

## Hinduism, Hegemonism and the Dalit Question

by

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### Abstract

Caste is deeply ingrained in the Hindu psyche and thus, forms the ‘conscious-collective’ of Hindu society. The perversities of socio-cultural vendetta lie couched in their rituals and the sickness syndrome of Brahmanical overlordship which is plaguing Indian society for the last couple of centuries. Particularly, it needs added attention at a time when an impulse of Democracy, Equality and Human Rights is flowing the world over. But the Dreamland called Hindustan, etymologically meaning ‘the land of the Hindus’ which cradles Hinduism as its prime possession brings with it a lurking fear. Contemporary India illustrates many paradoxes and complex problems of a society in the transition lying between “modernity” and “tradition”. Her modernizing elite, as Gupta (2000), one of the foremost sociologists of today, so candidly observes, “has prepared ambitious projects for national development and is seeking to bring about, at an accelerated pace, the transformation of her backward economy and pre-industrial technology”. But the experience shows that in addition to ‘planned change’, we need a ‘social ordering’- getting out of primordial loyalties like ‘caste rules’ which keeps a major chunk of her population away from the very process of development and nation-building. While locating cultural problems of economic development, India needs to give due attention towards structural context and institutional framework within which Hinduism (read caste system) stands as an obstacle. It is at this backdrop that we need to see the ravages of Hinduism, which came to India in terms of the caste system. The romantic idea of an India lost in dreams but divided into permanent categories not only presents a disjunct reality but also goes contradistinction to the world of order in terms of reason and rationality. Caste, the distinctive social institution of Hinduism, assumes its manifestations still in its medieval history. The Supreme Court of the country has also very recently acknowledged that even after 75 years of India’s Independence, caste has not been annihilated and that bigotry perpetuated by caste practices are still prevalent even today, which impedes the Constitution’s objective of Equality of all before the law of the land. And it is here that we try to map out some of the basic and foundational questions being raised now so vociferously by the educated and enlightened Dalits of contemporary India while striving to work out a brighter future not only for their community but also for a more inclusive, democratic and egalitarian India.

**Keywords:** Hinduism, Brahminism, Caste System, Varna Vyavastha, Human Rights, Humanism, Hegemonism, Dalits, Brahmin, Dalit Community, Dalit Identity, Dalit Movement(s), etc.

## Caste System: A Chronic Ailment of Hinduism:

Understanding Hinduism is a stupendous task as it is a congerie of many creeds and doctrines.<sup>1</sup> Hinduism in its essence has scriptures such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagawad Gita*, *Manusmriti* and *Puranas*, and epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Some individuals and groups argue that Hinduism is what the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* advocate, while others think that only the teachings of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagawad Gita* should be considered as true Hinduism. While some say that the way of living of the priests like Shankaracharyas is to be considered as Hinduism, others believe that the way of living of an ordinary Hindu is to be seen as Hinduism. Understanding of Hinduism varies even from individual to individual. However, the basic tenets of Hinduism stem from the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

According to the *Vedas*,<sup>2</sup> there are five tenets (Chattopadhyaya, 1964) that underlie Hinduism. The first tenet is the concept of 'Brahman', considered to be the unchanging, underlying reality that pervades the entire cosmos. The second tenet emphasizes the point that as the changing universe outside is pervaded by the *Brahman*, the changing world within man himself is based upon the undying 'Atman'. The human entity is born again and again across the aeons, gathering a multitude of experiences and gradually moving towards perfection (*nirvana*). The third tenet is the realization of the *Vedic* seers through their spiritual insight that the *Atman* and *Brahman* are essentially one. Then comes the tenet of 'Varna Vyavastha', according to which the whole society is divided into four orders namely, *Brahmin* (the priest), *Kshatriya* (the warrior), *Vaishya* (the trader) and *Shudra* (the slave-labourer) who are believed to have sprung from the mouth, the arms, the thigh and the feet of *Brahma* the Creator. And at last, comes the faith of 'Karma'. *Karma* is a concept, which includes actions, causality and destiny. Action being inevitable, it is said that the human individual is bound by the results of his actions: pleasant fruits flowing from good deeds and unpleasant consequences from evil ones. But in the provision of Hinduism, 'karma' is fixed for each and everybody according to the *Varna*, which he/she belongs to. There is the 'dharma' of doing one's duty but without any scope for any change or mobility in one's lifetime. Particularly, if a *Shudra* attempts to go up in the occupational hierarchy, he was liable to capital punishment including being slain like a lizard, an owl or a dog (Doniger and Smith, 1991; Abbe, 1906).<sup>3</sup>

And here comes another invention of Hinduism which mysteriously goes with the caste system influencing all levels of individual and social behaviour in Indian society.<sup>4</sup> Caste is deeply ingrained in the Hindu psyche and thus forms the 'conscious-collective' of Hindu society. The

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<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of 'Hinduism' does not consist of a systematically arranged part, but a variety of opposed but interdependent pieces. Characteristically, as Inden (1990, p. 88) feels, it is uncentered (not one god but thirty-three crores gods and goddesses), unstable (new sects and castes constantly sprouting up) and lacking uniformity (it indiscriminately mixes magic and pantheism, philosophic and emotion, modern, medieval and ancient traditions).

<sup>2</sup> 'Veda' literally means knowledge, the knowledge par excellence, and the sacred knowledge. In Hinduism there are four Vedas namely, the *Rig*, the *Sama*, the *Atharva* and the *Yajur*, which are considered to be the oldest and most sacred scriptures. These Vedas seem to have been the orally composed songs and eulogies of a pre-literate pastoral people, the Aryans, which were to be transmitted to the later generation by a method of sheer retentive memory. All other scriptures that followed the *Vedas* aimed at upholding the teachings of the *Vedas* and maintain the racial supremacy of the *Brahmins* vis-à-vis *Dalits* as well as others.

<sup>3</sup> All the prescriptions and proscriptions on the basis of *Varna* order for various groups of Hindu society are provided by Manu –the ancient law-giver of Hindus.

<sup>4</sup> For an illustration of *varna*-oriented and *jati*-oriented Hindu social structure, see Saraf (1986). As it comes out, the first phase of social segmentation and the emergence of the *Varna* system are founded even in the Rigvedic times. But the social differentiation, as inaugurated in the early Vedic period undergoes significant changes toward the close of the Vedic and especially during the Brahmanic period. And it is during this span of time that the erstwhile "open" social classes come to occupy the scene of the Aryan polity getting consolidated in the "rigid" caste system.

perversities of socio-cultural vendetta lie couched in their rituals and the sickness syndrome of Brahmanical overlordship which is plaguing Indian society for the last couple of centuries. Particularly, it needs added attention at a time when an impulse of Democracy, Equality and Human Rights is flowing the world over. But the Dreamland called *Hindustan*, etymologically meaning ‘the land of the Hindus’ which cradles *Hinduism* as its prime possession brings with it a lurking fear. Contemporary India illustrates many paradoxes and complex problems of a society in the transition lying between modernity and tradition (Gupta, 2000).<sup>5</sup> Her modernizing elite, as Gupta (2000) so candidly observes, “has prepared ambitious projects for national development and is seeking to bring about, at an accelerated pace, the transformation of her backward economy and pre-industrial technology”. But the experience shows that in addition to ‘planned change’, we need a ‘social ordering’ - getting out of primordial loyalties like ‘caste rules’ which keeps a major chunk of her population away from the very process of development and nation-building. While locating cultural problems of economic development, India needs to give due attention towards structural context and institutional framework within which Hinduism (read caste system) stands as an obstacle.

It is at this backdrop that we need to see the ravages of Hinduism, which came to India in terms of the caste system. The romantic idea of an India lost in dreams (Hegel, 1895)<sup>6</sup> but divided into permanent categories not only presents a disjunct reality but also goes contradistinction to the world of order in terms of reason and rationality. Caste, the distinctive social institution of Hinduism, assumes its manifestations still in its medieval history. It still exists as a part of wider orientalist discourse that not only distinguishes India from the West but also within Asia itself (Inden, 1990).<sup>7</sup>

Now a question arises as to what is the nature of such a civilization that could explain the seeming paradox? The answer lies in the minds of Smith (1958) and the utilitarian Mill (1978) that point out towards the peculiar institution of ‘caste’ and distinctive religion called ‘Hinduism’ in

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<sup>5</sup> It is befitting to see how Gupta’s *Mistaken Modernity* (2000) looks at Indian society in comparison to other parts of the worlds and laments that though the past is in our present, it is not as if the past in its entirety is our present. Thus, while we are not “traditional”, we are also not “modern”. Defining “modern” society in terms of dignity of the individual, adherence to universalistic norms, elevation of individual achievement over privileges/disprivileges of birth and accountability in public life, Gupta issues a damning indictment of the “westoxicated” elitist Indian middle class, and shows how “unmodern” the people of this class are, although they might be considered “modernized” in other respects.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Schlegel (1890) held that *Vedanta*, the teaching of Vedas, is one of the six systems of Indian philosophy that exerts the greatest influence and equated with what he refers to as a complete system of pantheism. Nonetheless, he repeatedly referred to a general inclination of the Indian philosophers to regard the whole external world of sense as vain illusion, and to represent individual personality as absorbed in the Godhead by the most intimate union. Hegel (1895) too, considered this illusionary pantheism the complement of India’s natural religion. In the same vein, Muller (1869 & 1880), the German Sanskritist and Indologist to bridge the East and the West (though never visited India) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century spoke for *Vedanta* representing ‘illusionist pantheism’. He observed that all the systems of Indian philosophy share so much in common, but with slight modifications. And he was convinced that behind the variety of the six systems, there is a common fund of what can be called national or popular philosophy, a large *Manasa* lake of philosophical thought and language. This metaphor of a sacred lake as a shared source of ideas, sums up rather well the essentialist tendencies of nearly all of these Indologists.

<sup>7</sup> Asia separates itself into two parts – Hither (hinter) and Farther Asia, which are essentially different from each other. While the Chinese and the Hindus are strictly ‘Asiatic’ and come under the ‘Far East’, Hither Asia belongs to the Caucasian i.e., the European stock. One who comes from Persia to India observes therefore, a prodigious contrast. Whereas in the former country, he finds himself still somewhat at home, and feels human virtues and human passions, as soon as he crosses the Indus, he encounters the most repellent characteristic, pervading every single picture of society.

India. Add to it, the observation of Senart (1930, p. 13), an established Indologist who finds in his famous essay on caste, *Caste in India: The Facts and the System* that:

It is possible . . . to regard it as the very soul of this somewhat indeterminate fluid collection of customs and beliefs which is called 'Hinduism'. The hope here is that by 'finding a permanent, stable, unitary nature, knowledge and control would be forthcoming. The fact that the word for this Indian essence is as almost every introduction to the subject points out, derived from the Portuguese 'casta' seems not to disturb its solidity as the foundation of an entire civilization.

The caste system in Hinduism has been characterized by a rigid tradition of 'ascriptive hierarchy',<sup>8</sup> by the principle of polarity in terms of "pollution" and "purity". It goes by the determination of social rank by ritual criterion restricting social intercourse in matters of food, marriage and physical contact. The institution of caste is an extreme form of stratification where social inequality is structured and given legitimacy by the values of the Hindu cultural system and normative pattern, which governs both inter-personal relation and inter-group behaviour. Reverend Smith (Fish, 1985), another British Indologist and Missionary, who is well-known for his powerful analysis of castes and tribes during colonial India, understood it well when he was searching for a methodology probing into Hindu society. He observed:

If it were possible to invent a method by which a few men sent from a distant land could hold such masses of people as the Hindoos in subjection, that method would be the institution called 'castes'. There is no institution, which can so effectually curb the ambition of genius, reconcile the individual more completely to his stations, and reduce the varieties of human character to such a state or insipid and monotonous farness.

Here we may refer to Murthy's *Depressed and Oppressed: Forever in Agony* (1971), which is worth noting, wherein he brings out Hinduism in its extreme irony. 'For a Hindu', Murthy writes, 'apparently, everything - the shining sun, the gushing river, the inert stone, the poisonous snake or even the live volcano is an object of worship'. It is not uncommon to see how altars are raised, temples are built and ritualistic worships performed with scrupulous care. But how do you serve the gods, if you do not serve your next-door neighbours?' (Murthy, 1971, p. 6). Even the most devout in Hinduism does not recognize the equality of all before God and forget the brotherhood of Man. Perhaps, it has gone into the very marrow of the Hindus to treat human beings according to the status they think, have been "divinely" ordained. It is, therefore, that Brahmins and to that matter, other upper castes, try to live a kind of pernicious isolation that they are separate and superior to all others.

There is a popular aphorism that suggests that man easily succumbs to vanity. He hardly loses any opportunity to presume his superiority over others. This can be explained only if it betrays a basic human weakness. But if it leads him to 'categorize' others as "mean" and "lowborn" —from one's birth—without any scope for change or mobility in one's lifetime, permanently setting the stage for one's painful existence just because one happens to have been born to a particular family and community, regarding which he had hardly any say or which was beyond his control, then he inadvertently tends to become 'procrustean' leaving a trail of misery and suffering behind him for his own life as well as for his future generations. And it is against such a backdrop that we

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<sup>8</sup> *Varna Vyavastha* prescribes/proscribes particular *dharma* for particular caste/class and to each stage in the life of the individual. The occupational calling goes on on the basis of 'hereditary hierarchy'. Birth determines one's present, past and future. Merits or achievement do not enable one to elevate oneself from a so-called "lower" caste to a "higher" caste. There is hardly any scope, particularly for upward social mobility.

come across this irrational, inhumane and illogical practice of caste, which has been the chronic ailment of India – the so-called pride innovation of Aryan-Brahmins with a ‘cult of constriction’ (Murthy, 1971).<sup>9</sup> Often paraded as a unique achievement of Hindus, it has blurred the vision of man, blotched the efflorescence of his personality and bogged down his progress for centuries. For the Indian sub-continent, overtaking such a catastrophe is never a possibility if it does not free *Dalits* from the clutches of Brahmanic hegemony. Time was when the name of India, our dear motherland, thrilled millions in the then known world. With impregnable fortresses, invincible armies, and wise ministers and as a great center of liberty, equality and social justice the country touched the high watermark of her civilization sometimes in the distant past. But the creation of a category called ‘*Dalits*’ has diluted its soil and air, which needs to be cleansed immediately. This calls our attention towards unearthing the history behind Dalitizing *Dalits*, or the way *Dalits* were created as a community.

### The term ‘*Dalit*’:

The term ‘*Dalit*’ refers to those people, who, based on caste distinction, have been oppressed, crushed and exploited under the overlordship of Brahmins and the so-called upper caste people for centuries. It has been derived from the root ‘*dal*’ which means grounded, broken or reduced into pieces (Kumar, 2000).<sup>10</sup> The present usage of the term ‘*Dalit*’ goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Jotirao Phule,<sup>11</sup> a Marathi revolutionary used it to describe the outcasts and untouchables as they were the oppressed and broken victims of caste-ridden Indian society. However, it was only during the 1970s that the followers of the *Dalit* Panthers movement in Maharashtra gave currency to the term as a reminder of their age-old oppression and cumulative deprivation (Patil, 1991; Waghmare, 2001; Namishray, 2003).

This Marathi word ‘*Dalit*’, like the word ‘Black’, is chosen by the group itself and is used proudly.<sup>12</sup> Such a connotation by *Dalits* themselves goes on to replace the imposed and stigmatized nomenclatures like Untouchables, *Harijans* (coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted and popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi), Exterior Castes (used by J.H. Hutton), Depressed

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<sup>9</sup> For the cult of ‘constriction’ or ‘restriction’ where the very essence of Hinduism is lucidly explained.

<sup>10</sup> Molesworth’s Marathi-English Dictionary, 1975 reprint of 1831 edition.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note how there comes out a symmetrical linkage between *Dalits* and Blacks if we ponder over their marginality and subalternity as well as their identity formation with the changing contexts in their consciousness. One needs to recall how in the 1960’s and 1970’s the stigmatized “Negro” was giving way to an affirmative “Black” identity in the post-war America. In fact, “the Black is Beautiful” mood captured the mind of the American Black with greatest intensity, striking thereby, a ringing note of affirmation. The Black American emerged from the depth of his being with honour, dignity and optimism. No more was he ashamed of the colour of his skin. They threw; therefore, their past (of servitude) in the dustbin and their future seemed to be a song of fortitude set in the flowerpot. In the same vein, today’s *Dalits*, whose touch was sinful, whose sight was sinister, and whose shadow was contaminating are reconstructing their identity in terms of *Dalit* collective thus, forging an alternative and emancipatory identity. As Waghmare succinctly puts it, while highlighting on the issue of identity, on how it is reflected in literature and how literature helps in the recovery of pride and identity: “Today the Indian *Dalit*(s)...like American Black(s)...are in search of their roots....”

<sup>12</sup> Jotirao Phule (1827-90), one of the *messiahs* of the *Dalits* and the downtrodden communities, hated slavery in any form. According to him, physical slavery is bad enough, but the slavery of the mind and spirit-perpetrated in the name of religion upon the Shudras and Ati-shudras of India down the ages is a blot on the fair name of Hinduism. Phule pours ridicule and contempt upon the Aryan interlopers for their tyranny. He hoped that his countrymen would be inspired by the noble example of the American Blacks to undo this wrong by emancipating the oppressed community from the trammels of Brahminic thralldom. For this, he suggested first and foremost, the change of name into ‘*Dalits*’, a characteristic and self-given identity (Patil, 1991).



Classes (by British officials), Scheduled Castes (by Government of independent India), *Pariahs* (derived from the Tamil word ‘*para*’ or ‘*parai*’ meaning the drum), *Mlechcha* and *Chandala* (addressed by Manu), *Panchamas* (the fifth class), *Avarna* (i.e., outside the four varnas), *Nishada*, *Antyajaja* (the last), *Atishudras* and Outcastes etc. By substituting the word ‘Black’ for ‘*Dalit*’, the phenomenon is comparable to the American Black Panthers and Black literature, which has surfaced among the oppressed castes in India both in social as well as literary affairs. In a sense, it represents a new level of pride, militancy and consciousness in recovering their history and identity. The clearest definition of ‘*Dalit*’, in its contemporary usage, comes from a letter written to Zelliott (1992) by Gangadhar Pantawane, a Professor of Marathi at Marathwada University, Aurangabad and founder Editor of *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of *Dalit* literature in Maharashtra. It goes like this:

To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in god, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in ‘humanism’. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.

It was really unfortunate that Brahmanic Hinduism forced a section of its population to be branded as ‘*Dalits*’. To be a ‘*Dalit*’ in India means very low and mean. It shows how the treacherous Brahmins went for self-service with which they adjoined the name of divinity. *Dalits*, over centuries, have borne extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of social segregation, economic exploitation and political subjugation. This has forced them to lose faith in society. They are struggling hard and forging a new identity to acclaim equality, humanity and individual dignity. This forms one of the core agendas of the educated-enlightened *Dalits* who have waged a war against Brahmanic hegemony all over the country.

### **The Historical Moorings of *Dalits* as a Community:**

The origin of castes and the making of the *Dalits* lie deep in India’s *Vedic* past and the evidence provided by archaeological and literary sources regarding this is at best only circumstantial. Scholars -- historians, sociologists, archaeologists and Indologists have been forced to engage in considerable speculation in their efforts to de/reconstruct the history of the *Dalits*. And what we now have are not hard and clear facts but a variety of competing theories, all trying in their way to substantiate it. However, a problem arises here because scholars are divided over the issue and there have been, broadly speaking, two schools of thought particularly on looking at the historical roots of the *Dalits*. There is a contentious debate whether we need to ‘unearth’ *Dalit* history or ‘forget’ the past (Massey, 1994).<sup>13</sup> I contend that we need to remember that it is only our history, which can tell us about our past identity. In addition to this, my purpose of unearthing the history of the *Dalits* or to be specific, the “making” of the *Dalits* in Indian society, is a point worth noting. While delineating the *Dalit* protest movement against Brahmanic hegemony, it seems pertinent that we have to locate the ‘present’ based on the ‘past’. My objective in the

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<sup>13</sup> It is a stupendous task to point out these two schools of thought. However, it is well understood that there are individuals, leaders and organizations who do not like to talk about the past. They are saying that we should forget our history, which has got a bitter truth in it. Particularly, people and ideologues who belong to power blocs – either upper caste/class fear that they will go downward if they are reminded of the *Dalit* history. But another group contends that we have to refer to our past before we put our striker for the future. These are the people for whom history is very important. Because of their neglect in the traditional history, they feel that it is high time and essential for them to ‘rewrite’ their history.

following few passages is to see the root cause which made a group of people called ‘*Dalits*’ such a vulnerable lot. There arise questions like who are these *Dalits*? What was their history? What made them be *Dalits*? Who is responsible for such a pathetic and inhumane catastrophe about *Dalits* as a community? And finally, whatever has happened to these *Dalits* over some time, say since the Vedic period to Mughal era to colonial and post-colonial periods and now, the era of globalization.

An attempt to answer these questions is a Herculean job given that nothing written has been left out by the forebearers of the *Dalits* about their origin and history. Whatever literature is available, however, have generally been produced by Vedic Brahmins and their believers. They are not of direct use in reading *Dalit* history but can be taken as points of reference while answering these questions. It is deconstructing/reconstructing *Dalit* history/identity.

While it is presumed that originally the people today known as ‘*Dalits*’ had a beginning similar to the beginning of every human being, we are not concerned here with this beginning. Rather, our concern is with that particular moment in India’s history, when the so-called *Dalits* began their present life i.e., as degraded human beings (Delie’ge, 1958).<sup>14</sup>

Hutton, an eminent anthropologist and author of one of the best-known books on caste, *Caste in India* (1963, p. 207), locates the origin of caste in the taboos and divisions of labour of the Indo-Aryan tribes as well as in their efforts at self-preservation. In his opinion, untouchability is the consequence of ritual impurity. He says:

The origin of the position of the exterior castes is partly racial, partly religious and partly a matter of social custom. There can be little doubt but the idea of untouchability originates in taboo.

The evolutionary theory propounded by Ibbetson (1916) held that the caste system originated due to the interaction of three factors: (i) Tribes, (ii) Occupational guild, and (iii) Religion. Further, the gradual assimilation of inter-tribal occupations gave rise to occupational stratification. Such occupational stratification was favoured by religion. In due course, the different occupations became hereditary for different tribes and restrictions in social intercourse between them grew stronger. It is in this form that this phenomenon ultimately emerged as the “caste system.”

Ambedkar, whose historic engagements on the Indian caste system—both as an analyst and as an activist - stands out more than any Indian sociologist and anthropologist so far, as well expounded his thesis on the origin, evolution as well as the mechanisms of caste as it operates in India, in his path-breaking works such as *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1917), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *The Untouchables: Who were they and Why they became Untouchables* (1948). According to him, the distinction between the Hindus and

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<sup>14</sup> Delie’ge, shows that the worldview of today’s untouchables (read *Dalits*) has undoubtedly been influenced by the democratic changes in Indian society. What is less clear, however, is whether *Dalits* were closer to Hindu orthodoxy and referred to religious concepts to legitimize their inferior position in the past, as Weber has also argued. Untouchable ‘myths of origin’ can, thus, be taken as a good illustration of the way *Dalits* view and viewed themselves and their place in Indian (read Brahmanic/Hindu) society. The myth of origin widely held by *Dalits* throughout the country claims that they were originally respectable people whose present condition is the result of a misunderstanding and treachery, rather than some inherent defect. The myth thus contests the position of the *Dalits* within the caste system, though not the system itself, whose ideological foundations it continues to uphold. This is a typical of the position of the *Dalits* within Indian society, as Delie’ge understands, due to the fact that the so-called low castes have no alternative to caste ideology and have nothing with which to oppose caste society. It is, therefore, that they take caste for granted and by stressing their brotherhood with the Brahmins and demystify the superiority of the latter. Yet, they do not think that their position in the system is immutable and divine.

the untouchables in its original form was the distinction between Tribes Men and Broken Men. It is the Broken Men, who subsequently came to be treated as untouchables. Ambedkar proposes an ingenious hypothesis: when primitive society began to settle down and to cultivate, certain tribes remained nomadic and warlike. They began to attack the settled tribes, as the latter were wealthier. In addition, they had grain, which the nomads needed but did not possess. There was a fight between these two. The settled tribes who had lost their warlike spirit lost the fight while the nomads employed the Broken Men - the defeated ones for their service. These became mercenaries but they were kept at a distance, as they belonged to a different tribe. They were treated with disrespect and exploited inhumanly for their benefit. Thus, got created the Dalits and the untouchables.

Apart from the above-mentioned theories, the dominant view traces the origin of caste and untouchability to the Aryans and to their ways of relating to the people of India with whom they came into contact. The Aryans, a set of well-built and highly conscious tribes began their invasion of India from the Northwest in around 1500 B.C. For centuries, they remained seemingly in constant conflict with the indigenous people, whom they looked down upon as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean. Having corrupted the warlike spirit of the aborigines, Aryans could succeed in the fight. Once conquered by the superior militia of Aryans, some of the natives withdrew into regions yet unoccupied by the Aryans, while others who were submissive, were incorporated as inferior castes within the Aryan-Brahmin framework (Risley, 1915).

Ram (1980)<sup>15</sup> then goes on to add that:

When the Aryans entered India; they had outgrown the stage of tribal endogamy. Among them, there were only three divisions of priest, warrior and artisan. 'Varna' in this trivarnic society indicated a particular social function and a distinct level of culture and way of life. The clash between Aryan invaders and the aboriginal inhabitants of India accentuated not only the cultural but even the occupational and functional divisions. A fourth caste, the 'Shudras' came into being. Thus, the society became 'Chaturvarnic'.

The conquered aborigines or the Broken Men were deprived of all claims for a place in the divinely ordained social order and on the communal land of Brahmins. They were forced to live outside the village and occupations regarded as low and contemptible were assigned to them. They were the ancestors of untouchables (now *Dalits*). They were attached to Hindu society and yet they did not belong to it, having been assigned no place in the socio-cultural practice.

Add to it, what a sad day it was when an over-ambitious Vedic Brahmin went on for a free flight of fantasy to announce to the world that his creator did produce one community (*Brahmin*) from the mouth, another (*Kshatriyas*) from the shoulders, the third (*Vaishyas*) from the thigh and the last (*Shudras*) from the feet.<sup>16</sup> And what an irony that this fanciful account, even as a metaphor, found its way into the *Purusha Sukta* or Creation Hymn in the Tenth *Mandala* of the *Rig Veda*. Narayana, the famous Rishi, who sanctified Badri for all times by his stay there, is supposed to be the author of the *Purusha Sukta*, the first (and the worst) attempt to give India a cosmogenic hypothesis. Not only this, but the *Nasadiya Sukta* of Prajapati Paramesthi<sup>17</sup> marks the worst level of philosophic conception, which no other philosopher of the world has ever transcended.

However, even some eminent Vedic scholars consider *Purusha Sukta*, which further describes the creator as thousand-headed, thousand-eyed and thousand footed, as an interpolation

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<sup>15</sup> Especially refer to Chapter- 1, The Genesis, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Manusmriti*, op. cit., Chapter I, 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Satpatha Brahmana*, Vol. VII, 29.



because it does not fit in with the language or the style of the *Rigveda* (Murthy, 1971, p.7). Yet, the *Sukta* was allowed to remain and became responsible for the seeds of dissension and disintegration, which were truly and deeply sown into the community with all the sanctity a religion could grant. This is borne out by *Taittareya Brahmana*,<sup>18</sup> which describes

Brahmana is a receiver of gifts, a drinker of Soma a seeker of food and liable to removal at will; a Vaishya is tributary to another to be lived on by another and to be expressed at will, and a Shudra is a servant of all others above him to be expelled at will and be slain at will . . .

How atrocious it seems even to read it!!! But this is what the so-called “sacred” scriptures of Hindus provide for a ‘harmonious’ living of various sections in its society. The amount of reverence which the Indo-Aryan society has for this ‘ideal’ mould of *Chaturvana* (four varnas) structure is beyond description. Probably they wanted to be the unquestioned master in all time to come and to ensure it, religious divinity was adjoined through Vedic and Upanishadic scriptures, legitimizing its authority. But when Manu<sup>19</sup> came to the scene, he finally placed the shackles of divinity inflicted on humanity and society. He declared that ‘Vedas is the only and ultimate sanction of Dharma’. Henceforth Vedas and Vedic literature did not look back while filling their pages with treacherous plans and prejudices, putting man-to-man relations in oblivion. Thus, were created and institutionalized the lowest of the lowly creatures on Earth in the name of *Shudras*, *Panchamas*, *Antyajjas*, *Untouchables*, *Chandalas* and *Harijans* etc., and now their modern derivative-- the ‘*Dalits*’. Going with Muller (1869 & 1880):

All these speculations are really the twiddles of idiots and ravings of madmen and as such they are of no use to the student of history who is in search of a natural and practical explanation of human problem.

*Dalits* of today have well realized this. They have started a critical evaluation of these so-called “sacred” texts, which had found a status beyond scrutiny and logical questioning. While deconstructing such a given history/identity, *Dalits* today are forging to rewrite and reconstruct their history/identity. They have started rejecting the Vedic religion of Indo-Aryans, which have looked down upon them and exploited them for centuries.

### **The Status of *Dalits*:**

Having understood how *Dalits* were created, it is as well crucial to see how they have been living over the ages till recently. I begin the analysis from the very ancient Vedic and pre-Vedic days to date to ascertain if changes are undergoing in the lives of these people. This will also be useful to correlate the direction of change and the essence of the *Dalit* movement, which has been taking shape all over the country. That is to say, that *Dalits* taking arms and going for protest movement(s) has to be seen in the backdrop of such a situation which forces them to do so. To get at the changing status of *Dalits*, I will be dealing as well with the status of the Brahmins, though tangentially, so that it will give us the story from a comparative perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> *Taittareya Samhita*, Vol. III, 2, 3, 9, and *Atharva Veda*, Vol. IV, 6.1, Vol. XV, 8.1 and Vol. VII, 9.3.

<sup>19</sup> Manu, the so-called lawgiver of Hindu India is the author of *Manu Smriti*, which is supposed to be the first systematic document, which gives legitimacy to untouchability, and rigidify the caste system in India. Manu draws on jurisprudence, philosophy and theology to create an extraordinary, encyclopedic model of how life should be lived, in public and in private, by Brahmins and the Shudras, by Priests and Kings, by men and women. It is a hegemonic discourse on humanity consisting of 2865 pages detailing corruption and treachery of worst kind.

### **The Status of the Brahmins:**

The Brahmins, according to Manu (1991) are the Lords of this whole creation because they are produced from the purest part of the Supreme Being. They are the most exalted among men, so much so that by their mere birth as Brahmins, they become living embodiments of the eternal law. A Brahmin alone can become one with the Brahman for only he, of all the varnas, is entitled to enter the fourth stage of life, i.e., Asceticism. Feeding the Brahmins is one of the acknowledged ways of gaining religious merit. A Brahmin is entitled to whatever exists in the whole world. The whole world is his property and all others live on his charity. According to *Satpatha Brahmana*,<sup>20</sup> the property of Brahmins should be exempt from the royal claim. They are as well exempt from any corporal punishment, disregarding whatever wrong they incur. Vishnu, (Ramaiah, 1994) another creation of Hindus, says that Brahmins are intermediaries between men and gods. According to him, gods are the invisible deities, Brahmins are the visible deities. It is in the favour of the Brahmins that the world is sustained. Brahmins are the equals of gods and can be enthroned to heaven if they like. Ghurye (1953 & 1969) also mentions how a speech uttered by a Brahmin (whether a curse or a benediction) never fails to come true. When the visible gods are pleased, the invisible gods are surely pleased. To avert providential calamities such as fire, flood, pestilence, the people should worship gods and Brahmins.

All the above-mentioned quotes, even though are from the divine utterance of various Hindu saints at different periods of Indian history, it is not to deny the fact that in reality, Brahmins enjoy a remarkably high social status in the Hindu social order, not only ritually but also in various other related fields including some of the secular spheres in the body polity.

### **The Changing? Status of Dalits:**

**Vedic Period:** The status given to *Dalits* (the ex-untouchables) is ironically just the opposite of the status given to the Brahmins. According to *Manusmriti*,<sup>21</sup> the Shudra's main duty is to serve others. Rather servitude is proclaimed to be a permanent condition for the Shudras and Panchamas. The food prepared by them is unfit for the consumption of Brahmins. They must not acquire wealth because thereby they cause pain to the Brahmins. A person who dies with their food in the stomach will be born again as a pig or a Chandala. If an unwise Brahmin has conjugal intercourse with an untouchable lady, the offspring will be untouchable and the Brahmin cannot have him ascend to heaven. Not only this, if a man of the lowest caste injures a man of higher caste with some particular part of his body, that that very part of his body should be cut off or burnt off, this is the instruction of Manu. Moreover, every prescription given in *Manusmriti* stands as degrading and humiliating for *Dalits*. They have been asked to live far away from the village, eat the leftovers and carry on their lives at others' mercy. Even as regards justice, Manu categorically takes into favour the Brahmins when he says:

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<sup>20</sup> See, *Satpatha Brahmana*, vol. XIV.

<sup>21</sup> Reference is taken from *Manusmriti* because it is this so-called "sacred" document of Hindus, which systematically codifies the Hindu laws. Often the so-called upper caste Hindus argue that *Dalits* do not look into the good aspects of Hinduism. But when the religion itself warns that Shudras and Atishudras (read *Dalits*) are not entitled to read or even to hear and recite the Vedas and Upanishads, where is the question of learning good things and bad things about Hinduism? It may be apt to recall Apastamba, who declared that a non-Brahmin trying to hear the vedic texts shall have his ears filled with molten lac or tin; if he recites the Vedas, his tongue shall be cut off, and if he remembers it, he shall be dismembered (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 43).

A man (Brahmin) who makes his living only by his birth (as a priest), or who merely says that he is a priest, may, at the king's pleasure, explain justice, but a servant (Shudra) never. If a Shudra makes decisions about justice while a king looks on, his kingdom sinks down like a cow in mud. A kingdom overrun by atheists, where servants are in the majority and there are no twice-born men, soon is entirely destroyed, oppressed by famine and disease (Ch: 8:20, 21, 22).

According to Manu, the most hated thing was the sight of a Chandala/Shudra. This is narrated in the real cause of the denigrated *Dalits*. As Manu prescribes:

These (Shudras) should live near mounds, trees, and cremation grounds, in mountains and in grooves, far away from the village. They should be recognizable as by making a living by their own innate activities . . . they must use discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys should be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and their food should be leftovers to be given in broken earthen pots . . . their ornaments should be made of black iron . . . they should not walk about in villages and cities at night (Chapter 10: 50, 51, 52, 54, 55).

This is how *Dalits* had to live with a status of lesser being during the Vedic period.

**Mughal period:** In around 700 A.D. Muslims entered India when *Manusmriti* had reached its peak with its strict social and religious discipline. Beginning from Mahmud of Ghazni to Muhammad Ghor and Bahadur Shah Zafar, they ruled for about one thousand years till 1712 A.D. During such a long period of Muslim rule, one could expect some changes in a lot of the *Dalits*. If one goes through socio-religious conditions during this period, one sees that the state of the *Dalits* remained almost the same (Yasin, 1958) and Muslim rulers were mere silent spectators of the situation. *Dalits* fought many battles for their Muslim rulers to safeguard their crown and glory. But this did not enthrone the rulers to improve the status of the *Dalits*. Rather, they thought it proper 'not to disturb' the graded inequalities of the Hindu social system lest the upper castes might become antagonistic.

**British period:** The next important period of Indian history is the British rule in the country. It was during the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Britishers arrived in India, ostensibly for commerce and trade. They found to their immense delight that people of this country were hopelessly divided among themselves. In such a situation they perceived a golden opportunity for ultimate conquest. The caste in India, they found, was the sovereign and hence they decided to exploit the caste divisions to perpetuate the slavery of the Indians. As they went about enforcing colonial laws for unbridled exploitation, they also took care to establish caste courts on caste lines. For instance, Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, set up caste courts in Calcutta in 1767 with full powers to interfere with the working of caste laws in the Hindu fold. Also from Burke's (1803) impeachment of Warren Hastings, we get a broad view of caste exploitation. It was during this period that the Jagannath temple of Puri was taken by East India Company for its management.

Here, we may quote Marc Galanter, who has been a keen observer of Indian society and whose works on religious order, caste system and more notably on the legal system such as *Law and Society in Modern India* (1993), *Changing Legal Conceptions of Caste* (1968) and *Competing Equalities* (1984) are very well-known. He so clearly writes: "As far as religious and social practices were concerned, Britishers maintained the *status quo* and followed a policy of *non-interference*, actively upholding and supporting the caste order" (Galanter, 1984: 19). Even the protection and preservation of caste was decreed by an Act of Parliament. In an Order, it was declared that 'due regard may be had to the civil and religious usage of the natives' (Kay, 1959:375). In addition to this, Warren Hastings published a *Digest* to make available the codes of

Brahmanical laws for the guidance of judges and lawyers. It was during this period that old Sanskrit/Brahmanical pieces of literature were translated with the help of Brahmin intellectuals.

Rao's classic work (1989, p. 118) also very comprehensively brings out the central points about the consequences or impact of the British rule on caste and that of Hinduism. According to her, it:

- i. Raised the Brahmins to the highest part of power, profit and confidence.
- ii. Championed the cause of reconstructing the decaying temples and revived many festivals and rituals for mutual benefit.
- iii. Unearthed Manus as divine authority, which many did not know of.
- iv. Gave caste distinction royal recognition and state protection.
- v. Frustrated the efforts of the reformers by making it impossible to change the status quo as they perpetuated the social evils.
- vi. Handed over lands to only the advanced castes either as zamindari or ryotwari, which widened the social distance further and caste problems entered as well as to the problem of class.
- vii. Here it is worth noting that even though there were Christian missionaries who worked in many ways for changing the situation of *Dalits* - economically, educationally and health-wise, socially they could not save *Dalits*. Varna system still intruded on Christianity and even after conversion and proselytization they were treated *Dalit*-like that is why we get a group called '*Dalit Christians*' whose living pattern and social condition is no way better than the '*Hindu Dalits*'.

However, it was during the same period that there were personalities like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar who were involved directly in the struggle for change and emancipation of the *Dalits*. They radicalized and revolutionized the *Dalit* movement and sown the seed of "annihilation" of caste as an irrational and inhumane system through 'total change' in the Hindu social (dis)order. They took to the roots of the evil of caste and untouchability. They made the *Dalits*, as well as Brahmins, realize that caste was an unholy creation in our history and it was high time, we get rid of it. They preached the gospel of 'social democracy' in addition to political and economic democracy, which was the need of the hour to take care of *Dalits*. There were several reform movements, which were at work for the betterment of the *Dalits* even by the appealing British government to take the cause of the Civil Rights of *Dalits*. Noteworthy of such a move resulted in some of the important legislation, which helped *Dalits* come up to a level. Mention may be made of the Depressed Classes (name change) Act 1919, 1931 and Government of India Act of 1935, which were instrumental in breaking the traditional nomenclature of Shudras, Chandalas and untouchables, and replaced by titles like Depressed Classes, Exterior Castes and Scheduled Castes. *Dalits* could have asserted their political rights in terms of a separate electorate as well. But it was Gandhi, who stood fast-unto-death against it in the fear that it was a threat to Hinduism and breaking the solidity of *Varna Vyavastha*. To save Gandhi's life, Ambedkar had to alter the communal award and went for a Joint Electorate for the Scheduled Castes with the caste Hindu majority. This was, according to Baxi (1978), a defeat for a political liberal Ambedkar from a shrewd opponent Mr Gandhi who knew how to deal with such a person. Seen as a whole, it was for Gandhi's gambling that *Dalits* lost one more chance of effective liberation and freedom. And not to forget how Ambedkar finally showed the path of liberation for the *Dalits* by choosing to denounce Hinduism and convert, ultimately to Buddhism along with his followers, which was found to be more liberating, more democratic and more inclusive than Hinduism as a religion,

although it was the towards the fag end of his life. As Ambedkar writes, it was without any of one's choice, where Dalits were born into, but that they can choose to die as a "non-Hindu." Nonetheless, Ambedkar's idealism and conscious-making which has got its prominence today world over is an achievement to reckon with, for millions of the struggling *Dalits*.

### ***Dalits in Post-Independent India:***

During the British rule, colonial plunder combined with the exploitation of landlords, traders and moneylenders intensified the miseries of *Dalits*. But when the country was getting freedom from the Britishers, *Dalit* had to raise questions: whose independence will it be? What will be the rights of the "untouchables" in free India? Will they get education? Will they get land? Will they get entry into government services? Will they get constitutional safeguards? Will the untouchability go??? The *Dalits* in 'Free India' had grave apprehensions about their probable plight in India ruled by upper castes/classes.

The problems of the *Dalits* and the struggle for their liberation are continuing with equal fervour, as it was earlier. Before independence, the system, which the Britishers used with the policy of 'non-interference' in local, cultural and religious practices, the new rulers of 1947 and after, till date, found the use of the same vocabulary and expression very convenient and useful for continuing their supremacy and rule on the masses, particularly the *Dalits*. Ambedkar rightly imagined it. He realized it very well and felt the need to expose the crooked politics and shedding of crocodile tears by both Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. In his very aptly titled work *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (1945), he writes that: "Congress fights for liberty. If it succeeds it will mean liberty to the strong and powerful to suppress the weak and the downtrodden unless they are protected by constitutional safeguards".

Much has been provided in the constitutional legislation for the upliftment of *Dalits*. But the people who are at the helm of affairs, those responsible for its implementation make it a mockery. For example, we can infer such a contradiction, which L.K. Advani, a senior BJP leader and now the Deputy Prime Minister of the country stated on June 12, 1990, at Thiruvananthapuram as regards his party's criterion on the reservation. This observation, which was reported in Indian Express (1990), goes like this:

The BJP leader, however, said that his party was stoutly opposed to any move by the V.P. Singh government to extend reservation to converts to Islam and Christianity from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It had supported the extension of reservation to SC/ST converts to Buddhism because under the Constitution, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains were classified as 'Hindus'. Reservation to converts to other religions would always be out of our agenda.

This is the basic contradiction in preaching vs. practice of our Constitutional Rights and Justice especially when it comes to the historically disprivileged communities such as the Dalits, Adivasis and various religious and ethnic Minorities. An agenda of such a variety not only violates the Fundamental Rights (especially Articles 14, 15 and 16)<sup>22</sup> but also questions the very idea of

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<sup>22</sup> 36. Article - 14 of the Indian Constitution suggests 'Equality before Law' i.e., the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. However, "unequals" are not only permitted to be treated unequally but also they have to be so treated. The general and abstract principles of equality laid down in Article - 14 are spelt out for certain situations in greater details in Article - 15. The Article permits the State to make special provision for (a) the socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, (b) the Scheduled Castes, and (c) the Scheduled Tribes. Further, the main objective of Article - 16 is to create a constitutional Right to Equality of opportunity and employment in public offices. This Article is applicable only to 'citizens' of the



Democracy and Human Rights based on the principle of Equality. The point to make here is that the Rights of the *Dalits* have been taken away with force and for centuries; they have been oppressed and exploited in the name of religion. But even today, in a Secular, Socialist, Democratic, Republic India, the same tool of oppression is in use, i.e., religion for the oppression of the *Dalits*.

Caste in today's Indian society is still the most powerful factor in determining a man's dignity, calling or profession. Despite all our modernization and secularization the social structure of India still consists of endogamous groups – caste ruling the game. *Jatis* are still the basic unit of our society. A person is born in a *jati*, is socialized in it, gets married in it, controlled by it. The *jati*-tie helps or retards its members in gaining access to material as well as non-material resources and privileges. Which *jati* an individual is born into still determines what type of education he/she can have, which jobs he/she can compete for, what state patronage he/she can hope for, how much capital (and other resources) he/she can vie for.<sup>23</sup>

India's system of preferential treatment for historically disadvantaged sections of the population is unprecedented in scope and content. India embraced 'equality' as a cardinal principle against a background of elaborated and perceived inequalities. The constitutional policies to offset these cumulative inequalities need a modern sensibility. It is unfortunate that even after half a century of India's independence, *Dalits* cannot live a life of dignity because, despite economic advancement, their social status remains elusive.

### **Hinduism, Hegemonism and the Dalit Question:**

Now, it is time for us to see how we can locate the Gramscian framework of 'hegemony' in the context of the Indian caste system *a la* Hinduism--the so-called "sacred" religion of Vedic *Brahmins* or *Hindus*.<sup>24</sup> Before we delve deep into the issue, however, it needs clarification. It is true that Gramsci's postulation of 'hegemony' took place in a capitalist state of Italy where there was no 'caste' system but governed by the rule of 'class'. But when we put the Indian caste system in a proper perspective, as has been done by Ambedkar (1990) Bailey (1957), and Bougle (1958), it is nothing but a 'closed class' category.

Rather, the Indian caste system is more than class-based Italian society, economy and polity and goes beyond the orthodoxy of the Marxist conception of "class" framework including that of

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country as distinguished from 'other' persons who are excluded— both formally as well as informally from its purview.

<sup>23</sup> The point of reference here is to social and cultural capital, which determines many more things than what market rules go with. This is due to the fact that India is still bound by primordial loyalties like caste-kinship solidarity, which has intruded almost every sphere of one's life— say, from private domestic alliance to such so-called secular modern and democratic open spaces like police stations, courts and universities

<sup>24</sup> Although there has been a solidification of cultural nationalism (read spiritual fascism) by Hindutva brigades, it is till date unclear, whether Hinduism is only a preaching or a way of life. If the priests define it as a religion, they do not go with the path of 'inclusiveness' which all other universal religion tread. This is problematic because even after the Constitution enshrines the Right to Religion (Art.25), *Dalits* today are out of their framework while entering into temples and to priesthood. Another stumbling block on the way is the very definitional problem of Hinduism. Taking Hindu social structure into consideration, we see that there are two broad camps called '*dwijas*' and '*Shudras*' – with altogether distinction of food habits, dressing and worshipping. It is really a puzzle which one to characterize Hindu life? Assuming that the *Dwija* way of life is *Hindu* life, does not that automatically suggest that the non-*Dwija* way of life is outside the framework of Hinduism? Here, I am specifically dealing with the Hinduism as has been conceptualized by the Vedic Brahmins. An interesting reading on this account is Kancha (2000).

the so-called radical Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci. As has been pointed out, the very essence of Hinduism has been “Division”, “Separatism” and ‘Exclusivism’ which goes with endogamous group formations in terms of clearly differentiated, segmented and compartmentalized categories of people and communities such as *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. The principle of hierarchy, which goes by heredity, further elaborates the issue. Add to it, these four main *varnas* were to be self-contained units further divided into several sub-sections, which neither inter-dine nor inter-marry with each other. As Sir Herbert Risely (1915) points out, “this process of caste-making has indeed by no means come to an end. Fresh castes are constantly being formed”. This establishes the fact that although Gramscian framework, as formulated in his *Prison Note-Books* (1975/1998) is helpful to understand domination and deprivation in caste-ridden India, it is not mere ‘hegemonic’ but ‘hegemony plus’. Because, although in principle, the labouring and the working class may be conceptualized as a single and unifying category, in India, one can very much see the caste-consciousness and caste-divisions in them, which is hardly accepted, acknowledged and addressed neither by the conventional Marxist formulations nor by the Marxist Movements, which are, by and large, led by the so-called upper castes and classes of India. And the crucial thing about Brahmanic hegemony as comes to the fore is in terms of the principle of “pollution and purity”, which is so clearly specified and dogmatized in the so-called sacred texts of Vedic scriptures and amalgamated further in the whole pattern of everyday living for different sections of the population. That is how the ‘purity of blood’ is being sanctioned and the whole mass ‘fooled’ for giving consensual surrender to Brahmanic rule.

Add to it, the faith of the Brahmins (and other upper castes) in the sanctity of *Varna*, i. e., colour and caste, which endure and abide Hindu society. The Hindu regards himself as the heir to the oldest conscious tradition of superior status in terms of ‘pure blood’, which keeps Nazism and Fascism as its decorum (Casolari, 2000).<sup>25</sup> Such a fanaticism directed against the rest of the population is, of course, a bag of bones. Caste stands as a pathology for Indian society, which is in the process of degeneracy. Retaining the corrosive characteristics that we see from the status of *Dalits* over the ages from the Vedic period to the colonial and post-colonial period, it is hard to reconcile this ever-expanding ‘Octopus’ of the caste system. The vagaries of socio-cultural tensions that have been cropping up with every passage of day are nothing but the cause-effect reactions, which Hinduism brings with it. The sloganeering of “Unity in Diversity” is thus, nothing but mere rhetoric.

This is because of the peculiar feature of Hinduism, its hegemonic domination has taken root in the caste system. While the caste system as a system of social stratification has to distribute prestige, power and property among various sections of its population, the superiority by the birth of Brahmins vis-à-vis subjugated living of *Dalits*, which forms the core of Hinduism, dehumanizes millions. For centuries, they have been denied opportunities to grow as a human being denied equality, social justice and humanity. Man as a biological being might be inheriting some characteristics from father to son. But the treachery that the hegemonic Brahmins intended has created hegemonism of inheritance so that the occupational division has to go by ‘hereditary hierarchy’. Although an efficient cook, a *Dalit* cannot open a hotel in the street and whatever learned his ideas might be, he can never think of becoming a priest (which seems to be a cent per

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<sup>25</sup> It is not a co-incidence that Marzia Casolari brings out the foreign tie-up of Hindutva along Italian connection. With archival evidence, Marzia uncovers layer after layer how Hindu Nationalism goes with Italian Fascism taking the root to the reorganization of Hindu Fundamentalism by B.S Moonje and his meetings with Mussolini, way back in 1930’s. Add to it, it is critical to note, how V.D Savarkar defended the position of Germany regarding the Sudeten problem in creating a “pan-German Nationalism.”

cent reserved for the Brahmins). Almost every day we come across how Dalits are beaten, killed, murdered and their women raped and murdered more like a “lesson to be taught” and as a “collective punishment” not only as individuals but more as a “community” whenever they have dared questioning the irrational, illogical and inhumane caste rules and transcend the age-old caste practices. This is because Hinduism has provided the theory of *Karma* and *Dharma*. They negate the very idea of “achievement” in due process of socialization and anticipatory developments.

Manu’s laws might have been used by the conservative and orthodox of *Vedic* times/minds only. But even after enlightenment, renaissance and a series of democratic revolutions, not to forget colonization, modernization and globalization the man-to-man relations, even today take refuge in the age-old tradition of caste rules and caste-based relations. Many believe that urbanization, industrialization and modernization, will go a long way in giving the *Dalits* a chance enough to muster the strength to throw off the yoke of social degradation. They also assert that economic empowerment will work as a talisman to wipe out all inhibitions. But, Hinduism as a religion and Brahmins as custodians of Hinduism have a role to play. Their hegemonism has treated a group of people for millennia as castaways and condemned them to a life of penury, degradation and misery. There is a web of mending such a social (dis)order world over. *Dalits* themselves have started realizing its potency and various steps by individuals as well as collective bodies have been taking shape, over the period, throughout the country and also outside. Breaking the “culture of Hindu (read Brahmanic) hegemony” will be the final of the things to come to shape. These issues of *Dalits*’ appeals nay assertion for Liberty, Equality, Freedom, Justice and Human Rights are increasingly being raised world over now and, thus, contesting the age-old Brahmanic hegemony, on the one hand, and radically reworking Indian social, economic, political and cultural order, on the other hand (Wendy & Brian, 1991).

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