

## CHAPTER THREE

### PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

In this sequel we propose to examine and exemplify the philosophical and religious perspectives of Indian caste-system. Indian caste system was the creation of Hindu religion. Therefore to understand the philosophical and religious perspective of Indian caste system, we have to discuss it with regard to Hinduism. The term Hindu is ancient, deriving from Sindhu, the river Indus. The Hindu religion as it is described today is said to have its roots in the **Vedas**. Most archaeologists today doubt that the Aryans were the main force responsible for the destruction of this civilisation, but it seems fairly clear that many of their early poems celebrated its downfall, with the rain god Indra claiming to be the 'destroyer of cities' and the 'releaser of water'. In any case, whatever we call the religion of these monadic clans, it was not the religion that is today known as Hinduism. This began to be formulated only in the period of the founding of the Megadha-Mauryan state, in the period ranging from the *Upanishads* and the formation of Vedantic thought to the consolidation of the social order represented by the *Manusmriti*. Unlike Buddhism and Jainism, Hinduism was known as Brahmanic. Hinduism was known as Brahmanism reworked and absorbing many indigenous traditions. It attained social and political hegemony during the sixth to tenth century and very often confronted with Buddhism and Jainism. There is no caste discrepancy or inequality in Buddhism and Jainism. However, Hinduism as religion actually sprouted caste inequality and caste hierarchy. The major strands within what was later to be called Hinduism were known separately in the south as Shaivism and Vaishnavism and their influence spread throughout south-east Asia as separate traditions.

The philosophy of the main themes of Brahmanic Hinduism or in short *Brahmanism* were the identification of orthodoxy with acceptance of the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmins and the idea of *varnashrama dharma*- the fourfold system of castes and stages of life- as the ideal social structure. Advaita, the identification of a self or atman within each individual with the universal 'Brahman' was the favoured philosophy. Brahmanism had a tremendous absorptive and co-optive power as long as dissident elements accepted their place within a caste hierarchy. The material base of this social order lay in the village productive system of caste, *jajmani*, and untouchability. It is indeed doubtful whether the masses of the people at this time identified themselves as Hindus. There were numerous local gods and goddesses who remain the center of popular religious life even today and the period gave birth to *bhakti or devotional cults* which rebelled against caste hierarchy and Brahmin domination. Even many of these in turn developed into religious traditions that consider themselves explicitly non-Hindus. Sikhism, Veerasaivism etc., are cases in point. What then is the construction of Hinduism? The major work of constructing Hinduism was done by the Indian elites. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people like Lokmanya Tilak adopted the 'Aryan theory of race', claimed a white racial stock for upper-caste Indians and accepted the Vedas as their core literature. Tilak was also the first to try and unite a large section of the masses around Brahmanical leadership. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hindu conservatives were mounting a full-scale attack on their upper-caste reformist rivals with charges that the latter were anti-national. However, over the course of time, 'Hinduism as nationalism' was a growing identification with religious community. Even Gandhi identified himself as a Hindu. The *Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis and Puranas* including the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are Hindu scriptures. Gandhi rejects anything that does not fit his idea of spirituality. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be

capable of being spontaneously experienced. Inevitably this very acceptance of the Hindu identity historically and philosophically meant an *absorbing of the caste element of this identity*. In this regard Ambedkar says, “Caste has nothing to do with religion... it is harmful to both spiritual and natural growth. *Varna and Ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. The calling of a Brahman – a spiritual teacher- and of a scavenger is equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the philosophy of Hindu religion was a formulation that accepted a hierarchy place or calling for a human being and would obviously be rejected by militant low castes. Gandhi’s vision and philosophy of ‘Ram raj’ made him ultimately not simply a Hindu but also an indirect spokesman for upper-caste interests. Of course, Gandhi had his biggest aspirations, confrontations and failures on the issue of caste. His conflict with Ambedkar at the time of the Second Round Table Conference clearly showed that he put his identity as a Hindu before that as a national leader. Indeed many of the lower castes were in the end alienated from Gandhi’s version of anti-communal Hinduism and it is clear from the remark of Ambedkar who once said that ‘this Gandhi age is the dark age of Indian politics’. According to Ambedkar, it is an age in which people instead of looking for their ideals in the future are returning to antiquity- was harsh. Like Gandhi, Nehru took the existence of a Hindu identity for granted. In contrast to Gandhi, his idea of building a modern India was to ignore identity, seeing it as ultimate irrelevant in the modern world. In this regard Nehru said, “ In my opinion, a real solution will only come when economic issues, affecting all religious group and cutting across communal boundaries, arise ...I am afraid I cannot get excited over this communal issue,

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<sup>23</sup>Ambedkar, 1979, p.83.

important as it is temporarily. It is after all a side issue, and it can have no real importance in the larger scheme of things.”<sup>24</sup>

The Brahmanic stream had its philosophical side, based largely among forest recluses, and its ritual side, found among the intellectual advisors of the rising kings. Buddhists and other shramanatreands also had their spiritual foundation among those who had renounced all worldly desires but not all of these lived on the forests. The support of their thinking came from the rising merchant classes and many of the working peasantry. This was true of both Buddhism and Jainism. Caste was only in an incipient phrase at this time, a projection of the Brahmanic ideas. Who is a Brahman? A Brahmin is one who is born for seven births in a Brahman family, or someone who behaves nobly, by birth (*jati*) or by action (*kamma*). Thus, it seems that Hinduism acknowledges biological differences among human beings. Buddha, however, denied all biological (*jati*) differences among human beings, and defining a person by what he or she did. One of the Buddhist *jatakas*(tales) described the contention of the time: the Buddha, born in a Naga, i.e., probably a trope for a tribal obligatory family, is arguing against the theme of a cousin praising Brahmanism. The Buddhist vision of society and the state differed profoundly from the Brahmanic. The main duty to the Brahmanic ruler was to enforce the law against *varna-sankara*, the mixture of castes. Buddhism was unalterably opposed to caste. Not only did he deny it, in many ways the Buddhist texts show a leading role for the untouchables of the time, known as Chandalas. The opposite of the *Vasetthasutta* in the *SuttaNipatta* is the *Vaselasutta* which describes the ancient hero Matanga, a glorious spiritual hero before whom nobles and brahmans bowed down. The Chandalas are always shown as enemies of brahmans. Buddhism played a leading role in contesting the field of defining social order with Brahmanism, and within this

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<sup>24</sup>Nehru, 1941, pp.410-11.

gave an important role to untouchables. *Bahujansukaya, bahujanhitaya* was the memorable phrase that was used to characterize the social goal of the Buddha: a universal compassion, seeking the welfare of all. And the last words of the Buddha, *attadeepabhav*, be your own lamp, be your own refuge, characterized heart of his teachings. Buddhism thus proved to be transient in India.

### **The Caste Structure in India**

On the basis of caste system or division of *varna*, there develops caste structure in India. In Hindu society, caste divisions play a part in actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values. Members of different castes are expected to behave differently and to have different values and ideals. These differences are sanctioned by Hindu religion. According to Hindu religion, individual's position in the caste structure is fixed by birth and is, to this extent, immutable. Formerly, birth in a particular caste fixed not only one's ritual status, but by and large, also one's economic and political positions. Even though today we have different economic and political positions in spite of one's birth in a particular caste, but caste is still very important in setting economic and political limits. Thus, the term 'caste' requires some philosophical discussion. What is the philosophy behind the caste system? Why the caste system appears as the determining factor of everything, such as, economic, social and political rights? Is it merely a convention or something else? From philosophical perspective, we can say that what people mean by caste in day to day life is different from the meaning it has in its traditional literature. Sometimes by 'caste' people mean a small and more or less localized group; at another times the same word is used to refer to a collection of such groups. This ambiguity in the use of the term reflects one of the basic features of the caste structure. The English word 'caste' corresponds more or less closely to what is locally inferred to as *jati* or *kulam*. In addition to

these, many of the villagers, particularly the Brahmins, are familiar with the concept of *varna*. Although the term *jati* and *varna* refer normally to different things, the distinction is not constantly maintained. *Varna* refers to one of the four main categories into which Hindu society is traditionally divided. *Jati* refers generally to a much smaller group. The English word 'caste' is used to denote both. Thus, there is no real contradiction between *jati* and *varna*. Thus, it is quite common for a person to say that such and such an individual is a Brahmin or even a Kshatriya, by *jati*. Within a given context such use is intelligible. However, some have tried to solve the problem by using the terms 'caste' and 'sub-caste' to refer to primary divisions and their sub-divisions. But this is not altogether satisfactory because the caste system is characterized by segmentation of several orders. The caste system gives to Hindus segmentary character because 'a caste group cannot be considered as a self-contained whole – as a society in itself – but only as a segmentary, or structural, group in the entire system.'<sup>25</sup>

It will now be seen that just as the total system can be broken down into a large number of castes, there in turn can be grouped together into a few broad divisions. These primary divisions are of great sociological significance, and a consideration of their nature provides a good starting point for our analysis. Historically and religiously, the Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas not only live in different parts of Sripuram, but also in some measure regard themselves as having separate identities. Historically, they have occupied different positions in the economic structure of the village and these differences continue to exist. Apart from occupying rather different positions in the economic, political, and ritual systems, the three groups of castes are in the popular mind associated with different qualities and attributes. The most striking difference between Brahmins on the one hand and Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas on the other, is in their

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<sup>25</sup> See. Dumont, 1957b, p.3.

physical appearance. The difference is summed up in various popular sayings, one of which runs as follows: *Parppankaruppumparaiyanschappumahadu*. It means dark Brahmins and light Paraiyas are not proper. In a common image the Brahmin is regarded not only as fair, but also sharp-nosed, and as possessing, in general, more refined features.

These differences are of significance because fair skin-colour and features of a certain type have a high social value not only in Sripuram, but in Tamil society in general and in the whole of India. The Brahmins are extremely conscious of their fair appearance and often contrast it with the 'black' skin colour of the Kallas. A dark-skinned Brahmin girl is often a burden to the family because it is difficult to get a husband for her. Traditionally, fair skin colour has been associated with the 'Aryans' from whom the Brahmins claim descent and with whom they are now identified by leaders of certain separatist political parties. The *gotra* system, which is an essential feature of Brahmin social structure, links each one of them by putative ties of descent to one another sage after whom the gotra is named. Besides, dress also is in some ways distinctive of caste in a broader sense of the way. Among Brahmins, men are required by tradition to wear the eight-cubit piece of cloth after initiation.

### **Philosophy of Hinduism**

What does Ambedkar mean by philosophy of Hinduism? Is philosophy of Hinduism the same as that of philosophy of religion? Religion is something definite, whereas there is nothing definite in philosophy. According to the story, the two were engaged in disputation and the theologian accused the philosopher that he was 'like a blind man in a dark room, looking for a black cat which was not there.' In reply the philosopher charged the theologian saying that 'he was like a blind man in the dark room, looking for a black cat which was not there but he declared to have

found there.’ Philosophy was described long ago by Plato as the synoptic view of things. Philosophy thus attempts to see things together to keep all the main features of the world in view, and to grasp them in their relation to one another as parts of one whole. It thus draws ultimate conclusions about the nature of the world-process and the world-ground. Thus, the philosophy of religion is to be taken as meaning an analysis and interpretation of the experience in question upon the view of man and the world in which he lives. Philosophy of religion thus takes the help from historical facts disclosed by the history of religion. As Tiele puts it, “all religions of the civilised and uncivilised world, dead and living”, is a historical and psychological phenomenon’ in all its manifestations. According to Ambedkar, if this is philosophy of religion it appears to me that it is merely a different name for that department of study which is called comparative religion with the added name of discovering a common principle in the varied manifestations of religion. Ambedkar’s understanding of philosophy is different from the traditional sense of philosophy. For Ambedkar, philosophy means teaching and secondly, it means critical reason used in passing judgments upon things and events. Ambedkar then understands the word religion in terms of theology and in these regard he sets aside himself from the two convention types of theology, such as, mythical theology and civil theology. Ambedkar advocates natural theology which is the doctrine of God and the divine, as an integral part of the theory of nature. Besides natural theology, there is another class of theology known as Revealed Theology. According to Ambedkar, the best method to ascertain the criterion by which to judge the philosophy of religion is to study the revolutions which religion has undergone. Students of History are familiar with one religious revolution. The revolution was concerned with the sphere of religion and the extent of its authority. There was a time when religion had covered the whole field of human knowledge and claimed infallibility for what is taught. History tells us that the



Copernican Revolution freed astronomy from the domination of religion. The Darwinian Revolution freed Biology and geology from the trammels of religion. There is no doubt that this religious revolution has been a great blessing. It has established **freedom of thought** that we do not find in Hindu religion. It has enabled society 'to assume control of itself, making its own the world it once shared with superstition, facing undaunted the things of its former fears, and so craving out for itself, from the realm of mystery in which it lies'.

Thus, it seems to me that Hindu religion in some sense or other was in favour of caste system. It is based on the philosophy of spiritualism which is based on the religious faith that there is a life after death. The soul is immortal and eternal. The birth-rebirth cycle continues on the basis of the fruitfulness of Karma. The Hindu spiritualism, a kind of philosophy, equally believes that there is a divine journey on the basis of which the meaning of life cannot be measured. Just like a materialistic way of life, there is a spiritualistic way of life. The sanctity of such life is based on the purification of the soul. Accordingly, the philosophy of Hinduism states that there is always possibility of uplift one life by way of doing selflessness action. Accordingly, if a Shudra acts according to the philosophy of Hindu religion, there always remains a possibility of becoming higher caste in the next birth. This is where the relevance of the philosophy of Hinduism actually hinges on.

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