



Introducing Religions

Hinduism in an Indian village

Narrator

A non-Brahmin village priest makes an offering to a local deity, Di Baba.

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The offering he's making is no different from the one his father made over a quarter of a century ago.

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Di Baba is the local guardian deity of Soyepur. Roughly 80% of Hindus in India still live in villages. The Open University first filmed here 25 years ago and documented the way in which Hinduism is lived out in a rural setting. One of the families featured was that of Dr Upadhyaya, a Brahmin, who has since died. We shall meet members of his family.

Paras Nath Upadhyaya

My father prayed every day. He had a lot of time for rituals. He would bathe at 10 am, do his prayers and rituals in a leisurely manner. He had time.

But with us, everything is in a hurry. Bathe, go to the shrine in the house, light an incense stick, say a quick prayer, gulp down some breakfast and run out of the house to work.

For a Brahmin it is very important to talk to God, even if it's only for five minutes every day. This is your duty.

Narrator

That duty is also carried out by women, who try to find time to conduct regular puja. Here in the 1979 film, a Brahmin woman makes an offering to a tulsi, or basil tree. This same ritual is still being carried out by Brahmin women today.

Usha Upadhyaya

This is an age-old tradition; my mother and grandmother did it before me, and I continue the tradition.

We light a lamp and do a puja every evening at sunset. We must do this without missing a single day, that is said to be most holy. If you do miss a day, we have to try and make it up the next morning.

Tulsi Ma has always been in the courtyard of homes as a guide to women. She is there for the peace and security of the home; after all, it is the women that are the guardians of peace in the home, and Tulsi Ma is the symbol of household amity and peace.

Women also pray to her for the long-life of their husbands, and unmarried women pray to her so as to get good husbands.

Narrator

The Upadhyaya family, like most of the Brahmins in the village, used to be major landowners. But as the local population grew, and the price of land went up, things changed.

Paras Nath Upadhyaya

25 years ago our village had no television, no electricity, no proper roads. Life was slow. Life was easy. Farming as a livelihood has begun to die out in these parts. Now you'll find houses, large buildings, schools, etcetera, on what used to be farming. So people here have been forced to look elsewhere, especially towards the city, for alternative livelihoods, like working

on building sites, building roads, pulling or driving rickshaws. These are the kinds of jobs that they are having to do.

Narrator

Three main castes live here. They're grouped around the pond and live in separate hamlets. The highest caste, the Brahmins, live on the north side, the Bhars live on the west, and the lowest caste, the Chamars, on the east. The physical distance between hamlets is reflected in the ritual distance between castes.

Narrator

Twenty five years ago, the lowest caste servant washed the dishes, but even though they are physically clean, Saraswati, Mr Upadhyas's sister-in-law, still considered them impure and they had to be ritually re-washed. It is in the idea of ritual purity that caste and religion are bound together.

Saraswati (Mr Upadhyas's sister-in-law)

The way we keep the kitchen pure is by not letting any outsiders in. Before I go in I change my clothes because they have been touched by outsiders. Only people from our own caste can come here and eat with us off our plates. And, of course, there would never be any question of us eating with Chamars.

Narrator

For Mr Upadhyas's wife, little has changed. There are still many restrictions on the taking and giving of food.

Baijanti Upadhyas (Paras Nath's Wife)

If they're from our caste then they can come into the kitchen, but not if they're from a lower caste.

Paras Nath Upadhyas

Our maid is of the lower caste but not an untouchable caste. But even so we would not eat food made by her hand.

Narrator

But outside the kitchen, things are changing.

Baijanti Upadhyas

Earlier, during the time of my mother and Grandmother, they wouldn't allow servants into the house, but now they come and go quite normally. Earlier, it was the joint family system, so we would do all the housework and the servants would do the work outside the house. Now families live separately, so we have to use servants in the home now.

Narrator

The classification of society into different castes is an ancient system, it is said to have been handed down from the time of the Veda. But for social and political reasons, the caste system in Soyepur is beginning to weaken.

Paras Nath Upadhyas

The fact is that society is changing around me and I have to keep up. In this day and age I can't afford to be rigid about caste. If I were, I wouldn't get very much done. And this is not just for me but for society as a whole, but particularly the Brahmin caste.

Narrator

The Bhars live on the other side of the pond to the Brahmins, but for them little appears to have altered in the last 25 years.

Kishori – Villager in Soyepur

The government has given resources to people all around us, but nothing has come our way. We live in the same huts we have always lived in and we earn our livelihoods the way we always have. Nothing has changed.

Narrator

The Bhars still have their own priest. Their shrine isn't dedicated to one of the major Hindu gods but to Di Baba, the local guardian of the village. Village deities have non-Brahmin priests.

Kishori – Villager in Soyepor

Of course Di Baba is important. He has been central to our lives for centuries, why should it be any different now?

Di Baba looks after us. He makes sure that no harm comes to the village, that our children are safe from ill winds and disease. That's why we worship him.

Narrator

The Bhar priest filmed in 1979 died in 2002, and his son has taken over.

Sattun Prasad is a local painter and decorator and works in nearby Varanasi.

Sattun Prasad – Soyepor village priest

As a young boy I used to watch my father doing pujas. I guess I must have learnt something along the way. The pujas don't happen every day. But whenever I do a puja the entire village gathers round. When I do the puja, I change. He enters my body and takes hold of it. I am immediately transformed.

I didn't know that I was to be the priest. But through some of the elders in the village I was told that Di Baba would be worshipped henceforth through me.

Narrator

In any one village a whole range of deities is worshipped through different rituals. Sokha is a Chamar. He is also an ojha, which means diviner and exorcist, and despite his low ritual status, everyone calls upon his services when modern medicine fails.

Although very old the ojha is still in demand.

Sokha – Soyepor Village Ojha

Lots of people call on my services, but I don't really go out much anymore, unless it's very urgent. I just don't go.

They come to me with all sorts of problems, physical problems, everything from stomach trouble to infertility, every kind of sadness, possessions by spirits, all kinds of things. I have solutions for all these things.

There is no one in all the four surrounding villages who knows as much as I do about healing and the Gods. You can use all your new machines and even they won't know as much as me.