



The Caste System

A Report

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Foreword

Last year was the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade act, a triumphant, landmark event the Hindu Council UK was pleased to support to the fullest extent.

As the Hindu community would champion any attempt to eradicate slavery, it is doubly unfortunate that some here in the UK used last year's anniversary to look further afield for discriminatory practices, and chose in particular to launch specific attacks on the caste system of the Indian subcontinent.

Numerous TV and Radio programmes alleged the caste system was an abhorrent practice, particularly when it came to the treatment of people of the Dalit, or 'untouchable' caste.

There is no doubt that, despite the Indian government's anti-discriminatory legislation, in place since Independence, there are still some areas in India where Dalits are treated appallingly. The good news is the government has long been bringing in policies of positive discrimination, by reserving large numbers of educational places and health and public sector jobs for the Dalit community, a move which we at the Hindu Council support.

Such government efforts have had a knock-on effect on the private sector too. In cities like Bangalore, Chennai and Delhi, Dalits have a high percentage of jobs reserved specifically for them.

However, giving priority to Dalits means those from higher castes are now complaining that even if they score highly in their college entrance exams, they cannot get places.

You may think this is a necessary if unfortunate consequence in order to secure a more just and equitable society in future. Certainly this has been the line taken by supposedly 'objective' British investigative journalists, who also imply the upper castes are privileged and wealthy. I cannot stress strongly enough that this is not the case. Many among the higher castes in India are also terribly poor, as poor as and, in countless cases, poorer than the Dalit community. In Delhi, many public lavatories are cleaned by the Brahmins, the highest caste, as they cannot find any other job. Here, the problem is not one of caste abuse so much as it is of India's poverty. Media coverage of the problem has frequently been misleading, as reporters appear either not to have done their research properly, or have resolved that facts should not stand in the way of their story.

Here in the UK, Dalit communities do well and are right to be proud of their achievements. The Hindu Council too is proud of the Dalit community, which has full representation on our executive board.

HCUK is not aware of caste discrimination here in the UK. If it does exist, we would be the first to condemn and aim to eradicate it. However, in the 14 years since HCUK was founded, only one allegation of caste discrimination has come to our attention, via ACAS. Ultimately it came to nothing.

So, why are certain UK parliamentarians, led by Rob Marris MP, lobbying the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to look at ways of legislating against caste discrimination in the UK?

The answer is simple; these MPs are associated with evangelical Christian groups who want, quite simply, to 'save' people from the 'falsehood' of Hinduism and convert people to Christianity. In other words, they are the ones who are practising prejudice and discrimination, by condemning the beliefs of those who do not follow their religion.

The Church Minister working with these MPs, the Reverend David Haslam, proves this point. He is on record saying that not only is the caste system is abhorrent, but the real problem lies with Hinduism.

It is in the Manu-Smriti, a book on the social structures and laws required to run societies, that we find mention of caste. This book, existing from the beginning of civilisation, continued to change until the last insertions around 200 BC. Likewise the caste system too is reforming itself as professions change and inter-caste marriages take place. Ultimately, these may in any event render the caste system totally redundant, a thing of the past.

Today, UK born Hindus are hardly aware of the old hierarchies of the caste system. They may identify with their wider caste, but would rather find a cross-caste partner from the UK than go to India to secure a same caste marriage, because the qualities and similarities they seek in a marriage partner transcend the mere label of caste. Certainly they would reject any notions of which caste is 'high' and which 'low.'

If the caste system dies out through inter-caste marriage, in contrast, Hinduism carries the eternal word of God through the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Gita and so on. Indeed the entire Hindu population revere Rishi Valmiki, a Dalit, for compiling the great epic Ramayana. The Vedas proclaim "all to be equal, none high or low or of middle status". Yes, the caste system in the last millennia did develop an over-protectionist streak, mostly due to the oppressions of foreign rule, but here in the UK, where we have equal opportunity for all castes and all classes, that Vedic precept holds true.

The HCUK believes (and has told the Department of Communities and Local Government) that the caste phenomenon here has now evolved into more of a 'clan' system, where people draw support from each other as if in a club and, moreover, are secure enough to be benevolent towards similar clans, as well as other wider caste groups. There is no discrimination in this, so how can such clubbing together of people be other than a healthy and cohesive force in society?

People in India have lived this way for centuries. Each caste has its own pride – some of the Dalit communities who own lands are fiercely proud. In the same way the Jewish community, Parsi refugees from the Iranian holocaust, etc, have lived as proud citizens in their own 'clubs'.

The current Chief Minister of the largest state in India, Uttar Pardesh, is Ms. Mayawati, a Dalit, who must enjoy the support of Brahmins, being the highest proportion of single caste vote in the state. Moreover Ms. Mayawati is tipped to become a future Prime Minister of India.

Why is it, that when a community starts to do well here in the UK, it seems to become a target for abuse? This has certainly been the case with the Jewish community in the past (and perhaps in the present) and we wonder whether this is now happening to the Hindu community. Our scholar Dr Raj Pandit Sharma sheds some light on this and other aspects of the caste system in this report, which makes interesting reading.

I sincerely hope Dr Sharma's report will discourage those who would use caste as an argument to promote their own hidden agendas. If nothing else, I hope it will alert politicians and the wider British public to their underhand and prejudicial tactics.

Of course, no report of this nature would be complete without a Dalit perspective and, to that end, I asked the Dalit community of Southall for their views, and to explain any grievances they had so we could help to resolve any caste issues. They did indeed point to some problems which we will need to work at. However their deepest grievance was an unwelcome interference by the host community.

While I am most grateful for this contribution by the Valmiki temple, and the hard work of Dr Raj Pandit Sharma, I truly regret having to commission this report. It is no joke to have to ward off concerted misinformation campaigns from UK parliamentarians who really ought to know better, particularly as those same parliamentarians would no doubt claim to be acting in the best interests of equality and human rights. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Reverend David Haslam and parliamentarians associated to the Evangelical Christian groups, like Rob Marris MP, shamefully used last year's slave trade media exposure to shift their biblical guilt onto Hinduism, perhaps with the express intention to convert the Hindu youth by inflicting shame onto their way of life. They have misjudged the resilience of the Hindu community and the profundity of their Dharma.

The hierarchical caste system of last millennia India is well past its expiry date. Hindus here have come from India, Malaysia, Sri-Lanka, Nepal, East Africa, the Caribbean and all of them are fully represented within HCUK. Here, we all share a single identity of 'British Hindu.'

Only one element of the caste system do I hope Hindu society will retain, its respect for the Hindu priest. Sadly, anti-caste propaganda seriously threatens this respect, as people develop misguided contempt for the Brahmin and attempt to do away with the core and beautiful values under which Adi-Manu, the first man to civilise the world, created the original caste system.

Anil Bhanot
General Secretary
Hindu Council UK

Statement

By the Valmiki Community of Southall

In our Executive meeting of 10th February 2008 we discussed the issue of Dalit discrimination. As a result of that meeting we agreed the following Statement for inclusion in the Hindu Council's report on Caste:

1. We resent having the word Dalit ascribed to us by Christian Missionary groups and the British media. Both Christian Missionary groups and the British media have attempted to come and talk to us but we reject their advances, believing they are spreading a hateful malaise in our community with the intention of dividing us. When a few months ago we asked one such woman to leave the temple she accused us of discrimination, whereas it was in fact she who was spreading discrimination.
2. We are aware organisations like Caste Watch UK are now securing large funding from Government agencies. While we attend their meetings, we feel their intention appears to be to make money and help create further divisions in our society.
3. We do have problems with the mainstream Hindu community in that we feel that some in the older generations do think of us lowly. But our children are setting a standard that is changing all that. In this temple alone there are many inter-caste marriages. We have also noted that now some of our surnames are the same as those of higher castes.
4. The word Dalit means "broken" or "crushed." The high caste surnames are evidence of how people who did not convert under Islamic rule went into hiding in order to maintain the survival of their Dharma.
5. We also believe our problems were exacerbated by British Colonialism which drained us of all resources and set caste discrimination in place.
6. We abhor the billions of dollars going into India to convert our community. Sometimes we too think how someone after conversion believes he or she can get a good job they could not get before. We wonder, but we are equally saddened that they have forsaken the oldest religion, the Valmiki Dharma – there is one God Brahm and Lord Ram was His incarnation, for the younger religion of Christianity.
7. We wish to protect our Dharma because it loves all and hates no one. It seems to us that Christianity loves only itself and spreads hatred among other communities.
8. We appeal to the British Government: Please help us to maintain our Dharma. We do have problems but with organisations like Hindu Council UK we will sort them out. We are a proud community here but the British media and some Christian and other money oriented organisations are bringing shame on our family life and on our children. Please protect us, we are British people.

Kewal Gill (President)
Piara Lal Soba (General Secretary)
on behalf of the Executive Committee,
Shri Guru Valmik Sabha Southall

1. Caste

1.1 Introduction

The caste system or *varnashram* has been one of the most distorted, perplexing, misunderstood, exploited and maligned aspects of Hinduism. This report is not a justification of the abuse of caste system; rather it is a factual account of the subject, a systematic analysis of how it has become adulterated and the reparative measures necessary to correct such distortion in the social arena, thereby eliminating unjustified discrimination and abuse.

The inequalities of the modern caste system and the fissures in Hindu society resulting from it are too well known to elaborate. The caste system is so pervasive that it has become a feature in the life of all religious groups living in India.

This report will investigate the following five assumptions commonly made in connection with the Hindu caste system: -

1. *Caste is an institution of the Hindu religion, wholly peculiar to that religion alone*
2. *Caste consists primarily of a fourfold classification of people in general under the heads of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, and that Dalits are not even part of this system*
3. *Caste is perpetual and immutable, having been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the ages of Hindu history without the possibility of change*
4. *Dalit Hindus who convert to other faiths become emancipated, experiencing equality and social mobility*
5. *The Hindu caste system is akin to hidden apartheid and slavery and should be abolished.*

1.2 Analysis of caste within the Hindu scriptures

In order to establish the truth behind the original purpose of the caste system, we must examine the most ancient of Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. Conveyed in Sanskrit, once the '*lingua franca*' of India spoken from the Caucasoid Mountains in the west to Indonesia in the east, the Vedas are the most comprehensive, resourceful and universally extolled philosophical treatises of the ancient world.

Once studied by and known to all Hindus regardless of social status, over time Vedic literature became inaccessible and confined to the priestly (Brahmin) class, a process precipitated partly by the successive invasion and domination of India; firstly by Kushans in 1st century CE, Muslims from 8th century and Europeans from the late 1400's. Prior to this era of invasion, India had a unique continuity in world history; Hindu civilisation evolved and survived without revolution or important changes, across several millennia.

As will become clear later in this report, it was as a result of repeated invasions that caste mutated to its current form. A useful measure to preserve Indian heritage, caste adapted as a 'survival mode' response to the need for self-preservation, not the mainstay of Hindu social order, as is frequently thought. As far as the Vedas, the fundamental and authoritative Hindu scriptures are concerned; there is no sanction of the caste system.

So what is the source of the contentions manifestation of caste seen today? Here the devil *is* in the detail.

Adversaries of Hinduism and proponents of hereditary caste cite various Hindu scriptures to assert their claims that caste is intransigent, hierarchical and determined by birth. In particular they quote *Purush-Sukta* (X.90.11-12) of Rig-Veda and verses (IV.13) and (XVIII.41) of Bhagavad-Gita, claiming these prove the different castes can be depicted as portions of the divine being, *Purush*, and that the fourfold caste system is a creation of the Almighty assigned at birth. Verses of the Manu Smriti are also cited as another religious endorsement for a discriminatory caste system.

It is important to dispel such fallacious assertions at the outset and explain why the defenders of this warped version of varnashram and those who would denigrate the Hindu faith continue to perpetuate this myth.

As the Hindu scriptures are composed in the highly sophisticated and intellectual language of Sanskrit, knowledge of which is available only to a minority, it is not difficult to publicise perverted interpretations of sacred texts. It is conceivable that some Hindus have deliberately and successfully manipulated interpretation of the scriptures for personal gain, as the non-Sanskrit speaking majority would be oblivious to their *actual* content, prior to the arrival of the British, at least. During the British colonial period, Sanskrit was taught in numerous British universities and the hitherto elusive Hindu scriptures were being translated into English.

However, some such translations can hardly be described as benevolent.

History has revealed that the motives behind the study of Sanskrit were not purely educational on the part of the early British emissaries sent out to India. Many Indians believe it to have been a strategy by the East India Company and other foreign parties in India to penetrate the Hindu Indian psyche by interpreting the

Vedic scriptures, which underpinned the Hindu mentality and social order. In so doing, they were able to better manipulate the Indian populace thereby facilitating the 'divide and rule' policy more effectively. This belief would explain the fact that nowadays Sanskrit is hardly offered in any UK university and the once prestigious Sanskrit faculties of Oxford and Cambridge universities have been axed. Not surprisingly given the rise in Islamic fundamentalism, Arabic has replaced Sanskrit at Oxford.

Prior to the Indian independence struggle (mutiny) of 1857, many European scholars and philosophers including those affiliated to the East India Company and British ordinance in India, praised the Hindu scriptures and culture for its opulence, complexity and resilience. A British Judge and classics scholar Sir William Jones of the Asiatic Society lauded the Sanskrit language:

"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either."

After the Indian freedom uprising, in a drive to subjugate the masses, certain British, Christian colonials adopted a more oppressive stance towards all Indians, including, of course, the Hindu majority. Hindu values and faith were denigrated systematically and deliberately, portrayed as backward, heathen and barbaric – an image still perpetuated today in many quarters.

The colonials achieved their aims in part by engaging in dubious translations and interpretations of the Hindu Scriptures, and through suggestions that less important works such as Manu Smriti had parity with the Vedic texts and were equally fundamental to Hindu ethos.

For instance, the description of varnashram as segments of the divine being Purush, sacrificed in order to populate the world in the Rig-Veda and Manu Smriti, is wrongly quoted as an implicit reference to and approval of a hierarchical caste structure.

Professor Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) a surgeon and Sanskrit scholar of Oxford University translated the verses from the Rig-Veda (X.90.11-12) as follows,

'When they immolated Purusha, into how many portions did they divide him? What was his mouth called what his arms, what his thighs, what were his feet called?'

'His mouth became the Brahmana, his arms became the Rajanya, his thighs became the Vaishya, and the Shudra was born from his feet.'

Non-Hindus commonly misinterpret these verses as meaning that because the feet are the lowest extremity of the body, the 'Shudra' must be inferior to other caste. Yet a verse in the same chapter (X.90.14) declares that Earth was born from the same feet of *Purusha*, thus implying that Shudras are closest to nature and mother earth (*Prithvi Mata*). Further, during Hindu worship, a devotee will prostrate him or herself before the deity and place their head on its feet, completely invalidating the argument that anything emanating from the feet of the Divine Being is impure and untouchable.

Vedic scholars recognise the illustrative nature of these verses, understanding them not in isolation but within the whole context of the Vedic ethos, and draw very different conclusions.

What Rishi Narayan, composer of (X.90) conveyed is the straightforward logic, that even the most powerful man like *Purusha* can be destroyed should his head, arms, thighs and feet be separated. Moreover, as *Purusha* is analogous to society, the message is clear: each member is integral to 'the body' as a whole; that acting

singularly, as little more than severed limbs, we are ineffective. Crucially, these texts also demonstrate the principle that whenever synchronisation between the different parts of the community is disturbed, that community becomes paralysed and inoperative.

Far from promoting caste separation and discrimination, these verses send a powerful message of integration and cohesion. Rishi Narayan is declaring that society can be empowered only if its intelligentsia (Brahmins), government (Rajanya/Kshatriya), mercantile and farming community (Vaishya) and labourers (Shudra) amalgamate and collaborate just as the components of a healthy body.

No one part of the human body (society) is inferior or superior to any other part of the body; each is dependent on the other, complementary to the other, there to support the other. *Purusha Sukta* commands Hindus to understand that none of the four classes is inferior or superior to the other but that each is dependent on the other for its survival.

Other Vedic endorsements to the concept of egalitarianism are legion:

"The earth is our mother, we are all her children."-Atharva Veda 12.1.12

"The universe is the outpouring of the majesty of God, the auspicious one, radiant love. Every face you see belongs to Him. He is present in everyone without exception." -Yajur Veda.

"The Divine is enshrined in the hearts of all." -Isha Upanishad 1 -1.

"Reality (God) is our real self, so that each of us is one with the power that created and sustains the universe."

"In the depths of meditation, sages (rishis) saw within themselves the Lord of Love, who dwells in the heart of every creature".

- Shvetashvatara Upanishad. 1 - 3.

'Unity in diversity' is a famous Hindu aphorism and these verses from the Rig-Veda clearly illustrate this point:

'Cows of various colours like black, red and spotted ones yield the same white milk (VIII.93.13) which is a metaphor used in Vedas for diversity yielding to unity. HH Wilson translates verse X.191.2, 'Meet together, talk together, let your minds apprehend alike in like manner as the ancient demigods, concurring accepted their portion of the sacrifice.'

1.3 Caste was never determined by birth

The contention is also made that caste is hereditary and immutable, binding an individual to a particular socio-economic stratum from birth. Again, an overwhelming number of religious texts suggest quite the contrary, that caste was so conferred on an individual *not* according to parentage but to his attributes.

"The fourfold caste has been created by me (the Almighty as Krishna) according to the differentiation of Guna (attributes) and Karma (actions)"

Bhagavad-Gita XVII.41

"The devotees of the Lord are not outcastes; outcastes are they who have no faith in the Lord whichever their caste be. A wise man should not slight even an outcaste if he is devoted to the Lord; he who looks down on him will be tormented and enter oblivion (naraka)."

Mahabharata

"There is no superior caste. The Universe is the work of the Immense Being. The beings created by him were only divided into castes according to their aptitude."

Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, 188

The earlier portions of the Rig Veda do not refer to any divisions of society based on caste. Later, the term 'varna' can have thirteen different interpretations in Sanskrit. In this context, it means 'attribute', or 'propensity'.

In the *Mahabharata* (12. 188), we again read that all creation is divine, that no one is high or low by birth and that the *atman*, soul, can progress through spiritual training through the *samskaras*:-

'At birth the soul is at a primitive level of development, it is only through the sacraments (samskaras) that it becomes 'reborn' and thereby elevated.'

This principle, of Dharma, of working for the 'greater good,' is a dynamic one throughout Hinduism; Hinduism is not a dogmatic faith, but one that has perpetually allowed flexibility, especially regarding caste.

Since Vedic times, caste has never been hereditary and in fact, even members of the same family pursued diverse vocations as the author of this verse from the Rig-Veda unequivocally demonstrates:

"I am a composer of hymns, my father is a physician, and my mother grinds corn on a stone. We are all engaged in different occupations."

The celebrated authors of the foremost religious scriptures of the Hindus, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Valmiki and Vyas respectively, were Dalits. The narrator of the Puranas, Suta Maharishi, was a Dalit. Surely evidence enough to dispel any misconceptions that caste was ever intended to be hereditary?

Interestingly, by examining the lineage of sage Vyas it may be noted that caste was determined by occupation and not through birth. A Brahmin (*in the true sense of the*

word) and the most revered author of major Hindu scriptures Vyas, was the son of Satyawati a fisherwoman of low birth. Vyas's father Parashar, a famous lawgiver was the son of a *Chandala*, a pariah of society. Parashar's ancestor was an acclaimed Vedic seer of the Vashishtha clan who was born of a prostitute. Vyas's profound knowledge of the Vedas determined his caste as a Brahmin sage, and not his birth to a fisherwoman.

The celebrated author of the great Hindu epic Ramayana sage Valmiki was a hunter of low standing. He came to be known as a Brahmin sage because of his wisdom and deep understanding of the scriptures, which led to his authorship of the Ramayana. Similarly, sage Aitareya, who compiled the Aitareya Upanishad, was born of a woman of low birth, yet his modern day descendants consider themselves Brahmins.

Sage Vidura, a Brahmin who gave religious instruction to King Dhritarashtra, mentioned in the Mahabharata, was born to a woman servant within the palace. He too became a Brahmin sage because of his wisdom and knowledge of Dharma Shastras (scriptures).

The Chandogya Upanishad relates the case of Satyakama (the illegitimate, mixed lineage, son of a low birth woman who could not recall who her son's father was) who went on to be accepted and educated as a Brahmin (Bhagvad-Gita: Ch. 18 - verse 42).

All Hindus, including those of low birth and even unknown lineage, had the choice of pursuing any occupation, including that of a Brahmin.

The two rival families of the Mahabharata, *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* were the descendants of Satyawati, the low birth fisherwoman mentioned earlier, and the grandsons of sage Vyas, also mentioned earlier. In spite of his mixed heritage, the

Kauravas and Pandavas were known as Kshatriyas (warriors) because of their occupation. Chandragupta, the monarch who founded the legendary Maurya dynasty of ancient India was from the Muria tribe, whose primary profession was to gather peacock feathers. Likewise, the heroic King Ashoka was the son of a female servant.

Saint Thiruvalluvar who wrote the theosophical treatise, *Thirukural* was a humble weaver. Other venerated saints of the Hindu faith whose teachings are followed by all Hindus including Ravidas, Valmiki, Sain Bhagat, Namdev, Kabir, Surdas, Ramdas and Tukaram came from the humblest strata of Hindu society, and in today's classification, some would be deemed Dalits.

These are but a handful of examples proving caste has never been determined by birth, as asserted by protagonists of a hereditary caste system, and by its critics.

Instead, those sages who have sought to comprehend mankind's nature and our role in creation as a whole, simply constructed Hindu society on a rational bases, systematising people in such a way as to facilitate the development of each human being, with due consideration to his inner nature and the reasons for his existence.

For Hindus the world is not merely the result of a series of chances but the fulfilment of a divine strategy in which all aspects are interconnected.

2. History

2.1 The role of successive invasions of India

This then begs the question, why have the original precepts stated in the Vedic literature become so distorted in modern interpretations of the caste system?

While certain socio-economic groups within the Hindu community may have deliberately manipulated the scriptures in order to exploit others, by far the most detrimental influence has been exogenous. Successive foreign invaders to India, predominantly over the past ten centuries, have imposed their self-proclaimed 'superior' socio-religious doctrines upon the Indian people.

Prior to this period, we have records of early visitors to India consistently praising Hindu society for its just and egalitarian values. Not once was the subjugation of citizens through the 'evil' caste system ever mentioned. Had such evil been endemic, surely these emissaries would have documented it?

Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador who visited the Maurya court at Pataliputra (Patna) in the 4th century BC, noted: "All Hindus are free, and none of them is a slave. Further, they respect both virtue and truth."

Huen Tsang (Xuanxang), the most famous of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who visited India in 7th century writes: "Though the Hindus are of a light temperament, they are distinguished by the

straightforwardness and honesty of their character. With regard to riches, they never take anything unjustly; with regard to justice, they make even excessive concessions. Truthfulness is the

distinguishing feature of their administration."

Al-Idrisi a Spanish born Muslim geographer in the 11th century visited India and reports in his journal that "Hindus are naturally inclined to justice and never depart from it in their actions."

In the 13th century Marco Polo described Brahmins he encountered "as the most truthful, for they would not tell a lie for anything on earth."

A few decades later Friar Jordanus emphasises that the people of Lesser India (South and Western) "are true in speech and eminent in justice."

It was the Mughal rule that heralded the darkest and bloodiest chapter in Hindu history. For the most part the Mughals' modus operandi was brutal, with little respite for the Hindus. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, falsely revered as a paragon of Muslim tolerance by modern revisionist historians, destroyed and pillaged numerous Hindu cities and temples. He made the following observations about Hindu prisoners taken following *jihad* and refusing to accept Islam in his autobiographical "*Baburnama*:"

"Those who were brought in alive (having surrendered) were ordered beheaded, after which a tower of skulls was erected in the camp."

Hindus lucky enough not to be murdered or proselytised by the Islamic marauders had to pay '*jazia*' tax to the Mughal sultanate for the prerogative to practice their faith. The predicament for Hindus was further compounded by other taxes imposed by the suppressive regime, including income tax (sometimes up to 50% for non-Muslims) paid to the Islamic rulers. In stark

contrast, Muslim subjects (mostly converts) paid only '*zakkat*' to the state, at a rate of 2.5% of their income.

In their homeland, Hindus were firmly subjugated under Mughal rule and relinquished much of their liberal Vedic ideology for an Islamised version. Not only were non-Muslims humiliated as being the *kuffar* 'infidel' heathen, but also financially exsanguinated through repressive taxation and law.

It is hard today to imagine how grim the situation must have been for the Hindu people. Muslim overlords to the north of India would often abduct and rape unmarried Hindu girls and, as a desperate measure to avoid this degradation, Hindu women were married early. Those within the Royal families committed '*johar*' (wrongly described as suttee) and immolated themselves along with their children, to escape a fate worse than death at the hands of Muslim conquerors. To avoid abduction and immediate recognition, to the north of India Hindu women adopted Islamic dress and the tradition of '*purdah*' or veiling of women, become common.

Under such treacherous conditions, previously liberated Hindu women who had enjoyed parity with men since Vedic times, and many female seers (*Rishikas*) who had composed verses of the Vedas, were compelled to withdraw from public into the shadows.

Entire Hindu kingdoms to the west, north and east were decimated by the Mughal invaders and populated with Muslims. (The current situation in Kashmir, now almost devoid of the Hindu populace due to Islamic insurgency, is not unprecedented; rather it is one of the latest examples of history repeating itself many times over the past centuries in Kashmir and throughout India.)

In such desperate times, facing the need to preserve the Hindu community and its traditional values, a more rigid hereditary caste system emerged, thereby facilitating the propagation of unadulterated Hindu beliefs and culture from one generation to the next.

To the south, from the start of the fifteenth century, Hindus encountered Portuguese colonists whose primary aim was to establish rule and exploit the opulent spice resources in this region of India. Although early historians have portrayed an amicable depiction of life under Portuguese rule, recent studies have revealed that in fact the Portuguese exported the Inquisition to Goa in the sixteenth century, and many Hindus were tortured and burnt at the stake for continuing to practice their religion. Historians now consider the Goa Inquisition merciless and the cruellest ever developed. A large number of Hindus were forcibly converted to Christianity and then persecuted from 1560 until 1812. Any man, woman, or child living in Goa could be arrested and persecuted simply for whispering a Hindu prayer or keeping a small deity at home. Many Hindus and some former Jews languished in special Inquisitional prisons for several years at a time.

Today, the Portuguese tend to think of Goa as the glorious capital of the spice trade; believing erroneously that people of different ethnic backgrounds lived there in tolerance and tranquillity. Many are oblivious to how their Christian leaders made Hindus suffer.

The role of the Portuguese is pivotal to the metamorphosis of the Vedic caste system in its present form. In fact, the word 'caste' is not of Indian derivation at all but is a derogatory epithet, meaning race or breed (*'casta'*), introduced to India by Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century to incorrectly describe *'jati'* or the Hindu community network.

The Portuguese wrongly assumed the priestly class or Brahmins commanded the same authority and power as the Christian clergy did at that time in Europe. The reality is that the Brahmins in India have never commanded comparable authority and power to the Christian clergy. They controlled neither the economy nor the army, both of which the clergy did in Medieval Europe. Believing however in this authority, they developed contempt for the Brahmins – contempt that continues to this day within Christian evangelical circles.

The vilification of the Brahmins by 16th century Christian missionaries is indisputably exemplified in this comment from Saint Francis Xavier, a missionary to Portugal at the time, in a letter sent to the his Society of Jesus:

"If it were not for the Brahmins, we should have all the heathens (Hindus) embracing our faith."

2.2 Caste and British colonialism

The British were the final wave of foreigners to impose their rule on India. As early as the eighteenth century successive British administrators attempted to categorise the Indian population, in addition to other parameters, according to religion and caste.

In 1872 the British planned a comprehensive census executed under the direction of Henry Beverly, Inspector General of Registration in Bengal.

The pretext given for the census was that the government needed to be prepared to deal with disaster situations. However the information collated from the unwitting Indian populace proved to be instrumental in perpetuating the colonial stratagem of *'divide et impera'* (divide and rule).

This was the precursor to the 'schedule' system, which would classify all Indians according to their socio-religious background. It has been argued that the census initiated division within the minds of Indians, who until now had not had to pledge so openly their affiliation to a particular caste or community.

Caste then became an important element in Indian politics after the British imperialists used caste-based taxonomy as the basis of classifying the colonised Indian inhabitants, particularly the Hindus, in the population census of 1872.

The question of caste became more specific in the 1901 Census, because by and large the Indian population did not understand what was meant by 'caste' and gave their occupation, religion and education, as their caste. This time the census enumerators insisted on compartmentalising the population into the four *varna* categories, even if it was a loose fit.

Thus the British succeeded in binding the empirical reality of *jatis* (communities) with the Vedic theoretical construct of *varna* (categorisation of occupations), as 'caste' (inherited social status), causing the popular contemporary perception of Indian society having been consistently divided into the four hereditary caste groups from time immemorial.

This move augmented the further fragmentation of Indian society on the grounds of religion, caste and community, thereby facilitating British colonial rule and the establishment of the 'Raj'.

Following the Mughal rule, the hitherto fledgling Indian society, having reconciled itself with differences of faith and foreign cultures, once again bore the yoke of servitude in the guise of British colonialism. Not only had India's resources been pillaged for decades by the rapacious East India Company, the now inexorable British Raj set about enshrining caste in the Indian

administration established on the British colonial class system.

As there was no classification of caste in the Indian legislation prior to this juncture, it was the British who single-handedly formulated the caste schedules that remain in place today.

The 'scheduled caste' was an entirely British creation into which the lowest strata of Indian society (including Dalits) were pigeonholed. It is ironic, is it not, that many of the present-day critics of the 'Hindu' caste system are the descendants of the same Colonial British who instituted the system in the first place?

The evils manifest in the current form of the caste system cannot be ascribed to the Hindu faith. The current adulteration of the Hindu varnashram system is a direct result of generations of British Colonial bureaucracy.

It is a further irony that those who criticise caste on the grounds it is abusive and discriminatory nevertheless happily vilify Brahmins who presently account for just 4.32% of the total population of India, for allegedly holding key positions within the Indian government and society.

This could not be further from the truth. Recent research has revealed that almost half the population of India are below the poverty line. Of these, Brahmins actually have a 10% higher level of poverty, compared with other communities in this category. Many Brahmins are engaged in menial occupations, having been forced to forfeit skilled positions under the highly discriminatory State sponsored reservation system, which allocates up to half the governmental and university placements to the 'scheduled class', to which Dalits belong. Some Brahmin communities - such as the 400,000 Kashmiri Pandits recently driven from their homeland by Muslim extremists - are refugees within their own country.

Since British colonial times, Brahmins, having a long heritage of literacy and erudition, have been quick to assimilate the English language and customs, making themselves obvious candidates for positions within the civil service and government departments. The Indian ruling classes, including many of the stately monarchs, were for the most part granted autonomy and awarded derisory concessions by the British. When the British quit India, monarchs (maharajahs and nawabs) surrendered their regal status and became ordinary members of the public.

Again, it is more than a little absurd that the British successfully abolished the monarchy in India, yet perpetuate their own hereditary realm to the present day.

No Muslim or European ruler ever enforced any privileges to the purported upper castes, only to their own kind. Muslim invaders gave preference to Muslims, European invaders to Europeans. Even after 700 years of the Islamic suppression of India, India was one of the richest countries, accounting for about a quarter of total world trade.

India's current state of poverty was aggravated by the mercantilist economic model followed during much of Britain's rule, which saw little development of domestic industry. The British, exporting Indian grown cotton to England to supply the mills of the North, before selling the fabric back to the Indians, crippled the booming textile industry in India. A new class of feudal landlords known as '*zamindars*' (*Jats in Punjab*) resulted from the innovative British schedules, thereby restricting the purchase and sale of land. For the British, this proved a more efficient way to maximise the collection of taxes and ensured the granaries were stocked for their needs.

The predominantly agrarian pastoral Hindu communities became tenants, shackled to repaying debts to the feudal proprietors for generations to come. Labour was cheap and abundant, leading to the colossal feats of development by the British such as the railway network (which

although a quantifiable achievement was not an act of altruism, but a system to ensure nationwide communication, dispersal and collating of personnel and supplies throughout the subcontinent. It was a means of ensuring British rule extended to the farthest territories of India).

Yet such achievements are miniscule compared to what India has achieved in just six decades post-independence. What the British spent on infrastructure is a fraction of the phenomenal financial gains made by them over three centuries of rule in India.

Given the fact that the Indian economy was on the verge of bankruptcy when the British quit India and that the country was irrevocably severed into two nations, India is set to be reinstated as a quantifiable world leader in commerce and industry. Yet certain western media corporations continually malign this advancement by portraying the excesses of a bastardized caste system, while failing to mention its origin as the 'bright idea' of their colonial predecessors.

Many Indians were engaged as servants to the British and one household would have dozens of such Indian domestics. Despite the abolition of slavery, the British recruited millions of Indians to work as indentured labourers in far off colonies such as the West Indies. The '*Coolies*' (*Indians as referred to by the British*) who arrived to work in the sugar estates in the West Indies were marched to their barracks known as '*Nigger Yard*.' It was the same in Mauritius only the language was different: '*camps des Noirs*' for the backbreaking work in the cane fields.

In 1843, the first shipload of 217 Indian labourers arrived in Port of Spain in Trinidad in the Caribbean.

Moreover, in the same decade, others were taken to British Guyana in South America, and Mauritius off the coast of Africa; in the 1860's to the British colony of Natal in South Africa; in the 1870's to the Dutch colony of Surinam; in the 1880's to Fiji.

By 1917-20, the indenture system was abolished but not before 1.5 million Indian bonded labourers had been induced to move to remote parts of the globe in the service of British capitalism.

The British of that period practiced their own 'class system' and, even within their own ranks, there was a rigid 'order of precedence' which pervaded all areas of daily life, including seating arrangements for dinner. Indians were excluded from interacting socially with Europeans and there was an enforced colour bar in place throughout the subcontinent with 'Europeans only' clubs. Indians were not allowed to travel by railway carriages, or use railway waiting rooms as these were reserved for Europeans. Not only that, Indian judges were not allowed to try Europeans in their districts and the Ilbert Bill, introduced in 1883 during Lord Ripon's viceroyalty to remedy the situation, had to be withdrawn in the face of vicious opposition by Europeans and Anglo-Indians.

Claude Alvares has written: "*The English establishment view themselves as a separate ruling caste; like other Indian castes, they did not inter-marry or eat with the lower (native) castes. Their children were shipped off to public schools in England, while they themselves kept to their clubs and bungalows in special suburbs known as cantonments and civil lines.*"

In addition to the explicit discrimination experienced by Hindus, European scholars further promulgated various philosophical arguments that fair-skinned natives of the north were in fact descendants of a superior Aryan race that had entered India from the west and brought with them the Vedas. Hindus to the north of India were considered by these European scholars to be the hybrid descendants of this superior Aryan race and the indigenous Hindu populace. Hindus throughout India were debased as being savage and heathen in nature and the idea followed that Vedic culture must have originated from a 'superior' Caucasian race. This 'Aryan Invasion Theory,' one school claims, was developed by Maximillian Muller in 1848, a

highly paid German employee of the East India Company in order to deny any political or moral basis to the Hindu claim for independence from British rule. For, under this theory, Hindus too were as much foreigners in India as were the British. This theory was not openly challenged for over 120 years and even many Indians were duped into believing they were descendants of a superior foreign civilisation.

Such an imperialist hypothesis was designed to ensure the British were allowed 'legitimate' political rights over India as did Hindus, all being foreigners. There is an implicit notion among some British historians to this day that their coveting of India and her assets was more through 'mutual' consent of the host than coercion, often comparing this subtle method to the brutish colonisation of the Americas. Though a romantic concept, few natives would concur with this, especially those who witnessed British led massacres of innocent civilians such as at Jalianwala Bagh.

Western scholars further theorised that the dark skinned southerners (Dravidians) were the indigenous Indian populace and primitive in nature, thus proliferating disunity between Indians in the North and South.

Gross misinterpretation of Sanskrit religious texts by some European scholars led to the assertion that the four categories of the '*varnashram*' are based on skin colour. This contradicts Hindu scriptures, which depict Hindu icons Lord Rama and Lord Krishna as having dark complexions (*shyama varna*). The celebrated Brahmin sage and vedic scholar Vyas was himself of dark hue. The Brahmin sage Kanva, who contributed richly to the Rig-Veda is too described as a dark skinned person *vide RV (X.31.11)*.

There is no mention of forced southward migration either in the Rig-Veda or in Dravidian literatures. Nevertheless, some scholars assert that fair-skinned Aryans invaded India during 1500 BC, defeating dark skinned Dravidians and pushing them into South India. But the date of 1500 BC

as the beginning of the Vedic era is grossly underestimated; recent archaeological and historical evidence suggests Hindu civilization predates this era and the date was a ploy by Christian historians to add credence to their own biblical accounts that the world began 6000 years ago. Analysed etymologically, the word *Dravida* occurs in the Rig-Veda (III.61.6) but means treasure or prosperity. In Atharva-Veda (XVIII.3.1), the word *dravina* alludes to property or wealth. Progressive societies rarely expel their wealthy citizens and it seems illogical that Aryans should have expelled Dravidians. Later, even Max Muller conceded that:

'Aryan in scientific language is utterly inapplicable to race. It means language and nothing but language. Aryans are those who speak Aryan language (Sanskrit) with Aryan grammar, whatever their colour, whatever their blood.'

In Rig-Veda, Arya means 'noble' or 'educated ones.'

Even though the Indians of that time suffered indignation from their British overlords, they displayed unprecedented loyalty to them through both world wars. In total, 800,000 Indian troops fought in the theatres of war with 1½ million volunteering to fight. They fought in most fields of war including Gallipoli and North and East Africa. In all 47,746 were classed as killed or missing in action with 65,000 wounded. The Indian Corps won 13,000 medals for gallantry including 12 Victoria Crosses. Such was the cost of the war, that India's economy was pushed to near bankruptcy by the end of the Second World War. The London Times reported how Indian support had surprised the British establishment: -

"The Indian empire has overwhelmed the British nation by the completeness and unanimity of its enthusiastic aid."

After these theories and postulations regarding the origin of the Indian race, in light of recent evidence, it is now accepted by a vast number of historians and anthropologists that all non-African races, including Europeans, are actually migrants originating from the Indian subcontinent. There is more evidence of an outward migration from India than inward.

3. Is Caste a Hindu Concept?

3.1 Caste outside the Hindu community

Despite the claims of critics, caste is not unique to India or the Hindu faith. Caste is prevalent throughout the world even in geographical areas far from the Indian subcontinent. Throughout Africa, Japan, Korea, Latin America, Yemen and Pakistan a vigorous hereditary and hierarchical system of social stratification exists. Castes are present within various religious communities preaching egalitarian doctrines, most notably the Muslims of Pakistan, Indian Christians and Sikhs.

Islam

Pakistan has a caste system not dissimilar to that seen in India, although with much inconsistency since the concept of caste is not actually recognised in Islam. It is however still practiced by some of its adherents. In the absence of traditional castes, the proxies used are typically ethnic background (Sindhi, Punjabi, Pushtun,

Balochi and Mohajir etc.), tribal affiliations and religious denominations or sects (Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, Ismaili, Christian, Hindu etc.). What is noticeable is the presence of *Qoums* being a distinct geographical community group and *Biradaris*, which are endogamous sub-communities comparable with the *jatis* in Hinduism, often interchanged with the term '*zat*' in Urdu.

Yoginder Sikand, an expert on Wahabbism, has made a detailed study of the severe conditions in which more than 2.5 million Dalits in Pakistan live, ignored by Christian funded anti-caste organisations. Sikand relates, of the 3 million officially classified 'Hindu' population of Pakistan, 80 per cent are Dalits. There are 42 different Dalit castes in the country, the most numerous being Bhils, Meghwals, Odhs, and Kohlis. Most Pakistani Dalits live in Sindh, with smaller numbers in southern Punjab and Balochistan. They are "pathetically poor and largely illiterate and eke out a miserable existence mainly as agricultural labourers, menials, and petty artisans". As Sikand states, in Sindh, a small class of landlords own most of the land, and some estates run into tens of thousands of acres. The conditions of the Sindhi peasantry or

haris, who include both Muslims as well as Dalits, are dismal. Many *haris* do not even own the mud huts in which they live. Absentee landlords who live in Hyderabad and Karachi, Sindh's largest cities, own much of the land.

Sikhism

Although caste is prohibited in the Sikh faith, there exists a number of caste communities, members of whom tend to marry within their own and frequent Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) belonging to their particular caste. Such communities include Ramgarhia, Singh Sabha (Jat), Ravidasi, Bhatra, Bhappa (Khatri/Arora Sikh refugees from Pakistan) and more recently, Afghani Sikhs. It is accepted that no worshipper is prohibited from entering a particular Gurdwara because of their caste, however it is significant that the management committees of such institutions are often exclusively of one particular caste. There is an inherent superiority among the farmer caste *jats* historically precipitated by the British legislation of restricting sale and purchase of land to this community. Punjabi films and folk songs frequently portray this image.

Christianity

Caste was used to justify Christian proselytising and domination over the Indian population by Europeans, an excuse that persists today.

Also, the ills of contemporary Indian society (poverty, caste, etc.), which were exacerbated in part due to centuries long foreign occupation, exploitation and domination as discussed earlier, are blamed primarily on Hindu thought. Thus, some Western scholars, ignoring the historic subversion of Indian society and Hinduism by the West, align themselves with the 'oppressed' against the 'evils' of Hinduism. The victim is made to feel culpable, hence the embarrassment found amongst 'progressive' Hindus whenever challenged with the subject of the caste system.

Christianity reached the shores of southern India in the fifteenth century through the Portuguese, whose blighted legacy has already been mentioned. Pope Gregory XV (1621-23) decreed that the missionaries could tolerate caste distinction among Christian converts; but largely, caste remained an effective hurdle to the destruction of Hinduism through conversion.

It was because of the persistence of Hinduism that missionaries started attacking the institution of caste and, in particular, the Brahmin priestly caste. This propaganda has bloomed into a full-fledged anti-Brahmanism, the Indian equivalent of anti-Semitism.

Missionaries have often used unscrupulous tactics when converting unwitting villagers, including financial inducements and substituting Yashoda and the infant Krishna with Mary and the baby Jesus. It will become apparent that Christian missionaries have undoubtedly been more interested in increasing the *number* of Christians per capita rather than giving due attention to the plight of Dalits after their conversion.

With the advent of the Christian missionaries in India under the patronage of British rule in the eighteenth century, a new chapter of conversion began. The missionaries were able to use this flaw in Hinduism to convert those who were worst hit by caste prejudice. These missionaries concentrated their 'charity' work mainly in tribal areas, advising the tribal people that they were not Hindus and that their indigenous culture and religion was different from Hinduism, even though one of the most celebrated Hindu dynasties, the Mauryas emanated from these very same tribes. Missionaries taught them that Christianity, (an alien religion) was their own; that Jesus Christ who was born and lived in the Middle East was also a 'Dalit' like them and that Christianity was a religion without the caste bias and offered them socio-economic equality. In their

naïve desire to experience this 'egalitarian' faith, thousands of tribal peoples were converted to Christianity, fooled into thinking they had found release from the now bastardised caste system in Hinduism. This accounts for once Hindu tribal regions such as Tripura in the northeast of India now consisting almost entirely of Christian converts.

Though these Christian converts were promised socio-economic elevation by becoming Christians, some of the poorest States in India are home to the largest number of such Christian converts. The message of Christ is rarely preached in more affluent regions, reinforcing the contention of many that the Church's strategy to conversion in India is 'predatory,' targeting only the most vulnerable strata of society.

3.2 Converts Betrayed

Little did these converts realise conversion to Christianity would not redeem them from social discrimination and untouchability. Although Jesus never advocated the caste system, Christianity in India was not free from the caste bias. Christian evangelical organisations, which criticised Hinduism for its caste system, themselves practised discrimination based on the very same caste system in their own Churches. In spite of the fact that around three quarters of the Christian converts were Dalits looking to shake off their caste or 'outcaste' label, Dalit Christians within the Church were discriminated against and are still denied powers to the present day within the ecclesiastical structure of Christian organisations in India.

The scale of discrimination against Dalit Christians is unprecedented not only in life but even after death. In churches and places of worship, generally cruciate in design, the Christians of 'upper' castes humiliate their fellow Dalit Christians by occupying the central part of the church. Dalits are assigned to the wings. They are allowed to take communion only after the higher caste people have done so. In some

Protestant churches, there are separate cups for the Dalits at the Eucharistic celebration. Some Catholic churches in Madras dioceses like Trichy and Pondicherry even have separate communion rails and separate cemeteries, and Christians are endogamous, families only accepting matrimonial proposals of their own caste.

Dalit converts to Christianity not only fail to gain emancipation, they also forfeit the rights and privileges given to them by the government under the Reservation Laws for scheduled castes. In the eyes of the law, Christians do not belong to this classification nor, apparently, so they observe caste prejudice. So not only have these hapless converts relinquished the faith of their forefathers, they still face discrimination from fellow Christians and have lost their rights under the educational and occupational reservation system.

As a result, even after hundreds of years of their existence in the Church, Dalits remain on the periphery of the community. The Church has not offered opportunities to Dalits to improve educationally or socially. Few Dalits become priests and leaders in the Church.

In the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar, where the majority of Christians are Dalits, this problem is more acute. According to reports, 70 per cent of the Tamil Catholics are Dalits and out of 14 Bishops in Tamil Nadu, only one is a Dalit. The percentage of Tamil priests is only four per cent. Vocation from Dalit Christians has not been encouraged. A recent article from the *Deccan Chronicle* dated 31 October 2007 highlights growing discontent among Christian converts and a deep fissure dividing the church regarding caste:

"Mylapore Bishop Chinnappa and Salesian of Don Bosco Provincial Stanislaus Swamikannu are among the priests who

will participate in the two day conference to be held in Madurai on November 5 and 6 to discuss the issue."

Dioceses, parish councils and educational institutions are riddled with casteism and Christian Dalits are discriminated against," says Father X.T. Selvaraj, one of the organisers of the conference.

Asked whether the church supported their effort, Fr Selvaraj said, "The progressive forces in all dioceses are concerned about the trend that goes against the very essence of Christianity." Fr J.R. Vencie said Dalits were segregated in all the church activities and there were separate burial grounds for them.

"Christians continue to maintain their caste identities and there are no inter-caste marriages. Even in ordinary conversations Dalits are denigrated," he said reading out from the pamphlet prepared for the conference. According to church sources, caste confrontations are not confined between the Dalits and other intermediate communities. Every district diocese has its own peculiar problem, they say.

In Kanyakumari district, it is the Nadars versus the fishermen community, while in Trichy the Vellalas and Udayars function as a group against the Vanniyars. In fact, Vanniyars (martial class) have formed a separate diocese in this district. Sivangai district diocese is witnessing a war between Udayars and non-Udayars.

In Thanjavur Vellalas and Udayars are against each other, according to them. Asked whether it would be possible to change entrenched attitudes of the people, especially when every community continued to maintain its identity, Fr Selvaraj said, "We are making a humble beginning."

He said Dalits who had converted to Christianity to gain social acceptance now felt they had been betrayed.

"We have to remove this feeling. Christianity does not discriminate against anyone in the name of caste," he said. To a question on why the Christians should demand reservation if they had no faith in casteism, Fr Selvaraj explained there was nothing wrong in making use of benefits of reservation for social elevation."

This discontent has manifested itself in events such as *Shabari Kumbh* whereby growing numbers of Dalit Christians have reverted to Hinduism and renounced Christianity. The move by many senior Hindu spiritual leaders such as Kanchi Acharya, Jayendra Saraswathi in outwardly condemning caste discrimination and appointing a number of priests from the Dalit communities is a small but significant step in eradicating the distorted colonial caste system.

Dalits now command important socio-political power within India and have greater economic strength. With the aid of current legislative measures ensuring between 27-50% of educational and governmental placements are reserved for scheduled classes, and laws preventing discrimination against Dalit communities, it is evident that as India's economic might intensifies, the corruption associated with caste could feasibly be eradicated within one generation.

4. Who are the Dalits?

4.1 The Origin of Untouchability

From where did the Dalit, untouchable, or outcaste communities emerge?

It has already been demonstrated that In Vedic times there was a fourfold caste system with no mention of Dalits or notions of untouchability. All citizens were referred to as 'Aryans' or 'Kanvas' and foreigners such as the Greeks were termed '*mlechhas*' or '*yavans*', those who did not follow the Vedas. Even so, historically foreigners were not discriminated against but welcomed into the community. It is well documented that trade existed for many millennia between China, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries and ancient universities such as Nalanda and Taxilla accommodated thousands of students from far a field regions as China, Iraq, Syria and Greece. Even the word Shudra referring to the labouring caste from which Dalits are thought to have originated is not mentioned in the earlier chapters of the Rig-Veda. Only in the concluding verses, which were actually compiled later than earlier chapters, is the term used. Shudras were more commonly referred to as '*das*' or '*dasyu*' in ancient Hindu scriptures.

4.2 Dalits - Fragmented clans

On closer examination of Dalit tribes and communities, it is evident through the *gotras*, clan or family names, that many of them share surnames with so-called upper castes including Brahmins. This fact may be accounted for in the following ways,

1. The death penalty was rarely invoked for heinous crimes and a common alternative punishment in Hindu law was to banish the

guilty party and or his family from the host community. This kind of 'expulsion' is frequently documented in the Hindu scriptures and epics and would result in the individual having to migrate to a new region and relinquish his caste vocation, pursuing a career entirely different to that of his former life. It is quite common in the west for example, that immigrants take up unpopular or low paid jobs even though they may be highly qualified professionals in their parent countries.

2. Although the science of cross-contamination and the spread of disease is a relatively modern concept in western countries, the Vedas documents how disease proliferates through microbes. In order to avoid contracting life threatening diseases, some castes such as Brahmins, in order to maintain physical purity and remain functional, would shun physical contact not only with such persons engaged in 'polluting' work, but society as a whole. It is not surprising therefore given the climate of India and the risk of cross contamination through water borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery and typhoid that removal of any potential source (excrement, human corpses and animal carcasses etc.) was advocated. It is plausible that those associated with such unsociable tasks would be avoided by others and not interacted with socially. This has probably accounted for the current outdated practices of some members of the community not sharing food with such individuals or discouraging them from drawing water from the same well.

Many westerners are highly critical of this behaviour, however are quick to comment on such practices and ignore them in their own countries. There are now record levels of homeless people in the UK, who are analogous with the outcastes of Indian society. British menial workers seldom interact socially with those of the higher echelons and food and hygiene legislation strictly governs how food is handled, prepared and served to the public. Even in restaurants, chefs habitually wear disposable gloves when preparing food and more frequently, vendors handle fruit, vegetables and other produce, which are to be consumed with gloves. The discerning UK public would not tolerate anything less.

Therefore, Dalits have always been an integral part of Hindu society and did not 'sprout from the earth;' neither are Dalits the remnants of a primitive race. The very word "Dalit" is a derogatory epithet for untouchables meaning 'broken' or 'crushed' eagerly used by some politicians, Christian missionaries and media corporations. The term is both offensive and inaccurate, even resented by those ascribed this label. They are simply Hindus who have been driven to the periphery of society and are a product of a myriad of socio-economic factors.

3. During the Mughal rule, many Hindu families were forced to flee their homelands for fear of death or persecution and diversified. Indeed this incidence occurred during the partition of India and more recently; consider the mass exodus of 400,000 Hindus from the Kashmir Valley due to Islamic military insurgency.

4. Royal households were deposed by Muslim marauders and, to avoid humiliation at the hands of the Islamic oppressor, many fled their kingdoms and were reduced to poverty. In order to survive many engaged in menial service and this would account for many members of the sweeper caste in Rajasthan for example, bearing surnames of the Kshatriya (warrior) clans.

5. Is Caste Hidden Apartheid?

This is an allegation frequently levelled at the caste system, yet this is a crucial distinction; apartheid is legalised racial segregation.

Apartheid legislation classified South Africa's inhabitants and visitors into racial groups (Black, White, Coloured and Indian) and then separated people using this arbitrary and unscientific classification, allocating grossly unequal civil rights. Black people were stripped of their citizenship and allocated 'reserves' or homelands akin to the reservations for native Indians in the Americas and Aboriginals in the Antipodes. North America practiced this type of apartheid system in the southern states particularly and some would argue (subsequent to the floods of New Orleans in the autumn of 2006) that there is still considerable disparity between African Americans and those of white European origin.

It has become vogue for Hinduism's critics to describe the caste system as every bit as bad as apartheid South Africa and the 1950s American South. This comparison is as ridiculous as it is untrue, especially given the fact these barbaric systems were born under the shadow of slavery or indentured labour, based on the colour of one's skin, and actually conceived and perpetrated by Europeans, not Hindus.

The Hindu faith has never condoned or supported slavery, unlike the Abrahamic faiths, and this is why, historically, India is distinctive in its ability to assimilate and tolerate migrants of diverse faiths and backgrounds, seeking sanctuary in

its territory, simultaneously allowing them to live and practice their beliefs as free and equal citizens.

Caste is a result of this spirit of freedom and pluralism allowing diverse communities to coexist rather than sacrifice their cultural identities and join the melting pot; quite a contrast to European colonisation techniques resulting in the cultural and often physical extermination of diverse identities by one intolerant and powerful group.

It should be remembered that the policy of Christian invaders to the Americas, Australasia and South Africa has been to suppress and sometimes annihilate the host and their cultural practices, subsequently imposing their own regimen and colonising the host's country with its own race. The pluralistic nature of the Hindu faith as opposed to religions such as Islam and Christianity permits diversity and cohesion within society. The author Nathan Katz states in his book '*Sugar in the Milk*,

"A crucial distinction however between India and the rest of the Diaspora, is that in India acculturation is not paid for in the currency of assimilation. By acculturation, I mean fitting comfortably into a society while retaining one's own identity, whereas by assimilation I mean that the loss of that identity is a perceived condition for acceptance. The study of Indian Jewish communities demonstrates that in Indian culture an immigrant group gains status precisely by maintaining its own identity. Such is the experience not only of India's Jews, but also of local Christians, Zoroastrians, and recently, Tibetan Buddhists. Each of these immigrant groups reflects this striking feature of Indian civilization."

6. Caste in the UK

It is now commonly argued that along with the Indian Diaspora, the concept of caste has permeated communities settled within the UK. Specifically that it is perpetuated in various caste-based temples, community groups and within marriage. There are anecdotal accounts of prejudice experienced by Dalits resident in the UK from various Christian backed Dalit groups.

A recent study by the Dalit Solidarity Network, conducted in July 2006 and titled *No Escape* concludes Caste is an issue among the UK Indian community and that EU wide reform is necessary whereby caste is included as a form of discrimination.

However, although the *No Escape* report claims 70% of Dalits interviewed expressed feeling discriminated against due to their caste, this cannot be taken as a serious indication that fresh legislation is required.

Out of a highly conservative estimate of 50,000 resident UK Dalits, only 130 Dalits were questioned for the Dalit Solidarity Network report. While it is accepted that there may be grievances within the Dalit community, further investigations are required to establish the cause of dissatisfaction.

Moreover, close examination of the Dalit Solidarity Network report suggests it is politically motivated. For instance, one particular case history cited, allegedly proving caste discrimination, describes how an Indian immigrant was helped by an upper class family living in the UK to establish himself in this country. He lies to them about his background and uses an upper caste surname. After achieving independent status and receiving much support from the host family, he reveals to

them that he is in fact a Dalit. He then alleges that the family distanced themselves from him, a move he supposes was due to them discovering his true family background. A more plausible explanation perhaps is that few of us, regardless of our class or creed, would not feel betrayed and used in such circumstances? That aside, of course, for the fact that we have to trust the testimony of one who has lived a blatant fallacy and shown shame in abusing a family's hospitality by lying.

His story also contradicts numerous examples of immigrants from India, belonging to diverse caste backgrounds, sharing lodgings, food and supporting one another

So, while the findings of *No Escape* appear to give weight to and benefit only various Christian evangelical groups who would convert the worldwide Dalit community en masse, the EU should not for a moment accept it is proof of 'widespread' caste discrimination.

Rather than promoting community cohesion, this move by the Dalit Solidarity Network is divisive, without merit and not supported by the majority of Dalit communities within the UK, many of whom feel there is more than adequate provision within existing legislature to prevent this kind of discrimination.

There is also concern that further legislation could be counterproductive and actually encourage discrimination against higher caste members. Moreover, as the case history from the *No Escape* report illustrates, trying to establish whether a person was discriminated against because of their caste or some other factor would be a legal minefield. Given the diverse nature of socio-cultural groups within the UK, such legislative reforms could open the floodgates to a plethora of lawsuits.

If anecdotal evidence is to be believed then statements from *all* sections of the Hindu community should be collated and, no doubt, there will be incidences of discrimination experienced by other communities because of their caste.

For example, there are a growing number of attacks and abuses against Brahmin Priests both in India and in the West. The perpetrators are often from within the wider Indian community and fuelled by Christian evangelical elements.

There is a worrying trend in India and beyond to vilify the Brahmin caste blaming it for the social and economic problems seen today. This anti-Brahmanism is fully exploited by certain politically motivated groups.

The recent shameful heckling by fundamentalist Christian senators of American Hindu Priest Rajan Zed, invited by the US Government to offer prayers in the United States Senate House, is a stark reminder of the deep hatred some Christian politicians have of Hinduism. They described the solemn Hindu prayers for peace as "an abomination before God." These very same politicians use caste as a pretext for their unrelenting support of evangelical missions in India.

By far the only 'caste system' apparent within the UK based Indian Diaspora is an effort to preserve communal, regional and vernacular based groups.

Such community living gives Hindu youth a sense of belonging and self-respect, key factors in facilitating their progress both

academically and socially and avoiding the isolation from the UK society as is arguably seen in some Afro-Caribbean and Muslim adolescents.

As previously discussed, Hindus have integrated well into the UK community yet, in line with their ethos, have resisted the pitfalls of 'homogenisation' and loss of cultural identity. Hindus have incorporated the qualities of both their parent culture and that of the western host community. This has led to community-based groups emerging in order to preserve their unique culture, language or traditions. Since time immemorial in the UK, there have always been a number of social institutions, clubs and lodges promoting common beliefs and values based on religious or ethical lines.

Hindus too wish to preserve their core beliefs and identities. How can this not be allowed to extend to who they wish to socialise with or whom they choose as a life partner? This is surely a fundamental freedom for each and every one of us, one in which there is no harm *per se* and which enables Hindus to maintain their distinct identities while simultaneously enriching the diverse cultural milieu.

7. Dalits and HCUK

Hindu organisations - including the Hindu Council UK - continuously try to dispel myths about the caste system through education in schools and colleges. Dalits are already affiliated to many Hindu organisations, including Hindu Council UK. So it is all the more regrettable that a British organisation purporting an end to caste discrimination has itself perpetuated prejudice against the Hindu Council.

CasteWatchUK has incessantly snubbed HCUK by not allowing them to participate in various high profile conferences related to caste. Although HCUK would welcome an opportunity to speak at such events and present the true Hindu perspective on caste, this has not happened. The only participation offered has been for a Hindu Council representative to attend as an 'observer' and witness a highly orchestrated and biased diatribe against the Hindu caste concept. Despite such responses, the Hindu Council will continue to strive to eradicate erroneous depictions of caste within Hinduism and its key objective of promoting harmony and unity among all Hindus and between communities.

HCUK anticipates that within one generation, issues related to caste discrimination can be resolved. Current trends in marriage are encouraging this and suggest Hindus are readily linking up with partners of different castes or regional backgrounds. There are too a growing number of interfaith relationships emerging. The supposedly intolerant 'upper castes' in the Hindu community are far more relaxed in such matters than suggested by groups such as CasteWatchUK or popularly depicted in the media.

8. Conclusion

The Caste system has been used as a stick to beat Hindus for the last ten centuries. Muslims, the British, Christian missionaries, secular historians, communists, Pre and Post-Independence Indian politicians, journalists and various indigenous socio-economic groups, all of them have sought to exploit the caste system for their own selfish ends.

Sadly, this has only added to the sense of inferiority that many Indians feel about their own culture; the caste system is often portrayed as the ultimate horror, while social inequities continue to persist in theoretically egalitarian western societies.

The question arises: who has the right to judge the caste system offensive by western standards, when racial groups have been isolated, or crowded into reserves (in the case of the American Indians or Australian Aborigines) where they can only atrophy and disappear?

Historically, Varnashram has enabled Hindu civilisation to survive repeated invasions. It has made Indian society stronger. It has served a purpose, performed certain functions, and met appropriate needs at appropriate times in history.

Certainly India's caste customs may once have had a rationale. Today, it has outlived its usefulness. Although not yet stagnant, caste is experiencing a transformation, fuelled by the impact of modernisation.

The Caste system should and will undergo reforms in the social arena. Through education and enforcement of existing legislation, unjustified discrimination and abuse will be eliminated and the original concept of caste re-established. Every human deserves dignity and respect and the Hindus of the UK can set a precedent in this, leading the way for others to achieve this end.

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