relations, because the pre-colonial Indian economy was not static.

Market exchange was in fact an important feature and, most crucial in this context, there were significant internal developments, notably the changeover to cash revenue systems and the emergence of proprietary rights. (Fuller, 1989, p. 54)

Mayer concluded from a survey of historical documents and sources that there were no references to the *jajmani* system as described by Wisner before the middle of the 19th century. Prior to that, the evidence is that instead of an individual patron-client relationship, village artisans were considered 'village servants' and were employed by villages as wholes.

what emerges consistently and clearly from these accounts of the relations between village cultivators and artisans is that the system which prevailed widely in north India, at least until the second half of the 19th century, was one in which the artisans and others like Chamars had general obligations of service to the entire class of village land-holders and were compensated for those services by all cultivators, either directly by payment at harvest time, or indirectly through grants of village land. (Mayer, 1993, p. 373, see also Neale, 1971, p. 224)

Mayer argued that, in all likelihood, the *jajmani* system became widespread only in the final quarter of the 19th century following population growth, legal changes in land ownership.

and the emergence of alternative opportunities for employment of artisans in public works introduced by the British.

There were ~~two~~ two forces of change from whose convergence *jajmani* emerged. The first of these was the growing partition of zamindari and *bhaiyachara* [brotherhood] villages into individual holdings. The second was the mounting pressure on landholders to offer significant incentives to village artisans in order to retain their services. (Mayer, 1993, p. 385)

Mayer suggests, paradoxically, that *jajmani* relations may actually have had their origins in towns and cities and then spread out to villages (Mayer, 1993, p. 378).

Sumit Guha, while accepting Mayer's general thesis about the relatively recent origins of the *jajmani* system, argues that 'village servants' were themselves a relatively recent development in the areas under Maratha rule. In the 18th century the *baluta* form of village service was strongest in the relatively well-off regions of western Maharashtra, but almost unknown in poorer parts of contemporary Chhattisgarh. Where elements of *balutadari* were creeping in, the impetus was the possibility of securing 'rents' such as fines from the possession of hereditary office (Guha, 2004, pp. 98–101).

Only ~~one~~ One kind Kind of ~~relationship~~ Relationship, or ~~many~~ Many?

In Wisner's initial account where each in turn might be master or servant, there appeared to be essentially a single form of the relationship. Pocock argued we should distinguish between two types of services specialists. The term *jajmani* should be restricted to services which deal with the impurities which arise in daily life. The others are those who provide a commodity (Pocock, 1962, p. 85). Gerald Berreman in his study of a Himalayan village reported that villagers distinguished four types of service relationships: *jajman* was restricted to the patron of a Brahman; *gaikh* was used to describe a patron who purchases the services of another; a third form, for which no name was given, is reciprocal exchanges among artisans; finally,

many services in his village were paid for either in cash or kind, on a piece-work or a daily wage rate (Berreman, 1962, pp. 388-389). Harold Gould reported that in his Uttar Pradesh village there were five distinct forms of payment to traditional specialists. The first was the payment by a patron to a Brahman; next were regular half-yearly grain payments to permanently engaged specialists; third were payments in kind or cash to permanently engaged specialists on a piecework basis; fourth were reciprocal payments between specialists; and last were payments in kind or cash on a piecework basis 'to any specialist who happens to be handy and is willing to provide a particular service' (Gould, 1964, p. 16). Gould notes that '... what has been conceived of as the ideal traditional economic relationship between a Hindu household and caste specialists is limited... to a very small proportion of the entire spectrum of specialists' (Gould, 1964, p. 17).

Only in ~~kind~~Kind, or ~~cash~~Cash?

Another disputed topic is the significance, if any, of payments made in grain and those made in cash. For Wiser, payments of grain in customary amounts had a dual significance. Their relatively settled quantities, paid on a regular basis which did not correspond to the work performed, were evidence of a village-wide system ensuring the subsistence of all. The fact that they were fixed by custom and thus not the subject of negotiation was evidence that the village economy lay outside the world of the marketplace.

[F]ixed cash and kind payments [are] made in the village. They cannot be compared with payments made for similar kinds of work outside of the jajmani system... The Jajman when he makes a cash payment thinks not in terms of value for value received, but that the payments together with certain concessions will give the "kam karne-wala" his livelihood. (Wiser, 1958 [1936], p. 42)-

For Dumont, too, regular payments to clients from the harvested grain heap were clear evidence that the encompassing whole of the caste system distinguished it utterly from the individualism of the capitalist market.

[D]istribution on the threshing floor is essentially different from a market in that it takes place in virtue of the fact that everyone is interdependent. If we look closely and see the farmer part with a significant portion of his crop for the benefit of a whole series of different people, we shall feel in the end that we are not in the world of the modern economic individual, but in a sort of cooperative where the main aim is to ensure the subsistence of everyone in accordance with his social function, almost to the extent of sharing out the produce of each piece of land. In the one case, the reference is to the *individual* pursuing his own gain, in the other to the *hierarchical collectivity*.

(Dumont, 1972, p. 147)

The view of *jajmani* payments as being of a different world than those of the market was sharply contested by Simon Commander who reviewed a wide range of historical documents and contemporary village studies and concluded:

Enough evidence has been presented to demonstrate the wide variations in the rates of remuneration. Moreover, it is clear that such rates were closely determined by very local factors, the conditions of settlement, the distribution of power and, above all, the land/labour ratio and the state of labour supply. Recognizing this necessarily means that we should modify the original conception of customary grain payment. Rather than a time-honoured set of rates tending to equality, they appear on closer examination to be closely related to the type of labour, the quantity of labour power expended and the relative availability of labour. The fact that there is no formal adjustment vis-

a-vis price does not really subvert the fact that what we are speaking about is a wage-in-kind, where the wage rate is determined, in the context of an improperly integrated market, by relative bargaining powers. (Commander, 1983, p. 304)

Other scholars also argued that individual economic rationality underpinned the *jajmani* system. Harold Gould, while noting that traditional economic relations continued in his U.P. village because they reinforced established relations of social status, nevertheless reported that

Relative to total grain and pea production---... the amount involved in traditional economic interaction is remarkably small-only 1.5 per cent of the gross harvest. (Gould, 1964, pp. 30--31)

Oscar Lewis, while arguing that *jajmani* was not a market-oriented system, did see that there were clear elements of economic rationality on the part of both patrons and clients. Clients preferred payment in kind because grain prices had risen greatly in the decade before he conducted his study of a Haryana village near New Delhi. For *jajmans* a 'major function of the *jajmani* system is to assure a stable labor supply for the dominant agricultural caste---... by limiting the mobility of the lower castes, especially those who assist in agricultural work' (Lewis, 1958, p. 57).

Bruce Caldwell noted that Lingayats in his Karnataka village did not believe that Hindu ideas of purity and impurity applied to them. They nevertheless had a small number of *jajmani*-like relations. Caldwell concluded that the most convincing reason they did so was 'the lack of cash and the easy availability of grain means that payment in kind is preferred, and the permanent tie ensures the provision of needed services' (Caldwell, 1991, p. 96).

Peter Mayer argued the market nature of *jajmani* relations was incontestable.

what is striking about the new jajmani relations is that they so clearly took the form of property.... in 1911 jajmani rights could be not only inherited but also transferred to another in lieu of dowry. By 1930 the United Provinces Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee found in Meerut that 'no less than 84 mortgages of jajmanis had been registered, most of which belonged to Bhangis, ... some belonged to Mahabrahmans ... whilst one was the purohiti of a Brahman'. (Mayer, 1993, p. 285)

Perspectives

Dissolution of ~~jajmani~~ Jajmani relations Relations

Even in his initial description of the *jajmani* system, Wiser ~~recognised~~ recognized that the system was undergoing significant changes. Every subsequent village study has made similar findings. Wiser felt that centuries of rule by Muslim kings followed by British ~~colonisation~~ colonization, which introduced private land ownership and free public schools, had made the system which he had studied 'a corruption of the ancient system' of communal ownership (Wiser, 1958 [1936], pp. 110--112). Various castes were taking up aspects of agriculture which were once the ~~specialisations~~ specializations of specific castes. Castes such as merchants and goldsmiths were outside of *jajmani* relations. Above all, villagers were obtaining services and manufactured goods from nearby towns for which, of course, they paid in cash (Wiser, 1958 [1936], pp. 114--116). The 'system' which should provide livelihoods for all was failing to do so for most client families who of necessity worked in other jobs and outside the village (Wiser, 1958 [1936], pp. 117--121).

Wiser gives details of a telling incident in which a jajman in his village sought to profit from high international prices for grain by selling all in his granary. When his clients learned of this, they stopped his carts and distributed the traditional amount to each client, keeping a careful record of their actions. The furious *jajman* had his clients arrested, but a

sympathetic Superintendent of Police let them off with a warning. 'If many jajmans treated their "kam karnewalas" in this way the Hindu Jajmani System would soon break down' (Wiser, 1958 [1936], p. 116).

In a study of a village near Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu, Joan Mencher found 'considerable change as many traditional roles have acquired a more temporary contractual nature' (Mencher, 1970, p. 208). Brahman landowners were leaving the village to pursue urban employment. Other villagers were increasingly obtaining goods, including wooden plows, from nearby towns. 'Traditional economic roles for service castes are changing as modern technology, including modern transportation, makes it feasible for both poor and middle-class people to resort to more impersonal services' (Mencher, 1970, p. 209).

Joseph Elder found in his study of a U.P. village that many service castes were greatly affected by economic change. Potters had given up their traditional trade in the face of competition from mass-produced metal vessels. Chamar leather-workers had given up skinning cattle and tanning hides because of its stigma and competition from factory-made shoes. In addition, the availability of ~~galvanised~~ galvanized steel buckets had replaced those of leather in field irrigation. There was less work for Carpenters, too; one family had turned its *jajmans* over to other families and set up a carpenter shop outside the village. 'It was better that one family leave the jajmani system and take its chances on the open market than for all the Barhais to starve slowly' (Elder, 1970, ~~443~~ p. 13). The village Blacksmith family faced falling demand for their services in the face of competition from machine shops in the neighbouring town. The last Lohar informed his *jajmans* that he could no longer afford to perform their ironwork. Barbers were now performing shaves and haircuts for cash payments. The demand for the products of Oil Pressers had also largely been extinguished by petroleum lubricants and commercially available cooking oils. There were no Washermen in Elder's

village, so residents made arrangements with Dhobis from other villages, paying either in kind or cash.⁴

Most striking of all, cheap hand pumps had devastated the income of Water Carriers. 'Once the price of a hand pump came within the range of the Jat families, its convenience spelled the end of the harvest grain payments to the Dimars, and with it the end of their core jajmani relationship' (Elder, 1970, p. 121).

The only relationship which did not seem threatened by technological competition was the service of the Brahman.

So long as people view rituals and ceremonies as an important part of their lives, and so long as Brahmans are the only ones trained to perform these rituals and ceremonies, their services will be needed. (Elder, 1970, p. 121)

Elder concluded: 'as a rule, where core jajmani relationships have ended in the face of competitive technology, the terminating initiative has come from the jajman [patrons] rather than the kam karnewala workers' (Elder, 1970, pp. 122–123).

S. G. Sapre and colleagues at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics resurveyed a Nasik District village in 1960–1961 which had previously been studied in 1939–1940. They found that the introduction of irrigation had led to an increase in the production of commercial crops such as onions, sugarcane and groundnuts [peanuts] and a decline in the production of cereal crops such as wheat and bajri (Sapre, 1962, p. 243). This change in cropping pattern had severe consequences for artisans who received traditional *baluta* payments as shares of the cereal crop: 'the share of the baluta in the total produce has nearly halved during the intervening period' (Sapre, 1962, p. 243). While payments for a few artisans such as the rope-maker and the potter had not changed greatly, payments to washermen, barbers, and others had shrunk considerably (Sapre, 1962, p. 246). In the case of the barbers, an emerging preference for more sophisticated, urban styles of haircutting were a

cause of patrons ceasing to use their services. In addition, the state government in Maharashtra had abolished *vatan* land grants which once supported village servants. Sapre concluded that urbanization and the growth of mechanization in agriculture would in time result in the elimination of the *baluta* system (Sapre, 1962, p. 246).

That, indeed, is what M. P. Kaushal found in a study of a village in Patiala, Punjab. Mechanized farmers displayed attitudes of

Prodigality, profit motivation, lack of interest in family and community traditions and a preference for kinship rather than for caste or community. . . . Agriculture for them carries an economic value and is a source of livelihood rather than a communal undertaking or a source of community participation. . . . [They] now have a greater dependence upon the urban centres for their implements, their repairs and maintenance and many other occupational requirements. (Kaushal, 1972, p. 56)

The consequence of these changes in technology and attitude were predictable: former service castes 'agreed that the indifferent attitudes of the mechanized farmers and their commercial outlook on life had affected the community's solidarity and its other aspects of social life' (Kaushal, 1972, p. 56). The loss of traditional payments and entitlements produced an interesting reaction among the lower-ranked castes: they were 'more united and willing to participate and bargain with other castes not as individuals but through their leaders' (Kaushal, 1972, p. 59). Overall, *jajmani* relations, where they persisted, had shrunk to minimal obligations on both sides; patrons made no informal concessions to clients and clients gave no informal help to patrons 'in any sphere except those covered by contract' (Kaushal, 1972, p. 61).

Tom Kessinger, in his study of Vilyatpur in the Punjab between 1848 and 1968, traces changes in the village's *sepidar* system over the course of a century. Artisans rose from 10%

per cent of men of working age in 1848 to ~~fourteen~~14 per cent in 1922. Wages for many artisans also increased in that period.

Since the nineteen twenties, however, the *sepidar* system (for agricultural labor) has slowly disintegrated~~---~~[...] [permanent employment] has been replaced by annual agreements on the amount of work expected and the rate of compensation received~~---~~... By 1947 the last vestiges of the system had disappeared for agricultural labor, the yearly contracts giving way to daily arrangements at cash rates for certain jobs and piece-work rates for others.

(Kessinger, 1974, pp. 123–~~124~~, 156ff.)

Vikas recounts sweeping changes in his Bihar village. Most service castes have freed themselves from the domination of their former *jajmans* by setting up small businesses and migration. At the state level, lower caste political parties have captured political power, challenging the dominance of once all-powerful upper castes. With their newfound wealth and independence, they have begun to set standards for conspicuous consumption in the village. A village Brahman now prefers to serve these lower castes because they pay more and don't expect him to provide services for free the way his old *jajmans* do (Vikas, Varman, and Belk, 2015, p. 488). Some Bhumihaar landlords who have remained in the village are now economically worse off and no longer able to either dominate or set social standards (Vikas, ~~Varman, and Belk et al.,~~ 2015, pp. 479–~~490~~).

Susan Wadley too, in her re-study of Karimpur, the village first studied by Wiser, found that the *jajmani* system had largely lapsed by 1984. She ~~emphasised~~emphasized the importance of government programs of education and reservation for former Untouchables. She quotes the observations on social changes made by Mohan, an elderly Brahman landowner:

These people don't work that much any more. Moreover, in former times these people were poor and weak. So they were happy with what we gave to them. They were satisfied. But now the government has moved these people ahead and we have been pulled back. Now these people have reached where we were and we have reached where they were. Now they have no need for us. Just suppose-earlier, if a Midwife man or Shepherd came to my door in the evening, and the poor fellow was hungry and I was cutting fodder for the animals, I would say, "-All right, sit down, cut the fodder."- I would go inside and bring out some vegetables, lentils and four breads to give him. He would cut my fodder and throw it to the animals. But nowadays, those who used to come to us for two breads don't need to. They don't need the breads. This is because their seats [in schools and government jobs] have been reserved [set aside for the scheduled castes]. Because of Jagjivan Ram [a leader of the Untouchables], they got their seats reserved. We are small in numbers, so we get only one seat while these people get ten or fifteen seats. So these people have become big men now, and they know that they are big. They get money; they help in reading and writing. So why would they cut our fodder for our two breads? This is the situation. (Wadley, 1994, p. 220)

In these accounts of the dissolution of the *jajmani* system in post-Independence India we can see that in many cases village patrons were responding to changes wrought by technology and growing access to markets. In a few cases, *jajmani* relations were retained because they were perceived to be integral to the functioning of caste *as a system*. It is possible, as Pocock suggested, that the original relationship between Brahman and *jajman* was also the last to succumb to the forces of change. In some villages, that too, was subject to change: in

Karimpur, Wadley reported that a man of the Cultivator caste was now performing marriages, once a Brahman monopoly (Wadley, 1994, p. 247).

Mayer, in summing up his argument that the *jajmani* system itself was of late nineteenth-19th century origins, concluded that '[l]ike many transitional systems of labour relationships, the *jajmani* system was in dissolution almost from its coming into being' (Mayer, 1993, p. 386). By the third decade of the 21st century, that dissolution is virtually complete.

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Notes

¹ Karimpur was later re-studied by the Wisers (Wiser and Wiser, 1963) and later still by Susan Wadley (Wadley, 1994).

² Mayer argued that the evidence from Bengal suggested that it was service roles which first took on the individual patron-client relationship typical of *jajmani*. Those relationships were only subsequently applied to religious specialists ([Mayer, 1993](#), p. 380).

³ This is similar to the periodic re-distribution of landholdings found in villages in the Kaveri delta in Tamil ~~Nadu~~ Nadu (see [Mayer, 1980](#)).

⁴ Berreman found similar changes in his Himalayan village ([Berreman, 1962](#), p. 390).