Chapter 7

Summary and Conclusions

The Pandas of Hardwar all claim to be Gaur Brahmans and they sometimes describe themselves as Adi Gaur Brahmans. They are all Yajurvedis and "belong" to the Yajurved. The Yajurved consists essentially of technical texts and formulae used in ritual, and these are based in large part on the Rigveda. The Pandas have ancient links with the tirtha which they serve and are, as a community, dependent on what is known as jajman vrти, the pilgrimage or jajmani trade. It is also known humorously as akas vrти, the sky trade, because it is entirely unpredictable and depends on the will of the Gods. The present study relates to the Panda community of Hardwar.

7.1 OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The major objectives of the present study are as follows—

1. To find out the traditional status and role of the Pandas of Hardwar;

2. To analyze the changes Panda community is undergoing in their status and role because of an altered socio-economic and political changes;

3. To know the public life of the Pandas of Hardwar at ghats, i.e. the daily life of the Pandas at ghats in context of the relations between jajmans and Pandas and the whole ritual complex of the ghats. In other words, to analyze the changing ritual status and role of the Pandas; and

4. To investigate the life of the Pandas at home, particularly with reference to ambivalence of their position both religiously and socially.
7.2 COVERAGE

The locale of the present study is Hardwar in the Hardwar district of Uttarakhand. Besides being an important pilgrimage centre, it is fast growing as a tourist centre. From Hardwar Ganges descends to the plains. It is one of the seven cities which give salvation mentioned in the Skand Puran, the other six being Ayodhya, in the north, where Lord Rama ruled; Mathura, the birth place of Lord Krishna; Kashi, the city of Lord Shiva; Kanchi, in the south, sacred to both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva; Avantika (Ujjain), in central India, also sacred to Lord Shiva; and Dwarka, the capital of Lord Krishna in the west.

There are several reasons why Hardwar is an appropriate choice for the study of a pilgrimage centre and its priests. It is one of the most ancient tirthas in India and its importance has been recognized throughout the centuries. It is situated on the banks of the Ganges and is the gateway to the high Himalayas, the home of the Gods. Its appeal to pilgrims is non-sectarian and supra-regional, and its sanctity is confirmed by numerous references in the Mahabharat, the Purans and other religious texts. The sacred complex is linked to mythical cycles of all-India importance and is the site of fairs of national renown (Kumbh Mela, Ardha Kumbh, Baisakhi, etc.).

Today, Hardwar presents an extraordinarily interesting and rich field of study. It is the home of many orders of monks and sanyasis, sectarians and institutes of traditional learning. In terms of secular development, it is a rapidly growing town, which is expanding as an industrial and tourist centre.

The Pandas of Hardwar are numerous, disciplined and possess bahis (record books) which go back to many centuries. Their links with their jajmans are even more ancient and they have been performing ritual and receiving donation for hundreds of years. Moreover, the jajmani system and the ritual
network within which the Pandas function is very complex and has by and large been neglected by the students of Indian sociology.

The major characteristics of the selected sample of 50 Pandas are as follows—

1. All the Pandas are Hindus;

2. Age-wise they are 43.5 per cent in the age group of 18-35 years, 29.6 per cent in the age group of 35-45 years and 26.8 per cent are above the age of 45 years;

3. As regards their marital status, we find that 80.0 per cent are married and 20.0 per cent unmarried;

4. Their educational background reflects the following position: up to Matric 60.0 per cent, up to B.A. 30.0 per cent and up to M.A. 10.0 per cent;

5. As regards their fathers' occupation, all were professing the traditional occupation of the Pandas indicating the continuance of traditional occupation among them in successive generations;

6. 75.0 per cent Pandas live in joint families, whereas the remaining 25.0 per cent in nuclear families;

7. Likewise, 70.0 per cent Pandas have large sized (more than 8 members) families, 20.0 per cent medium sized (5 to 7 members) families, whereas the remaining 10.0 per cent have small sized (less than 5 members) families; and

8. All are native residents residing in Haridwar city, Jwalapur and Kankhal.

7.3 TOOLS, DATA COLLECTION & DATA PROCESSING

The data were collected by informal interviews which are characterized by a flexibility of approach to questioning. They do not follow a system of
pre-determined questions and standardized techniques of recording information. This technique allows the interviewer much greater freedom to ask, in case of need, supplementary questions or at times he may omit certain questions if the situation so requires. The data collected through the informal interviews were supplemented by non-participant observation. Observation of Pandas was confined only at ghats. Informal interviews with the family members of the selected Pandas were also conducted. Data from jajmans about their views about the Pandas were also collected through informal interviews. The collection of data was done in 2001-2002. The primary data collected through informal interviews and observation were qualitative in nature. These data along with the secondary data required about the locale, traditional status and role of Pandas and collected from secondary sources available were manually handled.

7.4 CONCLUSIONS

The major conclusions of the study are as follows—

1. The traditional status of Pandas has been very high not because of higher caste, but also due to sacred profession. They were regarded in high esteem and were not always after money. Their relations with their patrons were very cordial.

2. Their traditional role has been to perform last rites of the deceased and to keep records of the deceased. They also performed pooja on behalf of their jajmans who visited the holy city of Hardwar. The Pandas perform all their ritual duties near the bank of the Ganges. They conduct the death ceremonies in general at Kusghat, and Ganga pooja and the immersion of the ashes at Har Ki Pauri. Other rites (mundan, yajhopavit, suhagnitari, godan, etc.) take place at both ghats.
3. The contemporary status of Pandas has changed considerably. The materialistic approach being adopted by them has lowered their status. Daily visitors can be seen avoiding the Pandas, if possible, or 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.

4. 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.

5. The public life of Pandas, as the hereditary priests of Hardwar, remains as mediators between their jajmans and the deities — mediators of merit (punya) and the means whereby sin (pap) is destroyed. It is through their knowledge of the correct procedures of worship that pilgrims attain maximum reward and gain specific ends. They claim and have a monopoly of priestly service as far as pilgrims are concerned. They maintain that their authority to perform rites for pilgrims and to receive their donations comes from Sastras and that those who neglect these obligations gain no benefit from pilgrimage.

6. Pandas also perform the historical role in maintaining Hardwar as centre of pure sanatan dharma. Because of their influence, they were able to defend and advance what were considered orthodox Brahmanical values.
Thus, they extended to the cities of Hardwar their own vegetarianism, prohibition of alcohol and ideas of ahimsa (not killing—no slaughter of animals, no fishing, etc.). Documents show that they frequently came into conflict with the British Government on issues which affected religion and that, even today, they continue to protect the interests of orthodox sanatanis against the encroachments of various municipal and state departments and generally act as publicists of sanatani causes.

The Panda community ability to function as the guardian of the sacred city and of sanatan dharma results from their numbers, status and cohesion over religious matters. It also depends upon their relationship with influential jajmans—in the past rajas and maharajas and today politicians, businesspersons, leaders of religious or quasi-religious movements. Even today, few Hindus, whatever their status, could afford to ignore requests or pressure from a community of priestly Brahmans. It may be mentioned here that the non-Panda Brahmans who serve as pujaris, jyotisis (astrologers), kathavacaks (preachers), vaidyas (ayurvedic physicians) are usually regarded as ‘outsiders’ since their ancestors did not belong to Hardwar.

The relationship of the Panda with his pilgrim is not only religious but also social and historical. A pilgrim may be skeptical of the value of certain rites and perform them only because he is pressurred by his female relatives, but he may still have some interest in common with his Panda—music, politics, etc.

The Pandas have a contractual relationship with many groups whose function is ritually neutral—shopkeepers, local farmers and gardeners, nearby villagers selling their produce, rickshawalas, tongawalas, etc.
Although some bargaining or bartering may take place, the relationship is primarily a cash one, depending on the market rate. Within the Panda community, true jajmani relationships occur only with those whose services are required for ritual purposes and in particular, those concerned with pollution. These specialists include the revered family priest as well as barber or sweeper.

10. Traditionally, the entire household was entirely supported by the donations of pilgrims and by the income from any property or farms owned. The senior male (i.e., usually the eldest grandfather) wielded authority and was responsible for the division of income, all outgoing expenditure, the management of law cases, etc. The other men, as well as their wives and children, were his dependents although they were equal coparceners. Where a younger man of greater ability was in practical control, there was still a careful deference to the older man. He, as karta khandan, arranged the marriages of the children of the family and oversaw all life-crisis ritual.

11. Although strong ritual ties bind all close kin, the household is a ritual unit. In all Panda homes, there is a place for statues of the gods and their pictures. Here, the women do puja daily and, on festival occasions, the men perform special pujas, bathing and feeding the household gods, offering incense, flowers, milk, etc. In the home, the women offer food first to the household gods and then only eat. The eldest male performs the sraddha rites for his dead father and all the ancestors, while the crises of death and birth affect all members of the household. The purity of the whole community rests largely on the family conduct of eating, sexual intercourse, ritual observance, etc. Today, certain aspects of the purity
rules are losing importance but each family maintains certain standards of ritual purity.

12. Most Pandas observe a strict etiquette in their behaviour within the family and preserve a formal deference to elders. The head of the household, who wishes to retain the support of his kin, will have to spend money on them—invite them to feasts, give generously in the marriages of sisters' sons, etc. Although his responsibilities and obligations are many, his investments in his kin will be reciprocated with loyalty, and often goods and money.

13. The Pandas generally say that they marry within the community and never outside the Gaur Brahman boundaries. In the previous generation, marriage was usually made between lineages within the community, with certain exceptions. Where there was some difficulty in finding a suitable partner, the family searched outside in the villages or occasionally in nearby towns (a second or third wife often came from outside).

14. Today, Pandas are often unwilling to marry their daughters into village families. The Pandas generally consider villagers more backward and their customs more rigid. Pandas prefer for their daughters a more sophisticated and comfortable life-style. Increasingly, therefore, there is a search for "professional" type boys from the towns. At present, there is a growing practice of marrying boys outside the community, although the idea of marriage within the community remains very strong and the incidence of marriage outside is usually grossly underestimated. The rule against marrying outside the sub-caste is still firmer and Pandas do not openly admit that such marriages have taken place.
On the whole, we can say that the traditional status of Pandas is fast changing. Though their role has not changed much, the change in status seems to be the resultant of materialistic conception among them as well as the changing conceptions of purity and pollution connected with the traditional caste occupations. The changes in private life lead to the changes in public life and same holds true vice versa. Respect among the Pandas is given to those of a senior generation and then to those of greater relative age, and this is reflected within the terminology of reference and address. In all cases, even today, the Pandas address each other with great politeness and formality, always adding ji to the relationship term and using that form of address, which shows most respect and gives greatest pleasure. It should be noted that pilgrims call their Panda by the word babhaji even if he is a mere boy. Out of respect, that will also address him as purohitji, guruji, panditji, etc. and their children often call him chacha (uncle). This shows that their traditional role is helping them to command respect from their jajmans even today, though it has slightly come down.