

CASTE IDENTITIES AND THE IDEOLOGY OF EXCLUSION

**CASTE IDENTITIES AND THE
IDEOLOGY OF EXCLUSION**
A POST-SCRIPT ON THE HUMANIZATION OF
INDIAN SOCIAL LIFE

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BrownWalker Press
Irvine & Boca Raton

*Caste Identities and The Ideology of Exclusion:
A Post-Script on the Humanization of Indian Social Life*

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BrownWalker Press / Universal Publishers, Inc.
Irvine, California & Boca Raton, Florida • USA
www.BrownWalkerPress.com
2018

ISBN: 978-1-62734-703-7 (pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-62734-704-4 (ebk.)

Cover design by Ivan Popov.

First published in 2016 by
Overseas Press India Private Limited, New Delhi, India

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Velassery, Sebastian, author.

Title: Caste identities and the ideology of exclusion : a post-script on the humanization of Indian social life / Sebastian Velassery.

Description: Irvine, CA : BrownWalker, 2018. | Previously published in 2016 by Overseas Press, New Delhi, India. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018940983 | ISBN 978-1-62734-703-7 (pbk.) | ISBN 978-1-62734-704-4 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Caste--India. | Caste-based discrimination--India. | India--Social conditions. | Marginality, Social--India. | Social change--India. | Ethnology--India. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Social Classes & Economic Disparity. | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Discrimination & Race Relations.

Classification: LCC DS422.C3 V35 2018 (print) | LCC DS422.C3 (ebook) | DDC 305.568/8--dc23.

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Acknowledgements

Our Gratitude to University Grants Commission

In Awarding a Major Research Project

Whose outcome is this Book

Dr. Pranab Patra, Arya Patra,

Mrs. Lucy Sebastian, Dr. Ivy Sebastian and Ashley Sebastian,

Our Colleagues in the Department of Philosophy,

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Our Parents, Friends and Relatives

&

Prof. Mrinal Miri and Sr. Tara

To

The Chuhras of the Punjab
The Chamars and Bhangis of North India
The Mahars, Mehtars and Madigas of
Central and Western India
The Paraiyar and Pulayas of South India
The unnamed broken ones of East India
Rest of the Other Anonymous Dalits of India

Preface

The present study is purported to examine and understand the Indian caste system as the unique ideology of exclusivist doctrine which has its distinctive and continuous impact on Indian social, political and cultural life. A central element in the humanization debate in the Indian context is the desire to return to the concept of equality and social justice. Unfortunately, even in the post-independence India, caste is a criterion of making one as the part of a society/ community. This study intends to re-look at the humanization claims of the social and political activists of India and argue that the existing conditions prevailing in this country, despite having attained political freedom, is not conducive yet, to achieve human freedom; the reason is that Indian societies are overshadowed with caste considerations and its metaphysical trappings where an individual is recognized and accepted in terms of his caste or ethnicity. Our general contention is based on the argument that if a civic culture is unable to provide resources for motivating persons in order to develop their capacities proper to citizenship, then such a society cannot augment a meaningful idea of what is civil in a given society. The radical question is whether the offered normative doctrines, unquestioningly practiced in India, provide the liberal political ideas of freedom and equality devoid of their casteist and its metaphysical trappings? This is the most formidable, intellectual, cultural, political and social anxiety that post-independence India faces with regard to the humanization debates of Indian societies.

Throughout Indian history, socio-cultural and political situations have been controlled and sometimes even distorted by the supremacy and clout of certain principles and ideals which are said to have religious backings. These ideals and principles, in turn, are instrumental in patterning and structuring the cultural spheres of a people. Every social and cultural change alters the essence of the activities in the different social spheres and is manifested in new interconnections between those spheres. Thus, we observe tremendous changes occur in the progress in traditional India, and the old values related to caste relationships are under great strain. It will not be an exaggeration to state that one of the profound changes that occur in contemporary Indian society has been the Dalit transformation of our times. The Dalits (the broken ones, so to say, the lower castes people in India) in this country have acquired a new sense of humanity based on their identity and are forging ahead to shape a new modern India. It is appropriate, therefore, to explore the social, political, economic, and cultural contents of this transformation and also the way such a transformation has paved way for the resurgence of the human spirit. The present book also intends to focus upon the relevance of such transformations that have happened for the nation and its possible implications in the present and future lives of this nation. It is pertinent to state here that the aspirations and struggles of the marginalized masses (Dalits) for a new identity and humanity are based on the values of equality, social justice and human dignity.

Today, when India is certainly once more emerging as one of the most important social experiments in the world, it is more than ever incumbent to explore and re-discover the underlying reasons and philosophy that marginalized the Indian consciousness in terms of caste, ethnicity, religion and the like. We are especially taking a re-look at the present research topic in a deeper level by taking recourse to the major mode of dehumanization that has been systematically happened in this country by upholding tradition as sacred and thus cannot be challenged. Being freed from such metaphysical trappings and their philosophies, we intend to maintain a balanced but critical stand with regard to tradition and

the human subject. It is peculiar of this culture that the human subject has always been recognized from the background of his caste. In other words, caste has been the fundamental quality that defines one's personhood. As a result, the ontological characteristics such as completeness, independence and being the subject or source of actions have seldom been acknowledged as factors for subject-hood in this culture. The sub-title 'post-script on the humanization of Indian social Life' requires certain clarification: Humanization is presently understood as synonymous with democratic institutions that, while protecting individual liberties, aggressively promote free markets. It is increasingly realized that western idea of democracy and technology are not the magic wands for a more humane world. There are problems such as poverty, homelessness, indigence, disintegration of the family, the greater than before divorce rate, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, pornography, drug addiction, Naxal movement, and a growing sense of apathy and disillusionment which are mainstream issues of humanization debate. There is, in short, a need to develop a deeper sense of personhood, of human dignity, of personal transcendence and ultimate meaning in terms of what it means to be human. A treatment of these issues will clarify, in turn, the question of change in our times and the direction that such change should take. The present study endeavors to illuminate these various concerns in a limited sense. Again, the topic under consideration, 'humanization of Indian societies', directs our attention to the notion of human subject and look for the important characteristics of our times which enable us to grasp with new insight as to what the dignity of human person. Towards that end, we need to re-discover and understand the following:

1. A re-look into the Indian tradition so as to discern the meaning of human person. This can be achieved in two ways: (a) How do the Indian philosophies constitute the idea of human person and (b) What are the capacities that provided an alternative to the human person in terms of his/her possibilities. To this could be adjoined, © thirdly, a Hindu ontology which would project a theoretical framework for the humanization of Indian societies. The following points have been overtly dealt with in the present study:
 2. Socio-Political Dimension: The dignity of the person can be experienced not only positively, but negatively or by contrast. Hence, persons are treated not only as subjects but as objects to be manipulated and used for goals or goods that are less than human.
 3. Socio-Cultural Dimension: In the socio-cultural dimension, what was the place of the human subject? Or, what is the place even in the present century? Are all individuals persons, socially and culturally? Or are there certain characteristic features that mark the uniqueness of persons in the social situations of this country?
 4. Religious and Spiritual Dimension: Even in the religious and spiritual planes, all people were not persons. In the Indian tradition, at least after the Manu period, only certain groups of people were privileged to have been called persons because of the rigid caste system which was prevailing in this country. Therefore, the development of historical processes of Indian social life should be considered in the backdrop of certain other considerations like:

1. Its detailed laws such as in Kautilya's Arthasasthra, Manu's classification of duties and Prasasthapada's detailed views on Dharma.
2. Its economic, cultural and political conditions.
3. Whether persons are treated as subjects of certain means or only as objects.
4. The conditions and differences of specific groups, regions and ethnicities and finally,
5. The common direction of the practice toward the development of Indian tradition and culture.

Historically, the caste system has formed the social and economic framework for the life of the people of India. In its essential form, this system involves the division of people into a hierarchy of unequal social groups where basic rights and duties are assigned or based on birth and are not subject to change. In the Indian caste system - Dalits were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, considered *Ati-Shudras* or *Avarna*, and are treated as untouchables or achuta, or as an outcaste, is a person who according to traditional Hindu order, is 'Sudra'; the lowest of the four castes. The word "Dalit (a)" comes from the Sanskrit - root "dal" - means "held under check", "suppressed", or "crushed", or in a looser sense, "oppressed". Most of them indulge in menial jobs such as leather-workers (called Chamar), scavengers (called Bhangis or Chuda), street handcrafters, poor farmers and laborers. In the past, the Dalits suffered from social segregation and restrictions in addition to extreme poverty. They were neither allowed temple worship with others, nor to draw water from the same reservoirs. Persons of higher castes would not interact with them. If somehow a member of a higher caste came into physical or social contact with a Dalit who is otherwise an untouchable, the member of the higher caste was defiled and had to bathe thoroughly to purge himself of the impurity. The social discrimination developed even among the Dalits. Upper sub-castes among Dalits like *dhobi*, *nai* etc. would not interact with lower-order *Bhangis*. Dalit status had often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure such as any occupation involving killing, handling of animal dead bodies and the like. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual who performed them. As a result, Dalits were commonly banned and separated from full participation in Hindu social life, while elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other Hindus. Some of the concerns that we have overtly taken up in the project may be enlisted as the following:

- This project is based upon a thesis that cultural, political, social and economic transformation of Indian societies will not yield to the desired results if there is no simultaneous progress in the moral transformation of a society.
- The moral force is a motivating force for solidarity and humanization debate that entice citizens to achieve social goals together. It gives people to an ideal to strive for and a sense of belonging. But in the post independence India, a majority of people were not permitted to be a part of the decision making not only in the arena of the powers that be but also in the place of their birth. As a result, the humanizing aspect loses its importance as a basic value that any society nourishes and fulfills in its search for ideology and truth as a reason for social involvement and as a motivation to live a dignified life and if necessary to suffer for this cause.

- There is an overall acceptance of equality as a desirable norm. It is compulsion and market economy to hold that inequality is desirable and necessary, the consequence of one's karma of the past birth. Conversion of a section of Dalits to Buddhism under Dr Ambedkar's leadership challenging the hierarchical social order also played a catalytic role in the process. Except for a small number, orthodox Hindus hesitate, at least publicly, to justify inequality as an ideal social order. Though social sanction justifying social inequality and discrimination in the form of untouchability has not disappeared, but there is always a gap between moral values and practice.
- Protective discrimination through reservations in government jobs and admission to educational institutions has paved the way for Dalits to enter the middle class. Upward mobility has created hope and given them the confidence that there is scope for improving their condition and being at par with others. However, the recent process of retreat of the state has begun to affect them adversely.
- Competitive politics within the parliamentary framework, with the provision of reservation of seats, has created political consciousness among Dalits on an unprecedented scale. They have begun to feel that a few of them can occupy political offices and be in the position to change their condition. Political leadership with a skill to bargain, manipulate and pressurize the ruling elite have emerged at all levels- from village panchayat to Parliament. However, this political leadership has so far failed to meet the expectations of the common Dalit. They either get co-opted by the dominant ruling classes, partly with a temptation to get higher offices or renewal of tenure, or they share the ideology and agenda of the ruling classes, or they are unable to find an alternative path.

Thus Dalit movements have successfully built up a good deal of pressure on the ruling classes and compelled them to provide concessions to Dalits. Dalit movement has a rich history of rationalism and humanism. In fact, the historical evolution took place with Buddhist revolt against Varnashrama Dharma. Buddha has not only rejected supremacy of Brahmins but also of the Shastras. Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins and knowledge was destined to be their sole domain; Buddha not only demolished the knowledge base of Brahmins but also popularized an alternative language Prakrit among the masses by sermonizing in it. Modernization and urbanization gave impetus to the new language of equality and rights. The discourse on equality of rights was important in terms of defining the Dalit being. In other words, it was not possible to define the Dalit being without the discourse on rights, which came up along with the process of modernization and new ideology of liberalism. In fact, this is what we mean by the humanization debate. It is a challenge before the Dalits intellectuals and political leaders to articulate problems and aspiration of the vast majority of Dalits who continue to suffer deprivation even after 67 years of independence.

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CHAPTER – I

Casteism: Onto-Genesis of an Ideology of Exclusion

In the chronological past of India, caste is a living concept with a reputable history and a highly regarded prospect. It continues to pervade the Indian sentiments and psyche with distressed perception both politically and intellectually. Critiquing Indian caste system and its concealed exclusion ideology as an outcome of deformed intellectual complacency and arrogance is also potentially a contentious issue.

It is contentious because critiquing a tradition such as Hindu tradition and blatantly disagreeing that this tradition is filled with certain forms of perverted and concealed intellectuality that upholds several forms of mental slavery like casteism is inviting trouble in these days of 'tolerance'. It is politically disturbing because of its enduring and increasing practical significance due to the social division that it has created all through these years of Indian history. It is intellectually disquieting as it provides to differentiate the human subject in terms of one's birth in a particular caste. Hence, from the point of view of intellectual level, caste is said to be both an illusion as well as a fantasy. It is an illusion as it is a mental creation of the society that we live in; it is a fantasy as it has paved way for diverse types of intellectual stimulation that has created various forms of mental delusions in India. Though caste cannot be accorded any kind of intellectual legitimacy nor scientific validity, yet caste as a social stratification of individuals add its political and social recognition in these times of modernity too. The question is: Can we legitimately claim that caste is an illegitimate child of a legitimacy propounded by certain groups that intended to uphold the political, social and cultural supremacy of India's intellectual and cultural tradition? It may be understood so because historically and theologically caste has been made to recognize as a social reality in all through these years by the perverted rationality that is assigned to this notion. It is socially accepted as a reality because the entire society as envisaged by Indian classical thinkers in general and Manu in particular is categorized under four groups, each with distinct spheres of duties and obligations.

Caste Origins and Its Intellectual Basis

The caste system is believed, not without good reason, to have been of immemorial antiquity. Many read a kind of caste structure in the *Purusha-Sukta* of *Rig-Veda* as describing the origin of four *Varnas*, later metamorphosed into castes. Although doubts exist about the status of *Purusha-Sukta* being an internal part of *Rig-Veda*, it is certain that a functional division of society was known at the time of the *Rig-Veda*.

Historically, caste was justified by interpreting the *Purusha-Sukta* in a particular way by saying not only that differences of function in society and their interrelations are part of the natural order of things, but also that attribution of their differences on the basis of births among a certain group of people are part of the natural order too. There are authors like S.C. Roy,

(1934) N.K. Dutta (1931) and G.S. Ghurye (1960) who have linked caste with racial factor. The initiation of the Indian caste structure has been credited to the Indo-Aryans and the *Varnas* were said to be of racial origin, diluted in course of time through race mixture and hybridization. N.K. Dutta (1931) argues that some of the seeds of caste were a common stock of the Aryan peoples in all countries, but while they failed to grow elsewhere they found more fertile soil in India because of the absence of a strong political power wielding supremacy over a large area and crushing tribal differences and enforcing uniform laws and custom.

Hindu society is historically marked by a rigid form of social stratification based on *varna-jati* model of social organization in which the Brahminical religious principle, namely purity and pollution, played a central role in defining social hierarchy and separation. The terms *Varna* (class) and *Jati* (caste) are two distinct concepts. *Varna* ("class") (from Sanskrit, literally "arrangement") is a supposed unification of all the Hindu sub-castes or *jatis* fall into either one of the four groups: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, *Shudra*, or into one of several *Varna-Sankaras*. *Jati* (caste) is generally known as an endogamous group. By and large, a sub-caste is divided into group based on same *Gotras*. Caste systems are traditional, hereditary systems of social stratification, such as clans, genres, or the Indian caste system. A *Brahmin*, also known as *Vipra*, *Dvija*, *Dvijottama* (best of the *Dvijas*), and God on Earth is a member of a caste within Hindu society. *Varna-Sankara* (of hybrid *Varna*) is a term used in the Hindu *dharma-shastras* to denote those communities which did not fit in any of the four *Varnas*. Endogamous group is a community in which the members generally marry within the group. A *Gotra* indicates lineage in the Hindu community. Many of the Hindus could be classified into a specific *Varna* but not all. During the British rule, several cases went to the courts to settle the "*Varna*" of a sub-caste. For example, the farmers are sometimes given *Kshatriya* status because many ruling Chieftains may have risen from them. On the other hand, some classified them as *Vaishya*, based on an older occupation of artisans. Orthodox *Brahmins* may classify them as *Shudras* because they do not have a tradition of undergoing through the thread ceremony that would make them *Dvija*. *Dvija* (Sanskrit) means the one who is twice born (Roy, 1934).

Metamorphosis of Varna into Castes

In *Purusha-Sukta* of the *Rig-Veda*, there is reference to the division of Hindu society into four classes. It is described there that the *Brahmins* came out of the face of the Lord, the Creator, and *Kshatriyas* from His arms and *Vaisyas* from His thighs and the *Sudras* from His feet. This division is done according to the *Guna* and *Karma*. *Guna* (quality) and *Karma* (action/ work) determines the caste of a man. This is supported by Lord Krishna in the *Gita* who advocates that the four castes were emanated by him as well as He is the author of them and thus one needs to know Him.

There are three qualities or *Gunas*, viz., *Sattva* (purity), *Rajas* (passion) and *Tamas* (inertia). *Sattva* is white, *Rajas* is red and *Tamas* is black. These three qualities are found in humans in varying proportions. *Sattva* preponderates in some persons. They are *Brahmins*. They are wise persons or thinkers. They are the priests, ministers or philosophers who guide kings or rulers. In some, *Rajas* is predominant. They are *Kshatriyas*. They are warriors or men of action.

They fight with the enemies or invaders and defend the country. In some, *Tamas* is predominant. They are *Vaisyas* or traders. They do business and agriculture and amass wealth. *Sudras* are the servants. None of these qualities is highly developed in them. They serve the other three castes. In a broad sense, a *Sattvic* man, who is pious and virtuous and leads the divine life, is a *Brahmin*, a *Rajasic* man with heroic quality is a *Kshatriya*, a *Rajasic* man with business tendencies is a *Vaishya* and a *Tamasic* man is a *Sudra*. Realization and belief in God are the duties of the *Brahmins*, born of (their own) nature. Prowess, splendour, firmness, dexterity, and also, not flying from battle, generosity and lordliness are the duties of the *Kshatriyas*, born of (their own) nature. Agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade are duties of the *Vaisyas*, born of (their own) nature. And action consisting of service is the duty of the *Sudras*, born of (their own) nature (Velassery, 2005: 204-206).

One would have thought that as the Hindu Civilization progressed and as memories of racial differences were obliterated through mixture of different groups, the tribalism of caste would give way to a more integrated society as happened with civilizations elsewhere. Different tribes mingled to make one society, but, this could not happen in India, for, the leaders were permanently entrenched in their position of prestige and power merely by virtue of birth and thus had a vested interest to maintain the system instead of altering it.

The Basis of Caste System

The basis of caste system and its classification is the “division of labour” (Hutton, 1963: 207) or what is sometimes called “specialization of functions”. The aim behind this classification was said to be better service to the society as a whole. The four classes in which society came to be divided are *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. Each class was expected to devote itself to the performance of duties peculiar to it – *Brahmins* to intellectual and spiritual pursuits, *Kshatriyas* to soldiering and maintenance of law and order, and protection of the society from external threats and aggressions, *Vaishyas* to agriculture, commerce, trade, industry, animal husbandry and so on, and *Shudras* to the service of all others. All these classes could ensure perfect coherence, justice and harmony only if they worked in close liaison with one another. It was thought that such a division of labour would invariably result in greater degrees of specialization and acquisition of skill. But in course of time the entire scheme became so rigidly followed that it gave rise to castes and sub-castes, group’s birth, not merit, became the right to continue in one’s ancestral group. A *Brahmin*’s son, for instance, would become a *Brahmin* and would be so respected. There was no corrective to this growing and governing rigidity. That is why emphasis was laid not on merit (*guna*) but on birth (*Janma*). The Varna system although enabled the Hindu society to survive, instead of completely disappearing as many other societies had disappeared under similar conditions, yet could not uphold the spirit in which it was formed (Bowes, 1977).

As Pratima Bowes argues, “it happened because a society functioning on caste rules and regulations could somehow carry on under its own steam, so to say – albeit in a state of frozenness and without any visible institutions, like churches, monasteries and so on, and it thus proved to be virtually indestructible. Besides this, there was the belief in a timeless being which through changes of progress and degeneration remains essentially the same.

And this made the Hindus believe that the Hindu religion, called 'Santana Dharma' had always existed and would always exist whatever the ups and downs brought about by time, and this enabled them to accept the reverse in their fortunes with a certain degree of philosophical calm, resulting in their capacity to wait patiently for the next phase of change when time would inevitably alter the picture" (Bowes, 1977: 166).

Defining Caste: A Sociological Perspective

"A caste may be defined as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name. It is said to claim a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community. The name generally denotes or associated with a specific occupation (Ghurye, 1960). A caste is invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside of the circle, but within the circle; there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous."

Caste includes three elements: Repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization; it is necessary to consider all three if one is to have a complete definition of the caste system. A society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups' mixture and of changing occupation. A caste may be defined also as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions (Ghurye, 1960).

The caste system constitutes the historical structure of Hinduism. Each caste has its own God-given *Dharma*, its religious way of life and natural priesthood. Indeed, one may think of caste *Dharma* as Hinduism in microcosm as individual or group may become a Hindu by adopting the customary behaviour of the Hindus rather than by being converted. In fact, it is practically impossible for an individual to become 'a Hindu'. For, the word of *Samsara* is Cosmo centric in Hinduism and the foundational values, which Hinduism is based on, are not centred on man but on the cosmos. Man is regarded to be a part of the cosmos. In other words, Hinduism upholds a Cosmo centric world-view which doesn't recognize individuals' worth unlike the anthropocentric world-view.

Traditionally, although the political power lay with the *Kshatriyas*, historians portrayed that the *Brahmins* as keepers and interpreters of religion enjoyed much prestige and many advantages. Some scholars, however, point out that the relative ranking of other castes was fluid or differed from one place to another prior to the arrival of the British. The castes did not constitute a rigid description of the occupation or the social status of a group. Since the British society was divided by class, the British attempted to equate the Indian caste system to the class system. They saw caste as an indicator of occupation, social standing, and intellectual ability. Intentionally or unintentionally, the caste system became more rigid during the British Raj, when the British started to enumerate castes during the ten year

census and codified the system under their rule.

The Caste Hierarchy and Ascriptions of Identities

The caste system constitutes a hierarchy of social status and ranks. This hierarchy may be called the structure of the system; it is self-regulating and graduated all the way from top to bottom. Each caste has its particular rank, defined by tradition and each one maintains or strives to advance itself. This defensive-offensive, inter-caste relationship constitutes the basis of caste rivalry.

Caste rivalry usually ends in a sort of mutual antagonism than progressive advancement in the hierarchy. Indeed, any idea of such advancement is minimal to the system itself due to the status of the positions that goes with it. The shape of the caste hierarchy and the size of any caste depended upon the population trend in that particular caste. The paradox of the Hindu social order is that while the original *Varna* idea with its four categories as found in the *Purusha-Sukta*, embodies an organic view of society which emphasized unity in and through differences of not just the unity of the society but also that of the entire cosmos, most aspects of the caste system which perhaps originated in a different intellectual milieu from the Vedic one, divided the society into hundreds and even thousands of schizophrenic groups through prohibition on inter-dining and inter-marriage, two institutions through which human beings express their belongingness to one community (Bowes, 1977). The organic orientation of the *Varna* system was subverted by the atomistic assumptions of *Jati* which found inalienable differences between people of different castes.

It is commonly believed that *Jati* emerged within the *Varna* system through fragmentation as well as the incorporation of tribal communities within a structure, which regulated hierarchy through marriage rules and endogamy and privileged heredity or birth in a particular lineage. Accordingly, it paved the way for the use of the term *jati* for indicating membership in a particular community. Thus *Varnas* were extended to provide the institutional and ideological base for the growth of a *Jati* society. Moreover, *Jati* are said to have derived from the earlier *Varna* system and was once flexible were arbitrary and have fragmented society in terms of *Jatis* which were made rather than found. They were made through the influence of a special kind of social, economic and political culture, which showed a dismal disregard for 'untouchables' who were outside its caste stratification and were forced to live in inhuman social and economic misery. The institutions of caste divisions, arranged marriage and joint family system reinforced and strengthened the present caste consciousness among Indians, which has resulted the water-tight compartments of castes and sub-castes. The rigidity in the system unfortunately, was responsible for *Bahishkara* and *Prayascitta*. Any person who broke the rules of the respective castes was excommunicated by the caste *Panchayat* and was admitted back into the fold only if he preferred the purification ceremony (Bowes, 1977).

The unity of society in India therefore, is traditionally based on the caste group or the sub-caste group. Each group has its own function or craft. There is a strong sense of solidarity and participation within the group. The group is supposed to protect the individual member

provided he conforms to the norms and rules of the caste group. As each group is specialized in its own craft or occupation it has a rightful place in the economy of the village as a whole (Kuppuswamy, 1977: 4). Thus, caste system has provided a kind of perverted independence and uniqueness to each group and has also fostered the inter-dependence of various groups. It has been and still is a kind of a social organization, which is non-competitive in itself.

Unfortunately, there is social prestige attached to each caste group. The *Brahmin* at the top was proud of his intellect and learning and was respected by all other social groups. The *Kshatriyas* enjoy power as well as wealth and were respected by all others. The *Vaishyas* were prosperous and were rich but had no high standing in the society like the Brahmins and the *Kshatriyas*. The vast majority of the population consists of *Sudras* together with the landless labourers and is supposed to serve all other castes (Bowes, 1977).

Caste System and the Untouchables

There are a number of castes at the lower strata of the caste system that generally engage in occupations, which are considered unclean like leatherwork, scavenging, etc. Along this group is included certain agricultural labourers who are landless but attached to farmer families. They were living outside the boundaries of villages and towns. In South India, for instance they were forbidden to enter the streets in which the houses of the upper castes were situated. Customs and laws have joined together in keeping them beyond the villages and towns. Though they were born as Hindus, Hindu Gods were not accessible to them in the temples. In other words, they were not permitted to visit their Gods in the temples.

The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four Varna and never a fifth, which in effect was a refusal to accept the tribal peoples of India (who formed the bulk of the untouchables) as part of the Hindu civilization. As they were rated outside the caste system – outcastes – that meant they were treated as untouchables and hence they were destined to live only in the outskirts of villages and had never been an integral part of the village community. They had to be the part of the system in some ways as their services were essential to the health of the community and they could be debarred from being full participants in the Hindu community only by being treated as untouchables. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusion, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the pollution – purity complex. As Pratima Bowes says: "This failure of the Hindu system to assimilate the tribal as full participants in the Hindu culture is its greatest failure as racial and cultural prejudices triumphed even over the organic biases of the Hindu mind which should have found the idea of some people rendering essential services to the community and yet not being part of its sacred order difficult to accept consistently with its assumptions" (Bowes, 1977: 106).

According to *Manu*, the untouchables – *candala* – is an offspring of *Brahmin* (female) and *Sudra* (male) union. Many have conveniently forgotten that in the Law Book itself, union between a *Brahmin* male and a *Sudra* female was allowed provided she is not his first wife. It means eventually that a *Brahmin* man was allowed to have a second wife for his physical and

conjugal needs but the same was denied to the female *Brahmin*. Manu's treatment of the *Sudra* too was not overtly human too despite the fact that *Sudra* is officially recognized as one of the categories of the sacred Hindu order. He is condemned to servitude even though his needs for security, unlike that of the *candala*, are not to go unrecognized. It ensured that a *Sudra* accepts his servitude through the deprivation of all means of education. He is not only denied to have any education but if he hears the Vedas through someone else's recitation of it, molten lead is to be poured into his ears (Manusmriti, 1992:92-94).

It may also be noted that the *Kshatriyas* and *Vaisyas* were not deprived of political, military and economic power and till the time of the *Dharmasastras* they had a right to study the *Vedas*, although later only the *Brahmins* were thought to be fit for such a high acquisition. Thus Hindu society was deprived of the resources and talents of the majority of the population who must surely have been effectively contributed to its further growth.

In order to ensure the *Sudra's* complete servility and good behaviour as required by the higher castes, he was to be punished for a lot for the crimes much more severely than the others. The *Brahmins* were either totally exempted from punishment or let off lightly compared to others (except for a few crimes such as theft). This was recommended on the ground that the *Brahmins* were versed in the *Vedas*. But if people versed in the *Vedas* were capable of committing the same crime as others it is difficult to see why they should not be capable of the same punishment. But this was in aid of maintaining the image of the *Brahmins* as especially sacred and beyond the reach of the treatment accorded to lesser mortals. All this was accepted by every section of the society shows what propaganda can do and how willing the human mind is to be conditioned to anything if it is repeated often enough (Manusmriti, 1992).

On the one hand, an image was built of a *Brahmin* living a simple frugal life on gifts given by society and entirely devoted to moral and spiritual aims. On the other, liberal gifts to them were so highly recommended as a gateway to heaven that they ended by becoming one of the richest communities despite the fact that theirs was not a productive occupation. (Bowes, 1977) They were donated whole villages as gifts by kings, anxious to secure a passport to heaven, or at least a good birth in next time. The *Brahmins* were supposed to be priests and teachers; *Kshatriyas* were protectors of the law and *Vaishyas* the producers of wealth whose benevolence must have been a major source of *Brahmin* affluence. (This is not acknowledged by *Brahmins*, but Buddhist orders were maintained mostly by gifts made by wealthy merchants, as can be known from Buddhist stories, and Hindu affairs could not have been very different). But *Manu* is not satisfied with the ideas that anything should be anybody's province except a *Brahmin's*. According to him, 'whatever exists in the world is the property of the *Brahmin*, on account of the excellence of his origin. He is indeed entitled to it all.' Thus *Manu* exhorts: 'The *Brahmin* eats but his own food, wears but his own apparel, bestows but his own clothes, other mortals subsist by the benevolence of the *Brahmin*.' 'He (*Brahmin*) sanctifies any company which he may enter, seven ancestors and seven descendents, and he alone deserves to possess the whole earth coming into the world is born as highest on earth, the lord of all created beings, for the protection of the treasury of the law' (Bowes, 1977: 112).

According to Pratima Bowes (1977), the organic view of the interrelation of social functions says that divisions of functions within society are for the benefit of the society as a whole. The duty of the *Brahmin* to study, teach, and sacrifice is a form of service to society as are the duties of a *Kshatriyas* to protect, *Vaishyas* to produce and increase the wealth of the society (the duty of increasing wealth is actually mentioned in the *Dharmasastras*) and Shudra to serve. No doubt the system based on the idea of these divisions was meant to be hierarchical, so that precedence was given to a certain kind of function, the religious and the intellectual, over others, even the political and the economic, and this order of precedence reflected the values of this society. As all the values in the society and powers inherent in them were not concentrated in one order, the people at the top, but were divided amongst different orders, the idea of a value-wise hierarchical ordering was not by itself detrimental to individual and social advancement if it were left reasonably open to people to find their own place within the overall idea of an ordered structure of society. This flexibility, in theory at any rate (for most people in pre-industrial societies followed their father's occupations), would have helped the sense of unity of the society which was being served by all four functions, whatever the privileges or burdens attached to them, and whatever the origin of the people who carried them on. But fixing every function by birth where the functions were divided and sub-divided into hundreds and even thousands of castes, each to be kept socially distinct from one another by elaborate rules, so that any sense of unity of the whole almost evaporated, made the system mechanical. Thus the idea of the hierarchical ordering of the fourfold *Varna* system when transformed into the hierarchical multifarious *jati* system turned the organic conception almost into its opposite, mechanical, putting together of essentially distinct units. It also managed to convey the impression that the system was altogether beyond human intervention and not only those who were at the top took their privileges as divine dispensation – rather than the result of their function – but those who were at the bottom took their deprivations in the same spirit (Bowes, 1977).

Brahmin Control of Thought

Brahmin monopoly of thought meant that their duties were more and more presented as a sacred privilege bestowed upon them by the creator himself, and the *Brahmins* thought of themselves as having a divine right to be served by everybody, including the king. Therefore, on the one hand those who had deprived of education and on the other those who had a monopoly over it did not believe that it was their sacred duty to use their opportunity for the uplift and enlightenment of the rest of the society. It was a privilege and this privilege entitled them to honour, respect, liberal gifts, precedence in all social matters, exemption from punishment, and so on. His privileged and sacred status may be summed up in the words of *Manu*: 'He sanctifies any company which he may enter, seven ancestors and seven descendants, and he alone deserves to possess the whole earth.' His claim to exemption from all social obligations is shown in the *Brihadaranyaka* story, where at a coronation ceremony the priest declared to the people that this was their king, while the king of the *Brahmins* was god Soma himself. So it was but natural that *Brahmins* were exempted from even taxation (Pratima Bowes, 1977: 110). All prohibitions on eating and drinking and against inter-dining and so forth are absent in the books called Vedas (*Rig-Veda* etc.). Indeed, the Vedic men ate beef and they drank *soma* and *sura* (wine). Even during the period of the

Dharmasastras, prohibitory rules against these practices were only gradually taking shape. According to Manu, a twice-born man who knows the law must not eat meat except in conformity with law and the law clearly thought that there was occasions fit for the consumption of meat. But a man, says Manu, who is duly engaged to officiate or to dine at a sacred rite and who refuses to eat meat becomes after death an animal during next twenty-one births (why twenty-one, one wonders). There was prohibition on eating various kinds of meats, pigs for instance, but not beef. And *Apastamba* (*Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, 1960), the writer of *Grihya Sutra* (*Indradeva*, 1973) says quite clearly, 'But the meat of milch cows and oxen may be eaten', and he does not attach any condition to this. Both *Apastamba* and *Manu* say that a *Brahmin* must not take cooked food from a *Shudra*, but according to the former he can accept uncooked food from *Shudras* and from some untouchables (*ugras*) (Bowes, 1977).

Apastamba says that according to the authorities food offered by people of any caste who follow the rules prescribed for them, except the *Shudra*, can be eaten by a *Brahmin* and he mentions people called *Kanva* and *Varshyayani* who believed that food may be accepted from anyone willing to offer it (both cooked and uncooked) (*Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, 1960). According to both *Manu* and *Apastamba*, when a man is in danger of losing his life he may accept any food from anyone and by so doing he 'is no more tainted by sin than the sky by mud' amounts to saying that the whole exercise was predominantly overshadowed by practical and realistic considerations. One wonders why if the eating of cooked food given by a *Shudra* does not pollute one when in danger of life such an act should acquire the characteristic of a sin when no danger of loss of life is involved. Clearly, the rule against eating *Shudra* food is devised to keep the *Shudra* from the culture of a common citizenship. However, it is evident that more and more rules were gradually and increasingly added as and when more and more requirements were needed to demarcate between *Varna* and *Jati* that arose in the complicated social fabric. The *Brahmins* are to be polluted for ten days after a death in the family, the *Kshatriyas* for eleven days, the *Vaishyas* twelve, and the *Shudras* a whole month. The griddle of a *Brahmin* is to be of munga grass, of a *Kshatriyas* of bowstring, of *Vaishyas* wool thread. What made the system offensive were certain moral values or the lack of them, the acceptance of which in practice buttressed it. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four *Varna* and never a fifth, which in effect was a refusal to accept the tribal peoples of India (who formed the bulk of the untouchables) as part of the Hindu civilization. Their existence was not officially recognized and they were frankly rated as outcastes, that is, outside the caste system, which means outside the Hindu system based on the idea of castes and categories. This was done in practice by treating them as untouchables, and this meant that they had to live at the outskirts of the village and not as an integral part of the village community (Bowes, 1977). They had to be part of the system in some ways, since their services were essential to the health of the community and they could be debarred from being full participants in the Hindu social order only by being treated as, so to say, inhuman.

Dalits: Descending Scale of Contempt

It is undoubtedly true that caste in India is a *Brahminical* child and that endogamy, the outstanding feature of caste, was first developed by the Brahmin community. It is not an exaggeration to state that the caste system is the basis on which Hindu society and its