Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism?
Demolishing a Myth

This paper, citing evidence from the ancient scriptures, attempts to establish that Hinduism – its vedic and classic variants – did not support the caste system; it rigorously opposed it in practice and principle. Even after the emergence of the caste system, Hindu society still saw considerable occupational and social mobility. Moreover, Hinduism created legends to impress on the popular mind the invalidity of the caste system – a fact further reinforced by the constant efflorescence of reform movements throughout history. The caste system survived in spite of this because of factors that ranged from the socio-economic to the ecological, which helped sustain and preserve balance among communities in a non-modern world.

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> One need not despair of ever knowing the truth of one's religion, because the fundamentals of Hinduism, as of every great religion, are unchangeable, and easily understood.
> – M K Gandhi, *Young India*, October 6, 1921

It is necessary to demolish the myth that caste system is an intrinsic part of Hinduism. This myth is believed by orthodox elements within Hinduism and also is propagated by elements outside Hinduism with the mischievous intent of proselytising. Ironically both, though opposed to each other, jointly do a lot of damage. Moreover, this myth has harmed relations between the so-called upper castes and lower castes. This paper intends to logically and with documentary proof show that Hinduism – even vedic and classical Hinduism – not only does not support the caste system, but has taken lots of pains to oppose it both in principle and practice, making it obvious that caste system is not an intrinsic part of Hindu canon, philosophy and even practice. It will then show that the caste system emerged and survived due to totally different factors, which had nothing to do with Hindu religion.

I
What Caste System Means

Caste system as discussed here includes untouchability too, but wherever necessary it will be referred to separately. As we shall note, untouchability came into the caste system much later. The following features are generally taken as essential in characterising caste system.

– It means not simply a division of labour, with each 'varna' associated with a type of occupation, but also a division of labour determined by birth permitting no occupational/social mobility. This is what distinguishes caste from class. While the former is hereditary, the latter is not – at least in principle.

– It is a rigid system, separating caste from caste, with restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage, due to a morbid fear of 'varna-sankara' (mixture of varnas). 'Caste' corresponds to jatis, and each varna is supposed to be a cluster of jatis, though there is sometimes ambiguity about which jati belongs to which varna. It is varnas that are cited in canon, not jatis. Restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage pertained not merely to varnas but also to jatis.

– It is a hierarchical system, one below the other in ritual (or purity) status, with several disabilities imposed on the fourth varna of shudras and even more on the untouchables known as 'antyajas'. It was not, however, hierarchical in power and wealth at least as between the upper castes. Dumont thought that the distinction between status and power is basic to understanding caste sysem [Dumont 1999:65-91].

– The system is associated with a notion of purity vis-à-vis pollution, with utmost purity at the level of brahmins declining successively with kshatriyas, vaishyas, and then shudras. At the other end, untouchables are treated as most impure or polluted. A touch of them is supposed to pollute others including shudras. A gradation of hierarchy and pollution was found among untouchables too, for example, bhangis (scavengers) considered as more polluted than say, mahars (agricultural labourers). Initially the notion of purity vs pollution may have been based on the need to maintain cleanliness, but it soon developed into an institutionalised form where pollution was associated with birth. The upper castes when polluted could, however, get rid of their pollution through ritual bath and such other expiatory measures. The notion of purity and pollution developed into a powerful instrument to discourage and prevent varnasankara.

– The whole system along with its taboos and restrictions is authenticated by religion or canon, giving it a religious sanctity.

– At the foundation of the whole system there is a production system, which is subsistence-oriented and locally based rather than oriented to larger market, and production relations being of patron-client type, based on mutual dependence. Such a system is not necessarily geared for the generation of economic surplus and its appropriation, as it was not oriented to the larger market but to local needs.

II
Our Approach to the Demolition of the Myth

I reject totally the myth that caste system, as defined by these features either collectively or singly, forms an integral part of Hinduism. Why Hinduism is not varna dharma understood as jati or birth based, will become clear in the course of this paper. Hinduism can be defined, as Gandhiji did, as search for truth, non-violence, compassion for all beings and tolerance. Consistent with its commitment to search for truth, it is also marked by liberalism. Hinduism is a dynamic religion, not fixed or

revealed once for all, and hence cannot be identified exclusively with the religion of the Vedas and Upanishads, nor with the religion expounded by 'Dharmashastras', nor with the Hinduism of the three eminent Acharyas – Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, nor also exclusively with medieval Hinduism and modern Hinduism. All these phases represent Hinduism, and have contributed to its development. Moreover, there is no disjointedness between different phases of Hinduism, each deriving its inspiration from the previous ones. In that sense, there is both change and continuity in Hinduism. Since however, it is accepted by all as beyond controversy that medieval Bhakti movement was a protest against caste system and since it is equally well known that modern Hinduism as explained by Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo and others also has rejected caste system, the focus of this paper is on previous or classical phases of Hinduism. It is this earlier Hinduism, which may be termed as classical Hinduism, that is taken as supportive to the caste system, and it is this myth that is being demolished by this paper. Our greater attention to the previous phases of Hinduism is thus not because Hinduism is defined in terms of these phases, but simply because the contention concerns these phases.

The myth is demolished in the following way:
(i) by showing that there is no strong correlation between Hinduism and caste system, either spatially or temporally;
(ii) by showing that even after the caste system emerged in Hindu society, there was considerable social and occupational mobility, and that none of the defining features of caste system listed above were strictly observed in practice particularly in the classical period;
(iii) by showing that far from supporting the caste system, Hindu canon and philosophy were actually against caste system based on birth;
(iv) by showing that, in addition, Hinduism created legends to impress the popular mind that the caste system is immoral and invalid;
(v) by showing that within the framework of Hinduism, there took place several movements against caste, starting from Bhakti movements continuing to more modern movements;
(vi) by showing that caste system emerged and survived in spite of Hindu canon and philosophy, because of factors which had nothing to do with Hindu religion.

III
No Correlation between Hinduism and Caste System

The statement that there is no correlation between Hinduism and caste may sound surprising to many. If not in exactly the same words, this is the sum and substance of what Dumont, the most highly regarded authority on caste system, and later even Gail Omvedt – not known to be an admirer of Hinduism – had to say [Dumont Omvedt 1994:31-32]. Dumont refers to caste distinctions including even untouchable castes, among Christians in India in different regions. The discrimination against untouchable Christians is reflected in the form of their separate seating in churches, and even separate burial grounds. Even today, one can see advertisements in newspapers seeking 'Catholic brahmin' spouses for Catholic brahmins. Islam, supposed to be an egalitarian religion, is not free from castes at least in south Asia. Dumont himself refers to different communities within 'ashrafs', who are supposed to be high caste, and also 'non-ashrafs' who have a lower status. Among the

non-ashrafs also, there are three levels of status: '(1) the converts of superior caste, who are mainly rajputs – except for those who have been admitted into the ashraf; (2) a large number of professional groups corresponding to the artisan castes of the Hindus, …; (3) converted untouchables who have preserved their functions. These groups indeed seem to be endogamous ….' [Dumont 1999:208]. There is no commensality also between ashrafs and non-ashrafs, due to difference in their status [ibid: 207]. There is caste system among Buddhists of Sri Lanka also. Some lingayats claim that they are non-Hindu because they do not accept the Vedas and the varna dharma, and yet they too are not free from castes and ritual gradation. Basaveshwara (Basavanna), who led the Bhakti movement whose followers became known as veerashaiva or lingayats in Karnataka, was truly against caste system. But unfortunately, he could not succeed in preventing caste system among his latter-day 'followers'. On the other hand, Gail Omvedt points out that among Hindus settled for many generations in Surinam, West Indies, Mauritius, Bali, Fiji and other centres outside India, caste system was weak, almost non-existent. There took place inter-mixture more freely, including inter-dining and inter-marriage, and no one took varna-based castes seriously, though identities in terms of regional jatis (such as Marvaris and Gujaratis) have not disappeared. Gail Omvedt, therefore, says significantly that caste is more a feature of south Asia than of Hinduism per se, taking root in this region because of its peculiar social and economic characteristics.

Now we may examine correlation between Hinduism and caste system over time. The first reference to the four varnas comes in the tenth mandala of Rg Veda, in two verses of Purusha Sukta (quoted in another section below). According to several scholars who have made deep research on the theme, the tenth mandala was chronologically the last to be composed. There is a good consensus on the point that previous to this, there was no varna system in vedic society. Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana also mention that in Krita yuga, there was no caste, but only one varna of human beings – that of the children of Vivaswata Manu [Arvind Sharma 2000:136]. Hence, the word manava, popular in all Indian languages. Puranas and other Hindu scriptures have preserved the racial memory of a golden age in the past when there was no caste.

According to B R Ambedkar, there were only three varnas in vedic society, and no fourth varna of shudras. He says, the economy had advanced enough to give rise to a division of labour but there was no hierarchy. He refers to other cosmologies in Hindu texts, but they are all secular, without hint of a hierarchy and without hint of a divine origin. He feels therefore that the two verses in Purusha Sukta are an interpolation, added much later after the caste system was established.[1] According to him shudras as an ethnic group were a part of kshatriyas, and a part of Aryan society itself. He does not accept the theory of western scholars according to which shudras and untouchables were originally non-Aryans who were defeated by Aryans, and taken into the vedic society giving them a lower status. On the other hand, shudras were very much a part of the ruling society, several of them being kings. As per Ambedkar, they fell from grace and became the fourth varna when brahmins stopped performing the rite of 'upanayana' for them as a revenge against harassment and insults suffered by them at the hands of some shudra kings. He also says that untouchability is a post-Buddhist phenomenon, which emerged as a result of Hindus giving up sacrifice of animals and beef-eating under the influence of Buddhism, but they went

to such an extreme that those who continued to eat beef were regarded as untouchables.[2]

Whether or not one accepts Ambedkar's theory of origin of shudras and untouchables, scholars are agreed that varna-system based on birth is very much a post-vedic[3] feature, and untouchability is a post-Buddhist phenomenon. This means that at some time, maybe for about first half of the long history of Hinduism since 4000 BCE to the present day, there was Hinduism but no caste system. This is so even according to Ambedkar himself. And, as we shall see in the concluding part of this paper, Hinduism can survive after the collapse of caste system.

IV
Social and Occupational Mobility Not Insignificant

The model of caste system as defined in terms of features listed in the first section here hardly ever worked in practice. There have always been exceptions to each of these features and to each of the caste rules and restrictions. Actual occupations have since centuries deviated from the varna theoretical model. Dharmashastras themselves allowed exceptions under 'apaddharma', whereby persons who could not make their livelihood under the occupations of their own varna, could take to other occupations. Brahmins by birth have taken not only to priesthood, which is their varna based occupation, but also to several others, including manual labour. It is not unusual to find brahmin cooks in the service of scheduled caste (formerly 'untouchables') and scheduled tribe ministers and officials. Havyaka brahmins in Karnataka have not only owned garden lands but also have been doing manual labour in them. Shudras, apart from doing manual labour and artisan jobs, which is their varna based occupation, have traditionally served as soldiers too, making the distinction between kshatriyas and shudras quite blurred.

Ambedkar himself has given several examples of social and occupational mobility during the vedic and upanishadic period. Raikva, Janashruti and Kavasa Ailusha were admitted to ashrams for vedic learning even after revealing their low caste status. Chhandogya Upanishad has a significant story of Satyakama Jabala. He sought admission to the ashram (hermitage) of Gautama rishi (not Gautam Buddha) for vedic learning. On being asked from what family he comes, Jabala frankly tells the rishi: 'I do not know this, sir, of what family I am. I asked my mother. She answered me, "In my youth, when I went about a great deal as a maid servant, I got you. So I do not know of what family you are. I am Jabala by name and you are Satyakama by name". So I am Satyakama Jabala, sir'. The rishi was so pleased with his truthfulness, he promptly initiated him as his pupil [Radhakrishnan 1994:406-07]. So many rishis came from obscure origin themselves, that there is a proverb which says that one should not ask about 'rishi-moola' (origin or birth of a rishi). Sage Parasara was born of a Shvapaka woman, Kapinjala of a Chandala woman, and Madanapala of a boat woman. Rishis had a much higher ritual status than brahmins who were mere priests. Valmiki (author of Ramayana) and Vyasa (author of Mahabharata, and editor and compiler of vedas) and even the great Vasistha belonged to the class of the so-called low birth. Kalidasa, the greatest of great poets in Sanskrit also came from a very humble and obscure origin.[4]

Even as late as 12th century, Vijnaneshwara in his commentary (Mitakshara) on Yajnavalkya Smriti said 'nrin pati iti nripah, na tu kshatriyah iti nemah' (whosoever protects people is fit to be a king; he need not as a rule be a kshatriya').

The Bhakti movement, both in the south and north of India, saw many saint poets coming from the so-called lower castes. They were more prominent than brahmin and upper castes in the movement. There were so many sharanas (male saints) and sharanes (female saints) in Basavanna's Bhakti movement in Karnataka that M N Javaraiah (1997) has written a whole book of more than 300 pages on them. It is thus evident that there was considerable social mobility in the post-vedic society too, not to mention the vedic society where it was very evident.

Because of this mobility, there was no unanimity about which caste is above which caste, because each considered itself superior to the other. They competed with others in observance of purity rules to show that they were superior to others. Thus, quite a few castes considered themselves to be kshatriyas, while upper castes considered them to be shudras. To gain a higher rank in the caste system, they practised what the upper castes practised, like upanayana (sacred thread ceremony), and even certain 'homas' and pujas. Such attempts are called as sanskritisation by M N Srinivas (1977), through which eventually several castes gained in caste status. Sanskritisation as a process through which whole castes gained in caste status could not have been a purely 20th century phenomenon, though scholarly attention has been mostly confined to the modern period.

Even marriages between different varnas were not rare. It must have been because of their significant occurrence, that there is a mention of different types of marriages in Hindu texts based on which jatis were evolved. When the husband is from a higher caste than that of the wife, the marriage was called as 'anuloma'; when reverse was the case, it was called as 'pratiloma'. While the former type was tolerated, the latter was despised. There was another type of classification also; according to it, a love marriage was called as 'gandharva', and a marriage where the woman was forced into marriage was called as 'rakshasa'. The former was tolerated and the latter was despised. It is evident from literature that not all marriages were arranged by parents, and mixed marriages were not rare. It is thus not a surprise that caste distinctions are not based on racial or colour distinction, though varna meant colour. Race and colour very much cut across castes since ancient days in India so that a person's caste cannot be determined on the basis of his/her colour or racial or genetic peculiarities. Just as it is possible to find upper caste people with black complexion, it is equally possible to find persons with fair complexion among the so-called lower castes and untouchables. This could not have been so without a significant degree of inter-marriages. Both Rama and Krishna are black gods but highly adored and worshipped.

The occupational and social mobility as well as the inter mixture of castes cannot be regarded as infringements of canon or as rare exceptions. As we shall now see, even canon itself did not respect the custom of determining status and character on the basis of birth.

V
Canon and Caste

We first take up such parts of the canon that are (wrongly) interpreted to be supportive of caste system, and then take up such parts as are directly and definitively against caste system based on birth.

It is only in the dharmashastras (dharma sutras and smritis) that we find support to the caste system, and not in other canon. However, dharmashastras never had the same status as other canon known as shruti (Vedas and Upanishads) and it is laid down that whenever there is a conflict between the shruti and

smriti literature, it is the former that prevails. It is Manusmriti, which is particularly supportive of caste system but where it conflicts with Vedas and Upanishads, the latter would prevail. Though Bhagvadgita (Gita) is not regarded as a part of shruti, Gita is highly regarded as sacred and is very much a part of classical Hinduism. As we shall just see even the Gita is against caste system based on birth, and not supportive to it. Thus, to the extent that dharmashastras conflict with shruti and the Gita, the latter prevails. Apasthambha dharmasutra may have supported untouchability, but it seems to be read more by those who like to attack Hinduism with it than by its followers! It is hardly regarded as canon, even if any Hindu has heard of it.

Though dharmashastras are supposed to support caste system, there is hardly unanimity about it among them. For example, as Ambedkar pointed out, though according to dharmasutras, a shudra is not entitled to upanayana, *Samskara Ganapti* explicitly declares shudras to be eligible for it. He also shows that according to Jaimini, the author of Purva Mimamsa, shudras could perform vedic rites. Ambedkar refers also to Bharadwaja Srauta Sutra (V 28) and Katyayana Srauta Sutra which concede eligibility to shudras to perform vedic rites [Vasant Moon 1990:198-99]. Kane points out that in spite of some other dharmashastras saying to the contrary, "Badari espoused the cause of the shudras and propounded the view that all (including shudras) were entitled to perform vedic sacrifices" [Kane 1990].

Interestingly, Manusmriti itself shows the way to demolish its own support to the caste system based on birth. In chapter 4, verse 176 clearly states: 'Discard wealth and desire if they are contrary to dharma, and even dharma itself if it leads to unhappiness or arouses peoples' indignation'. Dharma here does not mean religion in the western sense, but rules of conduct. If varna dharma, or rules of conduct governing varnas, and caste for that matter, lead to unhappiness or to people indignation, as they certainly do, Manusmriti itself says that such dharma can be discarded. What then is dharma, according to Manusmriti? The first verse in chapter 2 of Manusmriti is a reply to this question. It says: "Know that to be true dharma, which the wise and the good and those who are free from passion and hatred follow and which appeals to the heart".[5] Mahatma Gandhi was fond of quoting this verse in his lectures. According to this verse, if the wise and the good, who are free from passion and hatred, do not accept caste system based on birth as it does not appeal to the heart, the system can be discarded according to the Manusmrti itself. So much to the support of Manusmriti for the caste system.

Purusha Sukta in Rg Veda (X 90) has often been cited, more than Manusmriti, as authenticating, sanctifying and glorifying the caste system. The pertinent verses are as follows:

Yatpurusham vyadadhuhu
kritidha vyakalpayan/
Mukham kimasya kow bahu
Ka uru pada uchyete// (11th verse)

when (gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? What (two objects) are said (to have been) his thighs and feet?

Brahmanosya mukhamasit
bahu rajanyah kritah/
uru tadasya yadvaishyah
padbhyam shudro ajayata// (12th verse)

The brahmana was his mouth, the rajanya (king or kshatriya) was made his arms; the being called the vaishya, he was his thighs; the shudra sprang from his feet[(5, 6)]

As is noted above, Ambedkar considers these verses to be an interpolation on several grounds, including the fact that while the style or format of the two verses is of a question-and-answer type, the other verses in the purusha sukta are narrative in style. Even if it is taken as a genuine part of the original purusha sukta, and not an interpolation, it cannot be interpreted as supportive to caste system based on birth and hierarchy. It is essentially a metaphor taking the society to be an organic whole, of which the four varnas based on division of labour are intrinsic parts. There is nothing to indicate that they ought to be castes or jatis as presently understood. The reference is evidently to occupations or work of respective varnas, which need not necessarily be based on birth. There is also nothing prescriptive or recommendatory about the two verses. It is only indicative of the existence of division of labour, with each varna corresponding to that part of the body of the primeval purusha with which the work or occupation of the respective varna is associated. Since vaishyas and shudras support the society through their economic or productive work, they were taken respectively as coming out of the thighs and feet of the purusha, without necessarily hinting at any lowly status of their work. Similarly since kshatriyas' work in warfare involved mainly the use of their arms, they were taken as coming out of the arms of the purusha. Since brahmins' work consisted of reciting mantras and preserving Vedas through oral transmission, they were taken as coming out the purusha's mouth. In a lighter vein, it could be said that this was also because brahmins are traditionally described as 'bhojanapriyah' (lovers of food)! If the intention behind the two controversial verses was to sanctify a hierarchical order, they could as well have described brahmins as coming out of the head of the purusha. It was perhaps seen by the vedic sage who composed the purusha sukta that brahmin priests mostly used their mouth rather than their head while reciting the mantras! There is thus no need for hard feelings due to the two verses in purusha sukta.

The Gita is alleged to support the caste system on the basis of three verses. The key quotation in this context is from 13th verse in ch 4 where the Lord tells Arjuna –

Chaturvarnyam maya srishtam
Gunakarma vibhagashah

The four varnas were created by me on the basis of character and occupation.

In verse 31 of ch 2, Arjuna is cajoled into fighting on the ground that he is a kshatriya for whom there is nothing more glorious than a righteous war. Again in verse 47 of ch 18 the Lord states that one should perform one's own dharma even if devoid of merit and not follow another's even if well-performed.[7]

Verse 13 in ch IV holds the key to the understanding of the other two as well. Krishna refers to the four varnas, saying explicitly that they were created on the basis of guna (nature, aptitude, character) and karma (work, action, occupation). He does not at all refer to birth as the basis for the fourfold division, which is only a division of labour where each one follows an occupation based on aptitude or natural inclination. Far from support to the caste system, K M Panikkar considers it as constituting a devastating attack on caste based on birth.[8] Kane says that if Krishna wanted to make birth as the basis of his division of labour, he could easily have said 'jati-karma-vibhagashah' or 'janma-karma-vibhagashah', instead of 'guna-karma-vibhagashah' as actually stated [Kane 1990:1635-36]. He pointed out clearly to 'guna'. This is also consistent with what Krishna replied to Arjuna's specific question in Uttaragita.

Once this is clear, it follows that the dharma referred to in the other two verses (II 31, and XVIII 47) also is based on guna and not birth. In the Mahabharata war, persons not born as kshatriyas also participated in the war as per their inclination, svabhava or guna. So there was nothing casteist in Krishna's asking Arjuna to fight like a kshatriya. Similarly, the advice to follow one's own svadharma only means that one has to follow one's aptitude and qualities, and see where one's comparative advantage lies. A talented person may be able to perform many tasks better than others, but she cannot afford to do so, and she would achieve more by concentrating on where her comparative advantage lies. The principle of comparative advantage, instead of absolute advantage, is followed in international trade between countries. What Krishna advocated was to ask us to follow the more scientific and practical principle of comparative advantage as that would maximise social as well as individual welfare. There is nothing casteist about his advice. Comparative advantage here can also be taken in the dynamic sense, of potential that can be realised, and not in terms of present or actual guna in a static sense.

The story of Shambuka in Ramayana is also cited as supporting caste system to an extreme extent. It is the story of a shudra who was killed on the advice of ministers by Rama as a punishment for doing penance and neglecting his caste duties. The story appears in Uttara Kanda, which is not a part of Valmiki's Ramayana which ends with Rama's return to Ayodhya in Yuddhakanda. P V Kane, an eminent Sanskrit scholar, is of the view that Uttara Kanda was clearly a 'work of later interpolators' [ibid: Vol 1, Part 1, p 389]. The interpolation was done at a time when varna system deteriorated and got established on the basis of birth in a rigid form. Shambuka's story is not consistent with many examples of persons of so-called low birth being initiated into ashrams as pupils by rishis, and becoming rishis themselves. Matanga rishi is mentioned in Valmiki Ramayana with high regard. He came from a caste that may be regarded as untouchable in today's parlance. Rama met him to pay his respects during his forest sojourn.

Now we may take note of those parts of classical Hindu canon, which cannot co-exist caste system and have condemned the practice of determining one's character and status on the basis of birth or 'kula' (family).

Vedanta philosophy declares that there is divinity in every lecture. Krishna says in verse 30 of ch 6: 'He who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me, never becomes departed from Me, nor am I lost to him'. The preceding and succeeding verses in the Gita also convey the same message. The lord says again: 'He who judges pleasure and pain in others by the same standard as he applies to himself, that yogi is the highest' (ch 6.32). How can this advice be consistent or co-exist with support to caste distinctions based on birth? In the 16th chapter, the Lord 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 of anger and hatred, giving charity and service selflessly, forgiveness, non-covetousness and modesty (ch 16, v 1-3). It follows that high birth is hardly relevant.

Rg Veda emphasises equality of all human beings. It goes to the extent of saying, which sounds quite modern: 'No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity'.[9]

The idea that all human beings are equal before god irrespective of caste and that all are entitled to receive his light comes out clearly from the following:
Rucham no dhehi brahmaneshu
Rucham rajasu naskridhi /

Rucham vishveshu shudreshu
Mayi dhehi rucha rucham ||

    –Taittiriya Samhita V 7.6 3-4
Put light in our brahmanas, put it in our chiefs (kings), (put) light in vaishyas and shudras, put light in me by your light.[10]

It may sound surprising to critics of Hinduism but is a fact that Hindu scriptures have backed liberalism and humanism by undermining birth, upholding character and basic worth of persons as being more important. Mahabharata makes this point very strongly, to an extent that it reflects a revolt against the caste system based on birth:
Na kulam vrittahinasya
Pramanamiti me matihi /
Anteshwapij jatanam
Vrittameva vishishyate //

    – Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva, Ch 34, v 41.
It means:
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 emphasises the same point again elsewhere too:
Yastu Shudro dame satye
dharme cha satatotthitah /
tam brahmanamaham manye
vritten hi bhavet dvijah //

    – Mahabharata, Vanaparva, Ch 216, vs 14-15.
It means:
That shudra who is ever engaged in self-control, truth and righteousness, I regard him a brahmin. One is a twice-born by conduct alone.[11]

Uttaragita, which is also a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, makes the same point. When Arjuna specifically asks Krishna how varna is determined, he replies:
Na jatih karanam tata
gunah kalyanakaranam /
Vritasthamapi chandalam
tam devah brahmanam viduh //

It means:
Birth is not the cause, my friend; it is virtues, which are the cause of welfare. Even a Chandala observing the vow is considered a brahmana by the gods.[12]

The verse above corroborates our interpretation of the three controversial verses from the Bhagavadgita quoted above.

The story of Shankaracharya (8th century), prostrating before a Chandala is well known. When the latter stood in the way of the former, he was asked to move away. The Chandala asked him whether the Acharya's behaviour was consistent with his philosophy. He asked further: *Viproyam Shvapachoyam ityapi mahan koyam Vibhedabhramah* (what is this confusing distinction between a brahmin and an untouchable?). Shankaracharya then prostrates before him as before a guru and breaks out into five verses known as Manisha Panchakam. He reiterates his advaita philosophy, but in his very first verse he says that a person who knows the Supreme, whether he is a Chandala or a twice-born, is a guru for him. (*Chandaloastu sa tu dvijoastu gururityesha manisha mama*).[13] Ramanujacharya who came in 12th century, defied caste even more powerfully. Madhvacharya (13th century) in his Brahmasutra bhashya declares: 'Even the low born (untouchables) have the right to the name and knowledge of god if they are devoted to him.[14]

Tirukkural, an ancient text venerated by Tamils as Tamil Veda,

authored by Tiruvalluvar, says: Let him who thinks inequity be warned that ruin awaits him' (116th aphorism). Again, 'All men are born alike; the differences are due to differences in what they do.' (972nd aphorism).[15]

There is an entire Upanishad, named Vajrasuchika, devoted to an attack on caste system based on birth. The name of the Upanishad can be translated as 'Thunderbolt suggestive', which fits its claim to blast ignorance responsible for leading to caste distinctions and away from god. It is in prose and small in size, having only nine short paragraphs. It is included as the last Upanishad in S Radhakrishnan edited The Principal Upanishads along with his translation [Radhakrishnan 1994:935-38]. The following summary account is based on it. The Upanishad is argumentative in style and begins with a few questions (in second para): 'Who is verily, the brahmana (brahmin)? Is he the individual soul (Jiva)? Is he the body? Is he class based on birth (jati)? Is he the knowledge? Is he the deeds (Karma)? Is he the performer of rites?' Then it answers the questions one by one. A brahmin cannot be the individual soul, since soul is the same in previous births. He cannot be the body because the body consists of physical elements, which are common to all human beings. He cannot be determined by birth, because many sages attained high rank irrespective of birth. He cannot also be determined by knowledge, as there were many kshatriyas and others who too attained highest knowledge and wisdom, and knowledge has not been an exclusive feature of brahmins. Deeds also cannot make a brahmin, since all human beings can do good work. Similarly, rites and charity can also be done by all. Who then is really a brahmin? He is the one who knows his self like an amalaka fruit (gooseberry) on his palm, without caring for distinctions of birth, being devoid of infirmities, narrowness and ego, and who functions as the in-dwelling spirit of all beings. At the end, the Upanishad calls upon all to meditate on the Supreme, removing all distinctions and egoism from mind. There is no need for further proof to show that Hindu philosophy and religion are against caste system, after reading this Upanishad.

VI
Legends as a Weapon against Caste System

Apart from such direct preaching discussed above, Hinduism fought casteism and untouchability by creating legends too. Such legends appealed to popular mind directly. A legend about Shankaracharya has already been presented above.

Tiruppan Alvar (10th century CE), an untouchable devotee of Lord Ranganatha, was insulted by a priest for standing in the 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 Alvar on his shoulders and circumambulates the temple three times and brings him in the Lord's presence, the doors would not open. The priest had to obey, and thereafter, Tiruppan Alvar was hailed as a great saint.

A similar legend is about Kanakadasa (16th century). When he was not admitted into Udupi Shri Krishna temple by the priests, the idol is said to have turned its face around so that Kanakadasa could have the darshan (sight) of the lord through a back window. It is still known as Kanakana Kindi (Kanaka's window).

There are similar legends in other regions of India too. An interesting legend concerns working class bhakti-saints of Maharashtra who came from low castes. The legend reflects poignantly the empathy felt by lord Vitthala for his working class devotees who struggle for their livelihood and yet are deeply devoted to him. The lord responds by deeply identifying himself with the devotees and participates in their work and toil, and brings them emotional relief. It is also a way of raising the status of manual labour in the eyes of particularly the upper castes for the lord himself does this labour of love for his devotees. There is such a legend about several, but is particularly interesting in the case of Janabai, a woman saint from a dalit caste. Chokhamela, a contemporary dalit saint-poet, has immortalised this legend in one of his poems:

'He scours the floor and pounds the grain,
sweeps rubbish from her yard,
hastens to fetch water,
the Lord of the wheel,
and plaits hair with his own hands,
sitting at peace, peering down,
he quickly kills lice.
Chokha says loves' labour this.
He cares little for greatness.'[16]

VII
Movements Against Caste within Hinduism

The most prominent movement within the framework of Hinduism to fight against casteism was the Bhakti movement. Though started first in Tamil Nadu as early as in 6th century CE by Shaiva saints, it found a powerful expression against caste system when Veerashaiva movement was led by Basavanna in Karnataka in 12th century. The Bhakti movement democratised, broad-based and humanised Hinduism as never before. Even if it may not have succeeded in eliminating caste system, it brought home the important fact that caste distinctions based on birth can have no sanctity in the eyes of god. The movement effectively undermined the authority of texts, which supported caste, though a false impression was also created more by upper castes than by lower castes that Vedas supported caste. As a result, several Bhakti sects declared that they rejected the authority of the Vedas, prominent among them being the Veerashaiva movement and Sikhism.

The Bhakti movement cut across not only castes, but even religions and spread all over India. Kabir in north India, Shishunal Sharif in Karnataka, and Shirdi Sai Baba in Maharashtra were born as Muslims, but were a part of Bhakti movement and highly respected by Hindus. The movement explicitly and powerfully condemned caste system, including untouchability. Basavanna's movement in Karnataka was most aggressively against caste, and included several dalit sharanas and sharanes as pointed out earlier. Basavanna went to the extent of getting a brahmin disciple's daughter married to an untouchable disciple's son, causing a serious commotion. Basavanna was far ahead of his time. Since the lower castes were from the working class, he preached dignity of manual labour as an important principle of his philosophy. The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra also was very similar, drawing saint-poets from the lower caste working class, though it included brahmins too. The movement in Maharashtra was started by an outcaste brahmin, Sant Jnaneshwar, whose family lost caste because his father, a sannyasi renounced sannyasa and got married on receiving a message from god to that effect. The movement in Maharashtra too emphasised dignity of manual labour. There is thus quite a lot of evidence to show that Hinduism constantly, deliberately and consciously fought against caste system and untouchability from time to time, even before the modern age and before the influence of western ideas.

Apart from the scattered and sporadic attacks on caste system, there were also concerted attempts to lift individual communities of untouchables as a whole and to bring them into the mainstream. These attempts started from the 19th century itself. Two glorious examples may be taken – that of ezhavas in Kerala and nadars in Tamil Nadu. Both examples relate to the pre-independence period of late 19th to early 20th century. These examples are of great interest as they involved two dalit communities elevating their caste status entirely through self-efforts and very much within the framework of Hinduism. They have been much more successful than other efforts involving conversion to other faiths for the purpose of elevation in social status.

Shri Narayan Guru (1854-1928) was the chief force behind elevating the social status of ezhavas, who is venerated by them as well as by others. He gave three slogans to his followers: "One caste, one religion, and one god for man". "Ask not, say not, think not caste." "Whatever be the religion, let man improve himself." Though a religious leader, his religion was not sectarian and emphasised that all human beings are equal before god. He wanted to totally remove all caste consciousness. When he saw that the caste Hindus did not permit the entry of ezhavas and other dalits into temples, he first started building new temples for them into which non-dalits too could enter. Then he started vedic schools where dalit priests could be trained both in rituals and the philosophy of Hinduism. Next, he encouraged general and secular education for all, by starting schools and colleges. His initial temple building programme was only to mobilise his community, but his later emphasis was more on general education so that all ezhavas and other dalits could get properly educated and seek good opportunities. He also started credit cooperative societies so that the dependence of dalits on higher castes was avoided. Thus, the guru sought all-round development of dalits. Like Gandhiji, he also tried to change the attitudes of upper castes. He did not preach hatred of upper castes to his followers, as he did not want a rift between them. An example of his success in this regard is the support he received from progressive sections of upper castes, which resulted in a savarna procession in support of dalits' entry in to the famous Vaikom temple during temple entry satyagraha started by Gandhiji. Narayana Guru and Gandhiji worked together in temple entry movement. Narayana Guru did not confine himself only to his own community of ezhavas. There were other communities among untouchables in Kerala, which were even lower in social status than ezhavas. But the guru involved them too in his attempts to elevate the status of all dalits.[17]

Though the nadars did not seem to have had the advantage of a charismatic and religious leader like Narayana Guru, they also did equally well under their secular leaders. The elevation of caste status came mainly through the spread of education and skills, mutual self-help by making credit available for starting enterprises, by helping caste members secure jobs by functioning as an informal employment exchange and also through Sanskritisation.[18] The members of both these communities – ezhavas and nadars are now highly literate and occupy important positions. Nadars have also emerged economically strong, creating a niche for themselves in industry and commerce.

The example of ezhavas and nadars offers important lessons for dalits. It is not enough to build their own organisation merely to spread awareness, make demands and protest against injustice, but it is also equally necessary to launch constructive programmes for the welfare of the community. The tendency to rely mainly 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 communities' 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 and skills for jobs outside their traditional vocations, to provide guidance and help to those who wish to migrate from villages to towns and cities and help in getting jobs and houses, preventing addiction to liquor and so on. The community organisations of both nadars and ezhavas took care of the members of their communities like parents. Once dalit organisations take up constructive programmes, help will come to them in a big way from private sources too like voluntary and social service organisations and philanthropic associations.

The successful example of ezhavas and nadars also has shown how irrelevant are conversions to other faiths to solve dalit problem. Another important lesson, particularly from Shri Narayana Guru, is that his movement was not adversarial in character. He broke through upper caste resistance to social change, without making enemies of them. He could even enlist their cooperation and support. He was Gandhian in his approach. In Indian ethos, conciliation seems to have been far more successful in effecting change than confrontation.

A difference between ezhava and nadar movements, however, is that the former was not concentrated only on one community, but aimed at reaching all untouchables and lower castes which suffered social deprivation. It was a serious attempt to hit out at ritual hierarchy, which existed among dalits themselves. Success in this task, however, perhaps was not as great as in elevating the status of ezhavas. Both nadars' and ezhavas' movements however, were successful in significantly reducing social deprivation among two numerically important untouchable communities, which had also a higher level of social status than others among dalits.

There have been more movements in modern Hinduism, which are not caste or community based and have helped to enrich the moral and spiritual life of their followers – such as those led by Ramakrishna Mission, Aurobindo, Brahmakumaris, ISKON, Shri Satya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi. Their main significance for this paper is that they have shown that Hinduism can very well thrive without caste system.[19]

VIII
How then did Caste System Emerge and Survive?

If all that is contended above is true and if Hinduism as a religion and philosophy was against caste system based on birth, and even in practice, it opposed the system, how did it emerge and survive for so long? Simply because, the system performed certain functions that were valued by the society. These functions had nothing to do with religion, being entirely in the 'aihika' (mundane) sphere. The unfortunate part of the story is that caste identities have outlived these functions. These functions may now be enumerated and explained.

(i) A System of Checks and Balances

The varna system was not just a division of labour. It was also a system of checks and balances such that there is no concentration of power in any varna or class. It was more a system to avoid concentration of power than one meant for appropriation of economic surplus. As per the varna system, brahmins were

not supposed to seek regal power. Their duty was to seek knowledge and preserve the Vedas and carry on the vedic tradition. They were not supposed to amass wealth and had to depend on other varnas for their sustenance. According to dharmashastras, 'a brahmana (brahmin) should not hanker after gifts; he may collect them only for his livelihood, a brahmana taking more than what is required for his maintenance incurs degradation' [Kane 1990: Vol II, Part 1, p 531]. As Dumont says there was a clear separation of ritual status from material power.

While the duty of kshatriyas, particularly of kings, was to maintain law and order, protect dharma and defend people, they too had no absolute power. It was their duty to consult their ministers and listen to people and meet their grievances. The ministry consisted of representatives of all varnas, including shudras. B R Ambedkar cites Shantiparva of Mahabharata, in which Bhishma advises Yudhisthira (Dharmaraja) to have four brahmins, eight kshatriyas, 21 vaishyas and three shudras as ministers to guide him in the affairs of the state [Moon 1990:112]. The relatively large allocation to vaishyas may be reflective of their numerical majority as agriculturists then, apart from their being merchants too. It is also possible that vaishyas were the largest source of revenue for the state and hence were given greater representation. If the king was unable to uphold dharma or protect people and their property, he could even be removed by the ministers with the support of people, according to dharmashastras. A picture of harmony and perfect alliance may not always have been obtained, but it was at least the ideal.

(ii) Division of Labour – Easy Acquisition of Skills and Knowledge

Though there was significant social mobility initially, varnas became gradually hereditary and jati system evolved with increasing division of labour and specialisation. It was easier for skills and knowledge to be imparted within family from father to children as there were no trade schools or polytechnics as such. Education in skills and knowledge required in hereditary occupations began quite early right at home from childhood. As families became specialised in arts and crafts, they flourished and sought even distant markets. Kane observes that "professional castes were wealthy and well organised" as seen from dharmashastras and epigraphic records. The organisation had reached such sophistication that there were larger professional associations called as 'gana', and village level associations called as 'sangha' [Kane 1990: Vol II, Part I, pp 66-67]. Kane observes further that 'the sudra gradually rose in social status so far as occupation was concerned and could follow all occupations except those specially reserved for the brahmana, so much so that sudra became even kings and Manu (IV.61) had expressly to enjoin upon brahmanas not to dwell in the kingdom of a sudra' [ibid:121].

Interestingly, while vaishyas and shudras were so organised in professional associations or guilds, there were no such organisations for brahmins. As Kane says, 'the brahmanas had no organised corporate body like for Anglican church with its hierarchy of archbishops, bishops and other divines' [ibid:118]. It is often argued that being at the top of the caste system brahmins designed the caste system and perpetuated it by giving religious sanctity. But they did not have an organisation to enforce it. The caste system could not have continued because of a small minority, which had neither regal nor monetary power. It continued only because all castes accepted it as in their interest.

(iii) Decentralised Democracy – Lobby Group

When the varnas transformed themselves into ethnic endogamous groups based on birth, they developed their own caste/jati panchayats to decide their own affairs, reducing their dependence on the king. The caste panchayats settled disputes within the caste in an inexpensive and prompt way. They also imparted tremendous social stability. Kings came and went, but the society remained stable in spite of all invasions, wars and political instability. The panchayats looked after the welfare of the members of their castes in a decentralised way. The caste system provided a mechanism for decentralised democracy. Though this mechanism provided stability, it also made at least the medieval Hindu society more conservative. The panchayats strictly discouraged inter-caste marriages and severely punished elopement in love affairs, because inter-caste marriages had the potential of weakening caste-panchayats. The separation of caste from caste was made more rigid. The hold of caste panchayats, though weakened considerably after independence, has not vanished at least in a few cases. We still hear news reports of lovers across castes intending to marry driven to suicide. This is more common in rural India, including the so-called low castes and untouchables. The continued hold of caste panchayats is ensured by continued dependence of families on members of their caste during birth, wedding and death, and excommunication by caste panchayat is still considered a matter of terrible disgrace and shame. Caste panchayats or their more modern avatar – caste lobbies – are simply instruments to preserve caste identities or ethnic identities, to seek concessions from or make demands on the larger society or the state. In this form, they are completely disjointed from the traditional notions of ritual status, purity and pollution.

(iv) Ecological Role

There is also an ecological dimension to the caste system, brought out by Madhav Gadgil in 1983 [Gadgil 1983; Kavoori 2002]. The caste system performed an important function of reducing competition for and avoiding overexploitation of natural resources. Only fishermen caste could go for fishing, and their caste panchayats evolved rules for sustainable exploitation of fisheries. Only hunters' caste could go for hunting wildlife in the forests, except the king who did it occasionally for pleasure and also to kill man-eating tigers, which intruded into villages. Only chamar or cobbler caste had the right to the dead animals and their skin. Caste panchayats evolved rules for restricting hunting in particular seasons, or particular animals so that wild life is protected and not driven to extinction. Certain forest areas known as sacred groves (known as 'devara kadu' in Kannada, or 'dev-ran' in Marathi, or 'pavithravana' in Sanskrit) were out of bounds for any hunting or even cutting green trees. The caste system also functioned in a way so as to control the growth of population by creating barriers for marriage. After giving several illustrations, Madhav Gadgil observes:

> The caste society had thus developed two special mechanisms to regulate the exploitation of natural resources. The occupational specialisation of each caste ensured that any particular resource was primarily if not exclusively utilised by one particular caste. The intra-caste territoriality then spread the exploitation evenly over geographical regions [Gadgil 1938:282].

Gadgil points out both positive and negative ways 'of viewing this ecological steady state':

> It may be viewed positively as a desirable state of man living in balance with nature. Alternatively, it may be viewed negatively

as a state of stagnation. For if the resources are used in a balanced fashion, there would be no pressures for cultural change and technological innovation. This is no doubt what happened and the Indian society remained largely balanced (or stagnant!) freezing its caste system for perhaps two and half millennia between the time of Buddha when the agricultural colonisation of much of the subcontinent was complete and the beginning of the British rule. But value judgments apart, an important consequence of the Indian caste system was this attainment of ecological approximate steady state [ibid:282-83].

(v) Security of Livelihood and Employment

An important feature of caste system was its localised system of production based on jatiwise division of labour for meeting local needs, rather than the needs of the larger market. As M N Srinivas explains in a posthumously published article, the base of this localised production was not necessarily a village, but a cluster of neighbouring villages, each cluster having one or more "weekly markets, where villagers and itinerant traders would gather to exchange goods, or buy paying cash. The cluster could claim a large degree of self-sufficiency as far as the production of basic needs was concerned…" [Srinivas 2003] In most parts of the India, there developed a system of making annual payments in kind or cash, as soon as harvesting was done, for services rendered by village artisans, barbers, washermen, agricultural labourers and the like. The system of payment was not on piece-work, but involved the principle that taking care of the artisans and labourers and their basic needs was the responsibility of land owning families. Whenever there were special occasions of urgent need such as marriage, the working class families were given special help. M N Srinivas refers to different names of this system in different parts of India: "jajmani in the north, *bara* balute in Maharashtra, 'mirasi' in Madras, 'adade' in Mysore. The relationship between the jajman and his kamin is unequal, since the latter is regarded as inferior" [Srinivas 1980:14]. The continuing tensions between land owning communities and communities which traditionally were subservient, resulting sometimes into atrocities against the latter owe their origin to this patron-client relationship and its breakdown, rather than to any canonical support to caste system. This institution in the past at least recognised the right to work and livelihood, and in the process controlled competition.

The relationship between patron and client extended beyond generations, and in the traditional system at least, it was not open to a landlord to prefer a new client merely because he charged lower for the services offered. Nor could the client seek alternative employment outside his traditional patron for a higher wage – at least not when his services were needed by his patron. It was the obligation of the patron that the client and his family did not starve. The much maligned 'Apasthambha Dharmasutra' even says that if an unexpected guest comes and there is limited food, the head of the family and his family members have to cut down their own food, but not that of the servants. The latter have to have their proper meal. The guest should not be fed at the expense of servants [Kane, Vol I, Part 1, pp 57-58].

The system was certainly not an ideal one without blemish. All the shortcomings resulting from patron-client relationship, curbing competition and subsistence oriented production followed from the system. In conditions of frequent droughts and high political instability since the medieval age, what mattered most was food security, more than growth. Yet, even under this system, arts and crafts flourished made possible by specialisation

and division of labour, especially under political patronage, as happened for example under the Vijayanagara kings and Mughal emperors. It was no wonder that caste system survived under such security. Neither the Muslim rulers nor the British interfered with the system. Many Hindus may have been converted, but the caste system was imbibed into the new religions of Islam and Christianity in India, since the jajmani system and other functions of caste system had nothing to do with religion.

IX
Collapse of Caste as a System

A posthumously published paper by M N Srinivas (2003) carries the assertive title – 'An Obituary on Caste as a System'. Paradoxically, the system has expired but caste identities remain and show no sign of going. It looks, caste system is dead but its ghost remains. Caste as a system is taken to mean by Srinivas as involving mainly its localised social production base, subsistence economy, and jati (caste) based occupations. Caste as a system, however, covers all the features listed in the beginning of this paper and its functions listed in the preceding Section VIII. Srinivas refers specifically to the last function discussed here. But other functions also were no less significant in determining the structure of the system. Caste as a system has collapsed today because all its functions have collapsed. It has lost whatever relevance, role, utility and justification it may have had.

Several factors contributed to the collapse of the system – ethical, political social, economic and technological. Though the system gave some stability and even security, it lost on the side of humaneness and social justice. All kinds of indignities were imposed on lower castes, their access to learning was barred, and they were pushed to unenviable and inhuman positions. It was thus that the caste system, particularly its extreme form – untouchability, became disgraced and condemned right from Buddha's time, and again from the medieval age, and then again in the modern times.

The functional significance of the caste system also vanished, making its collapse all the more inevitable. A major factor is the emergence of the modern state as a much stronger, much more powerful and pervasive institution than it ever was with its different wings – the executive, judiciary and legislature, able to exercise powers on all. Hinduism has accepted the emergence of the modern state to enact its own laws, including personal laws, and the sphere of dharmic laws regulating the conduct of people in day-to-day life has shrunk very significantly. There is thus no need for either dharmashastras which served as de facto legislation in dharmic matters, nor for caste panchayats which acted as judiciary. To the extent that their role still continues, it is much less powerful and is superceded by the role of the state. For the same reason, the role of the varna system in providing a system of checks and balances also has vanished. The legally enacted constitution, accepted by all, provides now a system of checks and balances to maintain equilibrium and stability.

Since in the bargain, decentralised democracy of the caste system has broken down, a new type of decentralised democracy, which is village based, has taken its place. It does not need any authentication by religion, but is backed by the Constitution and state power, which is more important. For some time, the dominant castes (which are not the same as ritually upper castes) may try to hijack the village panchayats, but it is a losing battle. The system of reservation for backward castes and untouchables and also for women will gradually but definitely reduce the role of

dominant castes. The secular and inclusive forces will prevail over the caste forces before long, even if they have not already done so in some areas. The political consensus against caste system and the power of adult franchise in democracy will ensure the success of democratic and secular forces and defeat caste forces.

The next factor, which worked against the caste system, was the rise of modern secular education. Education need not be and is not family-based though family education will supplement outside education. It is in schools and colleges including trade schools, professional colleges and polytechnics that skills and education are provided. Thus the need for hereditary occupation is now redundant, and social mobility will be much more.

The need for hereditary principle in occupation is now redundant also because of the rise of new occupations and the extinction of several old occupations. The dynamics of the growth of diversity of occupations is such that the hereditary principle looks totally outdated and nonsensical. The information age has thrown up an opening for new occupations, which cannot be classified into the sphere of the four traditional varnas. It is wrong to interpret that all the intellectual tasks were assigned exclusively to brahmins in the traditional varna system. Brahmins had no monopoly of intellect even if they had some monopoly to study the Vedas and officiate as priests. Even the monopoly as priests has been broken, with different jatis arranging their own priests from outside the caste of brahmins and evolving their own rituals. The institutions started by Shri Narayana Guru and Mata Amritanandamayi have been training priests from all castes including women. The exclusive role of brahmins in conducting rituals and ceremonies is highly exaggerated. In any case, it could not have been exclusively intellectual, because every task – regal, warfare, agriculture, arts and crafts required the role of intellect. This is even more so in the modern age, particularly the information age, under which every sector demands the role of intellect and information and not one sector alone. The reason why this point is elaborated is because the new intellectual tasks of the information age cannot be mechanically interpreted as brahmanical. Can we say that the study and research in medicine fits into brahmin varna, but practice of medicine into shudra varna? How can we separate the two?

Just as new professions and occupations emerged, quite a few old occupations have vanished. Some of them have moved right into homes and do not any longer require specialised occupations and caste groups, thanks mainly to technological change. The system of toilets has undergone a revolutionary change during the last 50 years even in rural areas, making it totally unnecessary to handle human waste and carry it on head as in the past. Toilets have moved inside the homes now, and family members themselves clean them. Several tasks which were considered as dirty and polluting need not be done now directly by hand, and can be handled by tools and machines. It is now possible to be clean and hygienic even while handling the so-called dirty tasks. Thus any rationale for separate castes for doing dirty jobs and for isolating them is now totally lost.

Alvin Toffler (1980) in his book, *The Third Wave*, has pointed out to the recent phenomenon of what he calls the 'prosuming' or 'prosumer', occasioned by the blurring line between producing and consuming. This refers to 'do-it-yourself' kits and self-service, which is becoming more prominent. From furniture pieces to cars to computers, several things are supplied with step-by-step instructions for assembling them at homes. This has reduced the cost to producer and the price to consumers. What is more, the consumer enjoys the thrill of doing it oneself, of

creating some thing. This phenomenon is not limited to commodities and has invaded services too. Thus, we do the daily shave ourselves with safety razor, taking over a part of the task of barber. Many of us, with or without washing machines, wash our clothes ourselves and iron them too. The social significance of all this is that the old wall of distinction between artisans and arm-chair consumer is falling apart. The old division of labour separating manual tasks from the intellectual is losing its meaning.

In this context, Arvind Sharma's reinterpretation of the purusha sukta in the 10th mandala of Rg Veda is of interest. According to Sharma, the reference here 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 being the king) including offering militancy 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 varnas are contained in every individual from now on instead of every individual being comprised within one of the varnas' [Sharma 1996].

M N Srinivas (2003) refers to a combination of new forces in operation, responsible for the destruction of the caste system. These forces have led to the breakdown of the caste-based mode of social production in turn leading to the collapse of the caste system. The new forces are breakdown of the jajmani system, emergence of the larger market and decline of the village based subsistence production, urbanisation, and above all the rise of democracy based on adult franchise. Along with these, there is widespread acceptance of new values – equality, self-respect, and human dignity. He cites several instances of how village artisan based production has given place to factory production – mass produced edible oil replacing the oil-seed pressing caste, factory produced plastic and aluminum vessels replacing the village potter caste, urban textiles replacing the village weaver and so on. Srinivas observes significantly: "The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was intrinsically bound up with jati" (p 458).

Last, the caste system has also lost its ecological role and relevance, as observed by Madhav Gadgil himself in the same paper in which he pointed out this role of the caste system. The resources under the control of local communities have been depleted significantly, thanks to their take over by the state and their exploitation by the larger market forces. "Thus alienated from their ecological resource base which was depleting rapidly, the Indian caste society was rudely thrown out of the ecological steady state maintained perhaps for more than a hundred generations"[Gadgil 1983:283]. The recent attempts at regeneration of local natural resources through local committees under schemes like Joint Forest Management, are not based on caste but are secular. Moreover, with the breakdown of social base of production, it is doubtful if the caste-based occupations will ever get a new lease of life.

It is evident from the above analysis that the emergence as well as survival of the caste system had nothing to do with Hinduism as a religion. The caste system was purely social phenomenon, very much in the mundane sphere. It is aihika sphere (mundane), and not paramarthika or adhyatmika (spiritual). Being in aihika sphere, rules of conduct and custom are liable to change from time to time, and not eternally fixed, as Hindu texts themselves concede. The support to it given by dharmashastras including

Manusmruti could be only a result of the social significance and role of the caste system of the time, and not the cause of it. Dharmashastras reflected what is already there in the society. They also approved rejection of it like when Manusmrti (IV 176) indicated clearly that any dharmic rule could be rejected if it led to people's unhappiness and indignation. There can be no ground for fear that dharmashastras would give a new lease of life to the caste system inspite of its being redundant and irrelevant in the modern age. Most of the verses in dharmashastras have themselves become irrelevant, at least those parts supporting caste system. On the other hand, the collapse of the caste system would also pose no threat to the continuation and survival of Hinduism. Hinduism has been thriving with renewed vigour thanks to such leaders as Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Sri Sri Ravishankar, and institutions like Ramakrishna Mission, Brahmakumaris and ISKON on an entirely non-caste basis. This is because caste is not intrinsic to basic principles and tenets of Hinduism as enshrined in Hindu canon. Hinduism itself has fought and is still fighting against casteism in a significant way. If caste system were intrinsic to Hinduism, Shri Narayana Guru and Mata Amritanandamayi would not have worked within the framework of Hinduism. **EPW**

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Notes

1 Dr Ambedkar finds R S Sharma's support here: 'It is evident then that the shudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of Atharva Veda [chronologically the last of the Vedas], when the Purusha Sukta version of their origin may have been inserted into the 10th book of the Rg Veda.' R S Sharma – *Sudras in Ancient India*, p 29, as cited in Arvind Sharma (2000) *Classical Hindu Thought*, New Delhi , Oxford University Press, p 142.

2 See Dr B R Ambedkar's two books – *Who were the Shudras? How They Became the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society* (1947) and *The Untouchables – Who were They, and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948), both reprinted in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol 7, ed by Vasant Moon, Mumbai: Govt of Maharashtra, Education Dept, 1990.

3 Dipankar Gupta Says: "It was well after the Vedic period, after even the period of Mauryan empire, that the notion of untouchability came into being. In *Satapatha Brahmana*, the chief or the noble is advised to eat from the same vessel as vis, and commoner. …In the Rg Veda there is no mention of untouchable either. …It was only around second century AD that the stratum of untouchables and the notion of untouchability became evident for instance in *Apasthambha Dharmasutra*". See his *Interrogating Caste – Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, (2000), Sage, New Delhi, p 190.

4 For examples of this type, see Arvind Sharma (2000), op cit, Ch19 on 'Varna', pp 132-180.

5 The two verses in original are (respectively):
Parityajet arth kamou
yow syatam dharma varjitow/
dharmachyapi sukhodarka
lokavikrishta mevacha//(Manus 4.176)
vidvadbhih sevitah sadbhir
nityam advesha ragibhih/
hridayenabhyanujnato
yo dharmastvam nibodhata// (Manus 2.1).

6 The translation as by Dr Ambedkar, Vasant Moon (ed), (1990) op cit, p 22.

7 Arvind Sharma (2000, op cit, pp 161-4) has identified these three verses

and discussed them. The interpretation here is based on this, but goes a little further. The principle of comparative advantage attributed to Gita here is not in Sharma's discussion. But without such interpretation, a full sense cannot be made of verse 35 in ch 3 and verse 47 in ch 18, both of which have the same message, with the first half of the two verses being common.

8 As quoted by Arvind Sharma (2000) ibid, p 163.

9 The Sanskrit original is '*Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya*' (Rg Veda V 60.5). Translation and original from K T Pandurangi (1999, second edn) – *Indian Thought on Human Values*, Bangalore: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p 3.

10 Original and translation from P V Kane op cit, Vol II, Part I, p 34.

11 The original of this verse taken from P V Kane, op cit, Vol V, Part II, p 1006, and the translation from Arvind Sharma (2000), op cit, p 158; Kane cites several more verses on the same theme, see esp Vol II, Part I, p 101.

12 As quoted by Arvind Sharma (2000), op cit, p 165. His source is S V Oka (1957) *Uttaragita with a Translation into English and Appendices*, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, p 44.

13 For both the original and translation, see Swami Iswarananda Giri (2000, second edn) *Portrait of Guru: Lectures on Maneesha Panchakam of Acharya Shree Shankara*, Mt Abu: Samvit Sadhanalaya, esp pp xiv-xviii.

14 K T Pandurangi drew my attention to this quotation.

15 At least two translations of *Kural* are available in English: C Rajagopalachari (1999; first edn 1965) – *Kural: The Great Book of Tiruvalluvar*, Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (containing selected portions); and, P S Sundaram (1990) – *Tiruvalluvar: The Kural, Translated from the Tamil with an Introduction*, New Delhi: Penguin Books (containing complete work).

16 As translated by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2002) *On the Threshhold: Songs of Chokhamela*, New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, p 65.

17 For a more detailed account of ezhavas' success (also known as izhavas), see Ciriac K Pulapilly (1976) 'The Izhavas of Kerala and their Historic Struggle for acceptance in Hindu Society' in Beldwell L Smith (ed) *Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia*, Leiden: E J Brill; and, Sathya Bai Sivadas and P Prabhakara Rao (2002) *Narayana Guru – The Social Philosopher of Kerala*, Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

18 See Robert L Hardgrave Jr (1969) *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu: The Political Culture of a Community*, Oxford University Press, and University of California Press, L I Rudolph and S H Rudolph (1969) *Modernity of Tradition – Political Development in India*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

19 These movements have been discussed at a little greater length in my earlier paper in *EPW*, 'Ethics and Relevance of Conversions…', January 18, 2003, pp 227-35.

20 Madhav Gadgil (1983) 'The Indian Caste System as a Historical Adaptation: An Ecological Perspective', *New Quest* 41, September-October, pp 279-83; also see Purnendu S Kavoori (2002) 'The Varna Trophic System: An Ecological Theory of Caste Formation', *EPW*, 37(12) March 23.

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