CHAPTER II

Caste As Tradition: A Strategy For Subordination

This chapter is an attempt to explore caste as a dominant tradition in the Indian social scene. Through a detailed analysis of the concept of tradition, I propose to explore the process of construction of brahmanic culture as the dominant culture as well as the process of suppression of dalit identity. I also analyse the employment of caste as a strategy for subordination through an analysis of documents/arguments like Vedic descriptions which are used to support and perpetuate the system of hierarchies. It has been observed that the caste system, symbolized by social positioning on the basis of birth, in a particular caste is responsible for the perennial plight of the dalits.

In the annals of history, if there is anything which has been accepted yet argued about, reinforced and fought against vehemently, it is invariably the concept of tradition. In every part of the world, whether it is the East or the West, tradition has always been a persistent object of acceptance and debate. Paradoxically, it is both a source and burden of life; it is a source of life in the sense that it puts before mankind a ready-made model to be observed and followed and it is a burden because it essentializes the model without allowing its improvement, or its final rejection when it is found that it has lost its significance for mankind. The paradox is neither simple nor superficial, nor is it real as it appears. Its study, as we shall examine, will be interesting because of its intriguing nature. The Oxford English Dictionary describes tradition as:

The action of transmitting or ‘handing down’, or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like, especially by word of mouth or by practice without writing.
The definition suggests that tradition includes everything passed on from one generation to another. It implies that practices or ideas handed over from one generation to the other can be considered as tradition. It includes religion, science, sports and various disciplines of thought thereby excluding virtually nothing. Tradition does not differentiate between good or bad, rational or irrational, materialistic or idealistic. It is not concerned about what happens in the future but is engaged with what has happened in the past. In short, tradition does not define anything but includes everything which is passed on from one generation to another.

While making an extensive and exclusive study about tradition, Edward Shils rightly defines it as:

... that which is handed down — includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, machines. It includes all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when the present possessors came upon it and which is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity. The Iliad, in a recently reprinted English translation, is a traditum; so is the Parthenon (12).

Shils’s definition of tradition covers an entire range of human activity in a given time. It goes with the spirit of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition and enlarges the idea to make it more explicit. To be precise, tradition is ‘the past in the present’ (13).

Etymologically, the word tradition comes from the Latin noun traditio, which means handing over. This noun is derived from the verb tradere, which
means ‘hand over’ or ‘deliver’. Traditio is equivalent to the Greek Paradosis, which also comes from a verb paradidomi meaning ‘hand over’. These two words are generally used to denote ‘teachings’ or ‘instruction’. Greek and Latin theologians commonly used these words to denote the body of teachings preserved and handed down by the church as the Catholic faith.

Though principally it means, ‘handing over’, tradition is associated with the sacredness of religion from its very first use and is regarded as ‘sacrosanct’ (Roy, 9). Every practice which is handed down does not automatically qualify to be tradition, for then fashions and rumours would also be traditions, since they can also be handed down from one generation to another. There is a difference between fashion / rumour and tradition. The former although received from others, is not regarded as tradition, as it is not vested with sacredness. In contrast, tradition is transmitted, it is argued, without any changes and its source is reliable and reverential: “Tradition … purports to embody a fixed truth from an authoritative source” (Encyclopedia of Religion). For example, a practice like cooking in a sudra-household is mere cooking, whereas in the Brahmin household it becomes a tradition, for the Brahmins have converted cooking into a ritual in their households with their principles of touchability and untouchability and their cooking has been invested with sacredness by their Shastras. This reveals the strong presence of religiosity in the concept of tradition and it is neither ‘neutral nor value-free’ as believed by traditional sociologists, like Gopalan (89).

Tradition is viewed as something natural and absolute. Any disagreement with the idea of tradition is tantamount to negating something innately sacred. All conventions, customs, ideas, knowledge systems that are passed on are viewed as natural but anything new is looked at with suspicion and disdain. This is true of brahminism. For example, new knowledge systems of thought like Marxism, Ambedkarism or gender theories are generally suspected as ideas anathemic to tradition. In the domain of traditionality, new knowledge about the physical and
social world is rejected and complete conformity with the past is demanded. Echoing the same view, Manu, the law-giver of Hindu society declares:

> All those (doctrines), differing from the (Veda), which spring up and (soon) perish, are worthless and false because they are of modern date. (Manusmriti, 96)

Manu rejects modern doctrines of his time like Buddhism on the premise that it is new. He uses tradition as an antithesis to modernity. He opposes Buddhism not only because it was new, but because it negates the caste system based on birth which he privileges. He uses tradition as a pretext to denounce the egalitarian philosophy of Buddhism. It is pertinent, however, to note that everything new is not sidelined; the new insights and interpretations using contemporary knowledge are welcome if they continue the spirit of tradition. What is not acceptable is the departure from the spirit of the past of the ruling elite. All new insights into science, religion, physical and meta-physical world are appreciated as long as they toe the line of tradition.

If tradition is simply an idea or practice handed down, why is there such hue and cry against a new idea or practice. If an old idea is passed on as tradition, the new idea is also capable of being handed down from one person to another, from one generation to another and in the process can strongly emerge as tradition. Then why should there be opposition or resistance to change or in the adoption of new ideas? If the old conventions and ideas enjoy acceptance and respect, this is not because the old ideas are rich and the new ideas necessarily suffer from lack of vigour but because the conventional ideas are already institutionalized. The acceptance, however, is not natural or automatic. Behind this acceptance, there is a dominant discourse which makes it possible. The study of tradition leads one invariably to the study of discourses that lie behind it.

Tradition plays an indispensable role in the appropriation of the scriptural source. A scripture cannot become a religious authority on its own:
Scripture cannot be used if it cannot be interpreted and every use (Liturgical, legal, theological, etc.) implies an interpretation. Interpretation, however, requires a general framework and accepted rules of discourse that scripture by itself cannot supply. They are supplied by tradition. (Encyclopedia of Religion, 4)

Tradition empowers and supplies authority to a scripture. A scripture on its own is like any other text. A particular text is invested with authority by a tradition and it is that authority that transforms a text into a scripture and that text is always dependent on tradition for its survival as a scripture. Tradition also, on its part, is not self explanatory or independent; it is only an interpretation. The interpretation is based on a general framework and accepted rules of a dominant discourse. A dominant discourse means an established value system and is created by the ruling forces such as patriarchy, class, caste and empire; it is, as rightly pointed out by Norman Fairclough, “...a sphere of cultural hegemony and the hegemony of a class or group over the whole society....” (95). Thus, it is the particular discourse which creates a particular tradition and there is nothing sacrosanct about tradition or the scripture that it interprets.

“The aim of interpretation is not to threaten but to preserve and protect scriptural revelation” (Encyclopedia of Religion, 4). It cannot be otherwise. The tradition / interpretation comes into existence with the sole purpose of converting a text into a scripture. Many scriptures which are highly revered today have remained as ordinary texts for many years but became scriptures when they were selected and disseminated by the dominant forces to serve their own ends. An aura was created around them, to transform them from mere texts to scriptures of authority. They were used and interpreted according to the needs of the dominant forces depending on the level of consciousness of the people. Kausambi argues that the Bhagavad Gita remained insignificant for many centuries becoming
Traditions are not independent, self-reproductive or self-elaborating. Only living human beings can enact them and re-enact them and modify them. Traditions develop because human beings want them. It is however only the dominant group or section in a society who chose certain practices and called them traditions. All that comes from the past is not regarded as tradition; the mere quality of being antique does not transform a practice into a tradition. A careful selection is made from the past, attributing sacredness and authenticity to it. Tradition is always intended to give a special status to what Michel Foucault calls “a group of phenomena” (21) but not to the entire phenomena as a whole. The whole exercise is done to establish the views of dominant class or group as tradition. In this way, ‘consent’ is ‘manufactured’ for public consumption.

Regarding the antique nature of tradition, the older it is the more respect it commands. It is a popular notion that traditions are sacred because they are passed on from one generation to another since times immemorial. They are valid because they have been followed by many generations. The pastness of the past brings authenticity and respect to tradition. But in the real sense, to quote Eric Hobsbawm, “Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (1). The much-talked-about pastness of tradition is “poetic – made-up.” (Said, Orientalism 55) The history which is part of the fund of knowledge of a given nation, state or movement is not what has been actually passed on and preserved in popular memory but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized. In a similar manner, tradition too has been popularized and propagated.

India’s caste system is perhaps the world’s longest surviving social hierarchy. A defining feature of Hinduism, caste encompasses a complex ordering of social groups on the basis of ritual purity. A person is considered a member of
the caste into which he or she is born and remains within that caste until death, although the particular ranking of that caste may vary among regions and over time. Differences in status are traditionally justified by the religious doctrine of *karma*, a belief that one’s place in life is determined by one’s deeds in the previous life. Traditional scholarship has described this 2,000-year-old system within the context of the four principal *varnas*, or large caste categories. In order of precedence, these are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the *Kshatriyas* (rulers and soldiers), the *Vaisyas* (merchants and traders) and the *Shudras* (labourers and artisans). A fifth category falls outside the *varna* system and consists of those known as ‘untouchables’ or dalits; they are often assigned tasks which are so ritually polluting that they do not even merit inclusion within the traditional *varna* system.

The primary aim and ideal of all religious traditions is the emancipation of all its followers, especially that of the weaker sections and the downtrodden. Thus, it is strange that a religion like Hinduism which stresses brahminism goes against that ideal and purposefully condemns a section of its own followers as untouchable outcastes. The Hindu brahmins have created theoretical explanations, puranic stories and religious myths to support and justify their conduct. The sole aim of what is called ‘brahminism’ is to create and maintain a system which gives a supreme place of importance to brahmanic priests and other brahmins in general. The caste system which forms the backbone of brahminism has existed for thousands of years. No other system of human differentiation based on religion has endured for such a long time. In the course of its existence, it has produced many sub-castes with innumerable inner divisions. The *Shastras*, puranic Stories and religious myths are there to support its continued existence.

The relationship between tradition and scripture is of mutual promotion. If tradition contributes to converting a text into scripture, the latter helps in establishing the reverence and authenticity of tradition. The power of the
scriptures is so enormous that it can convert any social practice into a tradition. Once a text is converted into scripture, whatever it says becomes divine. With this power, the scriptures not only declare certain selected practices as traditions but also make them appear as passed on from past. Scriptures are normative; they prescribe and proscribe anything they deal with.

In this light of above discussion, it becomes pertinent to understand what is Indian Tradition. It is significant to debate whether there is anything called “Indian Tradition”. If there is, how it is different from other traditions and what makes the difference? This leads to other pertinent questions: who are the people speaking about the greatness of Indian Tradition? Are there any scriptures in India and what is their role in relation to tradition? These are some of the important and fascinating questions and the endeavour to understand them further throws light on what has been already discussed.

Many scholars have written on India while glorifying its tradition and culture. Most of them believe that India is distinct from other nations as it negates materialism. In his book, *Nature of Indian Culture*, R.N. Vyas emphatically points out:

> the entire edifice of Indian culture is based on the foundation of spirit. Her religion, art, literature, everything has drawn inspiration from this spiritual out-look alone. The source book of Indian culture can be called “Shruti-Smrithi-PuranokthcT i.e. based on Shruthi, Smrithi and Puranas. (15)

He says that Indian culture recognizes the spirit as the ‘truth’ of being and life as a growth and evolution of the spirit. He pronounces that the western man has always been an ephemeral creature of nature, whereas “Man in the Indian idea is a spirit veiled in the works of energy, moving to self discovery, capable of Godhead” (14). He declares that history reveals that the Western culture is marked by
intellectualism and materialism; on the other hand, Indian culture is spiritual and non-physical in nature.

In describing Indian cultural tradition as non-physical and spiritual, Vyas is not an exception but one among many and is only echoing the dominant opinion about India. Almost all major Hindu thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - like Vivekananda, Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi and Golwalkar - have believed in and propagated the idea of a spiritual India. What is more important is that all these and others, who believe India as ‘non-physical’, take pride in that opinion. For them India is ‘ever ever holy’ as Raja Rao emotionally puts it (The Serpent 55). Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Max Muller subscribe to similar opinions and are responsible to a large extent for the manufacture of such notions about India.

A careful study of Indian tradition discloses that what has been told and disseminated for years does not go hand in hand with the actual circumstances. Hindu and brahmin tradition is projected as Indian tradition which is not the actual case. This usage completely excludes Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and dalits who constitute nearly twenty per cent of the Indian population and their traditions are not represented in such a definition. There is no mention of these cultural traditions when Indian is discussed and defined, leave alone the debate that those traditions too are spiritual. Even among the Hindus, the Sudras, who constitute ninety per cent of the Hindu population and all women belonging to Sudras and ‘the twice-born’, are excluded from the spiritual domain. They are barred from the initiation ritual to study the Vedas, which are the only prescribed source of Hindu spiritual knowledge. Orthodox Hinduism uses religious imagery, glorifies the ‘golden past’ of the rule of Hindu kings, sees women primarily under patriarchal control dictating their way of life, dress code etc. It co-opts all the sundry religious professionals to strengthen its ideology and political base and it uses religion to evoke sentiments creating national hysteria. (Ram, 115). These facts make it clear
that ninety per cent of the Indian population is outside the ‘spiritual domain.’ Yet Indian tradition is always defined as spiritual. Clearly, everything that is passed on in the form of ideas, customs and practices from one generation to another does not automatically become tradition. The beliefs and practices of the majority of people are not termed as tradition but, rather, are silently ignored, as if they do not merit any attention. This happens because, as discussed earlier, traditions are not self-proclaiming but are proclaimed. And it is the discourse which validates tradition. The more dominant the discourse, the more dominant the tradition.

Unfortunately, this kind of discussion usually runs into the danger of mere abstraction. It is always useful to concentrate on a particular tradition to understand the theoretical conceptualizations implicit in its foundation. It is essential to investigate into the dominant discourse/discourses that are responsible for converting a particular practice into tradition. In this context, the discussion will be more fruitful if it is centered on a dominant Indian tradition that is the Indian caste system. Its study will further throw light on the problem of tradition. The study of caste system is significant here because the writers under study Raja Rao, U R Anantha Murthy and Laxman Gaikwad, focus primarily deal on Indian life which is bound by the concept of caste.

The Indian caste system is one of its kinds which has such a gruesome impact on the life of its victims and which has lasted for over two thousand years. In India, there is no aspect of life which is not governed by the caste system. In the West, during the last 2000 years there have been many grassroots changes; the whole gamut of social life was influenced by various moments and revolutions like Democracy and Socialism. Many religions and empires have taken birth and many have disappeared. On the other hand in India, nothing has been able to shake the caste system; the fall of empires, the rise of new religions has not jostled the system. The caste system has survived not because it is humane but because of other factors. During this time, there have been many discourses which
contributed to the emergence and continuation of this social order as the tradition. It is interesting to note how the varna structure or the caste system as it is called today, has been portrayed, analyzed, rationalized and institutionalized by different cosmological, metaphysical and epistemological discourses. The two terms, Varna and caste, are used here as equivalents, since both denote, as we shall see, distinctions based on birth.

We find a number of justifications for the degraded status of the Sudra in these scriptures. In the Taittriya Samhita it is said: “Among men the Sudra has the same position as the horse has among animals. These two, the horse and the Sudra, are conveyances of the beings; therefore Sudra could not participate in a sacrifice” (VII. 4. 19. 3). In the same spirit, the Tandyamah Brahmana propounds but more explicitly:

Therefore, even if a Sudra has a lot of cattle he is not entitled to perform a sacrifice, as he is without God. No god was created after him. Since he was created from the feet he should not do anything but wash the feet of the three higher varna. (VI.I.II.)

The economic status of the Sudra has no consequence. Using the Purusasuktha analogy, the Sudra is degraded and insulted and robbed of his rights. He is fit only to wash the feet of the three varnas, for the simple reason, that he is stated to be born from the feet of Purusa.

The mythical interpretations are also used in support of the degradation of the status of the Sudra. The Aitareya Brahmana puts forth: “He created the Brahmin with Gayatri, the Rajanya with Tristubh and the Vaisya with Jagati, but he did not create the Sudra with any meter.” (V.II) Hence the argument runs that the Sudra is to be ordered about by other three varnas; he can be made to rise at will and can be executed at will (XXXV. 3). In the Satapatha Brahmana, a Sudra,
a woman, a dog and a crow are called the untruthful and it is suggested that the teacher while teaching should not look at them (V.XIII. 6.2.10). We find a similar attitude in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* where the protagonist refuses to acknowledge the existence of Sudras during his travel to various holy places.

The condemnation of the Sudras as a servile class is not done in a direct manner. If it was the case, there would have been a strong possibility of a Sudra revolt. The pronouncements disapproving the Sudras are made in a calculated and sophisticated way. At the first place, divinity is attributed to the *Vedas* by all later scriptures. The analogy of Hindu society into the four fold *varna* system with that of *Purusasuktha* is made and justified in the context of Vedic divinity. The same analogy is extended and reinterpreted by the *Brahmanas* and *Samhitas*, so as to make the *varna* distinctions natural and divine. Consequently, the condemnation of the Sudras is accepted as a norm of the society by both the twice-born and the Sudras. This brings out the point that the evolution of a practice like the Sudras’s condemnation is neither spontaneous nor its transmission in the name of tradition automatic. The question of class, discourse and context play a pertinent role in this regard.

The highly contentious question of occupations to make a living is completely based on the *varna*. The best duties are allotted to the Brahmins; their duties include studying and teaching the *Vedas*, sacrificing, officiating as priests for others, giving and receiving alms, apart from the coveted positions like ministers in the courts of kings. The prescribed duties of Kshtriyas are studying the *Vedas*, giving alms, governing and fighting, whereas the lawful occupation of the Vaisya is studying the *Vedas*, giving alms, rearing cattle and trade. All the lucrative and easy occupations are reserved for the three higher *varnas* and the Sudra is left with only one occupation — the occupation of serving the three *varnas*. The higher the *Varna* he serves, the greater the merit he earns. (Apastamba *Dharma Sutra*, I.I.I. 7) For such service, the Sudras would get remnants of their
food, cast off shoes, used umbrellas, garments and mats. (Gautama Dharma Sutra, X. 61-63)

Though both the Brahma Sutras and Manu (Manu Smrithi, X. 81, 82) allow the Brahmins to take up other professions, they are strictly prohibited from taking up a business like selling fish, meat, milk, medicines, honey and most importantly, tilling the land. Tilling the land is prohibited on the assumption that it would not only cause great pain to the bulls that pull the plough but this act of digging will also wound the earth and the creatures that subsist in it. Nevertheless, this philosophy of non-violence does not restrain Manu when he purports the Brahmin’s right to commit regicide in such clear terms:

Of a Kshtriya (military man or king), who raises his arm violently on all occasions against the priestly class, the Priest himself be the chastiser; since the soldier originally proceeded from the Brahmin. (IX.20)

The word chastiser should be understood in the context that the Brahmin is conferred the power and right to kill all the three varnas. From such sins, he would be completely free just by “reciting three times the Rig, Yajur or Sama Veda with the Upanishads. (XI. 261-62)

The Purusasuktha and the later Rig Vedic conceptions do not accord the Brahmin the right to be a king. It is the privilege of the Kshtriya. But, Manu though operating within the discourse of the fourfold Varna, invents a new tradition by conferring kinghood to the Brahmin. He bestows on the Brahmin all privileges hitherto traditionally reserved in favour of the Kshtriya. In his own words:

The post of the Commander-in-chief of the Kingdom, the very headship of the Government, the complete empire over every one is deserved by the Brahmin. (XII.100)
This is a clear violation of the tradition of Varna. There is no coherent relationship between the Varna and its related prescribed dharma. Yet Manu justifies his arguments based on the very premise of Purusasuktha. He states:

As the Brahmin sprang from (Brahma’s) mouth, as he was the first born, as he possesses the Veda, he is by right the lord of this whole creation. (1.93)

Manu is aware that the society, or in particular the Brahmin and the Kshtriya are dependent on the two lower varnas. The first two varnas do not participate in production. If the last two varnas refuse to carry on with their toil in their respective occupations, the existence of the first two varnas would be endangered. For this very reason, the duty of a king, Manu affirms, is to make sure the lower varnas fulfill their duties.

Manu ordains the king to shower special privileges upon the Brahmin. The Brahmin should always be kept happy with dana and dakshina. “If a Brahmin finds a treasure, it should be given to him without the king claiming any part of it. But when the king finds a treasure, he should give one half to the Brahmans” (VIII, 37-38). The Brahmans should be completely exempted from paying taxes. Even when the king is in dire need of money, he shall not touch upon the Brahmans. It is the paramount duty of the king to see no Brahmin in his kingdom “perish from hunger” (VII, 133).

Apart from the above privileges, the Brahmin is also excluded from punishment when proved guilty. On the proved charges of false evidence, the king is told to fine and banish the three varnas, but whereas the Brahmin should only be banished. He is completely excluded from capital punishment and only
tonsure (of the head) is ordained for a Brahmin (instead of) capital punishment: but men of other castes shall suffer capital punishment. (VIII-379)
Manu, the son of Svyambhu, (self-existent) continues:

Let him never slay a Brahmin, though he has committed all (possible) crimes; let him banish such an (offender), leaving all his property and (his body) unhurt. (VIII-380)

Thus, Manu places the Brahmin above the common penal law for felony. He is allowed to leave the country without being hurt and with all his property intact in proved offences that otherwise invite capital punishment. He is not to suffer fine or any physical punishment, leave alone capital punishment. He suffers only banishment which in the real sense is nothing but only a change of place after having committed the most heinous crimes.

If the Manu Smrithi and other canonical scriptures are benevolent towards the Brahmin, they are particularly harsh with the Sudra. If the Brahmin is considered the god on earth, the Bhoo-Deva, the Sudra is termed as the burial ground. The Sudra is condemned in very clear terms and is not entitled even to have a high sounding name. He must be contemptible both in fact and name. In the Hindu tradition, merit has no place. Instead everything is determined by birth. One does not become a Brahmin or a Sudra because of one’s abilities. It is one’s birth into a particular varna which is crucial for one’s occupation and social position. Laxman Gaikwad too, in one of the subsequent chapters, raises questions about the tradition of considering birth as the most essential quality. In his autobiographical work, he narrates how his birth in a denotified tribe blocked his way towards education and development and he was forced to take up his family profession. (The Branded, 2)

Instead of respecting the merit of an individual, the Hindu scriptures denounce the very concept of merit, which is based on abilities and skills. The scriptures are harsh especially with the question of the Sudra’s merit. Condemning the Sudra’s merit, Manu ordains the king not to take cognizance of his abilities.
Even if the Sudra is more scholarly than the Brahmin and has the ability to interpret law independently and efficiently, his services should not be called for.

A Brahmin who is only a Brahmin by descent i.e. one who has neither studied nor performed any other act required by the Vedas may, at the king’s pleasure, interpret the law to him i.e. act as the judge, but never a Sudra (however learned he may be). (VIII-20)

Manu continues his proclamations, pointing out that if this is not taken care of, the kingdom will sink like a cow in a morass.

The Sutras and Smrithis are not satisfied with the mere denouncement of the Sudra’s merit. Orthodoxy has seen to it that the Sudra would never be able to have any merit. The concept of merit is purely linked with the study of the Vedas, from which the Sudra has been already debarred, with the rule of donning a sacred thread as a precondition for such study. As the Sudra is denied the right to sacraments, he cannot be invested with the sacred thread (X-126). To further nail it down, the Shastras ensured complete ignorance on the part of the Sudra, by prohibiting him from listening to, or reciting or remembering Vedic texts. Gautama provides that if a Sudra listens intentionally to the recitation of the Veda, his ears shall be filled with the molted lead or lac; in case he recites it or remembers the Vedic texts, his body shall be split into two (Gautama Dharma Sutra, XII. 4-6).

Manu does not take into consideration the historical necessities that contributed to the emergence of the number of castes. He does not try to understand the phenomenon in an objective and dispassionate way. Instead he invents a tradition based on the Varna. He declares that the mixture of varnas led to the rise of number of castes. He lists the castes linking them to the ‘illegitimate mixture of varnas’. He declares that Medas are the progeny of a Vaidehika father.
and Nisada (boatwoman) mother and Andras as the progeny of a Vaidehika father and a Karavara (leather worker) mother. In the same breath he maintains that the Chandala are the progeny of a Sudra father and a Brahmin woman. Commenting on the philosophy of Hinduism and the role played by Manu, Ambedkar takes serious objection to this invention. He points out that Manu’s understanding is ahistorical and vehemently condemns it. He writes:

Manu makes the wild allegation without stopping to consider what aspersions he is casting upon men and women of the four original castes. For if the Chandalas — the old name for untouchables — are the progeny of a Brahmin female and a Sudra male then it is obvious to account for such a large number of Chandalas it must be assumed that every Brahmin woman was a slut and a whore and every Sudra lived an adulterous life with complete abandon (Ambedkar, Literature 37).

Ambedkar points out that Manu in his mad lust for debasing the different castes indulges in this kind of absurd endeavours which deliberately pervert historical facts. He suggests that Manu’s interpretation of castes had the ulterior motive of justifying the caste system and debasing the majority castes in order to privilege the Brahmins in particular and the twice-born in general. Manu’s mission was to establish the privileged position of the higher varnas as the sacred tradition in Hindu society.

The study of Brahmans, Samhitas, Grihya Sutras, Brahma Sutras and various Smritis has presented us a society divided into watertight compartments based on hereditary Varna or caste system. This has been by and large, the social reality of India for more than two thousand years. The persecution of the lower varnas or castes is not a phenomenon of the past but quite like a living tradition even today. The Chundur, Karamachedu, Belchi incidents, to name a few, in
which the innocent untouchables are brutally massacred for the fault of being born untouchables testify to the continuation of this ‘glorious tradition’, as Vivekananda has famously called it.

No tradition remains unchanged and the tradition of Varna also, as we have seen, has undergone many changes. The very concept of Varna has been consciously constructed and justified time and again by the scriptures and this process has converted Varna into the sacred tradition of India. In defending the Varna system, what is really supported is the hierarchy and inequality present in the caste system. Once the caste is established as the tradition per se and realized into social practice as the only mode of living, there is no necessity for the latter commentators or supporters of the caste system to mention either the privileges to the twice-born, or the inequality of the lesser born as the premise of the caste system. This gets accepted without any opposition. The mere glorification of the Varna system as the ideal would ensure the continuation of the caste system, which in reality ensures the privileged status to the higher castes. Living very much in the caste-ridden society, which has come into being before Manu’s time itself, we find many commentators and supporters of caste dwelling upon the Varna distinctions. They deliberately use the term Varna in place of caste because it sounds ancient and it is easy to establish legitimacy for social divisions on such a premise. The mystification of the caste system is not possible using the term caste in a society where caste distinctions are prevalent. This can be done by terms like varna and for this very reason the proponents of traditions extol the term varna. Once the divisions based on inequality and birth came to be accepted as the tradition, there have appeared many theories which philosophized and justified the caste divisions without indulging in the crude exposition of the details. It must be borne in mind that supporting social divisions is supporting inequality.

Vivekananda’s discourse on caste is critical, yet it is traditional. His interpretation of caste bears a new dimension. He proclaims: “Unity is before
creation, diversity is creation. Now if this diversity stops, creation will be destroyed” (The Complete Works, Vol 3 37). He asserts that any species, which do not throw varieties, would eventually die. He points out that the original idea of Jati constitutes the freedom to express one’s nature, one’s prakrithi, one’s jati, one’s caste. He maintains that according to The Gita, the extinction of caste would cause the destruction of the world because it is tantamount to the negation of variations. He emphatically declares that the present caste is not the real caste. He tells us that India has fallen down because it obstructed the growth of caste. Every frozen aristocracy or privileged class is a blow to caste and is not caste. He maintains that if we “let Jati have its sway; break every barrier in the way of caste ... we shall rise. Europe is progressing because it allows each individual to develop his caste.” (IV, 372).

According to Vivekananda, the individuality of a person is the real caste. He maintains that with the rise of individual variations society would prosper. He rightly recognizes that the full space to variations would augment progress. But at the same time, he wants to restrict the scope of innumerable variations through his recommendation of four absolute categories, i.e. the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra. On the one hand he praises the innumerable variations, while on the other, he exhorts people to stick to the caste system. His rhetoric on liberty, paradoxically enough, is prescriptive. Vivekananda is against the practice of untouchability but not against the caste system itself which he rates high.

We believe in caste as one of the greatest social institutions that lord gave to man.... this most glorious Indian institution ... has already worked wonders for the land of Bharatha and is destined to lead Indian humanity to its goal. (IV, 299)

Such is his profound appreciation for this ‘glorious’ tradition called caste. Vivekananda builds a discourse in favour of the caste system on the presumption that it is a natural phenomenon of any society. He declares that there is no country
in the world where there is no caste. He maintains that Indian caste is better than the caste which prevails in Europe and America. He points out that an Indian would start with caste but move towards a state where there is no caste. The ideal caste is Brahmin and Indians move towards the achievement of that highest stage. Equating caste with class, he informs us that in the West, as the society is individualistic, one individual with his efforts can rise from his class and join the upper strata of society. In India, as the society is not individualistic, an individual cannot cross the caste boundaries. But he ascents that one can rise with the rise of his caste and points out that in history there are many instances which show us the rise of castes in the social order.

This shows that Vivekananda is a staunch believer in the caste system. In fact, he goes so far as to say that what saved India from being disintegrated by the onslaught of the Muslims is nothing but caste. He adds that nothing would have been left for Europeans to study about India, had not caste existed and preserved in India. He proudly informs us that it is caste which preserved the Sanskrit language. Though he declares that being a sanyasi he is outside the caste system, he, as we shall see in the progress of our discussion, “born for the caste …. Live(d) for the caste.” (Vol 8, 62) Vivekananda is not blind to the problems of the caste system. Like Manu and Sankara, he does not indulge in the irrational praise of the Brahmins. He is vehement in his condemnation of the corrupt Brahmins too. Writing about the positive side of the West, he maintains that India hardly offers any space or possibility for the growth of an individual. If one is born in a low caste, he simply cannot rise. He is doomed forever. But in the West, he points out that a person may be poor today but he may become rich and respectable tomorrow. This possibility is open for any one in the West. In addition, there are conscious attempts in the West to help the poor. But the Brahmins, the most privileged class in India, instead of coming to the rescue of the poor and needy, howl at them, “Don’t touch”. He feels sorry that this eternal religion became
miserable in the hands of Brahmins with their “Don’t touchism” (Vol 5, 27). However, he attacks only the selfish Brahmins but not the caste system as a whole which has allowed the Brahmins to become egoistic.

No practice can automatically become a tradition. There should be a discourse to transform a practice into a tradition. No tradition is transmitted without being altered. This applies to the *Vedas* also. Vivekananda calls the *Vedas*, the essence, thus separating them from other Hindu Scriptures. Regarding the relationship between caste and ritual, he maintains that both change with the changing times while leaving the essence unchanged. The essence, being the *Vedas*, does not change. Only form changes. But the scriptures that interpret the *Vedas*, like *Smrithis*, do change depending on circumstance. He also provides that every book must change except the *Vedas*. As the caste system is an institution that has come from the *Vedas*, he emphatically declares that caste should not be abandoned and that it should be readjusted occasionally.

Within the old structure is to be found life enough for the building of two thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is evolution of the old (V, 215).

This shows that Vivekananda is also glorifying the past. He pleads for the continuation of the caste system on the basis of its antiquity. He does not seem to oppose change but the supposed change should carry the spirit of the old unchanged. And that unchanged spirit of ‘old’ and ‘ancient’ is caste. This leads to another important question about Vivekananda’s opinion on caste as hereditary. He affirms:

A man’s occupation is hereditary — a carpenter is born a carpenter; a goldsmith, a goldsmith; a workman a workman; and a priest, a priest (IV, 200).
He declares that man is born and not made; men are “born demons or born gods. Education or other things are a bagatelle” (VIII, 60). He asserts that even if one goes to a hundred thousand colleges, reads a million books and associates with all the learned men of the world, one does not become intelligent and learned, unless one is born with the “right stamp” (VIII, 60). He affirms that good and healthy people are not born of weak parents. What matters for the health and intelligence of an individual is not the social and physical environment but the birth itself. All qualities and abilities are inborn.

Vivekananda’s admiration for the higher castes is so intense that he does not mind supporting cruel traditions like the practice of widowhood and child marriage. Talking about the predicament of widows in his lecture “On Women of India”, he does recognize the seriousness of the problem. Yet he justifies the tradition of widowhood on the ground that among the higher castes the number of women is ‘disproportionately large’ compared to men whereas among the lower castes, “…the number of men is larger than the number of women…” (VIII, 65). Hence the lower caste women get more chances of marriage since the number of men is more. In the upper castes, the number of men is less; secondly, they ‘die like flies’. That is why, he reasons, an upper caste woman gets only one chance of marriage and gets married only once. If accidentally she becomes a widow, though she is of marriageable age, she is not permitted to remarry since other unmarried girls are in the waiting list (because of the shortage of men). Her counterpart in the lower caste can happily marry any number of times since there are plenty of men. Vivekananda resolves the problem of widowhood of upper caste women, by suggesting that they should seek the ‘comfort of religion’ in complete asceticism. It is strange that a person like Vivekananda fails to resolve such a simple problem. The problem is simple and there lies an easy solution in his own argument. It can simply be settled by allowing the ‘disproportionately large’ number of upper caste women to get married to the ‘large number of men’ in the lower castes. But
Vivekananda’s belief in caste distinctions and admiration for the upper castes does not permit him to offer such a solution. He also advocates ‘very early’ marriage, which means child marriage, to avoid the danger of a boy or girl getting married to a person whose father may be a lunatic, or a consumptive or a drunkard. What he really wants to avert through such marriages is the intermingling of castes, which results from intercaste marriages that are founded on mutual love. That is precisely his stance on the problem of caste. Vivekananda is not for the abolition of the caste system, nor does he believe in the equality of all castes. He is interested in the continuation of caste system and aspires to revive the old laws which declare and justify inequality. In his own words:

We must revive the old laws of the Rishis. We must initiate the whole people into the codes of our old Manu and Yajanvalkya, with a few modifications here and there to adjust them to the changed circumstances of the time. Do you not see that no where in India now are the original four castes (chathurvarnya) to be found? We have to re-divide the whole Hindu population, grouping it under the four main castes of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras as of old. (V, 405)

Like Vivekananda, Gandhi too builds a discourse in favour of social divisions based on hereditary occupations. But Gandhi differs from Vivekananda in that. He favours Varna structure in the place of caste system. Yet both strongly advocate the continuation of the social divisions. Gandhi states thus:

‘Varna’ means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. The law of Varna is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood.... Varna therefore, is in a way the law of heredity (My Varnashrama Dharma, 51).
Gandhi sustains that *Varna* is not human invention. It is an immutable law of nature like Newton’s law of gravitation. With the discovery and application of Newton’s law, the people in the West easily increased their possession of material wealth. Likewise, the Hindus by their discovery of *Varna*, an ‘irresistible social tendency’, have achieved immensely in the spiritual domain more than any other nation or race in the world. The ancient Rishis after their incessant experiment and research have arrived at this fourfold *Varna* divisions. Though he mentions *Purusasuktha*, he maintains that the hereditary divisions were founded by the Rishis. This is a clear departure from the earlier tradition of interpreting the *varna* distinctions.

Gandhi draws a line between *varna* and caste; he emphatically says that the two are not one and the same. Condemning caste, he emphasizes that it ruined India and Hinduism. He holds India’s failure to follow the *varna* in the real sense responsible for its failure in the economic and spiritual domain. Unemployment, impoverishment and untouchability — all these evils are prevalent in Indian society because he points out, India failed to uphold the varna dharma.

According to Gandhi, there were automatic trade guilds in the past which used to support all its members. Gandhi regrets that one hundred years ago, a carpenter’s son never wanted to be a lawyer but today he wants to be one because he thinks it is the easiest way to steal money, (*My Religion*, 143). He points out that in Cicero’s time the lawyer’s was an honorary profession and any brainy carpenter could become a lawyer for service and not for money. However, money and fame crept into the profession. He also mentions about the degeneration prevalent in medical profession in this context. However, what he fails to see is that a lot of changes have occurred between Cicero’s and his own time.

Gandhi does not want to see that the division of labour was not known in Cicero’s time and there was not much wealth in that society as modern science and technology and administration were not available then. Since there was not much

60
wealth, there were few disputes. The law too was not complex as it is in the present century and hence there was hardly any need of professional lawyers then. Thus, a brainy carpenter could become a lawyer for a stint. Gandhi does not take into account these historical limitations but simply glorifies the practices of the past. It is a real paradox that a staunch advocate of Varna system, Gandhi himself tried to make a living as a lawyer something quite contrary to his Varna dharma as he was a Vaisya by birth.

Gandhi maintains that Varna satisfies the religious and economic needs of a community. It satisfies the economic needs because it enjoins professions on the basis of birth and thus the ‘killing’ competition is eliminated. As one does not waste time in search of a profession to make a living, Varna system gives people enough time to devote themselves to spiritual pursuits. Though it is not the idea of varnashram, it ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth, if people regard Varna as a law laying down, not the rights or privileges of the community but their duties. But when people disregard Varna for self-advancement, it leads to confusion of Varna and ultimate disruption of society. Varnashrama leads to happiness, whereas its disruption leads to distress. He concludes that the so-called civilized nations have not reached a state of happiness and peace because in these countries the varna is not observed.

Gandhi is aware of the argument that Varna forces an individual to take up the profession of his ancestors. He asserts that there is no question of compelling any body to follow his parental occupation against his or her interest from outside forces. But Gandhi does not forget to mention that “By training, the people had recognized the duty and justice of the law and they voluntarily lived under it” (My Religion, 145). The training that Gandhi is talking about is nothing but the discourse constructed in favour of Varnashrama by various Brahmanical texts like Samhitas, Arayankas, Dharma Sutras and Smritis. The consent among people was created with the help of many discourses, as exemplified in the scriptures cited.
earlier. These scriptures presented a society divided into many divisions as natural and proper. The people were ‘trained’ to look at the social divisions as the best mode of living and in turn people volunteered to live under the varna law, though it was suffocating them. But Gandhi goes on to say that people have lived happily for several thousand years following this sacred law. He repeats the same idea at several places but does not indicate any historical period or rule of a king to explicate his idea in concrete form. He constructs his discourse in favour of Varna purely on imaginative grounds but never on the historically available facts. Even his opposition to the practice of untouchability on the assumption that it is a sin and not permitted by shastras is also emotional and not rooted in facts.

For Gandhi, Varna is purely hereditary, by birth but not by merits. Gandhi also believes in the mobility theory but it operates in the descending order and never vice-verse. He maintains that Varna is determined by birth but can be retained only by observing its obligations. He points out that one born of Brahmin parents will be called a Brahmin, but if his practice in the life does not exhibit the virtues of a Brahmin, he will fall from brahminhood. On the other hand, one who is born not as a Brahmin but reveals in his conduct the attributes of a Brahmin will be regarded as a Brahmin, ‘though he himself disclaims the label’ (145).

Gandhi maintains that if a Brahmin fails to reveal the qualities of a Brahmin, he will fall down and lose his caste. This means that the Brahmins are above the other varnas and the varna system is a vertical hierarchy. Though he says that all varnas are equal in so many places and words, he really does not believe in the equality of varnas. His enunciation that a Brahmin will fall down if he is not a true Brahmin, but a Sudra though he has all those virtues of a Brahmin, will never dare to consider himself as one, shows that what Gandhi really intends is the continuation of caste inequalities in the name of Varnashrama. Precisely for this reason Gandhi allows a Brahmin devoid of all Brahmanya qualities to continue to be a Brahmin. In his own words:

\[ \text{\underline{\text{\textbf{S\text{u\text{y\text{I}\text{7}\text{0}}}}}}} \]

62
A Brahmin may, by doing the deeds of a Sudra, become a Sudra in this very birth but the world loses nothing in continuing to treat him as a Brahmin (The Removal of Untouchability, 43-44).

According to Gandhi, if a Brahmin falls down he will be a Sudra. If a Sudra falls down, what will he be? But a Sudra cannot afford to fall down because in Gandhi’s discourse, there is no fifth Varna, the panchammas. His insistence that a Brahmin and a scavenger are equal and a Brahmin’s son should be a Brahmin and so also the scavenger’s son continue his father’s profession is aimed at strengthening and justifying the hereditary character of the caste system. It is important to note that in a caste society strengthening of the varna system is in fact strengthening the caste system, since both are based on hereditary occupations and as they are one and the same in the practical sense.

It would appear Gandhi is obsessed with the varnashrama for he rejects the concept of school education all at once in preference to varnashrama. In his opinion, the school would train people only in the skills that will help them to make a living. He does not see educational institution as a place where an individual is provided an opportunity to develop his personality to the fullest extent possible. He declares thus:

When I follow my father’s profession, I need not even go to a school to learn it and my mental energy is free for spiritual pursuits because my money or rather livelihood is ensured (My Religion, 144).

Further, Gandhi ordains people to live according to Varna tradition and to continue one’s parent’s profession without bothering about worldly benefits. They should not contemplate any improvement in their socio-economic life. He asserts that “we need not, ought not, to seek new avenues of for gaining wealth.” (My
Instead he enjoins them to devote themselves completely towards spiritual perfection. It will be interesting to see if Sudras are allowed to seek such spiritual salvation in Gandhi’s discourse.

Gandhi is like any other traditionalist. He concurs with Manu and Gautamma who have declared that the Sudras have no right to study the Vedas. Gandhi’s whole argument in support of varnasrama is based on his declaration that it is not based on inequality but on hereditary occupations. He maintains that Varna is a boon to mankind because it provides ample time to people for spiritual pursuits by eliminating competition in the economic domain with its hereditary nature. The whole thrust of his argument is based on the assumption that varna enables people to move towards spiritual perfection. However, Gandhi reveals what he actually means by varna, when he denies the Sudras the right to spirituality which he has been extolling all through as the greatest ideal achieved by the Hindus. He affirms in his work The Message of the Gita:

A prayerful study and experience are essential for a correct interpretation of the scriptures. The injunction that a Sudra may not study the scriptures is not entirely without meaning. A Sudra means a spiritually uncultured ignorant man. He is more likely than not to misinterpret the Vedas and scriptures. Everyone cannot solve an algebrical equation. Some preliminary study is a sine qua non. How ill would the grand truth ‘I am brahman’ lie in the mouth of a man steeped in sin! To what ignoble purpose would he turn it! What a distortion it would suffer at his hands! (20).

For Gandhi, the Sudra is not only ‘ignorant and spiritually uncultured’, but ‘a man steeped in sin’. Hence Gandhi pronounces that the Sudra be kept away from the study of scriptures, the only source of spiritual knowledge. Gandhi continues his tirade saying that only those who have spiritual discipline are entitled to read the
Vedas; one must practice *yamas* and *niyamas*, the eternal guides of conduct before one starts reading the *Vedas*. But he does not pause to interrogate why the Sudra is eliminated from such practice. He provides that the *shastras* should strictly be read under the guidance of a teacher and never independently. As there is dearth of ‘Gurus’ these days, he recommends ‘modern books inculcating ‘bhakti’. the devotion to God. He affirms that those who lack *bhakti* are not qualified to interpret the scriptures, though they are very learned. It is pertinent to note that Gandhi by making it obligatory to study the scriptures under a guru and proscribing the learned scholars with independent mind preempts any critical interpretation of the scriptures. He ensures people stick to the traditional interpretations of the scriptures which as we have seen earlier are detrimental to the Sudras.

As against Vivekananda and Gandhi, Ambedkar points out that the caste system rejects the three vital principles of justice — Liberty, Equality and Fraternity — on which modern democratic nations are built. He states that the caste system, with vertical hierarchy as its basic principle, negates equality among the castes. He adds that the caste system believes in slavery but thrusts it only upon the Sudras. Talking about the principle of freedom, he argues that it is completely stifled in the caste system. He says that the people who live under the caste system do not have the freedom to pursue knowledge, to choose a profession or to save and defend one’s own life. All these rights are determined by the birth factor and the individual does not have any role in the making of his own life. Fraternity among people is just impossible in a society in which each caste despises another caste placed below it. He laments that all these three principles of justice, which are a pre-requisite of any just society, are completely rejected in the Hindu social order.

Ambedkar denounces Gandhi for defending the caste system in the name of ‘Division of Labour’. Ambedkar points out that “Caste system is not merely
division of Labour. It is also a division of labourers” (Annihilation 67). He agrees that a civilized society needs division of labour but points out sharply that in no civilized society labourers are divided into so many watertight compartments as it is done in the caste system. He continues that the caste system as a division of labourers and not as labour is based on hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. He adds that this has not happened in any other country and points out that this division is not spontaneous and not based on natural aptitudes.

In sum, the caste system has been constructed, strengthened, modified, rationalized, justified and institutionalized time and again by various discourses during the last two thousand years. Some of the important discourses have been discussed here. There have been many discourses which have come in opposition to this tradition right from its first construct down to the present. The declaration that if a Sudra knows the Vedas, his body should be split allows us to infer that there had been traditions which enabled the Sudra to study the Vedas. But these practices have been brutally eliminated from the society and from the memory of people. These humane traditions have not been allowed to flourish and the dictums of the likes of Manu exemplify how cruelly these have been dealt with. In comparison to the discourses in support of the caste system, the discourses that have opposed it have been very few and almost insignificant in the presence of the enormous literature in support of caste. Despite this, the opposition to caste has not only been fought with different theoretical propositions but also been dealt with the sword. The state being dominated by the twice born always favoured the continuation of caste and its oppositions never enjoyed the state’s support except during the Mauryan Empire. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, different religions and thoughts like Buddhism, Jainism and Charvaka were systematically eliminated and destroyed for their opposition to the Hindu social order based on caste. But the fight is continuous and has been carried out all through history in
some form or the other. That is why, over the years, there have been many changes within the caste system. The opposition to the caste system has not become dominant and hence it is not considered as tradition.

The leaders of modern India have to address the caste system in a way different from that of the ancient thinkers. The old kingdoms have been completely washed away and the whole Indian sub-continent which was hitherto divided into many kingdoms came under the colonial rule of the British seeks a new identity. The Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries was gripped by nationalism and this concept also attracted the attention of the ‘third world’. Indian nationalists who were drawn from among the twice born engineered a political movement against the exploitation of the British. The twice-born raised their voice because they were the people who were displaced by the British from the dominant positions of power and privilege traditionally reserved for them. Since then the pre-eminently upper-caste leadership has been engaged in building India as a nation. In order to fight the powerful British Empire, it was necessary for them to seek the support of the masses who were none other than the Sudras and the lower castes apart from the non-Hindus. These contingencies have made the Indian leadership address the question of caste in a different manner for they could not afford to be as harsh and categorical as the ancient law givers had been.