CHAPTER IV

CASTE SYSTEM

The Hindus and Muslims constituted the bulk of the medieval Indian population. The most striking feature of the Hindu society was its caste system which was marked off from others on the basis of social status determined by birth and sanctified by the Hindu law books. The system had a cultural basis in the beginning, but with the passage of time, the castes became hereditary. Certain theological notions like karma and dharma, writes M.N. Srinivas, had contributed very greatly to the strengthening of the idea of hierarchy which was inherent in the caste system. The idea of karma taught a Hindu that he was born in a particular caste because he deserved to be born there. The actions he performed in a previous incarnation deserved such a reward or punishment, as the case might be. The other important concept attached to the caste distinctions was dharma. The existing moral code was identified with dharma. A man who accepted the caste system and the rules of his particular sub-caste was considered to be living according to dharma, while violation of these codes was punishable both here and hereafter. This was the common belief on which the brahmins based their superiority and exploited the low-born people to their own interest.
The institution of caste divided the entire Hindu population into various castes and sub-castes. Guru Nanak takes notice of the four varna and refers specifically to the brahmin, the khatri (kshatriya), the vais, (vaishya) and the sudra. He takes notice also of the high and low jatis and refers to the chuharas, the chandalas and the dhanaks, all of whom were probably outcastes. He calls the brahmin, a pandit, a panda, a jyotishi or prohit.\(^4\) Outside these there were the panchamas (the fifth caste) with innumerable divisions of untouchables, unapproachable and unlookables the majority of aborigines of India belong to the fifth caste and these together with the sudras form the bulk of the Hindu population. Their standard of morality, their behaviour, their dresses, their languages and their modes of living were different. They lacked national solidarity. They had no social cohesion.\(^5\) There are many references of four varnas in the Bani of Guru Nanak. In Ramkali he says:

Khatris, brahmans, sudras or vaishyas find
not its worth by thousands of calculations.\(^6\)

Alberuni also observed that in the 11th century there were four varnas among the Hindus, the brahmin, the kshatriya, the vaishya and the sudra.\(^7\) He also observed a number of 'subcastes' of each varna.\(^8\) Furthermore, he noted that below the varna were certain crafts or professions such as the shoemaker, the fisherman, the sailor,
the hunter, the juggler, the chandalas, and some other categories of people, were still lower in social order, they were rather outside the pale of Hindu society. Obviously, the varnas did not cover all the people.

Guru Nanak not only mentions these four varnas but also tells us about, the duties, assigned to them by the society. Guru Nanak says in Salok Sahskriti:

The way of union with lord is the way of divine knowledge,
with the brahmins the way is through the vedas.
Khatri's way is the way of bravery
and of the sudras, the way is the service of the others.

In Alberuni's account the four major castes or varnas, have specific duties assigned to them. The brahmin was to learn and teach the religious scriptures. The duty of kshatriya was to rule and to defend the country and the people, to read but not to teach the veda and to act according to the rules of the puranas. The duty of the vaishya was to cultivate the land, to tend the cattle and to relieve the brahmin of his material needs the duty of the sudra was to serve the high castes. It is highly improbable that these classified duties comprehended all the professions followed by these social groups even in Alberuni's days.
The concept of varna was accepted and advocated throughout the medieval period by those who regarded themselves as the true representatives of Hinduism. At the close of the 17th century, Sujan Rai described the ahl-i-brahama as those who subscribed to the varna order of the brahmin, the chhatri, the baish and the sudra. In the 19th century, Ganesh Das ascribed the institution of the varna order to Raja Bharat with an implicit appreciation. He was, however, himself aware of the fact that the Hindu social order of his day did not correspond to the varna order as it was originally conceived.

The concept of varna divided the entire population into three social groups. The privileged, the unprivileged and untouchables. Broadly speaking, the people of brahmin, kshatriya and vaish castes belonged to the first group and were the twice born. They were entitled to the ceremony performed by the brahmin priest, initiating them into the second birth. The sacred thread was the chief mark of distinction and an emblem of the superiority of these high caste Hindus. The brahmens wore tilak mark which was another distinctive feature of their superiority. The members of the second group, loosely termed sudras, could not perform the thread ceremony, they were debarred from the privileges of study and recital of scriptures. The untouchables, were the sudras of impure birth, performing social duties which subjected them to constant defilement. They were condemned to permanent social degradation, denied
elementary civic rights and rigidly excluded from places of worship, public places and even the neighbourhood of caste Hindus.

Thus the caste system which was woven in the fabric of religious belief, formed the bedrock of the Hindu society. It brought degradation in its train and became a burden and a curse for the society. Guru Nanak, a keen observer of the existing conditions of his own times did not fail to comment on the caste system and the degeneration it had brought into the fold of Hindu society. The traditional four varnas - the brahmins, kshetriyas, vaishya and sudras had undergone tremendous changes ever since the Turkish invasions on North India after 1000 AD.

To the Muslims the institution of caste was something new. Islam with its faith in equality and brotherhood of man did not make any distinction between man and man. Naturally, this institution aroused great curiosity among the early Muslim intellectuals who came to India. The Hindu population as a whole could not reconcile to the idea of mixing with Muslim invaders and tried to isolate themselves from the Muslims with scrupulous determination to save their religion and social system. The Hindus treated the early Muslims as malecha with a social status much lower than that of the sudras. As Alberuni stated in the early part of the 11th century AD, 'All their fanaticism is directed against all foreigners. They call
them malechas - i.e., impure and forbid having any connection with them, be it by inter-marriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating and drinking with them, because thereby they think they would be polluted. Guru Nanak has also used the word malechas for the Muslims in his Bani. But by his time the high caste Hindus including the brahmins had adopted much of their culture and had started wearing their blue colour and taking their food and meat prepared in the muslim fashion. The brahmins in their private life tried to keep their traditional taboos regarding the preparation of food etc., which was nothing more than cheating the masses in the name of superiority of their caste. Guru Nanak strongly denounces the hypocrisy prevalent among these cowardly and caste conscious high caste Hindus in the following couplets of Asa di Var:

They seek approval of the Muslim rulers by wearing blue.
And worship the puranas succoured by the barbarian's (malechas) food.
And eat they the he-goat over which is breathed the foreign word.
And allow they no one to enter upon their kitchen square.
They mark off the square, and plaster it with the cow-dung.
And upon it are seated no other but the false ones.
Lest it be defiled, lest it be defiled.
'And this our food be polluted' they cry.
But with their impure body, defiled they are,
Their minds are impure, though they cleanse their mouths.
Sayeth Nanak 'Dwell, 'O' man on the Truth,
Yea, if thou art pure (of heart),
To Truth attainest Thou'.

Apart from indicating the hypocrisy, cowardice and false sense of purity possessed by the high caste Hindus, the above quoted couplet throws a significant light on the cultural mingling of the Hindus and the Muslims. Despite the fact that the Hindus contemptuously looked upon the Muslims as malechas and the Muslims in turn looked upon the Hindus as infidels or kafirs, there was, it is evident, a certain degree of social intercourse existing between the members of the two communities. As a matter of fact, the Hindus had learnt to accept Muslim rule with all its merits and faults. A large number of low caste Hindus embraced Islam because it promised them better treatment and more economic gains. Even the high caste Hindus (as referred earlier) reconciled with the changed situation and adopted their dress, food habits and language. This was done with a double purpose of pleasing the Muslim rulers as well as to gain the economic benefits.
The chief result of the political domination of the Muslims was that the brahmins who had been exempted from all sorts of taxes were subjected to pay jizya. Although Guru Nanak makes no direct reference to jizya as such, yet he clearly states that cows and brahmins were taxed by the Muslims. In several cases the tax collectors were also Hindus, belonging to brahmin, kshatriya or other high caste people of the community. The Muslims right from the days of Ala-ud-din Khilji down to Feroz Tughluq and Sikandar Lodi, thought in terms of Islam and treated the Hindus as inferior. They were living in a strange type of contradiction in their day to day life as is clear from the following couplets of Guru Nanak:

They tax the cow and the brahmin
and with the cow-dung they hope themselves to save
(on the one hand) they wear the dhoti,
the saffron mark and rosary, (on the other)
they eat the barbarian's (melacha's) grains.
Within they worship (the idols),
(outside) they read the Quran, and observe
the code of the turks.
Shed thy hypocrisy, O brahmin,
For 'tis through the Name that thou
swimmest across'.

Traditionally, a brahmin was supposed to spend his
time in the study of *vedas* and *puranas* and perform the religious rites. They had, however, abandoned those intrinsic virtues which their class originally stood for, and had themselves fallen a prey to all the vices which they were expected to combat in the community and had only external marks of holiness left in them. They would dispense sacred thread to the people, perform their marriages by getting commissions, show them the path for the future on the basis of *patri* or scroll and, though blind in soul, call themselves seers. They would go to the houses of other people, sound conches and enjoy their food. They had lost all sense of 'honour and shame' and dealt only in falsehood which had become their way of life.

Although *brahmins* had lost their sanctity and integrity by their actions, but they were still acknowledged as the leaders of Hinduism. They were proud of their high caste and their pride led them to acts of cruelty towards *sudras* or low caste people. According to Guru Nanak, 'he alone is a *brahmin* who knows the Transcendent Lord, who does the deed of devotion, penance and self-restraint, who observes the path of humility and contentment'.

Such a brahman alone is worthy of being worshipped.

He alone is a brahman who knoweth brahman, yea, the God.
And practiceth austerity and contemplation and self-control.
And doeth (righteous) deeds.
And keepeth the religion of contentment and culture.
And earneth emancipation, breaking the bonds (of desire).
Yea, such a brahmin is worthy of being worshipped.

The main aim of pandits (brahmans) was to study the scriptures (books) and teach the philosophy contained therein. They were supposed to educate the people and lead a life of restraint and contentment. But they too were concerned with their material and worldly gains only, through their occupation. Guru Nanak clearly states that mere knowledge unaccompanied by 'right conduct', was despicable. 'One may load carts with books, one may read them for all twelve months of the year or indeed, at each and every moment of one's entire life. All this will be of no avail if they are devoid of God's name'. Guru Nanak is critical about those who tell lies and do not practice righteousness. They spend their time in fruitless discussions and quarrel themselves. In Sri Rag, he writes:

The pandit reads the books, but gives no thought to them,
he instructs the others, but himself trades in maya.
By the false prattle is the world deluded,
true living is in the word alone.
Many are the pandits and the diviners of future
who read the vedas,
but they waste away life upon life
in clash or arguments which they cherish.
Without the Guru's grace, whoever is ever
saved by mere talk? 

Guru Nanak advises the pandits to know the acts
that result in happiness, for they cite the vedas and the
shastras and yet their real interest is in worldly occupa-
tions, this pretence does not cleanse the inner dirt, this
is precisely the way of the spider that weaves its web all
the time, living and dying upside down. Without Guru's
grace no one can get rid of the chain of life and death
and achieve salvation. Guru Nanak writes in Rag Sorath:

Hear thou, 0 deed-bound pandit,
the One deed that leads to bliss is to reflect on
the Reality of the Real.
Thou recitest the vedas and the shastras,
but thou doest the deeds of a man of the world.
And thy mind is cleansed not of the scum of guile,
and within thee is piled up in the dirt of sin.
Like the spider thou art caught in thy own web,
tossed upside down.
Myriads have been thus wasted away by their evil mindedness and love of the other.
For, he who serveth the true Guru attaineth peace, and then cease his comings and going.\(^{32}\)

About their character Guru Nanak says that even the learned did not practice righteousness. There was malice in their mind. He says in his Bani:

The pandit studies and quarrels
He does not understand the things within.\(^{33}\)

'\textit{The pandits} go through the holy books (\textit{vedas}) but do not understand their substance. They give advice to others. This is the trade of mammon. They tell lie!'\(^{34}\)

'\textit{Pandit} understands nothing of the real value, he only reads books, he advises others and runs his shop on falsehood, his world revolves around falsehood'.\(^{35}\) 'They only indulge in profitless strife and remain chained to the cosmic circuit'.\(^{36}\) 'A million recitations of the\textit{ puranas} and a million expositions of the\textit{ shastras} are fruitless if one fails to receive true honour from God'.\(^{37}\) 'The\textit{ brahmin} or\textit{ pandit} does not know the acts that lead to salvation'.

According to Guru Nanak, 'he who attains to salvation and leads others to salvation is a\textit{ brahmin}'.\(^{38}\) 'He reads books and mutters his prayers and he closes his eyes like the heron (that falls on its prey) and by mere talk presents
iron as gold'. 39 'The pandit is a broker in false practices, his hands will be cut off in the next world'. 40 'But his ignorance does not deter him from preaching'. 41 They failed to perform, their functions in accordance with the position assumed by them. 42 There is a yawning gulf between his acts and professions'. 43 Guru Nanak says about himself that 'I am not a clever pandit, misleading others and myself, I tell no false tales, I recognize His hukam'. 44

Guru Nanak's denunciation of the pandit or brahmin may now be easily understandable. He is often referred to as 'the clever panda', 45 in contrast to the one who really knows and understands, the generality of men are called pandit.

There are many scholars (pandits) in this world, but hardly a man of deep deliberation. Without meeting the True Guru, all wander in pride. 46

According to Guru Nanak, 'the real pandit is one who understands Divine knowledge, he becomes a learned scholar. If any one knows the one Lord amongst all the beings, he talks not of ego, then'. 47 The wise pandit is one who really knows the true object of worship. If he knows the place, wherefrom the soul wells up. Then alone
can his name be an intelligent pandit'. The true pandit in the view of Guru Nanak adopts God's Name.

He alone is learned,
he alone scholarly (pandit)
and wise, who practises
the Lord's name.49

The kshatriyas, next to the brahmins in social hierarchy, had become covetous and cowardly, and earned their livelihood by dishonest means.50 Writing about the kshatriyas and their duties, five hundred years before Guru Nanak, Alberuni had observed that he rules the people and defends them, for he is created for this task. The kshatriya reads the veda and learns it, but does not teach it. He offers to the fire and acts according to the rules of the puranas.51 Commenting on the traditional duties and responsibilities of the kshatriyas, like Alberuni, Guru Nanak also observes: 'of the kshatriyas the way is of heroism'.52 It seems from the above couplet53 that Guru Nanak used the word khatri54 for kshatriyas in his Bani.

Like the brahmins there was also a marked change and degradation in the character of the kshatriyas under the direct impact of the Muslim rule over the country. Guru Nanak is pained to see that the kshatriyas whose primary duty was to fight and defend the country have
denounced the path of heroism and have adopted the language and dress of the Muslims to please their new masters (the Muslim rulers). In *Rag Dhanasri*, he writes:

The kshatriyas have given up their religion (i.e. heroism and defence of the people and the country). and taken to the foreign language (which was a symbol of political and cultural subjugation). The distinction of good and bad is obliterated, and no one thinks of religion (i.e., attributes of a particular caste).\(^{55}\)

By the close of the fifteenth century, the social situation in North India and specially in Punjab had considerably changed under the impact of Turkish conquest and the rule of the Delhi sultans. The rajput ruling classes, the kshatriyas of the varna concept, had been dislodged from power. After a prolonged struggle they lost the ground, and many of them were forcibly converted to Islam or migrated to safer places. Those who remained near the centres of Muslim power they accepted subordinate positions with the local authorities. Their significant remnant could perhaps be seen in a few *zamindars* called the *rais*. To equate the Hindu *zamindars*, *chaudharies* and *muqqadams*
of the Lodi Punjab with the *kshatriyas* of the varna concept would be the best way of glossing over a significant social change. The occupation of the old *kshatriyas* ruling classes with the vital politics of India was gone. At the close of the fifteenth century one could even find individuals tilling the soil but styling themselves as rajput. If the Hindu subjects of the Delhi *sultanate* were adjusting themselves to the conditions of Muslim rule in the late 15th century, the *khatri* of the Punjab were among those who showed a considerable adaptability, and success. The Persian knowing *khatri* rose to comparatively higher positions in the administration and to higher status. Many of them were employed in the civil administration. This class had no stable economic base. Some of them were petty businessmen and some of them even took the responsibility of collecting *jizya* imposed on their co-religionists.

The position of this class was such that they had to be cunning as they could not afford a conflict with the ruling class, but at the social level they wanted to maintain their superiority. Thus, they were humble to the ruling class and very harsh to the downtrodden. Guru Nanak does not give any credence to these *kshatriyas*, who are devoid of their 'high traditions', yet feel proud of being *kshatriya*. In the opinion of Guru Nanak:
He alone is a khatri (kshatriya)  
Who is a hero in deed,  
and dedicates his body to  
compassion and charity,  
and knowing the right farm,  
soweth the seed of beneficence.  
Then such a kshatriya is,  
approved of at the Lord's court.\(^58\)

From the above citation there appears to be little in the khatrias (kshatriyas) of the time that was commendable. They fell far short of the duties of their own conception. Their failure was greater when they were judged on Guru Nanak's criterion.\(^59\)

Next to the kashtriyas was the class of the vaishyas, who were considered inferior to the brahmins and the kashtriyas in the Hindu social structure. This class consisted of the people whose profession was agriculture and trade. Sometimes they also joined the fighting force, and this class formed the bulk of the population, both in the cities and the rural areas. This class was hard-working, sturdy and of very honest tendency. The duties of the vaishya, were to devote himself to agriculture, cattle breeding, and business either on his own behalf, or on behalf of a brahmin. Alberuni mentions the sub-divisions of the vaishyas on the basis of the different trades they adopted.\(^60\) There are some references about this caste in the Bani of Guru Nanak.\(^61\)
In the Punjab, the *vaishyas* were known as *jats*. The Hindu society in the rural Punjab was marked by the preponderance of the *jats*. Divided into numerous clans, they had their *zamindars*, *chaudharies* and *muqqadams*, but the bulk of the *jats* consisted of ordinary cultivators. They were generally sturdy and loved manly sports. They were not reluctant to pay the ordinary dues to the state through its intermediaries, but they resented oppression and occasionally took arms against their oppressors.\(^62\)

In the beginning of the 11th century, Alberuni had observed that the duties of the *vaishyas* are to practice agriculture and to cultivate the land, to tend the cattle and to remove the needs of the *brahmins*.\(^63\) With the passage of time alongwith agriculture, their other main professions became trade and money lending.\(^64\) Though persons engaged in agriculture were hardpressed under the burden of heavy taxes\(^65\), yet those who had gone in trade and money-lending business were prosperous economically. Their profound and expert knowledge of financial matters was so well recognised that even Muslim rulers employed them on posts of great responsibility.\(^66\)

Like the *brahmins* and the *kshatriyas*, their were several sub-castes among the *vaishyas* depending on the type of work or business they were engaged in. Guru Nanak Bani indicates a higher social status for those who were *sahukars* (moneylenders), or traded in horses, diamonds and held
high positions in the courts of central or local authorities. The petty shopkeepers or banias of moderate means enjoyed a lower status as compared to those vaishyas who were sound economically.

The lowest class among the Hindus was that of the sudras and the untouchables. The sudras were to serve the people of the other three castes with humility and a sense of self-surrender. The sudras formed a big section of the Indian proletariat. Many mixed castes were included among the sudras. Majority of the agricultural labourers, craftsmen like kumharas (potters), kahars (palki bearers), malees (gardeners), betel sellers, telis (oil-pressers), tarkhans (carpenters), lohars (blacksmiths) etc. formed the sudra community. Guru Nanak has made a mention of all these professions in his Bani.

After the sudras were the people called untouchables or chandalas. They were depressed classes outside the caste system. They rendered various kinds of services and were not reckoned among the castes. They lived outside the town or village and performed various functions either too dirty by their very nature or involving cruelty to dumb creatures. People belonging to shoe making (chamars), basket making and sailors, fishermen, jugglers and hunters etc. belonged to this group. Kasai or chandal (butcher) and dooms (bards) also belonged to this category. It is important to note that Guru Nanak kept Bhai Mardana as his companion on the missionary tours, who was a doom/mirasi.
In those days, if a chandal touched a member of any other caste he was considered to have been defiled and had to purify himself by taking bath with clothes on. A person could get defiled in a number of ways viz. if he carried on conversation with a chandal, joined him on a journey or took water from a well or pond owned by the chandal, took chandal's food or lived in his house for some time. For this defilement the person had to undertake various kinds of penances under the direction of the brahmins. The chandalas were expected to carry a bell, whenever on the move, so that the people of high castes might get aside to avoid defilement. From all counts it can be said that their position was very miserable in the contemporary society. They had been assigned place at the bottom of the social scale. They were discriminated against in every sphere of life and had no rights or privileges. Laying the caste gradation, the oldest Hindu scripture reads 'Brahmin was the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriya his arms, the Vaishya his thighs and Shudra his feet'.

Not only the sudras were prohibited to practise the vedic or ordinary religious exercises, they were also not to study the vedas or the purans nor were they permitted to explain the sacred text. In fact, they were considered like illegitimate children. They were considered unclean. The doors of knowledge were closed for them and any
attempt to cross the barrier was severely dealt with, the
case of the untouchable was obviously the worst. They
lived not only under the shadow of contempt but also below
the subsistence level of human existence. 80

The tendency of the caste system all along has been
to divide the community into innumerable water tight com-
partments. This had rendered the Hindus incapable of think-
ing in terms of any interest larger than that of their sub-
caste. Caste was believed to be predestined an immutable
transmigration of souls being the principal dogma of popular
Hinduism, birth in a particular caste was not considered an
accident but the natural consequence of deeds done in a
former life. Interdining and intermarriage between sudras
and the other three castes was not to be thought of even
where intimate friendship obliterated all other differences,
however, a brahmin could marry a sudra wife if he wished
so. 81 Sudras were occupied with menial duties. Feeling the
pinch of sudra's degraded condition in the society, Kabir
challenges the brahmins and the so called superiority of
their caste and questions them by saying:

In the womb of the mother, no one knoweth one's caste,
yea, it is from the lord's seed that the whole
creation came into being.
Say, O Pandit, how didst thou become a brahmin-born?
Do not lose the merit of thy human birth
by calling thyself a high caste.
If thou art a brahmin being born of a brahmin mother.
Then why didn't you choose to be born in some ways different than the others?
O' how art thou a brahmin and I a low caste?
Is it that I have blood in my veins and thou hast milk?
Sayeth Kabir 'Honour is that which the Lord approveth,
Without the Lord's Name, One findeth not deliverence.'

As cited earlier, they suffered from various religious disabilities including the study of scriptures and freedom of worship in the temples. The following Shabad (hymn) of Bhagat Namdev is symbolic of the existing state of affairs for the sudras in the society.

I come to thy temple in a happy mood, whilst in devotion I Nama (namdev) was caught and asked to get up.
I belong to a low caste, O Yadava king (Lord Krishna).
Why have I been born in a calico printer's family?
I took my blanket and turned back
And sat down at the back of the temple
As I Nama, utter the praises of Hari (God)
The temple of the saints revolves.84

Guru Nanak unreservedly repudiates the religious sanction of birth distinctions, refuses to admit that there are any divinely ordained classes amongst mankind, denies that social gradation determines social ethics and civic obligations of individuals and unambiguously declares that class and caste distinctions are just so much non-sense, as all men are born equal, for men were not created from different parts of the primaeval man, but all originate from the same source, the light of God, and therefore, there are no one high or low by birth:

O wonder of wonders?
Thou art the spirit that pervadeth all.
Its Thy light, that lights all hearts.85

This idea that all mankind is God's creation occurs several times in Guru Nanak's compositions.86 There is no doubt that Guru Nanak firmly believes in God as the creator of all. It is also clear in his view that human beings should be equally entitled to salvation. Guru Nanak's attitude towards the caste system was radical and went far deeper than that displayed by most of the bhagtas of medieval period. Guru Nanak was not a social reformer in the ordinary
sense of the term. He did not aim directly and specifically at removing social injustice. His purpose was to lay down a path for men's spiritual journey. For entering that path, no social qualifications no high rank in the social hierarchy was needed, a craving for spiritual bliss was the only requirement, in pursuing that path it would be necessary for a man to drop his inherited social prejudices.  

See thou of each the light within
and ask not his caste,
For hereafter the caste is of no avail.  

Because:

Vain is the pride of caste,
Vain the pride of glory,
The Lord alone giveth shade to all,
he who of himself feigneth glory (is vain),
For only if the Lord approveth of him,
is he approved.

Guru Nanak believed in the natural equality of all beings of whatever race, religion or birth they might be. Not only this that there is no high or low, rather, he took pride in associating himself with humble and the down-trodden whom the Hindu society discarded as untouchables and unclean. His two life-long companions belonged to two different caste and community, Mardana a Muslim marasi and Bala a Hindu of
khatri caste. Once, at Aminabad (Saidpur), Guru Nanak stayed at the house of Bhai Lalo, a poor carpenter instead of staying with the brahmins, the so called high caste people or with Malik Bhago (a richman) of high caste of the town. Malik Bhago invited Guru Nanak for dinner and Guru Nanak refused to join it and said:

The lowliest of the lowly,
the lowest of the low born,
Nanak seeks their company.
The friendship of the great is vain.
For, where the weak are cared for,
there doth thy mercy rain.90

Thus Guru Nanak was not keen to keep relationship with the brahmins or the so-called high caste people. He attacked the caste system most vehemently and most successfully. He considered caste of no avail and held that not birth but deeds determined one's merit. In his Bani he says:

The God mindeth not our caste or birth,
so one must find the house of truth,
for, as be one's deeds
So, be one's caste.91

According to Guru Nanak 'low people are not those who are born in a low family, but those who forget. the
name of Lord'. Guru Nanak shows no concern for the iniquitous system of caste. 'God has no 'caste'. There is no 'caste' in the next world and caste there is of no account'. 'One does not become 'high' in God's eyes by regarding oneself as high. Without his name one remains an 'out-caste'. It is for God to bestow greatness irrespective of one's caste'.

If the Lord blesseth one caste, the other caste likes it not, but He in his hands hath all the glory and he giveth to whomsoever He pleaseth.

From these verses, it may be safely inferred that in Guru Nanak's view the social fact of one's belonging to a high or low caste is totally irrelevant to one's salvation. One's real caste is determined by the honour one earns from God. Caste and power not count in God's reckoning who bestows status on a different criterion, only those who are good receive honour from him. In Var Asa Guru Nanak says:

In the next world, caste and power count not hereafter, the mortal has to deal with the new beings. A few, whose honour is of account, they are good.
Further he says:

What merit is caste?
Know thou the truth within,
whatever the caste may be
He who tasteth the poison will die.\(^98\)

On the question of inter-caste relations, not only his sympathies were with the lower castes but he himself considered low or \textit{nich}. While addressing God, he always says 'You are high I am low (\textit{nich})'.\(^99\) 'To be low in relation to God, one had no use for caste'.\(^100\) Again he says 'I am a singer (\textit{dhadi}) of low caste (\textit{nich jat}) others claim to be of high caste, they do not know themselves and think too much of, self'.\(^101\) 'Indeed God made all the 'vessels' and his light shines in all, call every one high, there is none who is low (\textit{nich})'.\(^102\) The idea of God's light being in all is closely connected with a social comment.

Guru Nanak has a good deal of appreciation for those who are above the distinction of caste. Only a few men have succeeded in transcending earthly attachment and the \textit{jat-varna}, they have passed as true (coins). In \textit{Rag Parbhati} he says:

In this world, rare are such persons,
assaying whom, the lord consigns to His treasury.
They rise above caste and colour and do away with worldly love and avarice.\(^103\)
'Whatever one's caste, servanthood of God is praise-worthy'. "In fact, if you desire a good end, do good deeds and think of yourself as low". Guru Nanak also suggests that 'What Sabad under the Guru's instruction does is to free men from useless thoughts of the jat varna'.

Caste and untouchability had disintegrated the Indian society. Guru Nanak vehemently condemned the caste ridden society and preached against varna system. Bhai Gurdas says that the gospel of Guru is common for the four varna, brahmin, kshtriya, vaishya and sudra. Guru Nanak's appreciation for those who are above the distinction of caste is very clear in his compositions. In the view of Guru Nanak, real servant of God is he, who remains above the discrimination of caste and colour. He says, 'Creator is one. All are His children and no body will get any thing without service'.

Although complete elimination of a deep rooted system was extremely difficult yet we can say that Guru Nanak did make a dent in the citadel of Hindu caste system and prepared the ground for a social revolution in the country.

The Muslim Society

Caste among the Muslims never existed like an institution, as was the case with the Hindus. Firstly, caste did not enjoy any sanction or justification in their traditional religious ideology. Secondly, there was no such
ritually pure caste like the brahmins in Islam. According to Islamic principles, all Muslims are equal and there is no distinction or discrimination among them. But in the course of time caste and class distinctions arose among them like those of the Hindus. The conception of caste-system was gradually developing among the Muslims and as Dr. Ashraf points out, 'they succumbed to new castes and sub-castes. Various classes of the Muslims began to reside separately in different localities even in the same town. The conception of untouchability evolved in due course in the Muslim society too. 

The men who brought about such caste distinctions in the Muslim society were generally the Hindu converts to Islam. Even after adopting a 'new faith', they could not get rid of their Hindu notions and practices and carried them to the new society. In course of time, these notions and practices became part of Muslim society as well. Most of the Hindu converts who took to Islam belonged to the lower castes. They adopted Islam with a view to escape the social disadvantage to which they were subjected to in the Hindu society. But they found their lot no better in the Muslim society which they adopted. They were treated as untouchables in the new society also. 

In the beginning, there were vast differences between the Hindus and the Muslims. They looked at each other with suspicion and hatred. But in the course of time, they
forgot their fundamental differences and spirit of harmony, cooperation and toleration began to grow among them. Hence the inevitable process of give and take started and went on unabated during the entire course of medieval history, affecting the manifold aspects of Hindu and Muslim culture of the country which is clear from Guru Nanak Bani.
NOTES


Yuan Chwang says that the four Hindu castes were based on 'hereditary clan distinctions', i.e., a Brahmin was to be born in the family of a Brahmin and a Kshatriya in that of a Kshatriya.


4. These references are to be found in the Adi Granth under the following Ragas: Rag Gauri, Var Majh, Sri Rag, Rag Dhanasari, Rag Asa, Japji, Rag Tilang, Rag Sorath, Rag Vadhans, Rag Gujri, Rag Bhairo, Rag Tukhari, Rag Ramkali, Rag Bilawal, Rag Suhi, Var Malhar, Rag Sarang and Rag Basant.


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(Translation of the Punjabi text: "The heart has been purified and the mind is at peace."
"The mind is at peace and the mind is content.")
It is not out of place to give Alberuni's full passage on antyaja as he observed in the beginning of the 11th century AD. He writes, 'After the sudra, follow the people called antyaja, who render various kinds of services, who are not reckoned amongst any caste, but only as members of a certain crafts or professions. These are eight classes of them, who freely intermarry with each other, except the fuller, shoemaker and weaver, far no others would condescend to have anything to do with them. These eight guilds are the fuller, shoemaker, juggler, the basket and shield maker, the sailor, fisherman, the hunter of wild animals and birds, and the weaver. The four castes do not live together with them in one and the same place. These guilds live near the villages, and towns of the four castes, but outside them'.

The lowest sections were enumerated as the hādi, doma, chandala, and badhātan and they were not reckoned amongst any caste or guild. Alberuni says, 'They are occupied with duty work, like the cleansing
of the villages and other services. They are considered as one sole class and distinguished only by their occupations. In fact, they are considered like illegitimate children.


14. This is to suggest that the socio-economic position of certain social groups did not always correspond to their ritual status. This would be true for instance, of the khatris of the Punjab. For social change with respect to caste, see, Upadhyay, V., Social-Religious Change in North India (700-1200), Varanasi, 1964, p. 365.


At the age of nine, Guru Nanak was asked to wear the sacred thread as per the custom among the high
born Hindus. Guru Nanak did not recognise any sanctity of this traditional ceremony and he refused to do so saying that he would rather have a thread that would neither break nor get soiled, nor be burnt or lost. The Guru's views in respect of this custom are as under:


Make mercy thy cotton, contentment thy thread, Continence its knot, truth its twist, that would make a jāneu, for the soul, If thou have it 0 brahmin, then put it on me.

See, Gandhi, S.S., History of the Sikh Gurus, Delhi, 1978, p. 82.

That such a thread once worn will never break. Nor get soiled, burnt or lost, the man who wearth such a thread is blessed. Thou buyest a thread for a pice and seated in a plastered square putteth it round the neck of others. Claiming an inheritance of holiness Thy thread helps neither here nor hereafter The wearer dieth and leaves it behind.

Also see, Banerjee, A.C., The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Religion, Delhi, 1983, p. 71.

contd..
The original text in the *Adi Granth*, p. 471 is as under:

`The brahmins not only wore a tilak mark on their forehead, but they kept a rosary and tied dhoti in a peculiar manner to keep themselves different from the people of other castes. Guru Nanak has criticised such brahmins who lay more emphasis on their outer marks and misguide the innocent people in the name of caste and religion. Only the worship of True Lord can save them.

*Adi Granth*, p. 355:


contd..```
The body is the brahmin, the mind the dhoti, gnosis the sacred thread, meditation the kusha-ring. O pandit, dwell thou on such heavenly wisdom, and seek piety through the Name, read only the Name. And make Name thy conduct and works. Thy sacred thread is of avail only if there is Divine light within. And the dhoti and thy saffron-mark, if thou cherishest the Name. For the Name alone lasts with thee both here, and hereafter. Yea seek no other works but the Name. For dhoti, saffron mark, sacred thread and rosary. See, Adi Granth, pp. 201, 237, 471, 888, 1099 and 1359.

17. In one of the hymns Namdev clearly states that when he went to pray in a temple, he was turned out for he belonged to a low caste of Calico printers. See, Adi Granth, p. 1164.


20. **Adi Granth**, pp. 471-472:

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abh teet hirte yate wargin
sajj saha do yate majhi
abh hnu jninh yate majhi
abh sangha sa jninh yate majhi

ke sa sahe na so sahe
abh hnu jninh yate majhi
abh sahe sa sahe

muh hirte ke muh hirte
abh hnu jninh yate majhi
abh sahe sa sahe

abh mna sa mna
abh sahe sa sahe
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abh mna sa mna
abh sahe sa sahe
abh sahe sa sahe
abh sahe sa sahe
abh sahe sa sahe
abh sahe sa sahe
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26. *Adi Granth*, p. 904:

`Hukh ra sahej pyare saman gaane`\[1\]
`Jali sa naam satar bhand langane`\[2\]
`Bajte bhard tevar langi loane`\[3\]
`Ghare surangi utta r cheane`\[4\]
`Dhange kathe svarma lujh toane`\[5\]
`Hukh bhi sarad yhe pyare swagane`\[6\]


Also see, *Adi Granth*, p. 471:

`Devar achar re`\[7\]
`Sant pyare abhun re`\[8\]
`He karnam dare lohanu`\[9\]
`Dhun rudhat ume vande`\[10\]
`Mujh dehun kheer kheer khund`\[11\]
`Mati kheer thaph mang`\[12\]


Twisting a thread, he puts it upon others,
and taking wages, he marries off his wards,
and reading their horoscopes, showeth the way to all.
Hear ye people, and see the wonder of wonders.
His mind is blind and his name is wisdom (aseer).


*Adi Granth*, p. 471:

`contd...`
Those who wield the knife wear the sacred thread.
And in their homes do the brahmins blow the couch,
yea, they too relish the same tastes.
False is their stock, yea, false their trade,
and through falsehood fill their bellies they.
The sense of shame and honour from them is far removed,
for, Nanak, tis falsehood that filleth them all.

29. Adi Granth, p. 662:

The Brahmin slayeth life
and then bathes (at the pilgrim places).
Also see, Adi Granth, p. 471.
The brahmins had become blind to the true path and
were following the path of falsehood and violence.
30. **Gopal Singh, (tr.), op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 1337.**

Adi Granth, p. 1411:

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मे शुरुत ने लिये युगम
लघु लघु संस्कृत समरे नरथ
मोह मोह कर लो यथानि
क्षण कैसे कैसे मूल
मोही शुरुत नुक्स नाक
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Also see, **Adi Granth, p. 662:**

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मे शुरुत ने शुरुत सोवहै
अभिन उमे मजे कुछ उठै
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**Gopal Singh, (tr.), op. cit., Vol. II, p. 637.**

He alone is a brahmin,
who reflecteth on the 'Brahma',
and saves himself and also
all his kindred.


Adi Granth, p. 56:

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ींड़ श्रवियो तरमों तर कुछ तीवरसु
अज अभि भवि ते तपि सरिष तर राधित
खव्हो हुक्ति नब नबे चक्को सक्तः पु मानि
तेः नींड़ नेतृतः वेशर राहित कारसु
राधित प्रेमद ताववेत अजवि तानु
कछु तु कुछ लक्ष त हुमायू लियि सुक्ति अर्धित लाहु
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*Adi Granth*, p. 635:

बुध देवी जगन्नाथ लंकोः

कियो ट्रवाल भूमि निधे लंको मु अधम उठा जोगला

सभन्दू देश बहे नले लंको जगन्नाथ लंको

प्रभाद लठु मुखं लंको लंको देवी देवी लंको लंको

यित बयख बुधे अद्वैत धर्मो दुलो निम निम दुलो

बुध बुधे बुधे बुधे बुधे बुधे बुधे बुधे बुधे

फिर सतिरु रघु मु झों मु झों मु झों मु झों मु झों मु

सतिरु मैसे उँ मु मु मु मु मु मु मु मु मु


*Adi Granth*, p. 152:

प्रभ विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व

पार विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व विद्व

34. *Adi Granth*, p. 904.

�नय अ रुपे ले नर नरे

.प्रभे विद्व विद्व विद्व
42. Ibid., p. 662.
43. Ibid., pp. 471-72.
44. Ibid., p. 221:

रज भीड़ििर रज ज्युदुः मिसालोढ़ुः
रज ज्युदुः रज ज्युदुः विलचः
मन्दुक्ति रज ज्युदुः विलचः सहस्त्रोः

45. Ibid., p. 1290.
Adi Granth, p. 413:

नन्द भीड़ििर देशः देशः
विद्युर्दः कालः कालः

Adi Granth, p. 432:

रूप भीड़ििर घरे ने घरे
विरिशः भीड़ििर घरे
सजद मण्डः भविः भविः
उस घरे घरे घरे घरे

Adi Granth, p. 1256:

तीनिय कीय नटिः नाटिः नाटिः
मुखः भीड़ििर उचः उचः
Adi Granth, p. 1288 :


50. Arora, A.C., op. cit., p. 166.


52. Adi Granth, p. 1353. For kshatriyas, also see, pp. 1289, 164, 300, 470, 663, 747, 1001 and 1141.

53. See footnote 10 of the present chapter.

54. Adi Granth, p. 1036 :


Adi Granth, p. 663 :


*Adi Granth*, p. 1411:

अभू नै ज राज त युज न।
इस तरह त यस सही क।
पत्र नामे नै उच न।
मे भजन तरक नतुष।


60. Sachau, Edward, C., (tr.), *op. cit.*, pp. 101, 125, 247.

61. See footnote 6 of this chapter.


64. For traders and moneylenders, see Chapter III of the present study.

65. See Chapter III of the present study.


67. See Chapter III of the present study.


69. As cited earlier (footnote 10), Guru Nanak also makes mention of the traditional duties assigned to sudras, see *Adi Granth*, p. 1353.
70. Lunia, B.N., *op. cit.*, p. 140. Many *sudras* also tilled the land, reared the cattle and followed the profession of artisans.


72. See Chapter III of the present study.


Even as late as in the beginning of the twentieth century in the Census Report of 1911, it was recorded that whenever a sweeper used to cross a street, a road or a village, he had to tie a broom with his back so that one could easily recognize him as a 'Bhangi' (a sweeper) and at the same time he kept informed by crying that he was coming by a particular side so that none could be polluted by his touch.
What to talk of the medieval period, the present writer sums up the condition of the sudras, and the untouchables in India of today. He writes, 'The feeling of untouchability coming from the Vedic age still exists in the minds of the Hindus. India became free after hundreds of years slavery of Muslims and British rulers. Although the waves of equality and freedom have come to this land, yet the conditions of sudras and untouchables in villages and towns are exactly the same as one could find in ancient and medieval times. When there is an awakening in the world and man is coming near to man for being united for larger and greater tasks for humanity, the Hindus are still living in old fashioned way of life based on caste relations and feelings of untouchability'.


81. *Lunia, B.N.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 135 and 140.


The entire shabad (hymn) of Kabir ji in *Gauri Rag Kabir of Adi Granth*, p. 324 reads as under:
83. Namdev was the son of a calico printer and hence belonged to the 'low-caste' - the sudra.


Adi Granth, p. 1164:

Sagar, S.L., op. cit., p. 93.

What was true in the medieval period, even today the doors of (many) temples in Maharashtra are closed for the untouchables. There is one place,
Pathakpur, in Maharashtra where thousands of visitors come to see the Hindu Devi-Devtas. There are numerous temples. They are open to all, but closed to untouchables even today.

Adi Granth, p. 13:  

Also see, Adi Granth, pp. 429, 392, 399, 403, 411 and 427.

86. See, Adi Granth, p. 414:  
Adi Granth, p. 2:  


Adi Granth, p. 349:  

Also see, Adi Granth, pp. 429, 392, 399, 403, 411 and 427.

Adi Granth, p. 83:

इन्द्र नमः इन्द्र रूपम्
सरस त्रिवर्ण दुरुव्र इति
अत्य ते देव यहें
रक्षक उर पुष्प नरु नाम पुज प्रक्ष परें


Adi Granth, p. 15:

दीपि अधिक दोष नयु कोटी यु भो दोषम्
हराम दिक्ष वै मीब गंगा लोकायिता रिक्त दोषम्
निष्ठ सावध साहवाणि निष्ठ दक्ष उल्लासः सामोतम्


Adi Granth, p. 1330:

गृह नमः गृह माते समाधे सुधु ग्रंथर अर्थम्
मह नामां श्री ब्रज वै मे ते वस वरणितम्

92. See, Adi Granth, p. 349.

93. Ibid., pp. 349 and 1257.

94. Ibid., pp. 1331, 464.


Adi Granth, p. 53:

रक्षक रक्षक नाम भविष्यमे विभे रक्षक वत्तातिः
रक्षे यथि रक्षकात्मकि न रक्षे ते पादिः

Also see, Adi Granth, p. 1188.
96. Ibid., p. 221; also see, p. 7.


100. Ibid., p. 358.

101. Ibid., p. 468.

102. Ibid., p. 62:


Islamic society was bound to be based on the idea of equality is refuted by the socio-economic facts. It is impossible to equate a Muslim noble with a Muslim bihishti. A broad social stratification in the Muslim society is easily discernible. The nobles undoubtedly formed what may be loosely called the social elite and they enjoyed greater economic
advantages than any other section or group. The craftsmen, personal servants and domestic slaves, both male and female, formed the lowest strata, while the middling strata were formed by the peasants, soldiers, traders, scholars, writers, the sayyids, the shaikhzadas and the administrative personnel. The word 'qaum' in its application to the social groups among the Muslims was almost the equivalent of 'caste'. However, in the Muslim society, inequalities were ignored, tolerated or occasionally denounced, in the Hindu society they were sanctified.


