

# Ethics and Relevance of Conversions

## A Critical Assessment of Religious and Social Dimensions in a Gandhian Perspective

*The concern over religious conversions cannot be naively attributed to narrow-minded Hindu fundamentalism. These concerns have been expressed by as progressive and broad-minded persons as Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Sir Syed Ahmed, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji went to the extent of saying that if he had the power and could legislate, he should certainly stop all proselytising. He had several convincing reasons for his persistent and dogged opposition to conversions, which are presented here. After arguing that religious and ethical grounds for conversions are weak and questionable, the article takes up the social and economic grounds for conversions and finds them equally weak and questionable. It is also argued that just as Islam and the whole Muslim society cannot be blamed for the terrorism by a fanatic fringe, similarly Hinduism and the whole Hindu society cannot be blamed for the atrocities on dalits by a few inhuman criminals. It is contended that the basic principles of Hinduism are not at all consistent with casteism and untouchability. If it is possible to quote from Hindu texts as supporting casteism and untouchability, it is equally possible to quote from Muslim texts as supporting violence against non-Muslims and inequality. But in both cases, they would be misinterpretations, for no true religion preaches violence and inhuman conduct.*

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### I Ethics of Conversions: Religious Dimension

The concern over religious conversions, which expressed itself recently in the promulgation of the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversions Ordinance and its subsequent passing at the end of October 2002 by the Tamil Nadu assembly, is by no means new in India. Similar legislations have been in force in MP, Orissa and even Arunachal Pradesh, all introduced by non-BJP governments. The concern over conversions is centuries old and cannot be naively attributed to the narrow mindedness of Hindu fundamentalism. As eminent a person as Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833) in the early 19th century itself expressed his opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries, even as he struggled to reform Hindu society simultaneously. Of course, his focus was on putting his own Hindu house in order rather than on opposing conversions<sup>1</sup>. Sir Syed Ahmed was even more forthright in showing his concern over conversions to Christianity and expressed his apprehension that the government itself was encouraging

proselytisation. He pointed out how the general famine was taken advantage of for converting many people including orphans.<sup>2</sup>

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) felt disgusted with the calumny indulged in by the missionaries in a routine way. He asked in pain: "What have the Hindus done to these disciples of Christ that every Christian child is taught to call the Hindus 'vile' and 'wretches', and the most horrible devils on earth?...Look again at the books published in Madras against the Hindu religion. If a Hindu writes one such line against the Christian religion, the missionaries will cry fire and vengeance."<sup>3</sup> He had a high regard for both Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammad, but had nevertheless this to say in a lecture in Detroit in 1894: "Welcome to your religion, but allow me to have mine."<sup>4</sup> The Swamiji also knew the weaknesses of Hindus, which made them vulnerable to conversion—their poverty, mass illiteracy, casteism and superstition. To eradicate these evils, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission and laid great stress on social service. Probably it was the first time that Hindu monks were devoted to social service too and not only to preaching religion and philosophy. These great

persons—Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Swami Vivekananda, emphasised social reform and service for their own sake and not just for the sake of meeting the threat of conversions. What is more, they derived their inspiration from the highest ideals and values preached by Hinduism itself in their mission of ridding Hindu society of its evils and weaknesses. Thus Raja Ram Mohun Roy drew support and inspiration from the Bhagavadgita (Gita, in brief) in stopping the practice of Suttee, and quoted its verses to orthodox Hindus to impress them that the evil practice was not consistent with Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Swami Vivekananda also drew inspiration and support from the Gita's philosophy of Karma Yoga and Lokasangraha (social service). The strategy of quoting support from the Hindu scriptures themselves for social reform within Hinduism was more effective in beating orthodoxy than making general appeals to the Hindu society in the name of modern values.

Above all, it was no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who persistently and doggedly expressed his criticism of conversions of Hindus both to Christianity and Islam, even as he passionately advocated eradication of social evils

including untouchability all his life. He had a profound regard for both the religions and gave his life in the protection of minorities. His views on conversions cannot therefore be considered as narrow. They are found scattered over many volumes of *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (*Collected Works* in brief). Browsing through them, one can easily derive his perspective, involving a coherent and systematic view of ethics (or lack of it) and relevance (or irrelevance) of conversions. The reasons for his opposition to conversions as given below, may not all be stated by him in exactly so many words, but are nevertheless evident from what he wrote. His perspective and the reasons for his stand are presented in what follows in a faithful spirit, supported with as many quotations as possible in an article.

As one goes through his many statements on the theme, one is struck by the fact that even as he vehemently and explicitly opposed conversions made through force, fraudulent means and inducements, he was also opposed to the very idea of religious conversion itself as the motto or hallmark of any religious preaching. He made a distinction between freedom of practice of a religion and freedom to canvass a religion for the ultimate purpose of conversion from one faith to another. While he staunchly supported the former freedom, he opposed the latter. His strong conviction about the unethical basis of conversions led him to frankly say: "If I had the power and could legislate, I should certainly stop all proselytising" (*Collected Works*, Vol 61, p 46).

Gandhiji had several convincing reasons for his opposition to conversions. First, there is no scope for conversion if one believes that all paths lead to the same god and offer salvation. Like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Gandhiji too believed firmly that all religions are equally true and god can be realised through any path of true devotion and social service, whatever be the banner under which it is done. There is obsession for converting others to one's own fold if, however, one believes that one's own religion is the true religion and others are false. This would be plain arrogance and blindness.

Such being the case, Gandhiji thought it bad ethics and unfair for missionaries to take advantage of poverty, ignorance and weakness of the poor with inducements of food, education and medical aid to convert them. He expressed it strongly when he said: "It would ...be an outrage to take advantage of someone's poverty

and tell him 'come my friend, I shall give you so many rupees, pay off your debts; because your co-religionists are pestering you, you come over to us' (*Collected Works*, Vol 25, p 240). He was of course gracious and understanding enough to concede that such service offered without any selfish motive would constitute a noble act. He felt that the aim of religiosity was for a Hindu to become a better (more humane and devoted) Hindu, for a Christian to become a better Christian, and for a Muslim to become a better Muslim, and not convert any from one religion to another.

In Gandhiji's own words: "If instead of confining themselves purely to humanitarian work such as education, medical services to the poor and the like, they would use these activities of theirs for the purpose of proselytising, I would certainly like them to withdraw. ...Certainly the great faiths held by the people of India are adequate enough for her people. India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another" (*Collected Works*, Vol 46, p 28).

He was bitterly critical of the way in which the ignorance of the people is taken advantage of for conversions. He observed: "The vast masses of people of India would not understand the pros and cons of Christianity better than a cow. ...Try to teach the principles of Christianity to my wife. She can understand them no better than a cow. ...Then you commercialise your gift, for at the back of your mind is the feeling that because of your service some day the recipient of the gift will accept Christ. Why should not your service be its own reward?" (*Collected Works*, Vol 65, pp 80-81).

### Putting One Religion against Another

There is scope here for questioning the spiritual basis of any conversion from one religion to another in this context. "Regarded from a deeper angle, Christian proselytising is an arrogant idea, a denial both of god and of one's neighbour; it denies god, denies His working in others, denies the many ways in which He fulfils Himself. It helps neither the missionaries nor the converts."<sup>6</sup> Gandhiji condemned pitting one religion against another particularly for the purpose of conversion. He said, "I believe that it is impossible to estimate the merits of the various religions of the world, and moreover I believe that it is unnecessary and harmful even to attempt it. But each one of them, in my judgment, embodies a common motivat-

ing force: the desire to uplift a man's life and give it purpose" (*Collected Works*, Vol 75, p 70).

One could argue here that granting that all religions lead a person to the same goal or the same god, one should nevertheless have a free choice on the basis of a personal assessment of different paths or religions as per personal aptitude or temperament. This would require freedom both to preach and to convert, as it is argued.<sup>7</sup> This argument of freedom of conscience should be examined in the light of realities, instead of using it only as rhetoric. To be meaningful, such a freedom of choice should first be available internally, i.e. within a religion, as is done in Hinduism. Its pluralism gives a wide choice of philosophies and practices tolerating differences liberally. There is scope for even an atheist within Hinduism. Hindu polytheism is actually the liberty given to its followers to conceptualise god in any way they like to facilitate devotion. The Hindu concept of 'paramatma', 'ishwara' or 'parabrahma' is also one of formless god, omnipotent and omnipresent, not only pervading but also transcending the whole universe. But the Gita gives a choice for persons who cannot conceptualise such god, to have a personalised god in a form one likes. This liberalism of Hinduism is very much unique.

Its openness to all the best thoughts is evident both from the Rigvedic prayer, 'may noble thoughts may come to us from all over the universe' (*aano bhadraha kritavo yantu vishwataha*) and also equally from its actual practice of this.

On the other hand, there is a basic problem in this respect with Islam and Christianity, at least in their orthodox versions. It is their intolerance to any difference from what they consider as ordained in their sacred books. Even scientific findings about the physical state of the earth or the universe had to agree with what is written in their scriptures. Persons found guilty in this respect were condemned as heretics or apostates. The Christian church has never taken kindly to heretics and punishment in Islam for apostasy is death. They give freedom of conscience to persons belonging to other religions to convert to their own faith, but not to its own members. This amounts to plain double standards or hypocrisy. Fortunately, with the growth of secular education and democracy following industrialisation and modern economic development, the western countries have given such freedom of conscience to their citizens. Liberalism, coming in the wake

of modern economic growth combined with democracy, may have influenced the Christian church too in these countries.

In a situation as in India, where Islam and Christianity are extremely sensitive to any critical assessment and where there is freedom only to criticise Hinduism, freedom of choice is really one-sided. It is not a level playing ground.

This point becomes clear if we also compare the resources at the disposal of missionaries for conversion from Hinduism. Arun Shourie has cited some figures taken from the church sources of 1989. Though the resources of the church must have increased significantly after this, even the 1989 figures are a fair indication. It then cost '145 billion dollars to operate global Christianity'. The church commanded four million full-time Christian workers, ran 13,000 major libraries, published 22,000 periodicals and four billion tracts a year, operated 1,800 Christian radio and TV stations, 1,500 universities and 930 research centres. The church had a quarter of a million foreign missionaries, and over 400 institutions to train them. Shourie has not given corresponding figures for India separately, nor has he clarified if the figures given refer to all Christian churches together or to the Catholic church alone. Shourie, however, refers to annual targets of building new churches in India, including in unreached villages.<sup>8</sup> Some Hindu organisations may also be involved in reconversion (*ghar vaapasi*) of particularly tribal people but they still constitute fringe elements and their resources can only be a tiny fraction of resources available to the Christian missionaries in India. It is evident that it is a pitifully unequal struggle. As Koenraad Elst put it, freedom to convert in situation like this is like equal freedom to wolf and goat to eat each other.

Koenraad Elst refers both to the enormous organisational advantage and the double standards of the church in respect of conversion. He says: "By contrast, the missionary religions in India... have a tremendous organisational advantage over Hinduism, being well entrenched in political and/or educational institutions, and in the media sector, and often enjoying lavish foreign funding. If any comparison can be made it is with the well-funded US-based Protestant mission in Latin America, against which the Pope protested during his visit to Guatemala, pleading that the people there had been Catholics 'for centuries'." Then Elst refers to a letter to the editor published in *Observer*, Mumbai, dated

February 8, 1996, which reminded the Pope that the Hindus too had been Hindus for centuries, and yet the Pope did not call for cancelling the Catholic mission project among Hindus. Elst adds that the Pope instead declared during his visit to Delhi that the church wanted to reap a rich harvest of faith in Asia. He comments: "The secularists felt badly let down by the Pope, because they had been dismissing as paranoid hate propaganda the Hindu misgiving about church designs on the Hindu soul".<sup>9</sup>

The second reason why Gandhiji was opposed to proselytisation was that it undermined and even demeaned humanitarian work and social service if its ultimate goal is 'harvesting souls'. In true religiosity, there is only love for god and humanity and for god's creation, and there is social service for pure love without any selfish motive as was done, for example, by Gandhiji himself and by Mother Teresa and is being done by the Ramakrishna Mission. In advancing this reason, Gandhiji was inspired by the values preached by all the three – Bhagavadgita, Holy Bible and Holy Quran. The Gita distinguishes between three types of charity or social service. The first and the highest is *saatvik*, done for pure love of god seeing Him in humans, without expecting anything in return. The second is *raajasik*, where something in return is expected. The third and the lowest is *taamasik*, where charity/social service is done with contempt (explicit or implicit) for the receiver and with a sense of superiority.

### Conversion and Alienation

This leads us to the third reason for Gandhiji's opposition to conversions. It is that humanitarian work done with the motive of conversion is demeaning to the dignity of the receiver. It explicitly involves contempt for him/her and his/her society, and superiority and arrogance on the part of those who give such a service. The contempt for the society from which conversions were sought, evident in the calumny indulged in by the missionaries, disgusted both Swami Vivekananda and Gandhiji. Contempt for the receiver is inherent when his/her poverty and ignorance is taken advantage of, over which Gandhiji persistently expressed his sense of outrage.

This is linked to the fourth reason for Gandhiji's clear stand against conversions. It is that the convert is torn apart from his/her parents, family, society, customs and culture. The process of conversion is also a process of alienation. It is not only at

family level, but also at the social level. Gandhiji clearly observed that 'in Hindu households, the advent of a missionary has meant the disruption of the family' (*Collected Works*, Vol 61, p46). He also strongly objected to the vilification of Hinduism by the missionaries. (ibid, pp 46-47). The calumny against the Hindu society and religion makes converts totally contemptuous and even hostile – an effect about which Swami Vivekanand also expressed his concern.<sup>10</sup> He did not mean that he considered all Christians or all Muslims as hostile. He was only worried over the fact that new converts can be unreasonably fanatic and hostile, and even old converts felt proud in being contemptuous of Hinduism and Hindu society. In other words, the alienation also soured relations between communities in an already charged atmosphere of communal tensions.

There is another dimension to this effect of conversions on tearing away the converts from the society and culture. The impact of both Islam and Christianity, if not of other religions, has been to homogenise, and to substantially reduce pluralism and diversity in native cultures in the name of fighting evil practices and superstition, if not to eliminate them altogether. How much is left of the native culture and societies where the two religions established their dominance, such as in Iran, Iraq, Europe and Australia? The two religions have simply followed the adage – give the dog a bad name and hang it. The amount of ridicule heaped on the so-called animist and pagan cultures led them to extinction and in the process values like environmentalism and respect for nature suffered enormously. It is in India that these values survived since Hinduism absorbed them, even while allowing the concerned communities to retain their separate identities in the form of so many 'jatis'. Contrast this with attempts such those by the Tabligh movement which in its emphasis on keeping Islam pure fought against any influence of 'other' cultures, particularly of Hinduism.<sup>11</sup> Ridding a community of its social evils is welcome, but not a policy of throwing away the baby with bath water. Christianity and Islam have been the most aggressive of all religions, each aiming to take over the whole mankind under its respective faith. They will evidently not succeed in this, at least for the simple reason that there would be at least two of them and neither can probably wipe out the other.

The most important reason for Gandhiji's opposition to proselytisation is that it

involves violence. He said, 'it is the cause of much avoidable conflict' (*Collected Works*, Vol 61, p 46). The bulk of conversions in the history of the world, also including India, have been through violence of some kind or the other, with honourable exceptions like Buddhism. Buddhism did not spread to other countries in the same fashion as Christianity and Islam. No Indian religion did. It is conversions which have brought bad name to Christianity and Islam. Even now conversions are a major source for disturbance of peace and cause for misunderstanding in India. Gandhiji observed explicitly: "...such proselytising efforts demoralise society, create suspicions and bitterness, and retard the all-round progress of society" (*Collected Works*, Vol 65, p 159). A country torn by communal tensions and violence can be a source of delight only to its enemies. Fishing in troubled waters through proselytisation is no sign of maturity or of good intentions.

Gandhiji often criticised the tendency to claim Jesus Christ exclusively for Christians or Prophet Mohammed exclusively for Muslims. They belonged to all humanity and the noble values preached by them are relevant to all.<sup>12</sup> A Hindu would have no trouble of conscience in venerating Jesus Christ or prophet Mohammed, though not exclusively, as Gandhiji's own example has shown. Unfortunately, conversions emphasised compartmentalisation and exclusivity, and the universal appeal of great men is lost.

Above all, Gandhiji wanted all religions to come together and build bridges of understanding between them. He was intensely aware that religion could be (and has been) a cause for strife and violence, and wanted to turn it into a factor of peace. Hans Kung is reported to have observed that there would be no peace among nations so long as there is no peace between religions.<sup>13</sup> How true even of the 21st century! Gandhiji knew it as no one else did. He tried to promote peace between religions, not by promoting his own brand of a universal religion, but by 'converting the barriers between religions into bridges', using Arvind Sharma's words. "This goal can be achieved by promoting the study of all religions as one's own, so that we stop regarding our own religion as the only true one."<sup>14</sup> Sharma then quotes Gandhiji's significant lines:

I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. We need

not dread, upon our grown up children, the influence of scriptures other than our own. We liberalise their outlook upon life by encouraging them to study freely all that is clean. *Fear there would be when someone reads his own scriptures to young people with the intention secretly or openly of converting them.* He must then be biased in favour of his own scriptures. For myself, I regard my study of and reverence for the Bible, the Quran, and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch Sanatani Hindu."<sup>15</sup>

Mark the sentence emphasised in the quotation above. What can hinder understanding between religions and peace between religions is the fear of conversion or at least the possibility of conversion. Once this fear is removed, there is no inhibition and there would be more openness. Followers of one religion can more freely understand other religions and even imbibe the noble values from others into one's own life, without the necessity of tearing oneself off from one's own society and family through conversion. Of course, conversion is not the only factor for communal tensions in the world at large, but at least in India it does seem to be an important factor.

Conversions have nevertheless continued after Gandhiji, particularly by Christian missionaries. Mainly the weaker sections are being targeted. Their activities were subjected to a critical scrutiny by an official report commissioned by the (Congress) state government of Madhya Pradesh in the 1950s and the Niyogi Committee Report (formally, the Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee) republished by *Voice of India* in 1998. Its chairman 'B S Niyogi, far from being a Hindu fanatic was one of the most prominent converts to Buddhism during the 1956 mass conversion ceremony led by Ambedkar'.<sup>16</sup>

## II The Social Dimension

Most of the conversions, if not all, particularly in the post-independence period, have been for social upgradation, the opportunity for which was perceived as denied in the Hindu society. It could be said legitimately that such conversions were out of the free volition of the converted. It could also be equally legitimately said that if there was an incitement, it came more from the atrocities from members of the Hindu society itself who made a mockery of equal treatment and respect for dalits.

Gandhiji, exasperated at the orthodoxy and inhuman attitude of the caste Hindu society, warned repeatedly: "Hinduism will

be destroyed if untouchability is not ended" (*Collected Works*, Vol 26, p 9). As early as in 1933, he stiffly warned: "If untouchability is not removed root and branch, Hinduism is bound to perish, for no religion can nurture itself on the degradation of its votaries" (Ibid, Vol 56, p194). "I have not a shadow of doubt that Hinduism will (and rightly) lose harijans if the so-called caste-Hindus will not love Harijans – the outcaste Hindus – even as themselves" (ibid, Vol 65, p 297; parentheses as in original). "The caste system as it exists today in Hinduism is an anachronism. It is one of those ugly things which will certainly hinder the growth of true religion. It must go if both Hinduism and India are to live and grow" (ibid, Vol 79, p 384). He showed his typical large-heartedness and understanding when we said (in a speech at Selu in March 1945): "it is my view that if the followers of Ambedkar oppose us we should not let ourselves be provoked and give up on our work (among harijans) because of it. We should reach their hearts and understand their feeling. If we had gone through the experiences that the harijans have gone through, there is no telling how embittered we might have become and how little our ahimasa would have endured. Therefore on such occasions we should look inward and if there is the slightest vestige of untouchability left we should purge ourselves of it. It is my firm belief that if Hinduism is to survive, untouchability must go" (Ibid, Vol 79, p 298). Gandhiji not only preached but also practised what he preached with unquestionable sincerity, and strove hard to end untouchability as well as inter-caste and inter-religious barriers. These goals were as dear to him as winning India's freedom.

Even 70 years after Gandhiji's warnings in this regard, atrocities on dalits are taking place, which is a shame. No words are adequate to condemn this. Those who have done this or do this cannot be real Hindus. They harm rather than serve the cause of Hinduism. The atrocities on dalits can only be a source of dismay and pain to Hindus, and can please only the enemies of Hinduism. This applies equally to atrocities on minorities. But let us understand that just as the whole Muslim society cannot be blamed for the terrorist acts of a fanatical fringe of it, the whole Hindu society cannot be blamed for the acts of a few inhuman criminals. If it is possible to quote Hindu scriptures as supporting caste system and inequality, it is equally possible to quote from Quran as supporting violence against non-Muslims and inequality. It is,

however, generously interpreted in tune with the modern times that Jihad was preached in a particular context, which is no longer valid. Yet the same generosity is not shown about Hindu scriptures though time and again Hindu saints and philosophers – both medieval and modern – have emphasised that caste system and inequality are not compatible or consistent with Hinduism, and that they are actually against the basic spirit of Hindu philosophies. We are good and generous enough to say that our struggle is only against terrorism and not against Islam. Yet we think nothing of not distinguishing between Hinduism on the one hand and inequality, casteism and untouchability on other. What prevents us from saying similarly that our struggle is against inequality, casteism and untouchability and not against Hinduism, even when time and again it is declared that they are at best an anachronism and can no longer be considered as part of Hinduism? If it is argued that reviling Hinduism is still necessary on the ground that caste system and untouchability still continue, we should then also remember that the jihadi spirit and terrorism also continue all over the world.

This is not to indulge in polemics, but only to point out the unfairness with which Hinduism is treated, which is the major reason for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. Just as Muslims and Christians are sensitive to the defamation of their faiths, Hindus too have now become so. If this is ignored and reviling of Hinduism is continued, it will only boost a fanatical, reactionary and intolerant version of Hinduism. We should, therefore, in all fairness face some facts on the positive and brighter side too. It is essential to have a look at the entire picture instead of focusing only on the negative.

As we know, untouchability is banned through the Constitution of India and stringent punishments are provided for those who infringe the law. The provisions in the Constitution were further strengthened by the Untouchability (Offences) Act 1955, which was renamed retrospectively and expanded in 1976 as the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955. It was further strengthened by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.<sup>17</sup> The pertinent point is to identify the culprits, hunt them down and bring them to justice. Persons hiding or protecting the culprits also should be booked under the law. There is neither moral nor legal sanction for untouchability any more, which is an important achievement. The second important and positive step taken

relates to reservation for scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) and other backward classes (OBC) in government jobs and also in admissions to educational institutions. This is done in India on a scale which is unique and has been continued indefinitely beyond the time limits originally envisaged. No doubt both steps were implemented due to the relentless struggle by the Ambedkar movement and backward classes movements. But there is also a complementary factor, namely, that the bulk of Hindus and Hindu leaders supported them.

### **Battle against Untouchability**

The battle against untouchability is not yet fully won, but we are definitely on the way to victory though we cannot be complacent about it. Together with modern economic growth, urbanisation, and technological change (which can do away with manual handling of unclean jobs, thus obviating the need for a caste to do it), outlawing of untouchability and the reservation policy have achieved significant results during the last half a century. Even if separate jatis (which are not hierarchical castes strictly speaking, but nevertheless confused with a caste system no longer prevalent) continue, the ritual hierarchy has completely broken down. This is because nobody supposed to be lower down accepts a ritually inferior status anymore. Ritual hierarchy and pollution have completely vanished from urban areas. Even in the rural areas they have considerably weakened. The jajmani system, which allotted duties and also gave some security and was the main factor behind the continuation of the caste system all these centuries in spite of the progressive teaching by many Hindu saints and philosophers, has now broken down. On the basis of his study of a Tamil Nadu village, Deliege found that ritual pollution had lost much of its importance in inter-caste relations. He observed that the Pallars suffered much more from their lack of education, capital and family connections in their attempt to improve their condition, but less from the hierarchical stigmas attached to the caste. He found that typically people referred to their material conditions and no body even mentioned pollution and ritual exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

An important advantage available in ending untouchability is that dalits cannot be distinguished on the basis of colour or even on the basis of language and dress especially in urban areas. It is in rural areas that jatis are known more prominently, but even here ritual hierarchy is weakening.

It is the economic or class hierarchy which remains, as for example between rich farmers and agricultural labour. Changes are taking place here also, even if they are not very conspicuous. SCs, who hardly cultivated land even up to 1960s, have now come to cultivate and even own land. Their share in cultivated land, which was insignificant earlier, was 7 per cent in 1980-81 and 7.9 per cent in 1990-91. The corresponding share of STs was 10.2 per cent and 10.8 per cent in the two years respectively.<sup>19</sup> The breakdown of ritual hierarchy is even more evident in urban areas, as illustrated for example by brahmin cooks serving under SC ministers or officers. What is more, inter-caste marriages, including marriages between SCs and brahmins, are taking place now, which was unimaginable only some 50 years back.

There were very few educated among dalits during the 1950s. Now, on the basis of their own merit, and not necessarily due to reservation policy, we can see dalits occupying high offices in the government, banks, universities, in the professions like lawyers, engineers and doctors, and even in the corporate sector. It is now possible to see dalit graduates even in villages. A strong educated and articulate middle class has emerged among dalits, contributing richly to creative literature in regional languages. They are now much better organised than ever before to voice their grievances and put forth their demands on the state. They also get quick attention. A remark which Amartya Sen made with reference to how famines were handled in democratic India is relevant here too. If one incident of atrocity takes place in any corner of the country, the whole world comes to know of it in a matter of hours, which is a very good thing because the government is shamed into taking proper steps immediately. The dalit lobby now is one of the strongest in the country. Thanks to education including higher education becoming more widespread and following awareness, their aspirations are rising fast. Even their anger against caste-Hindus is a positive development, because it shows their unwillingness to accept humiliation and injustice any more. Unfortunately, the progress in meeting their aspirations is not as fast as the growth of aspirations themselves. The proportion of SCs in total employees in the Karnataka Civil Service which was 8.47 per cent in 1971 increased to 14.62 per cent in 1994. Though scheduled tribes appear as lagging behind in this respect, their share being only 0.92 per cent in 1971 increasing to 2.8 per cent in 1994, it is more than their share in the population. In the

case of SCs, however, their share in government jobs is still less than their share in population.<sup>20</sup> Yet things are steadily improving and it is difficult to deny that a significant portion of dalits (particularly SCs) has already come into the mainstream and the rest are on their way. There has been nothing less than a silent revolution during the last 50 years in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

It is also heartening that some of the traditional Hindu Swamijis who preside over brahmin mathas (monasteries) have also contributed to breaching the untouchability barrier. It is well to remember that a conference of over 40 mathadhipathis (heads of monasteries)—both from brahmin and non-brahmin mathas, was convened in Udupi in Karnataka in 1970 under the leadership of Vishweshateertha Swamiji of Pejawar math. The conference declared clearly and unanimously that Hinduism has no place for untouchability and called upon Hindus to discard it completely. A prominent (retired) IAS officer from a SC community hugged the Swamiji on the stage as the whole conference applauded. Vishweshateertha Swamiji followed it up by visiting a slum of dalits near swimming pool extension in Malleswaram, Bangalore, and participated in pooja and took 'prasaad' from the hands of dalits. This was more than a decade before the famous conversions in Meenakshipuram (in 1981). The Swamiji also took a vow to go on fast whenever any atrocity on dalits took place and it is reported that he has been scrupulously implementing this vow. The Swamiji also financed the construction of 150 pucca houses to rehabilitate those displaced by floods in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>22</sup> I am not aware of such activism by swamijis or other Hindu religious leaders in north India. I do hope that if it is not already there, it will soon be initiated. Apart from making symbolic expressions, which are also useful in the fight against untouchability, the Hindu leaders should monitor whether any vestiges of untouchability still remain and try to remove them with all earnestness. This task appears to be urgent particularly in north India.

It is worth recalling that much before the post-independence developments, which promoted the process of taking dalits into the mainstream, there were community efforts within dalit castes by which they elevated their caste status, and shed their earlier outcaste status, and absorbed into a position of dignity well within Hindu society without having to convert to any other religion. Two prominent instances of this in south India are those of izhavas in Kerala and nadars in Tamil Nadu. Shri

Narayan Guru, who was instrumental in elevating the status of izhavas, is venerated by them as well as by others alike. Though Nadars did not seem to have had the advantage of such a guru, they also did equally well under their own secular leaders. The elevation of the caste status came mainly through the spread of education and skills, mutual self-help by making credit available for starting enterprises, by helping the caste members to get jobs by functioning as an informal employment exchange and also through sanskritisation. Members of these two communities are now highly literate and occupy important positions. Nadars particularly have also emerged economically strong, creating a niche for themselves in industry and commerce.<sup>23</sup> It is not conversion, but community efforts at self-help, which changed their status.

### Important Lesson

Their example offers an important lesson for dalits. It is not enough to build their own organisation merely to spread awareness, make demands and to protest against injustice; it is equally necessary to launch constructive programmes for the welfare of the community. The tendency to rely only on making demands on the government to promote social welfare among dalits is not enough. By its very nature, government bureaucracy has limitations in promoting social welfare and social mobility. The community's own efforts at constructive programmes are also necessary. These programmes may be to induce dalit parents to send their children to schools, to help them in getting training in skills for jobs outside their traditional vocations, to provide guidance and help to those who wish to migrate from villages to towns and cities in getting jobs and houses, preventing addiction to liquor, and so on. The community organisation of Nadars took care of the members of their community almost like parents. This was at a time when government had not come into the picture for providing social welfare in a big way. Though the government is now playing a major role in providing social welfare, reliance on the government alone can hardly help dalits to achieve the desired success. Once they open up the possibility of constructive programmes, help will come to them in a big way from private sources too like voluntary and social service organisations.

This would also show how irrelevant are conversions to solve dalit problems. That mere conversions have not helped most of the dalits is evident from the fact that they

have not ended social discriminations within the new religions like Christianity and Islam. It is well known that there are dalits among Christians too and there are similar classes discriminated against among Muslims too. The jaati or the caste system is universal in India and has not escaped any religion. There is jati hierarchy even among dalits. Gail Omvedt, by no stretch of imagination a Hindu fundamentalist, observed that the caste system is more a feature of south Asia than of Hindu society as such. It is there among Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims, among Indian Christians, and even among Sri Lankan Buddhists. On the other hand, Hindu societies abroad, as for example in Bali and Fiji islands, do not have any caste hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> Ambedkar himself was conscious of social evils within Christian and Muslim societies, and as Elst observes, "for all his bitterness against Hindu society, Ambedkar's verdict on Muslim society was even harder".<sup>25</sup>

Ambedkar had observed in this context: "There can thus be no manner of doubt that the Muslim society in India is afflicted by the same social evils as afflicts the Hindu society. Indeed the Muslims have all the social evils of Hindus and something more. This something more is the compulsory system of purdah for Muslim women. ... The Hindus have their social evils. But there is one relieving feature about them — namely that some of them are conscious of their existence and a few are actively agitating for their removal. The Muslims, on the other hand, do not realise that there are evils and consequently do not agitate for their removal."<sup>26</sup> It was no coincidence that he chose to convert to Buddhism along with his followers, rather than to Christianity and Islam.

The oft-repeated charge that the caste-system and untouchability are intrinsic to Hinduism and that it cannot have an identity without them deserves to be rejected in toto. This is necessary not merely to meet the attack on Hinduism but even more to fight orthodoxy within Hinduism. The attack here is not only on the practice but more so on the very philosophy and ideology of Hinduism which are supposed to have led to the practice of casteism and untouchability. It is usual to quote Purushasukta of Rigveda as supporting Varna-dharma and Apastamba Dharmasutra as supporting untouchability. The Purushasukta is only a poetic imagination in terms of which the primeval man (Purusha) is supposed to have generated the four castes of brahman (as coming out of his mouth), kshatriyas (as

coming from his arms), vaishyas (as coming out of his thighs) and shudras (as coming out of his feet). It only *indicated* that the Vedic society had castes, but not that they were *recommended* as sacrosanct. It indicated a *class* system based on vocations, which was true of almost all societies all over the world. There was nothing uniquely Hindu about it. Unfortunately, the caste Hindus interpreted it as recommendatory and hierarchical as it suited them. But this was a misinterpretation. This is clear because the same Rigveda also has the following to say: *ajyesthaaso akanishtaasa aete sambhrataro vahadhuhu soubhagaya* (Rigveda 5-60-5), which means: 'No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity'.<sup>27</sup> There was no case for shudras to consider themselves as inferior because of Purusha Sukta. This can be seen from a stone inscription by a shudra king of 14th century, which showed his pride in being a shudra on the basis of Purusha Sukta itself, instead of any inferiority complex.<sup>28</sup> The Gita also refers to the four varnas, which were later wrongly confused with hierarchical castes. But the reference there is clearly to vocations based on aptitude and work skill ('guna' and 'karma' and not to either birth or hierarchy (Ch 4, Shloka 13). The Mahabharata, of which the Gita is a part, makes the point clear, by saying: "*Nakulam vrittaheenasya pramanamiti mae matihi/Anteshwapi jaatanaam vrittamaeva vishishyate*". 'High birth can be no certificate for a person of no character. But persons with good character can distinguish themselves irrespective of low birth' (Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva, Ch 34, Sl 41).

The point to note is that castes were not ironclad compartments but permitted a lot of social mobility. To the extent they were also hereditary, it was more because vocations were family based and skills were passed on from generation to generation in the family and not in trade schools, rather than because of scriptures. That is how the castes were formed and continued. But, as the Rigvedic quotation above shows and as Gandhiji emphasised persistently, there was no implication of superiority or inferiority. Also, the caste system did not preclude social mobility. Vijnaneshwara of 12th century in his well known commentary, 'Mitakshara', on Yajnyavalkya smriti, clearly declared *Nrin paati iti nripaha, natu kshatriyaha iti naemaha* (whosoever protects people is the king, he need not be a kshatriya as a rule).<sup>29</sup> That is how, brahmins became kings, and kshatriyas became rishis, and what is more, even the

so-called shudras became kings, poets and rishis. There has been a significant contribution from the so-called lower castes both to Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit literature.<sup>30</sup> The top-most eminent poets in Sanskrit like Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa came from very humble origins of shudra caste. There were several dalit saint-poets in the Bhakti movement. The contribution of the so-called shudras to Hindu philosophy and literature is so much that it is incorrect and misleading to call Hinduism as brahmanism. What actually prevailed in India was not the varna system, but a caste or jati system where jatis could not at all be ordered into a neat hierarchy nor even classified into a neat varna-system.<sup>31</sup>

### Castes Today

It is even more important not to unnecessarily exaggerate the importance of castes in the modern age. Gupta refers to empirical findings of modern scholars in this regard. He says, "They [modern scholars] are willing to recognise that the institution of caste has not particularly blocked the development of democracy and adult franchise" [Rudolph and Rudolph 1969]. Nor has the castesystem held up occupational mobility and economic innovations [Singer 1972]. What is more, it has also been found that the caste system provided for social mobility by an almost deliberate relaxation of rules.<sup>32</sup>

Hinduism has not found it difficult to discard what is dysfunctional and outdated, by simply reinterpreting and giving a new meaning to old terms and metaphors. An example of this is how the Gita itself changed the meaning of the Vedic term 'yajna' from ritual oblation in holy fire to a non-ritual sacrifice for the sake of others and god and selfless service. It is interesting to see how Arvind Sharma has reinterpreted Purusha Sukta to suit the modern times. Its reference, according to him, need not be to social structure as such, but to combining in the same individual different duties one has to perform during one's life, learning, helping in the management or governance of the community and the country as in a democracy (voter is the king) including offering military service when needed, participation in economic or professional activities, and service to society including manual labour (for one's own benefit and for the society). In his words: "The idea is that *all* the varnas are contained in *every* individual from now on instead of every individual being comprised within one of the varnas".<sup>33</sup> Even if varna-dharma is said to be intrinsic to Hinduism

(actually, it is not), the above interpretation totally demolishes the whole system of hierarchy and compartmentalisation. Such radical changes in ideologies are nothing new to Hinduism, as it is a dynamic religion.

All the medieval Bhakti saints and all modern Hindu philosophers have denounced the caste system and untouchability, in addition to Mahatma Gandhi. Dalit classes have played no insignificant role in this reinterpretation and democratisation of Hinduism. Modern Hinduism as prevalent today is more a product of the teachings of medieval saints like Basavanna, Ramanuja, Tukaram, Kabir (who was a Muslim), Purandaradasa, Meerabai and Guru Nanak, and of modern saints like Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Sri Shirdi Saibaba (who was a Muslim), Swami Chinmayananda and Sri Satya Saibaba than a product of the teaching of Vedas. Hardly one out of one hundred thousand Hindus would have read the Vedas or Manusmriti even in translation, but they are much better aware of the teachings of these great persons.

Regarding untouchability, Dipankar Gupta observes: "Historical evidence tells us that untouchability is a latter addition in the history of the Indian caste system. Till about the second century AD certain castes... were despised, but were not considered untouchables. Untouchability is, therefore, a historical cohort of the caste system, but not its essence. The notion of purity and pollution, as Dumont correctly observed, is integrally linked with the institution of untouchability. But like untouchability, the notion of purity and pollution is also an historical accretion."<sup>34</sup> He says further that "it was well after the Vedic period, after even the period of the Mauryan empire, that the notion of untouchability came into being. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the chief or the noble is advised to eat from the same vessel as the *vis*, or commoner. ...In the Rigveda, there is no mention of untouchable either. ...It was only around second century AD that the structure of untouchables and the notion of untouchability became evident, for instance in the *Apasthambha Dharmasutra*".<sup>35</sup> But *Apasthambha Dharmasutra* or even Manusmriti never had the same status as the Vedas or the Gita. Referring to Romila Thapar's source, Gupta further states that as Buddhism flourished in urban centres, "all those who entered urban areas sporadically to render services and then returned to non-urban hinterland were considered untouchables by Buddhists. But in rural areas where Vedism reigned, and

where these communities settled, they were not given this lowly status, and this is reflected in Hindu texts. Strangely enough, Dumont notes the absence of any reference to untouchables in Vedic texts, but dismisses its significance.<sup>36</sup> It may be added that the Gita also makes no reference to untouchability, signifying the absence of such practice during the period.

The practice of untouchability seems to have, however, reached epidemic proportions affecting the vitals of Indian society by 12th century. But it also attracted condemnation by Basavanna and Ramanuja in the same century. Madhwacharya, who came on the scene later, clearly said in his commentary on the *Brahmasutras*: "Even the low-born (untouchables) have the right to the name and knowledge of god if they are devoted to Him".<sup>37</sup> It becomes clear thus that untouchability developed not because but in spite of the basic tenets of Hinduism. Not one or two, but many medieval saints and modern philosophers of Hinduism condemned both untouchability and the unequal caste system determined by birth and declared that they are not consistent with the basic tenets of Hinduism. This was done again in the 1970 Udupi Conference, which has been referred to above. The textual basis of this condemnation may be briefly stated.

The Vedanta philosophy declares that there is divinity in every creature, both human and non-human. Lord Krishna says in Bhagavadgita: "He, who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me, never becomes separated from Me nor am I lost to him" (Ch 6, Shloka 30; the preceding and the succeeding verses also convey the same). He further says: "He, who judges pleasure and pain in others by the same standard as he applies to himself, that Yogi is the highest" (Ch 6, Shloka 32). In the 16th chapter, He narrates the virtues he looks for in human beings and says that those who possess them are divine. Among these virtues are: non-violence, truth, compassion to all, absence anger and hatred, giving charity and service selflessly, forgiveness, non-covetousness and modesty (Ch16, Shlokas 1 to 3). Hitopadesha, a rich treasure of morals told through simple stories, has expressed a basic principle of Hinduism in a verse, which has now become immortal: *Ayam nijaha paroveti gananaalaghu chetasaam/Udaarachritaanaam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. ('This person is ours, that one belongs to others!') Such consideration is made only by the narrow minded; for the liberal and broad-minded however the whole world is a family."<sup>38</sup> How can an

unequal system of caste and inhuman untouchability be consistent and compatible with such preaching? How can a religion which declared that the whole world as a family (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*) be considered as casteist?

It is interesting that apart from the noble principles in the texts as quoted above, Hinduism also created legends from time to time to express its condemnation of untouchability and casteism. These legends appealed to the popular mind and were intended to influence the practice of religion directly. In the 10th century, Thiruppan Alwar, an untouchable devotee, was insulted by a priest of the Ranganatha temple (Tamil Nadu) for standing in his way to the temple. The temple doors did not open to the priest, but a voice came from within the sanctum sanctorum that unless the priest takes the Alwar on his shoulders and circumambulates the shrine three times, the doors would not open. The priest had to obey and thereupon Thiruppan Alwar was accepted and hailed as a great saint by vaishnavas. A similar legend is about Kanakadasa (in Karnataka) of 16th century. When he was not admitted into the Udupi Sri Krishna Temple by the priests, the idol is said to have turned its face around so that Kanakadasa could have Darshan through the back window of the temple. It is still known as Kanaka's window. There are other such legends about saint poets in Maharashtra also, most of whom came from the so-called low castes. There is thus evidence that Hinduism constantly tried to fight blind orthodoxy and disrespect to lower castes.

### Impact of Modernisation

It is thus shown above that neither Hindu society as a whole nor Hinduism as such is in support of a hierarchical caste system and the savage practice of untouchability. Both are well on their way to going, thanks both to deliberate state-sponsored measures, like the anti-untouchability law and the reservation policy, and also to modernisation, technological change and democracy. As these forces gather further strength, the remaining vestiges will also vanish. The stratification of society has not vanished yet, but this is true even among dalits themselves in hierarchical terms, and so also among Christians and Muslims at least in south Asia. If there is no religious sanction for it in these religions, so it is in Hinduism too, though some from the upper castes may have misinterpreted a few things to their own advantage and even added some verses of their own later but they

are discardable.<sup>39</sup> The solution to the problem of inequality and injustice, particularly for dalits, consists neither in reviling Hinduism nor in conversions. The solution lies in community efforts at self-help in a constructive way, the way shown by nadars and izhavas, supplemented by state help.

On their part, the leaders, including the religious leaders, from the so-called caste Hindus should spare no efforts in condemning the continuation of casteism and untouchability, in supporting inter-caste marriages, and call upon their followers to treat the deprived classes with greater respect and humanism. They should remember Gandhiji's warning that Hinduism will be destroyed if untouchability continues. An important constraint in the path of heads of traditional monasteries ('mathadhipatis') in reaching out to dalits is that their 'mathas' are organised on the basis of respective communities which do not easily allow their swamijis to look beyond their own communities even if the swamijis want to do so. Often, the followers of the 'mathas' are more orthodox than the swamijis heading the 'mathas'. This problem prevents the Swamijis to look beyond their mathas at the social problems of Hinduism as a whole, which actually seems to be an important factor in the continuation of untouchability and the caste system. The latter are weakened more by forces of modern education, urbanisation and technological change than by the preaching of Swamijis. If the Swamijis, particularly the heads of brahman 'mathas' cannot break out of their shells, they will be simply overtaken and rendered redundant by the forces of modernism. Fortunately, Hinduism is solving this problem through altogether new types of 'mathas' and new types of order of monks which are not at all based on castes. They have attracted non-brahman communities in large numbers, besides brahman communities, both among monks and laity. To mention a few examples, they comprise Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, ISCON, Brahma Kumaris, Chinmaya Mission, Swami Narayana order of monks, Shri Satya Saibaba followers and many more. Except for Arya Samaj, they do not have any programme of reconversion but do offer a way for it without the reconversion having to seek any caste base to enter into Hinduism. These new institutions are quite modern and egalitarian in outlook, devoted to social service too in addition to giving spiritual guidance, at the same time continuing to draw inspiration from the most noble and the best in Hinduism. Also, non-brahman castes which

did not have their own 'mathas' and swamijis have gone in for them with the help of the main established 'mathas'. This has helped them to get spiritual guidance and leadership and at the same time even ritual equality with brahmins. This new dynamism of Hinduism has already found a way for it to end hierarchy in castes and eradicate untouchability, and make Hindu society more democratic and egalitarian. The trend is that these new forces will eventually overtake the caste-ridden traditional order, where they have not already done so.

In any case, as Gandhiji said, it is an outrage to take advantage of poverty, blame it on Hinduism, and convert the poor and gullible. Poverty is not unique to India, and cannot be attributed to Hinduism. Poverty as a mass phenomenon emerged in India during the British period, as is well known, due to the systematic destruction of indigenous industry, heavy land taxes and zamindari. The extent of mass poverty declined only after independence, at least by half during the last 50 years. Neither Hinduism nor its alleged caste system came in the way of achieving this progress.

Most of the tensions between communities arise from a slow growth in employment opportunities and incomes of particularly the poor. While economic growth has to some extent accelerated, eradication of poverty seems to have slowed down. Such a situation can be explosive, particularly when aspirations are rising fast and disparities are widening in the course of economic growth. Not only conversions are no solution to this problem, they also divert attention from its solution. Both the state and the advantaged sections, including the elite among dalits, have to find ways of meeting the aspirations of the poor, removing all vestiges of untouchability by strict implementation of the law, by encouraging the urbanisation of dalits and by ensuring a fair share to them in the benefits of economic and social development. [27]

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## Notes

[I have benefited from discussions with K T Pandurangi, V M Rao, Suryanath U Kamath, P V Krishna Bhat, and R S Deshpande. I am immensely grateful to them. Usual disclaimers apply.]

- 1 Cf R C Mujumdar (ed), *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Third Edition, Vol 10, Part II, pp 15-16.
- 2 Ibid, Vol IX, Part I, pp 420-21.

- 3 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 14th Impression, 1998, Vol 4, p 345.
- 4 Ibid, Vol 8, p 212.
- 5 Cf Satya P Agarwal, *The Social Role of the Gita: How and Why*, Delhi Motilal Banarasis, 1993, esp Ch 2 on 'Ram Mohun Roy: Using the Gita for Social Reform' and Ch 3 on 'Vivekananda: Institutionalising the Karmayoga Based Socio-Spiritual Approach'.
- 6 Attributed to Ram Swarup and quoted by Koenraad Elst in *Decolonising the Hindu Mind – Ideological Development of Hindu Revisalism*, Rupa and Co, New Delhi, 2001, pp 274-75.
- 7 Editorial in *The Times of India*, October 28, 2002, argued the same thing under the caption, 'Democracy of Faith' and asserted that the right to freedom of religion also included the right to convert.
- 8 Cf Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemma*, Harper Collins Publisher India, New Delhi, 1997, pp13-15.
- 9 Koenraad Elst, op cit, pp 271 and 278.
- 10 He observed: "...every man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less, but an enemy the more." Cf *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op cit, Vol 5, p 233.
- 11 Cf Arun Shourie, op cit, p 221; Koenraad Elst, op cit, p 366.
- 12 See Gandhiji's article published originally in *Modern Review* in 1941, reprinted in his *Collected Works*, Vol 75, p 70.
- 13 Quoted by Arvind Sharma in his *Hinduism for Our Times*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp 85-6.
- 14 Ibid, p 89.
- 15 M K Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, Bharatan Kumarappa ed, Ahmedabad: Narjivan 1950, Press, p 231, as quoted in Sharma, op cit, pp 89-90.
- 16 Elst, op cit, p 286 fn.
- 17 For details of the historical background to these Acts and provisions therein, see Simon Charsley and G K Karanth (eds) *Challenging Untouchability – Dalit Initiative and Experience from Karnataka*, New Delhi, Sage, 1998; also Ghanashyam Shah's Introduction in his edited book: *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Sage, New Delhi, 2000.
- 18 Cf Robert Deliege, 'At the Thresholds of Untouchability: Pallars and Valaiyars in a Tamil Village' in C J Fuller (ed), *Caste Today*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, especially p 90.
- 19 Cf Agricultural Censuses of 1980-81 and 1990-91.
- 20 See P Hanumantha Rayappa and T V Sekhar, 'Development and Disparities among Backward and Scheduled Groups in Karnataka', *Journal of the India School of Political Economy*, 1996, Vol 5(1), Tables 1 and 2 on pp 51-52.
- 21 M N Srinivas, *On Living in a Revolution and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.
- 22 P V Krishna Bhat told me about the Udipi Conference and Suryanath Kamath, a reputed historian of Karnataka, told me about the Swamiji's visit to a dalit slum on the basis of his recorded notes.
- 23 For an account of how izhavas and nadars achieved spectacular success, see Ciriak K Pulapilly (1976) 'The Izhavas of Kerala and Their Historic Struggle for Acceptance in the Hindu Society' in Beldwell L Smith (ed) *Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia*, Leiden: E J Brill, 1976; Robert L Hardgrave Jr, *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu: The Political Culture of a Community*, Oxford University Press and University of California Press, 1969; L I Rudolph and S H Rudolph (1969), *Modernity of Tradition – Political Development in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1969.
- 24 Cf Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution*, Sage, New Delhi, 1994, esp, pp 31-32.
- 25 Koenraad Elst, op cit, p 424.
- 26 B R Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, 1986-90, Vol 8, p 233.
- 27 As translated by K T Pandurangi in his *Indian Thought on Human Values*, Bangalore: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1999, 2nd Edn, p 3.
- 28 The inscription cited is attributed to Singaya Nayaka (AD 1368) which says: "The three castes, viz, brahmanas and the next (kshatriyas and vaishyas) were produced from the face, the arms and the thighs of the lord; and for their support was born the fourth caste from his feet. That the latter caste is purer than the former is self-evident; for this caste was born along with the river Ganga (which also springs from his feet), the purifier of the three worlds. The members of this caste are eagerly attentive to their duties, not wicked, pure-minded and are devoid of passion and such other blemishes; they ably bear all the burden of the earth." Quoted by Koenraad Elst, op cit, p 403. His source is Epigraphica Indica, Vol XIII (ASI Report 1982), pp.259 ff, v 5-7. Another inscription cited from the same source by Elst refers to how Singaya Nayaka's relative, Kapaya Nayaka, 'rescued the Andhra Country from the ravages of the Mohammedans' (Elst, op cit, pp 403).
- 29 K T Pandurangi drew my attention to this quotation.
- 30 For details, see M V Nadkarni, 'Broadbasing Process in India and Dalits', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 32, Nos 33 and 34, August 16-23, 1997, pp 2160-71.
- 31 See Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste – Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2000, esp Ch 3.
- 32 Ibid, p 55; Rudolph and Rudolph op cit; Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernises: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilisation*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1972.
- 33 Arvind Sharma, op cit, Ch 3, 'Castes and Stages of Life in Modern Living', esp, p 46.
- 34 Cf Gupta, op cit, pp 143-44.
- 35 Ibid, p 190.
- 36 Ibid, pp 190-91.
- 37 K T Pandurangi drew my attention to this verse. The original in Sanskrit is *Antyajaahs api ye bhakataha, namajnyanadhikarinaha*, Brahmasutra Bhashya (1-1-1).
- 38 Cf *Hitopadesha*, Sandhi – 131.
- 39 The much maligned Manusmriti itself says (in Ch 4, verse 176): *Parityajaetharthakamow yow Syaatham Dharmavarjithow!* *Dharmachyapyasukhodarka Lokavikrushthamaeva cha*, it means: Discard Wealth (*artha*) and desire if they are contrary to *dharma* (customary morality or social duty law), and even *dharma* itself may be discarded if it were to lead to unhappiness or arouse people's indignation'. This gives freedom to Hindus to discard any teaching or verses in their smritis or Dharmasutras which leads to ill fare rather than welfare of people or creates righteous indignation.