

'DALITS' AND THE CASTE SYSTEM OF INDIA

Some Explorations and Conjectures

A Transcend Research Paper for Discussion

By Vithal Rajan

Abstract

This speculative paper argues that the caste system of India could be seen as a present-day remnant of 'tribal apartheid' which came into being when Indo-European warlike nomadic pastoralists overran and dominated an earlier urban Dravidian peoples. This form of discrimination based on identity is akin to racism. The enduring salience of caste and colour consciousness among Indians forms one of the great modern paradoxes that have resisted Indian governmental attempts to bring about social change.

It is a truism that any statement made about India even when backed by some adduced facts can be immediately contradicted by equally probable deductions and countervailing information. This sense of intellectual confrontation has been heightened to painfully shrill levels of late, and everything is now being called into venomous political question and public debate. Paintings, literature, theatre, cinema, and even scholarly works on pre-history are seen as deliberate and malicious insults to one community or other. In such a charged social atmosphere, it is impossible to raise debates on the fraught question of the Indian Caste System without immediately igniting attack. Hence, most Indian scholars avoid exploring this question after routinely passing a comment condemning it, and decrying its continued social observance, though outlawed by law.

However, because of its singularity as a socio-religious system, its discriminatory hold over the civic life of over two-hundred million people, and its constant fueling of heinous violence in India, the caste system deserves to be studied with whatever intellectual honesty is possible, and not only through the lens of inflamed bigoted passion, derogatory or defensive.

The Present Indefensible State of Discrimination

The person accredited with framing the Indian Constitution was Dr. BR Ambedkar, an 'untouchable' himself, a great and enlightened founder of Independent India, who has written extensively on the subject of 'Caste,' and who finally gave in to Mahatma Gandhi's pleas that the untouchables should not break away from the rest of the Hindus but remain united in the Freedom Struggle. However, Dr. Ambedkar did lead a movement for the untouchables to convert to Buddhism [Shabbir 2005].

Because of Dr. Ambedkar's personal eminence, Mahatma Gandhi's moral indignation against the caste system, and the modernizing zeal of the founders of Independent India, discrimination on the basis of caste is illegal under law and a culpable offence. Since the

tribal and 'untouchable' communities have suffered much discrimination, Parliament and the various state legislative assemblies have reserved constituencies for their political representation, and there are reserved seats in educational institutions and in government offices for members of these communities. India has had Dalits as President, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and as the Speaker of Parliament. Several distinguished officials have also been Dalits.

However, caste discrimination continues to be a social evil experienced everyday in several covert forms, and in periodic public acts of murder, rape, and arson. Poor people identified as Dalit are routinely refused housing in communities dominated by the upper castes, even in urban conglomerations where such distinctions are hard to identify. In rural areas where everyone's social origins are well established, Dalits suffer the most. Marriage with a higher caste person is absolutely taboo. If anyone breaks the taboo, lynching is a common tragic occurrence. Dalits are expected to be submissive. A demand for better treatment can be met with beatings or even murder. Upper caste landlords occasionally exercise the *droit de seigneur* over attractive poor Dalit women in rural areas. Minimum wages established by law are rarely paid. Bonded labourers are more often Dalits. Most out-of-school working children are Dalits, especially girls. Educational and better employment opportunities are few [Thorat 2010]. So-called 'glass ceilings' also exist which deny promotion for those who have made it. This situation is analogous to the experience of racism in several societies where racism has been officially outlawed, though the life experienced by most poor Dalits may be unique in its extreme harshness. Most of these varied instances of discrimination, intimidation, and of atrocities against Dalits are routinely reported by the Indian press, and almost daily put on the internet by the Peoples Media Advocacy and Resource Centre [PMARC] Dalit Media Watch News Updates at <http://dgroups.org>

To further complicate our understanding of 'caste,' whole castes or important sections of a caste have moved up and down the scales of power and wealth in historical times, and changed their supposed allocated avocations. Today, Ms Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous key state in India, is a Dalit woman, and she is reckoned to have the best prospects of becoming a Prime Minister in the future. Her party has made alliances with Brahmin groups. The TVS group, the richest and most stable business house in Southern India, is owned by Brahmins. At the same time, recent reports have pointed out that large sections of Brahmins live in abject poverty and even do menial jobs like cleaning public latrines [Gautier 2006]. Even way back in 1978, the Karnataka government revealing the per capita monthly income of people within a region reported that while a Dalit earned Rs.680, a Brahmin earned only Rs. 537! [Jain 1990] The Reddy caste, nominally counted as Sudras rose to royal power in Southern India over 600 years ago, and today dominates politics and business in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka states. The real struggle for political power both in the north and the south is fought out between 'backward' castes nominally considered Sudras.

The British had an ambivalent position with regard to the untouchables. The British Empire itself was founded because its sepoy armies, mostly of low-caste or untouchable

castes, fought with great courage and skill against rajahs to whom they owed no loyalty. In the East India Company's army of the British they gained the respect they were denied in civil society. However, by the middle of the 19th century, the British armies were mostly composed of upper-caste Hindus in a vain attempt by the rulers to win legitimacy in the eyes of Indians. There were of course a few notable exceptions, like Dr. Ambedkar's father, who rose to high rank in the army and hence could educate his son.

With the evangelical influx of Christian missionaries, several untouchables converted to Christianity, just as they had converted to Islam several centuries ago, partly to escape the injustices of the caste system and partly out of devotion to a new monotheistic inclusive religion. However, for most 'inclusion' remained elusive, with separate pews and entrances for them at Church, and the upper caste converts refusing to marry into their families. Such exclusion has regrettably remained in Christian, Muslim and Sikh congregations even to this day. The National President of the All India Catholic Union made the following representation to the Dalit Chief Justice of India: "The economic exploitation, cultural suppression and political domination of the Dalits in the whole country for hundreds of years have their own repercussions on the Catholic Church dominated by an upper caste clergy" [Menezes 2007].

The British listed the untouchable castes as 'The Scheduled Castes,' – i.e. under a list or schedule – just as the aboriginal or indigenous tribes are listed as 'The Scheduled Tribes' of India, and this nomenclature remains the official one to this date. Mahatma Gandhi in an attempt to remove the stigma of untouchability coined the phrase 'Harijans,' – meaning the children of God, but this has nowadays been rejected in favour of the term 'Dalits,' which means the 'broken people,' itself a denunciation of the system.

It must be pointed out straightaway that though nominally there are the four castes of India plus the Dalits or outcastes, identities are really vested in the myriads of sub-castes that fracture the communities into mutually exclusive endogamous societies, each with its own cultural history and customary observances and beliefs. The Anthropological Survey of India lists well over 4000 such communities. These exclusionary sub-caste groupings are based not only on differing regional origins and languages, but for historical reasons even within every region and linguistic group, so much so that intermarriages between neighbouring sub-caste groups are traditionally forbidden, whether they are Brahmins or Dalits. Struggles for power or privilege are most common between such sub-caste groups, and also of course across caste lines, the closer the groups are to each other, the more violent or pronounced the struggle.

It must be added that almost all violent struggles across castes or sub-castes lines are almost always politically engineered to enable caste or community leaders to secure their grip over votes, power, privilege, and money. However, it may also be stated that most Dalit leaders are right when they blame the 'Brahmanical' order of society for the grievous discrimination practiced against them, for though the people who actually perpetrate violence against Dalits might be from some other 'low' castes, the reification of the caste system even to this date depends for its authority on the socio-religious

observances of Brahmins, the high priests of Hinduism[Rodrigues 2004]. Here again, this is not dissimilar from inter-racial violence elsewhere, in which poor white communities competing with black communities in the same economic or social space are manipulated by upper class leaders who can mask their racism. It must also be noted that right through history, despite such religious and social strictures, a few untouchable men and women and others of very low castes came to be regarded as saints and were venerated as such even by Brahmin priests.

Speculations on Caste Origins of Dalits

It is a fact that one of the sacred texts of Hinduism, the so-called 'Manusmriti,' formally written down perhaps about 2000 years ago, ostracizes Dalits as outcastes, that is as not belonging to the four-caste division of the Hindus. In a way, an observing Hindu would consider Europeans also to belong to the outcaste category. My own grandfather, who had many English friends, never broke bread with them for the same reason! The Manusmriti text goes into detail on the origins of 'untouchables.' It distinguishes between the 'Twice-Born,' that is, Brahmins or priests, Kshatriyas or warriors, and Vysyas or merchants on the one hand, from the Sudras or workers and peasants on the other. A 'Twice-Born' man was permitted to marry a Sudra woman to procreate children, *if he found no woman of his own caste*. However, if a 'Twice-Born' woman married a Sudra, her children would be untouchables and outcastes, and further the higher the rank of the woman, the lower the rank of her untouchable children. If a Brahmin woman married a Sudra, her children would be Chandalas, the lowest of the untouchables, fit only to be scavengers, and skin dead animals [O'Flaherty 1991]. The Manusmriti also stripped all religious and social rights that 'Twice-Born' women previously enjoyed, transferred these rights to their husbands, and reduced them in social stature to be explicitly governed by men of their families. In earlier tribal 'Vedic' times women enjoyed far greater rights and status [Shastri 1954]. The Manusmriti also codified a rigid hierarchical socio-political order of society which neither the Mughal Empire nor the British ever really tried to challenge.

In the context of caste discrimination it is also important to remember that the Manusmriti was codified in the period of the Hindu counter-reformation, when the Buddhist Emperor, a descendant of the great Emperor Ashoka, was assassinated in 185 BCE by his Hindu Commander-in-Chief Pusymitra Sunga in full view of the troops. The open assassination makes me conclude that this was no palace coup but a defining act of the counter-reformation and its purges. The *Ashokavadana* of the 2nd century records that Pusymitra hated Buddhists, and says: "Then King Pusyamitra equipped a fourfold army, and intending to destroy the Buddhist religion, he went to the Kukkutarama. (...) Pusyamitra therefore destroyed the sangharama, killed the monks there, and departed....After some time, he arrived in Sakala, and proclaimed that he would give a hundred dinara reward to whoever brought him the head of a Buddhist monk." [Strong 1983].

Buddhism which advocated not only ahimsa but also a casteless, egalitarian, and compassionate society ceased to be the state religion. However, it remained influential for a few centuries. The University of Nalanda, the world's greatest university of those times, was Buddhist and existed for a few centuries. Ultimately the great Hindu philosopher of the 8th century, Sankara, explicitly encapsulated into Vedanta all the high philosophical ideals of Buddhism – though even this philosophical question is hotly debated in India's present-day politically-charged climate [Ingalls 1954]. Buddhism ceased to be an important religion in India, and the rigid caste system continued to flourish. Vedanta had little direct influence on politics or society in general.

Speculations on the Origins of Indian Society

As mentioned at the very start a vigorous acrimonious debate rages over the pre-history of the Hindus, and that of the Indus Valley civilization which existed from its early Neolithic times around 7000 BCE till around 1500 BCE when it vanishes, almost all of a sudden. This civilization existed at the same time as the Sumerian, and there is ample evidence of trade between the two. The Indus Valley script has not yet been satisfactorily deciphered, though the bulk of learned opinion supports Asko Parpola, the great Finnish expert, in his assertion that the language of the Indus Valley was Dravidian [Parpola 2009].

Only the four South Indian languages, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada are Dravidian languages which have no connection with the great family of Indo-European languages in the north of India and elsewhere. However, they have linguistic links with several tribal languages in Central India, like Gondi, spoken by indigenous forest dwelling tribes. Interestingly, within the Dravidian group is counted Brahui spoken by a remote people in the Baluchistan tract between Iran and Pakistan [Krishnamurti 2001]. Scholars have also linked the Dravidian languages with Sumerian [which has been deciphered], and with Basque [on the basis that such languages use 'ur' as a suffix for place names] and even with Wolof by the late Dr. Leopold Senghor of Senegal [Hawley 2008]!

Modern genetic analysis has established credible evidence that Indo-Europeans entered India in waves from the northwest and diffused throughout the subcontinent. They later admixed with an older Dravidic-speaking population. Analysis of genetic data has established that the upper castes have a higher genetic affinity to Europeans than to Asians [Bamshad 2006]. Another parallel genetic study indicated that Dravidian tribals might have been widespread in India before the arrival of Indo-European nomads who pushed them into southern India, with the upper castes showing greater genetic affinity to Central Asian populations [Basu 2006].

Despite strong resistance from nationalist Indian scholars who insist that the Indus Valley civilization was Hindu, the language Sanskrit, or one of its earlier Prakriti forms, the bulk of scholarship not only points to that great urban civilization being Dravidian, inhabited by a mixture of peoples who could be described as Semitic and Negrito, but places the

‘Hindus’ or ‘Aryans’ as they called themselves, as latecomers from South-Central Asia, who seem to have migrated in waves in the Second Millennium BCE [Childe 1926].

The great European archeologist, Professor Marija Gimbutas, who established the new science of archeomythology – that is, integrating archeological findings with mythic texts to arrive at plausible pre-history conjectures – has convincingly postulated that early Europe was home for a peaceful urban matri-focal civilization that was overridden by a patriarchal warlike, horse-mounted ‘Kurgan’ culture coming out of South-Central Asia [Gimbutas 1992]. Sumerian inscriptions also lament attacks on their cities by similar horse-riding chariot-driving, tall and fair-haired barbarians. The horse was not known in either Mesopotamia or the Indus Valley till these ‘invasions’ or migrations by the peoples of South-Central Asia [Kramer 1963]. Though in the highly politicized debate even the absence of the ‘Aryan’ horse is challenged by some scholars, who contend that India was always the home of the Hindus [Witzel 2002].

The kings of the short-lived Mittani kingdom located in present-day north Syria had marriage alliances with the Pharaohs of Egypt in the 15th century BCE. A tablet of a letter from the Mittanian king Tushratta to the Pharaoh Amenhotep III is preserved. In their dealings with the Egyptians and the Hittites various Mittanian gods, Mitra, Varuna, Indra, the Ashvinis, all ‘Hindu’ gods are regularly invoked [McBrewster 2009]. The earliest Hindu texts of this period, the Vedas and the Puranas connected with them, are full of stories about conquering dark, curly-haired snub-nosed people. The Hindu pastoralists attacked cities on horseback and with chariots, and broke down dams across rivers. They called the people they conquered as *dasyus*, people to be killed, and later as *dasas*, people to be enslaved. These early texts also mention only three vocations, that of priests [Brahmins], warriors [Kshatriyas], and pastoralists [Vysyas] in this early period, and people of the same family could apparently perform all these functions. The identification of Sudras or workers seems to have emerged later than even that of the *dasas* or slaves [Piggott 1950]. It is not illogical to infer that a conquered people were ultimately assimilated as a distinct endogamous group of Sudras or workers. There is much textual corroboration of these Hindu texts to be found in the Assyrian-Persian *Avesta*, though the Hindus considered the *Asuras* as enemies and the *Avesta* called the Hindu *devas* or gods as demons [Kocher 2000]. Their language has no relation with that of the Dravidians of the Indus Valley. Sanskrit or the locally used parlance, Prakriti, is closely linked to a host of Indo-European languages, other than Ugro-Finnish and Hungarian. In fact Lithuanian is part of the Sanskrit group in the Indo-European language cluster.

In the context of warlike texts, including the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, early archeologists, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, and even Dr. D.D. Kosambi, postulated an Aryan or Hindu invasion theory [Wheeler 1984] to account for the mysterious disappearance of the great cities of the Indus Valley, Mohenjodaro and Harappa, and several other lesser urban sites during the middle of the Second Millennium BCE. Present day scholars favour an ecological theory for the disappearance of this urban civilization. While this is equally plausible, it does not preclude the role of conquest and pushing the original Dravidians into Southern India. The theory of conquest has found no acceptance among modern Indian scholars who see it as part of an ‘Orientalist’ attempt at

postulating invasion and colonization as ‘natural’ processes in history. The critics, and these include the most respected historians [Thaper 2004], archeologists [McIntosh 2008], and astronomers [Kocher 2000] point to a lack of archeological evidence of war. Many even dismiss epic texts as non-historical, and Gimbutas’s approach of archeomythology has not yet been attempted in deciphering the prehistory of the Indus Valley.

What is undeniable is that it takes almost another thousand years before a comparable culture rises up as the Magadan civilization around the city of Pataliputra, near the present-day city of Patna, soon to be ruled over by the Emperor Ashoka. Even the great scholars who support the ‘peaceful’ migration theory cannot account for this mysterious and long decline of a thousand years. If evidence is lacking to prove conquest, by the same token there is little historical evidence for the ‘peaceful’ assimilation of any migrating tribes with local native tribes. Early British history for example gives us ample horrific detail of how migrating Saxons and Angles slaughtered the native Britons. They bred with the local women and replaced the local language with Old English. Further, after Roman Briton declines, several hundred years elapse before an urban civilization is established once again in England. The same goes whether we look at the migrations of the Incas, the Mongols, or the Zulus. A recent genetic study of Indian castes and tribes concluded that paternal lineages of Indian caste groups were primarily descended from Indo-European speakers who migrated into India around 3,500 years ago. This was in clear contrast with the paternal lineages of Indian tribals which were derived from an original Indian gene pool. This study also indicated that the migrating Indo-Europeans males later mixed with local females through the practice of hypergyny – that is, the mating of higher-ranking males with lower-ranking females, and that Indo-European females were largely replaced by local women [Cordaux 2004].

There can be no doubt that the early Hindus of the ‘epic period’ were patriarchal and reveled in war. They give a loving detailed description of their war chariots, compared in detail by Stuart Piggott with those used by the Britons under Cassivelaunus against Julius Caesar [Piggott 1950]. The bronze-age heroes and their styles of fighting detailed in the *Mahabharata* can be easily compared with descriptions found in the *Iliad*, Arjuna the great Hindu hero being little different from Achilles. The cattle raid in the *Mahabharata*’s *Virat Parva* reads like the cattle raid in the Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* [Lal 2006]. There seems to be no doubt that these vast migrations and invasions took place and came out of areas like the Fargana, famous for its sturdy horses. This has recently been attested by the new science of genetic analysis. A study of the human Y chromosome haplotypes of several extant Eurasian populations revealed traces of migration and settlement patterns. Central Asia was found to be a great reservoir of genetic diversity accounting for several large migrations into Europe, India and even North America [Wells 2001]. Of course till a ‘Rosetta Stone’ for the Indus Valley Script is found, this argument will continue.

What makes this issue of more interest than an academic one is not only the unique emergence of the caste system in India, but the heightened ‘colour’ consciousness among the Indians even today. Almost every ad in the matrimonial columns of any newspaper

insists that the bride should be 'fair.' Present-day concepts of beauty have been shaped by some other historically determined imperative. Such colour consciousness [Dasgupta 2009] reminds one easily of the apartheid period in South Africa, the uneasiness over the mixed-blood 'coloured people,' and the apartheid rules to prevent exogamy among races. The word 'caste' is significantly derived from the Portuguese 'Casta,' which means 'Race.' Further, the Hindu word for caste is '*varna*' which literally means 'colour.'

The caste system begins to make historical sense if we postulate that the migrating warlike Hindus from South-Central Asia, speaking a Prakriti close to classical Sanskrit overcame the Dravidian peoples of the urban Indus valley and after a period of turmoil assimilated the conquered darker tribes as *Sudras*. The epics of the Ramayana and the later Mahabharata clearly point to a period of tribal fighting, uncertainty, and mixing of different cultures. The Princess Draupadi is identified as dark and she contracts polyandrous marriages with five princes! There are other polyandrous marriages and instances of women in the epics acting in a non-typical manner within a patriarchal society. Tribal totems are gradually incorporated among the Hindu gods, who themselves change in importance. Indra the great war god, and the nature gods Varuna, and Vayu are relegated to the background in a polytheistic world. Siva the old yogic god found in the Indus Valley seals becomes a supreme god acceptable to all, and several tribal totems get incorporated, such as Naga the Cobra totem, and Ganesha the Elephant totem, all of which come to be regarded as sub-gods. Ganesha must have been one of the last incorporations, for in Buddhist texts he is called a demon! It is also important to note that the last most popular incarnate god, with the Mahabharata epic to give historical reality to his existence, was Krishna, considered dark in colour [though later meaninglessly called sky-blue]. The word 'Krishna' itself means dark or black.

The Astronomical, archeological and textual evidence places the Mahabharata war around 900 BCE [Kochar 2000]. A few hundred later, the Buddha preached against the folly of such wars, banned needless sacrifices of cattle to appease gods, and said compassionate behaviour amongst people was more worthy of devotion than worrying about appeasing gods. Caste distinctions had no place in Buddhism. Around the time of the Buddha, lineage-based tribal societies gave way or were incorporated within stable kingdoms [Thaper 1984]. Though tribal fighting ceased to be important, the newly developing Magadhan empire with its capital at Pataliputra embarked on a series of bloody conquests. Its architect was Kautilya, the great minister of Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka's grandfather, and Kautilya codified in his *Arthashastra* a rigid and harsh centralized state system. Different castes were identified and their role, rights and duties were prescribed within the state [Kautilya 1992]. Ashoka found the system he inherited intolerable, he became a Buddhist, and tried to make the state machinery an instrument of Dharma for all, even foreigners. Undoubtedly vested interests chaffed at losing privileges and ultimately discontent amongst the powerful classes led to the Hindu counter-reformation, which itself brought in the strict codification of the Manusmriti. In the period of Buddhist state ascendancy, Patanjali a famous grammarian of the 2nd century BCE mentioned that even in those days of miscegenation, the single most important physical characteristic of a Brahmin was 'fair hair' [Sengupta 1950]. If this reading of history is plausible, then it is understandable why the Manusmriti created rigid caste

boundaries and decreed that if any of the upper-caste women married Sudras their children would be untouchables and outcastes, and a Brahmin woman's outcaste children would be the lowest of the lowly.

However, after several years of benign Buddhist ascendancy, several large communities of 'untouchables' must already have existed, and proscription came too late just as it did in apartheid South Africa after a largish population of mixed-blood 'coloured' had come into existence. The religious belief that comforted all people in those times was the concept of the undying *atman* or soul living through the 'transient' physical world of *maya* and later promoting itself through its *karma* of good deeds generation by generation. Every soul whatever the present position in lived life was on the same journey as every other till ultimate dissolution as part of the *Brahman*, the only unqualified reality to which even the gods owed their creation. This belief restricted harsh behaviour from those above, and gave the strength to bear it to those below. It also made it possible for all to venerate a saint even if she was born an untouchable. The twelve Azhwar saints, 'those immersed in God,' of southern India were born to several castes and lived between the 5th and 9th centuries. The *Divya Prabandham* which is a collection of their sayings and verses is as much venerated by Hindus in Tamil Nadu as the Vedas are. Tirumalisai and Tirrupani Azhwars were born as 'untouchables.'

When under the modernizing rule of the British, people started to lose this unquestioned belief in karma and see its fruit of action as itself illusory, untouchability and the caste system stood out as a social system to be abolished as soon as possible. Social reformers like Swami Vivekananda, political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, and human rights stalwarts like Dr. BR Ambedkar recognized that the removal of the caste system and its evils was key for national salvation [Chavan 2001]. Independent India's Constitution likewise banned caste discrimination and parliaments have approved affirmative action. Urbanization and capitalism have also helped to obscure *identity* discrimination and have provided new chances for Dalits [The Economist 2007]. However, this age-old form of discrimination, fueled by competition for livelihoods at the very bottom of the social pyramid, continues to crucify the poor and the helpless.

Are Caste and Race Similar?

During the Conference on Race in Durban in 2001, Dalit participants made out a strong case that caste discrimination was no different from race discrimination, and casteism was no different from racism [United Nations 2001]. The Indian Government rejected this equation, just as it rejected calling Indian forest dwelling communities as 'indigenous peoples,' though its own terminology of '*adivasi*' means exactly that. It has maintained such classifications are not rigorous enough. The Indian government apparently has forgotten that it was the intervention of the Indian delegation in 1965 that forced the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination [CERD] to include the term 'descent' as a factor [Kothari 2010]! It has also been pointed out that in practice racial and caste discrimination coalesce "be it exclusion, inequality, institutionalised prejudices or discrimination" [Khan 2010].

I have tried to show that a plausible argument can be made to say that caste discrimination, especially against the Dalits, can be said to be the sociological remnant of a system of tribal apartheid put in place more than a couple of thousand years ago. If this is vague, so are all definitions of racism. We now have enough scientific knowledge to see that all of humanity has come out of Africa. Even the genetic differences between human beings and chimpanzees amount to less than 2%. So racism is a general portmanteau term to describe *identity* discrimination exercised by a powerful group against another subordinate group, on some fancied basis, religious, linguistic, ethnic, or cultural. The age-old discrimination of European Christians or Gentiles against even Ashkenazi or European Jews is also racism just as exclusion practiced by the Israel government against Palestinians who are fellow Semites is also racism. As is the attitude of Orangemen against Catholics in Ireland. Such discrimination is of an insolvable nature, it does not permit anyone to get out from under. It is different for example from the discrimination practiced by the rich against the poor. If against all odds the poor man becomes rich, he is accepted and even feted; such 'happiness' is not the lot of one identified as a Jew, or as an Arab, or as a Taig, or as a Dalit.

The Future

When the British ushered in the modern period, which resulted in the introduction of industrialization and scientific learning, the Indian Caste System was widely seen as unjust, and a block on further progress. The process of economic development driven by the rich and educated has mostly benefited the upper castes, though at present there is a skewed societal picture, with a few of the upper castes among the poor, and a few of the lowest castes among the better off, the 'creamy layer' of Indian political debate. Some of the worst excesses of discrimination based on identity have been mitigated in the great and crowded mega-cities of India, though again one hears of such practices even in urban centres. We have seen that the law alone cannot abolish this system of discrimination. Only the upper castes mostly benefit from higher education, better jobs, and better standards of living, and hence there is still no real societal impetus to gradually dissolve caste boundaries as meaningless distinctions.

Independent India inherited an elite hierarchal system of government, a rich, educated and powerful elite, and a very large disciplined army and police to maintain order by force. The very factors that enabled Indians to achieve independence from colonial rule have prevented a more egalitarian form of society from developing. An age-old cultural indifference to the poor and marginalized and the practice of manipulating them politically or by force has resulted in several long-standing irreducible rebellions, the most important being the Naxalite or Maoist one among tribal populations; the Kashmir conflagration; and the revolts in the tribal north-east bordering China and Myanmar. Policies to accelerate national growth based on elite economic trickle-down theories have again mostly benefited the rich and the super-rich, and even worse left behind in partial stagnation the huge agricultural sector on which the bulk of the people depend for livelihoods. After sixty years of Independence, the Indian polity is still without firm foundations, and high elite expenditures on nuclear weapons, space research, and high-end technologies which can only benefit the rich, whether in medicine or in energy, add

to the fragility of the total system. The added tensions only exacerbate caste and class tensions, and many times result in horrendous superstitious acts such as honour killings of women and the burning of witches. Very recently a Brahmin woman journalist was murdered by her own family for wanting to marry a professional colleague of a lower caste! [International Business Times 2010]

By a historical irony, the State has held together so long mainly because caste fractures in society have prevented the vast masses of the poor from mounting a revolutionary challenge to centralized elite power. But violence between castes has continued to increase. Professor Ghurye, a founder of Indian sociology, warned eighty years ago that growing intra-caste solidarity would result in growing violence and disharmony between castes [Ghurye 1932]. However, Professor M.N. Srinivas, India's best known sociologist, has famously held to the opinion that caste hierarchy has been breaking down under "the impact of new ideas of democracy, equality and individual self-respect. While caste *as a system* is dead or dying, individual castes are thriving" [Srinivas 2003]. But this seems to be more a hope of what should happen rather than an analysis of what is actually happening. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading Dalit intellectual, has highlighted that few of the government's programmes to transform a caste-ridden society have succeeded. He concludes that "the enduring salience of caste itself" is the greatest paradox of Indian society [Babu 2009].

'White Revolutionary' policies have been attempted from time to time by the country's leaders in a desultory manner, their ameliorating aspects being quickly watered down by vested interests. The economic mechanisms by which the poor can help themselves have been known for some time, but elite intransigence has steadily prevented such bottom-up impetus. It can only be hoped that as the 'old guard' passes from the scene better sense will prevail, and the poor with their own histories of compassionate understanding will teach the Indian elite accommodation and survival.

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