Chapter 4

Forces of Change and their Impact
Contemporary Status and Role of Pandas of Hardwar

In this chapter, an attempt has been made first to emphasize the dynamism of the Hindu tradition and its complexity. Secondly, the usefulness of anthropological models for explaining dynamism in the field situation are also critically analyzed and lastly, the emerging status and role of Pandas of Hardwar are portrayed. Let us first take up the anthropologist’s notion of two levels in religion; the traditional higher Sanskrit civilization, and the lower or popular level of culture and Hinduism. Tambiah (1975) points out that the very idea of such levels in religion and the attempt to uncover their links is, in some respects, static and profoundly a historical, “in as much as the motion of Sanskrit or Literary Hinduism is posited as a single uniform category or level, when the fact is that the texts range over vast periods of time and show shifts, in principles and ideas.”

4.1 DYNAMISM OF HINDU TRADITION

Traditionally, the Pandas and their Jajmans (whatever their place of origin) shared a certain religious framework. This was despite the fact that the Pandas were generally more familiar with Shastriya texts and the details of ritual and were, correspondingly, more eloquent. Tambiah points out that, even within the villages, there is usually a Brahman priest, and perhaps other learned men from the higher castes, who have a knowledge of the texts. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the villages are visited periodically by the Pandas, by
wandering sadhus and by sectarians and that villagers frequently hear
programmes of bhajans on the radio or transistor or see films, which relate to
religious themes. It is also true to say that Pandas and Jajmans alike accept
what Tambiah terms a ‘hodge-podge’ of belief and custom, which are not
reducible to different levels. It makes sense only to distinguish certain basic
and complementary relationships such as the pure / impure distinction, the
double relationship to the divine through priesthood and possession, and the
distinction between male and female deities in cults, which are reflected both
at the level of Sanskritic literature and in everyday Hindu ritual action.
(Tambiah, 1975).

The Pandas envisage the Sastras both as a monolithic body of teachings
which reveal a consistent wisdom, and as diverse texts which reflect different
‘historical periods (for example, the Pandas will refer to those Shastriya sloks
which validate their own attitude towards the sacrifice of animals or the eating
of meet, but most, if pressed, will acknowledge that a contrary view exists within
the Vedas). And, while the community as a whole asserts the fundamental and
basic authority of the Vedas it is permeated by ideas and later writings. The
eyear philosophers as well by their own observations and contacts with Jajmans
and sacred specialists have influenced not only by ancient rasis but also by
famous bhaktas and reformers, the Pandas. It would be impossible to separate
out a literary culture from popular religion, and there is no sense in which the
Pandas would define any hierophant or cult as being outside Hinduism, unless
it led to iconoclasm. The gods can reveal themselves in any form and through
any man. Some textual evidence can support almost any form of worship or
belief and, in the Panda community; incantations, which appear to have a
magical, popularartistic quality, are, in the fact, taken from the Atharvaveda.
Although ritual observance is acceptable only if it is remembered that the Vedas, sorts of permutations of metaphysical doctrine and social law.

Any major concept becomes overlaid, in the mind of the Pandas, by literary and historical accretions. A good example is the Hindu thinkers. The Pandas, in general, follow the teachings of Krishna in the Gita and do not accept non-violence as a rule. They believe that violence is sometimes necessary. They think that killing in a just war may be part of the dharmas of the Brahman as well as that of the Ksatriy and some Pandas took part in the fighting of 1947. Many admire the militaristic fervour of Hindu leaders Sivaji, Guru Govind Singh and even of women such as Maharshi Padmini and the Rani of Jhansi. However, they have obviously been influenced by Buddhist and Jain writers and even by Gandhiji. Translated into practice, the concept takes on great complexity, as it relates both to the dharma of caste and to a universal dharma. Thus, they will not kill anything, which is defined as containing life, and believe that the souls of the dead can be reborn as animals, vermin, lice, etc. They will not kill the rats, which eat their food and contaminate it. They merely trap them and let them free outside. They do not kill marauding monkeys, although they will scare them off by throwing stones and sticks. They will not kill snakes, but rather give them milk and show them reverence. On the other hand, they know that municipal servants round up stray dogs to be exterminated and that they poison rats. In this case, it is felt that it is part of the dhrama of the servant to kill and that of the rat or dog to suffer. In the same way, many Pandas believe that to eat meat and kill animals is against a universal dharma, but they accept that it is not against the caste dharma of a Kasai to slaughter and of a Ksatriy to eat.

Even within the relatively homogenous Panda community, there are great differences of learning and interpretation. Thus, although many of the Pandas
share a similar working view of the Shastriya texts, knowledge of them is not uniformly spread. Outstanding gurus have taught some Pandas, some have learnt from their fathers, some have been to pathsalas and Sanskrit colleges. Within each branch of learning—Vedic studies, karmakand, astrology, Sanskrit, etc.—certain Pandas are regarded as profound and proficient. Conversely, many Pandas are regarded within the community as relatively ignorant and unlearned.

We have already seen that there are differences of level within the community, which result from inequalities of income and education. Poorer Pandas tend to resort more frequently to sayanas and to retain customs that wealthier Pandas have forgotten or neglected. Moreover, some of the younger, secularly educated Pandas have less respect for ritual and for ritualized living than their fathers, and a few have moved towards defining religion in simple terms as the devotion to a personal god.

Let us look a little more specifically at the literary background of the Pandas. The most general statement of all Pandas in spiritual matters is: "The Sastras say that......", "We should do this, it is written in Sastras". Generally, the Sastras are known as part of an oral tradition, which is confirmed in katha, festival, procession, image, calendar, temple iconography, etc. A few Pandas are known to be "learned in the Sastras", that is, they devote some time to reading and studying the scriptures and own discuss intricate points of detail.

The books most commonly read and owned by the Pandas are the Ramayan, the Mahabharat and the Purans—particularly the Harivams Puran, the Siv Puran, the Devi Bhagvat. Markandey, Padma and Srimad Bhagvat. Many Pandas possess books of devotional songs (bhajan) by Mirabai. Surdas and Tulsidas, the Gita in the Hindi translation and prayers to particular gods (for
example, the Hanuman Calisa). Most Pandas also possess small books of karmakand, which give all the sloks and mantras they will need and which are taken, in the main, from the yajurveda. Generally, Pandas try to borrow books from someone else or from a library, but a few Pandas, who are ‘learned’ and prepared to spend the money, may have more. They may, for example, own the Yajurveda itself, Purans other than those mentioned above, the Upnislads, Manu, etc. Some Pandas have particular interests—for example, the science of mantras, socialism, astrology, Sanskrit poetry, Vedic studies, history, etc.—and try to collect a few books on these topics. A very few Pandas are interested in samkhya, yog, mimamsha, advait philosophy, etc.

In the houses of most Pandas, there are usually a few pamphlets or tracts on sandhya, tarpan, sraddha, arti, different devotional procedures, etc. There may also be some Hindi novels, newspapers, and weekly papers, books containing the latest film music and songs, occasionally a book of meditation or a biography of Gandhi. Young boys may read modern, ‘sexual-type’ magazines, novels, biographies of heroic man, some historical writings or religious magazines.

Individual Pandas frequently recite sloks, not only from the Purans or Gita, but also from classical poetry and drama. Particularly appreciated are the Meghdut, Raguvans and Sakuntala of Kalidas. Also loved are the Ramayan of Valmiki in Surdas in Brajbhasa and the love poetry of Mirabai in Hindi. These also celebrate the ideals of heroism and fidelity in men and obedience and beauty in women.

It is certain that, within the community, ideas of maya, or karma and dharam are complemented, in myth, in art and in music, by the affirmation of the world and an almost lyrical enjoyment of it. The tendency towards self-denial
and austerity is balanced by ideas of sensuality and the reutilization of enjoyment. Through myth and through ‘culture’, the Panda does experience himself as agent and, even within his family; his individuality is enhanced, according to Panda norms, by his taking on and manipulation of many roles. The sanyasi, in some senses, is regarded as losing his individuality because he foregoes attachment. Thus, many different emphases on caste, merit, fate, salvation and dharma are incorporated into the lives of the Pandas.

Dumont (1965) contrasts the pure holism of traditional India with the individualism of the West and the unmitigated holism of caste society with the individualism of the sanyasi. In accepting his models, we should not forget that the Hindu tradition is not monovalent. Dumont argues that, in the West, the ontological unit is the human indivisible being while, in traditional India, it is the idea of dharma (the holistic idea of order). He notes that transmigration constitutes a dramatic illustration of the unreality for the traditional Hindu mind of the particular being, a vivid picture of holism. Such ideas are highly abstract. Practical experience of the Panda community revealed an affirmation of the individual as agent and of this life as valuable, and that these positions were often validated through the Sastras. Much of daily religious practice is directed towards earthly rewards. Moreover, there is a view that the individual stands in a direct relationship with God and that to proceed towards a closer unity demands a higher dharma than that of caste.

Thus, although the Pandas conceive of themselves in terms of the family, lineage, caste and as a part of a whole, they also conceive of themselves as individuals outside this framework. Although the ideals of varna ashram and the linked concepts of dharma and karma may dominate their beliefs, there are aspects of their thought which are egalitarian and individualistic. Many Pandas
can quote Shastriya exceptions to the rules of caste while others regard the
dharma of caste and the duties of karmakand as a preliminary to salvation, as
the initial stage. There is a higher level at which such bondage is overcome.
Many Pandas accept advait vedant as the highest philosophy, and the empirical
realization of its truth depends upon a freedom from hierarchy.

Pandas generally accept that they follow the two paths of karmakand
and bhakti. Karmakand, is linked with the caste structure and holistic notions,
but it also carries with it the idea of worship and even of love (in the same way
Pandas describe dharma both in terms of caste and in terms of universal
qualities, such as truth, mercy and love for all). This karmakand is perceived as
having some of the elements of bhakti. All Pandas would describe themselves
as bhaktas and some are renowned as such. They consider bhakti as an easier
path than that of Jhan or karmakand since it is available to all, to the illiterate
and humble as well as to the learned and highborn. Moreover, we may add that
many of the Brahmanical rites and procedures followed by the Pandas have
strong tantric elements, and a few Pandas are specialists in tantric forms of
worship. Since even Dumont (1960) finds in Tantrism, the bhakti cults and in
the sects an individuation which adds to the traditional group religion, it would
appear that the Pandas are influenced by contradictory but complementary
ideals. Dumont himself allows that an unqualified opposition of the holism of
caste with the individualism of renunciation is impossible—

"To sum up, Hinduism, the religion of caste and of renunciation, has
developed by integrating—in Brahmanism—and by tolerating—in the
sects—the products of the renounder's thought and mysticism. The most
important aspects is the addition to group religion of individual religion,
even in Tantrism which in place of renunciation introduced as a
fundamental variation and following an elementary formulae, the sacred}
reversal. The devotional cults have, on the one hand, inherited
individuation from the sanyasi, and, on the other, they are in touch with a
basic aspect of popular religion. Otherwise and in general, what popular
religion displays in structural from is found again, partly substantial zed
and disjointed, in Brahmanism, partly in Shaktism and in Bhakti". (Dumont,
1960 : 61).

What appeared to occur within the community was the polarization of
different paths and different ways of being in the world and an acceptance of
their co-existence. O’Flaherty says (1973) that myths return again and again to
the age-old quandaries about the way in which men ought to live, and she speaks
of the "extraordinarily flexible state of mind which the Hindu myth-maker
ultimately developed in his attempt to view simultaneously every possible solution
to his dilemma". In a similar way, the Pandas, as mythmakers, carry on this
tradition. They may hold fast to the framework of caste, but they participate in
the Zeitgeist of each age of metaphysical thought and in the comparatively late
developments of Tantrism and devotionalism. We would further argue that it is
only at the extremes that the abstract opposition between caste society and
the individualism of the sanyasi works. The values of the ascetic permeate the
values of the householder and cannot be held to be exclusively the possession
of the former. As O’Flaherty says, the two realms may meet on either side of
the line—the householder may embrace the philosophy and even chastity of
the ascetic, or the ascetic may go so far as to take a wife and become a
householder. Within the Panda community, there are three sadhus, several
brahma-caris and many more who strive to live detached from their householder
affairs. Linked with the community are several families of girls who are
"householder sadhus".
4.2 STATUS OF PANDAS VIS-A-VIS SADHUS

It may be stressed here that the Pandas regard themselves as householders in opposition to the sadhus, but that they also regard their own community and that of the sadhus as forming a group both spiritually and socially. Both exist by donation and both keep alive a tradition of learning. Both are spiritual gurus and both may be pujaris. (There is some difference in that pujaris who take the donations of Shiva should be sadhus or family-holding sadhus and those serving Durga and Hanuman should be brahmachari or keep their families with them). In Kankhal and Hardwar, the sadhus own extensive property and were major zamindars. They have long formed part of the elite of the town with the Pandas and their mahants are present at many social occasions.

There is an even more important source of identity. While the anthropologist opposes the lonely sanyasi to the gregarious householder, the Panda views all ascetics as divided into many orders and as anchorite or cenobite. Even sadhus who wander are attached firmly into an organization and a hierarchy and possess marks, which distinguish them from members of other orders. They form societies with rites of imitation and some have rules of admission which are in fact caste-biased while others retain some internal caste hierarchy.

Many orders of sadhus have their own Panda and some sadhus come to Hardwar to bathe and even to donate. When they arrive in Hardwar, they ask to know the Panda of their math. Among the orders belonging to the Pandas are the Nagas (Bhairom Akhara, Niranjani Akhara, Nirvani Akhara), Udasin (Bara and Chota), Nirmala Akhara, Vairagis and Nath Sampraday. In addition, individual sadhus living in villages are sometimes recorded in the bahis of the Pandas. In ancient times, the bodies of sadhus were never burnt but buried or
thrown in the river. Even today, many sadhus (for example, the Nagas) never burn their dead. Others, however, do and they bring the ashes to the Ganges or bury them. When the bodies of the dead sadhus are thrown in the Ganges, the Panda is contacted and he will be present and give a blessing. In return, he will receive some donation. At this time, it is customary for the order to feed many sadhus and Brahmans (bhandara). The dead body is wrapped in a saffron-coloured shroud and pupils and disciples place shawls upon it. These are taken sometimes by the Mahabrahmans, sometimes by the societies and sometimes by the Panda. Generally, the bodies are weighted with a large stone and put in a deep ghat.

Householder sadhus are always seen as sadhus in relation to the Panda, but they are indistinguishable from them in life style. They are Brahmans and come to their Pandas for all ritual performances (including those of death).

While the sadhu can adopt some of the attachments of the householder—property, shelter, stable existence, etc.—the householder can move towards even greater asceticism in diet, sexual behaviour and detachment from the cares of the household. Salvation is regarded as the result of two paths—fidelity to the dharma of the householder and renunciation. It is likely, however, that the former is envisaged more as resulting in the attainment of good heavens than ultimate release from the cycles of birth and rebirth. The acceptance of both views was noted in one Panda, if one did not have children, this could be regarded as fortunate in that it permitted one to concentrate one’s mind upon god and upon salvation. Salvation in envisaged both as easy (the result of a particular work) and as extremely difficult (the result of thousands of lives spent in tapasya and bhakti).
Many Pandas, as we have seen, ostensibly resolve the conflict at a conceptual level by reserving a period of non-attachment and renunciation for their old age, or by adhering to the teachings of Krishna in the Bhagavadgita—

"Your right is to work only, but never to the fruit thereof. Let not the fruit of action be not your object, nor let your attachment be to inaction".

(Chapter 1, verse 4)

"Offering the fruit of actions to God, the Karma yogi attains peace in the shape of God-Realization; whereas he who works with a selfish motive, being attached to the fruit of actions through desire, gets tied down".

(Chapter 5, verse 12)

Pandas say that they seek peace of mind beyond transient temporal things and value santi, clam self-control and lack of passion. At the same time, they cite many sloks to the effect that man can never be sated with property, women, life and wealth. This, it appeared that the Pandas through devotion, through music, through narcotics, through tantric knowledge, through festival and fair and pilgrimage can simultaneously accept the unstructured and the structured, denial and affirmation, non-attachment and attachment, individualism and holism, asceticism and passionate love. In myth particularly, their own problems of how to live and lead a full life are reiterated and inflected. O’Flaherty mentions above all the pendulum swing between asceticism and sensuality. With the Pandas too, such a problem is central, but so also is the relation of the individual to the world and his quest for liberation. In myth, the gods act independently but they are bound by inexorable cosmic cycles. They mirror the position of the Pandas, who are bound and yet and who simultaneously desire chastity and sensuality.

The ancient Indian knew will the Faustian lust for the full experience of the most diverse possibilities of human life; the Buddha saw this thirst as the cause
of all human misery, but the Hindus did not dismiss it so easily. They recognized
a constant tension between the desire to sample every aspect of experience
and the desire to exhaust at least one by plumbing its extreme depths. Thus
every human action involves a choice, and every choice implies a loss.

O'Flaherty (1973) goes on to say that, in the sphere of human society,
the choice implicit in this conflict was simply denied by the caste system with
its doctrine of svadharma, one's own particular duty in life; each person could
perform one role fully and must let the rest go, at least in this existence. But
these frustration are relieve in myths, where Shiva embodies all of its life, in all
of its detail, at every minute. O'Flaherty also says that the structure of the myth
expresses the conflict between the scales on which human life may be viewed.
The gods, who represent the awesome powers of nature, are suddenly revealed
as petty and confused pawns like ourselves, while the apparently insignificant
mortal is transformed into the instrument of divine grace or wrath.

The myths which are "of this place", of Hardwar, are, in a sense, the
particular property of the Pandas since they are the professional tellers of myth,
the possessors of the knowledge of the sacred places. Each Panda remakes
the myth with different emphases and repetitions, sometimes confusing minor
characters but retaining the main pattern.

The most well known of all the myths are those which concern the exploits
of Siv and his two consorts, Sati and Parvati, those which concern the descent
of the Ganges and those which tell the story of the finding of amrit by the gods.
There are, however, many others, which tell of the appearances of Brahma and
Vishnu and of the heroic deeds of Durga.

O'Flaherty, in her fine and subtle analysis, carries the analysis much
further. Many Pandas have a particular devotion to Shiva (or to his consort)
both as a householder and as an ascetic. He is worshipped as a supreme Yogi sitting in samadhi on Mount Kailash adorned with snakes, skills, elephant skin, crescent moon and third eye. He is smeared with ashes and from his matted hair the river Ganges descends. His throat is blue since it contains the poison, which would otherwise destroy the world, and it throws a blue shadow onto the main stream of the Ganges at Hardwar (Neel Dhara). He is sometimes thought of as taking bhang or caras. He performs tap alone without a wife and this gains for his erotic powers.

Shiva is also pictured with his wife Sati or Parvati in a later incarnation. Sometimes they are together and sometimes Ganesh, Kartikey and the faithful Nandi accompany them. The women in particular worship Shiva and Parvati as an ideal couple and, on festivals such as Gauratij, they pray to be blessed as Parvati. Shiva, the greatest of Yogis, is also praised as the greatest of lovers, whose ascetic merit enables him to make love to Devi day and night for thousands of years. Parvati is worshipped both as a devoted wife and as a yogini who remained alone in the jungle near Hardwar for hundreds of years. She perform tap in order to win Shiva for her husband. She too has gained much merit from her chastity and asceticism and she alone is capable of satisfying the lovemaking of Shiva. More abstractly, she is seen as the only yoni that can quieten the penis of Shiva after the immolation of Sati. The ling and the yoni represent a satisfied union.

Thus, Shiva is worshipped both as a householder and as ascetic. From his long tap emerges an excessive sexuality and from his excessive sexuality a period of calm. As O’Flaherty suggests, he alternates between quiescence and energy, peace and passion. Many of the Hardwar myths certain a similar oscillation between detachment and involvement, between the cosmic and the
human. Through myth and through worship, individuals within the Panda community can exploit both aspects and both extremes.

4.3 CONTEMPORARY STATUS AND ROLE OF PANDAS

The impact of forces of change and the dynamism in Panda-Jajman relationships is quite evident. With the town growing very fast and number of dharamshalas and hotels increasing over the years, jajmans no more need the hospitality of Pandas for accommodation in their residences or the places suggested by them. They, instead, go to a dharamshala or a hotel of their choice before going to their Pandas for pooja or the last rites of the deceased. This has drastically changed the dependence of visitors on the Panda community. Some of the visitors avoid taking any assistance from the Pandas in the changed scenario.

Now-a-days, the criteria for higher status have changed. The purity aspect which gave higher status to Pandas has changed a lot. As we have stated earlier in introducing Pandas in chapter two, it is now those Pandas who gain local offices or who are elected to positions within a political party who have to mix with people from all communities, including the Muslim. Paradoxically, therefore, it is those of highest status who meet the widest range of local castes and who are most likely to be contaminated from the orthodox point of view. Again, it is the wealthy and highly educated who are most likely to marry out of the sub-caste. They alone can afford it and can withstand any criticism made within the community. Previously, it was the bhangoinevalas (bhang drinkers) and the lowest of the Pandas that tended to be in the company of the impure.

There has been a shift in the position of the Panda community in relation to the town as the rate of immigration and urbanization has speeded up. Moreover, the perspective of the Pandas as a traditional community is seen as
increasingly 'specialized' is being "betrayed" from within by many of the younger Pandas who are leaving the profession and who are thereby affirming change in the context of a community in which change is traditionally not a value. Yet these are the sons who today bring most prestige upon their lineages and families and through whom the community hopes to exert its influence.

As a consequence, the contemporary status of Pandas has changed considerably. The materialistic approach being adopted by them has lowered their status. Frequent visitors can be seen avoiding the Pandas, if possible, or one can see Pandas quarrelling with their jajmans over the amount to be paid in return of the services rendered by them. Many pilgrims are seen to avoid Har Ki Pauri to take holy bath and do so on the other side of the Ganges. Many ghats have come on Rishikesh Road side of the Ganges, where Pandas are not present and have adequate parking space. These ghats are now being preferred by large number of pilgrims to avoid Pandas whom they regard 'gurus', not in the sense of learned Pandits but clever guys in getting money in the name of deities.

However, it may be mentioned that there has not been much change in the role of Pandas. Their traditional role of performing last rites of the deceased, to keep records of the deceased and to do pooja on behalf of their jajmans remains the same. Now one can find competition among Pandas to attract jajmans for pooja in the same fashion as the shopkeepers have while attracting customers for the sale of prasad or other holy material. This has very significant implication for sociological concepts of status and role. Here the role has not changed with the change in the status of Pandas.