

Caste in India

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* This article was written as a reply to a document on "Caste in India" issued by the Hindu Council of the UK, which was itself a response to Dalit organizing globally as well as nationally. The issues it deals with are very general, and I have attempted to give a full alternative account. Those interested in the Hindu Council's document may email me at: krantivir@gmail.com. I owe thanks to Michael Witzel for his note citing Vedic references on caste and his careful reading of an earlier version of this essay.

INTRODUCTION

The essay submitted by the Hindu Council of the United Kingdom on "Caste in India" contains no surprises. It seeks to justify and legitimise the continuation of the caste system. It argues that in its origin the caste system was a way of maintaining a harmonious and integrated society, that it was not by birth but by "merit", and that today it functions as something like a "club" in which likeminded people can associate freely with one another. Caste, according to the Hindu Council, took on its severe and birth-related qualities only during the medieval period in India, when a wave of invasions, mostly by Muslims (though the report mentions at first the Kushans), forced a retreat into a defensive form of integration. It has not been stagnant, and is in the process of being reformed today. The Report concludes by saying that "Historically, *varnashram* has enabled Hindu civilisation to survive repeated invasions. It has made Indian society stronger.... Today it has outlived its usefulness."

Does this mean it should be destroyed? Not according to the Hindu Council:

"The caste system should and will undergo reforms in the social arena. Through education and enforcement of existing legislation, unjustified discrimination and abuse will be eliminated and the original concept of caste re-established."

The Hindu Council apparently wants to maintain their

idealized version of *varnashrama dharma*, in which caste functions like a "club", in which people perform their ascribed duties but are given "respect." Let us see what this means. We want to examine not just theirs, but the original (Brahmanic) concept and reality of caste.

THE HISTORY OF CASTE

Before going into our critique in detail, it is necessary to put forward our own perspective. It is true that caste has never been stagnant, that it is a historical phenomenon and has changed a good deal. In fact, the caste system was imposed upon the whole of the people of India during a long historical process. It was contested from the beginning, as it is today.

It is also true that caste as a system did not exist during the Vedic period. The caste system is a form of social stratification, consisting of an ordered hierarchy of intermarrying groups or *jatis* (the real caste, as opposed to *varna*) each of which tended to have assigned occupations. There are thousands and more of these. As a system, caste is based materially on a complex and relatively productive agrarian society. In contrast, Vedic society was a semi-nomadic one, based on lineage and relatively loose strata (known as the brahmins or priests, the *rajanya* or nobles, and the *vis* or commoners) which indeed eventually evolved into the caste system, but was not itself such a system. Nevertheless, the roots of caste

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go back to this period. The earliest mention of varna is the much quoted and debated *Purush sukta*, which is generally considered to be a relatively late part of the Rig Veda, dated to about the 10th century.

In discussing the role of invasions in caste, the report is quite silent on the first and famous (or infamous) one, that of the Aryans or Vedic peoples. The south Asian subcontinent from the very beginning was an area which saw the incursions of many groups, the most famous of these being the Aryans (though Dravidians also apparently moved in from outside). But the Hindu Council report avoids this issue of incursions of groups, especially of the Aryans, as it wants to assert that all of "Hindu" society was one ethnic group.

The Aryans did not mount the same kind of conquest and invasion as did many later groups; theirs was an earlier incursion, and they apparently entered the subcontinent after the Indus civilization had declined (it could be added here that the Dravidian group also apparently entered the subcontinent from the outside, though earlier). Nevertheless it was an incursion, the Aryans were aggressive as others, and it was during the confrontations and clash of the Aryans and the earlier inhabitants of the subcontinent that caste emerged.

When did caste, then, have its origins? Here we distinguish between the caste system – the ordered hierarchy of innumerable jatis – and the varna system, or *varnashrama dharma*, the ideology that justified this hierarchy. In contrast to varna, which has four major groups (brahmins, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras) and no untouchables; the caste system has innumerable and fragmenting groups, and above all, the division of the toiling castes into the "clean" but lowly placed sudras and the "unclean" or untouchable communities which performed the most degrading work.

This system can be said to have originated during the long period of the first millennium BCE. It was a period in which the Aryans were moving and settling in the Gangetic plain. The Indus cities had long ago disappeared, but with the growth of agriculture, the discovery of iron and new productivity came what historians often call the "second urbanization": a growth in trade and commerce, and the rise of cities and kingdoms. It was a turbulent period, one in which a new class society was coming into existence amidst conflicting ideas about what shape this society should have.

The two major streams of these conflicting ideas were the *brahmanic* and the *shramanic*. The brahmins derived from the earlier priests of the Vedic society (though many originated also from indigenous inhabitants), and influential sections of them were beginning to propagate a theory in which the Vedas were the original, unwritten,

eternal sacred literature, the brahmins were their authorized interpreters, and a *varnashrama system* (the four major varnas and the prescribed four stages of life or *ashramas*) was the ideal social form, in which the Vedic sacrifices could be performed and the proper rituals maintained by the elites of society who were preserved from impurity by having "impure" occupations performed by groups lower in the hierarchy. This theory was beginning to be put forward in clear terms by around the middle of the first millennium BCE, as noted.

Brahmanic theory gave religious sanction to a society of inequality. It has to be noted that we use the term "Brahmanism" for this, and not "Hinduism." "Hinduism," as a term for a religion only begins to be seen in very late Sanskrit texts after the Muslim period, and became generalized with the colonial era, when it was identified as the religion of the "people of India" and a number of disparate elements (including the sanctity of the Vedas, the various bhakti movements, and popular stories such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata) were brought together as the main components of this constructed religion. In the earlier period the term "Hindu" was unknown in India; it originated first as the mispronunciation of "Sind" by the people in the Iranian plateau, who pronounced "S" as "H", thus turning "asura" into "ahura" and "Sind" into "Hind." For a long period the area beyond the Indus (Sind) was known as "al-Hind" to the Muslim world.

Thus, the term "Brahmanism" denotes the theories of inequality that were hegemonic for so long in India. We assert here that besides this, there were many important philosophies and religions in India, ideological trends and movements of equality, contestations of the varna system, all of which were embodied in much of popular literature and action. To point to these anti-Brahmanic trends and movements as evidences of "Hindu" equality is only self-serving for the interests of the elites. Yet this is constantly done; it has been one of the tactics of Brahmanism.¹

The shramana trend contested Brahmanic inequality. The word "shramana" means to strive, and these trends consisted of those who renounced worldly life in striving for religious and social meaning. The shramanas included many groups: Buddhists, Jains, other important sects of the time such as the Ajivikas, and the materialists, known as Lokayatas or after their reputed founder, Carvak. These had many points of difference on spiritual and social issues, but they agreed on the important points of denying the authority and antiquity of the Vedas, denying the pre-eminence of Brahmins, and rejecting varnashrama as a model of society. In other words, they were relatively equalitarian, and the social model they were propagating for the newly emerging class society

was an open one, in contrast to the closed system of the brahmins.

It is also significant that the shramanic groups, especially the Buddhists and Jains, were associated with the relatively open commercial and urban world, while Brahmanism developed a more rural base. This is reflected in their literatures.

The Buddhist literature (which is normally more socially realistic than the Sanskritic) gives a clear picture of this contestation. In the Vasettha sutta of the Sutta Nipata it is described how a young brahmin, Vasettha, comes to Buddha. He says, "my friend Bharadwaj and I have been having a dispute: what makes a brahmin. He asserts that it is birth (jati): a pure birth through seven generations produces a brahmin. I say it is action (*kamma*)." The Buddha then answers him by arguing that while there are jatis among plants and animals, human beings, from the hairs of their head to the nails of their feet, have no essential biological differences. Rather, it is action that makes a person: one who makes war is a soldier; one who farms is a farmer; one who does commerce is a trader, and so on. The debate depicts several features. First, there were differences also among brahmins about the emerging theory of "Brahmanism." Second, there was a racial-biological element in the interpretation of caste even from the beginning, which the Buddha refutes (showing that he knew what the Hindu Council theorists do not know even today: there is no race among humans). And third, what was essential at the social level was not so much the varnas as the various occupations which were to become (in varnashrama dharma) described as caste duties.

The debates went on, the contestations went on. It is important to realize that the caste system was never imposed all at once on Indian society: it took centuries – a full millennium – before caste became the hegemonic feature of the society. This happened before the Muslim invasions, and came around the 5th-6th centuries with the decline of Buddhism. But the beginnings were laid in the middle of the first millennium BCE, when the caste system was promulgated as a theory, a model of how to organize society, being propagated vigorously by the Brahmins. These used their interpretations of earlier scriptures such as the Vedas (particularly the *Purush sukta*), and then produced many "manuals" of the social order, or dharma shastras. Texts such as the *Manusmriti* are thus more prescriptive than descriptive. But it is important to stress that the most severe interpretations of caste rigidity, such as the *Manusmriti*, came long before Islam even came into existence. The Hindutva theory that it was Muslim invasions that caused the rigidity of caste is historically impossible.

We see Indian tradition, then, in relation to caste, as a complex, historical and changing one. This does not dilute our opposition to the theories that justify caste, including that of the Hindu Council of the United Kingdom.

Now let us turn to some specific flaws in the Hindu Council report.

THE PURUSH SUKTA AND INTERPRETATIONS

The Hindu Council report begins justifying caste by arguing that there was a deliberate conspiracy by the Europeans to misinterpret the scriptures, to justify their conversion efforts by ascribing all sorts of evils to Indian society.

The main "example" of such a mis-translation the report gives is that of H.H. Wilson's translation of the *Purush Sukta* of the Rig Veda, which depicts a primal sacrifice of a man or "Purush" in which the mouth becomes the Brahmin, the arms the ksatriyas (*rajanya*, the vedic term is used), his thighs the Vaishya and his feet the shudra. Yet, the report does not contest the actual translation; what it contests is its *interpretation*. It does not argue, in other words, that Wilson has translated "feet" wrong; rather it argues that "in the context" of overall Vedic equality, this simply meant that all the different components of society were part of one body and – this is important – that there is no inferiority associated with the legs or feet. "No one part of the human body (society) is inferior or superior to another" and "a devotee will prostrate him or herself before the deity and place their head on its feet, completely invalidating the argument that anything emanating from the feet of the Divine being is pure and untouchable" (HK, page 9).

This is an invalid argument. The original assertion is not that the feet are "untouchable" (indeed, Dalits or "untouchables" are not mentioned in the *Purush sukta*, that came later), rather that they are inferior. Organic images of society are common in early religious sanctions of inequality, and this is one of them – it is really only the first hint of what was later to become *varnashrama dharma*. That devotees prostrate themselves at the feet of the deity, that people bow to the feet of superiors, is an assertion of humility before what is greater or relatively holy – it is certainly not done to assert equality! In fact, the report's examples prove the case: that the feet are considered lowly. As the Vedas show, a sudra was often required to wash the feet of the twice-born (Panc. Br. 6.1.11; reference from Witzel), and even today it is women who massage the legs of husbands, daughters-in-law of mothers-in-law.

To assert that a community is paralyzed when divided, when its essential functions are not performed, is not to deny inequality; it is rather to justify it. Sudras always

performed essential functions for society and they were always considered inferior.

The Hindu Council report slides over the later justifications of caste, rather asserting that the *Manusmriti* and others are of less importance than the Vedic texts. Yet the Vedas assertion of "equality" is vague and amorphous. Vedanta has always claimed that atman is Brahman, that God is in everything – yet this has never been seen as contradictory to the actual inequality of actually existing and labouring human beings.

But it is useful that the Hindu Council report has raised the issue of translation. There are indeed some major problems here – but they are in the other direction from its assertions..

THE TRANSLATION PROBLEM: VARNA SAMKARA IN THE BHAGAVAD GITA

While the Hindu Council report accuses the early European translations of serving the self-interest of missionaries and others who wanted to denigrate Indian culture, in fact it is the "modern" "Hindu" translations which are at crucial points really questionable, evasive and distorting. We will illustrate this with a crucial passage in the Bhagavad Gita.

In the first section, verses 40-43, an explanation is given as to why Krishna has become an *avatar*, and what he is saving the world from. Here the crucial term we will focus on is *varna-samkara*, essentially meaning "mixture of castes".

My "old" – presumably misguided, self-interested, non-"Hindu" translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* has verses 40-43 of the first section of the *Bhagavad Gita* translated as follows:

Upon destruction of the family, perish
The immemorial holy laws of the family;
When the laws have perished, the whole family
Lawlessness overwhelms also (40)

Because of the prevalence of lawlessness, Krishna,
The women of the family are corrupted;
When the women are corrupted, O Vrsni-clansman,
Mixture of castes ensues (41).

Mixture (of castes) leads to naught but hell
For the destroyers of the family and for the family;
For their ancestors fall (to hell),
Because the rites of (giving) food and water are
interrupted (42).
By these sins of family-destroyers,
(Sins) which produce caste-mixture,

the caste laws are destroyed,
and the eternal family laws (43).

(*The Bhagavad Gita*, Translated and Interpreted by
Franklin Edgerton, Harper Torchbooks, 1944).

This is quite clear (and a contemporary translation by Radhakrishnan gives approximately the same meaning). But a modern translation by Ramanand Prasad has this as follows:

With the destruction of the family, the eternal family traditions are destroyed, and immorality prevails due to the destruction of family traditions. (1.40)

And when immorality prevails, O Krishna, the women of the family become corrupted; when women are corrupted, social problems arise. (1.41)

This brings the family and the slayers of the family to hell, because the spirits of their ancestors are degraded when deprived of ceremonial offerings of rice-ball and water. (1.42)

The everlasting qualities of Varna and family traditions of those who destroy their family are ruined by the sinful act of illegitimacy. (1.43) (*Note: Varna means color, or the make up and the hue of mind; a social division or order of society such as caste in India.*)²

Here *varna samkara* has become simply "social problems"! Another of the recent "Hindu" translations has also, for verse 41, giving *varna samkara* as "unwanted progeny":

When irreligion is prominent in the family, O Krishna, the women of the family become polluted, and from the degradation of womanhood, O descendant of Vrishni, comes unwanted progeny. (from <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/categories/Chapter-One-of-the-Bhagavad-Gita/?Page=2>)

These are serious differences, differences in meaning coming through differences in translation and not simply in interpretation. Verse 41 reads, in Sanskrit, as *adharmabhibhavat Krishna/pradusyanti kula-striyahstrisu dustasu varsneya/ jayate varna-sankarah*. The crucial term, which is translated as "unwanted progeny" or "immorality" or "social problems" in the "modern" translations, is obviously *varnasamkara*. It is repeated again in verse 42: *dosair etaih kula-ghnanam/varna-sankara-karakaih/utsadyante jati-dharmah/kula-dharmas ca sasvatah*. and "unwanted children" is given by this translation again as the result of the evil.

Both recent translations avoid the mention of caste or *varna*. They are clearly inaccurate, and it would appear that the contemporary translations are attempting to obscure and hide the original sharp condemnation of inter-caste, or inter-varna, relations that was traditionally

made by the scriptures, including the much-revered *Bhagavad Gita*. Verse 42, it should be noted, also carries with it the terms *jati-dharma* and *kula-dharma*, or the dharma or duties of caste and lineage. These are what are ruined with *varna samkara* and the degeneration of the family. To repeat, the “modern” translations completely evade this issue.

“Jati, or caste, in both animals and humans, is assumed to be a grouping within which sexual relations and marriage can rightfully take place. Sexual relations (married or not) outside of this are illegitimate and, as we are told in the *Bhagavad Gita*, lead to hell. It was this destruction of the society, this intermixing of castes, which Krishna became an avatar to save humanity from, according to the *Gita*!

DO THE VEDAS JUSTIFY CASTE?

As we have noted, Vedic society, as a non-agrarian semi-nomadic society, did not have a fully developed caste system, and the *Purush Sukta*, a late text, gives only a hint of the full-fledged system. Nevertheless, by the late Vedic period, it was clear that there were important status differences between brahmans, ksatriyas (rajanyas), vaishya and the now-existing *sudra* groups, and these were linked with views of the lower groups as inherently inferior and even polluting. Thus, for example, the *Artharvaveda* links the washerwoman with urine and feces (12.4.9; reference provided by Witzel). The *sudras* and *vaishya* were subordinate to the upper two groups, and could in many cases be treated as equivalent to slaves.³ In any case, the *Sudras* had no rights to any of the Vedic rituals.

Thus, in later times, as *varnashrama dharma* was put forward as the ideal society, the Vedas became used as the main justification for caste. As Brahmanic theory developed, it relied on the notion of *varnashrama dharma* as the central organizing feature of society, and interpreted the Vedas in these terms. By the time of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, it was clear that the Vedas and the *Purush-sukta* were being interpreted mainly as support for a *varnashrama* society. According to the *Arthashastra*, whose view of the Vedas is the opposite of that of the Hindu Council,

“The three Vedas are most useful because they establish the duties of the four varnas and the four stages of life” (Penguin, translation by L.R. Rangarajan, p. 100).

In other words, the equalitarian ideals that the Hindu Council holds are the “essence” of the Vedas are completely ignored in this summary of how the Vedas were understood by their Brahmanic interpreters at the

end of the first millennium BCE. The *Arthashastra* then outlines the duties of the four varnas in the usual way, and states,

“The duties of a householder are: earning his livelihood by pursuing his own profession; marrying a woman from the same *varna* but not of the same *gotra*” (101).

This makes it clear that caste was by birth: *varna* of a person followed the *varna* of parents. The original metaphor from the *Rig Veda* was by this time being used as a clear prescription for a caste society — caste by birth. But even in the Vedas, *sudras* were very clearly viewed as inherently inferior, as the numerous examples given by scholars such as Michael Witzel have shown.

CASTE BY MERIT?

It is a familiar theme of modern justifiers of caste in the traditional or early Indian society that the original system was according to merit and not birth. This is the theme of the Hindu Council report; this is its justification for arguing for “restoring the original concept of caste”. To back it up, the report quotes the *Bhagavad Gita*: “The fourfold caste has been created by me (the Almighty as Krishna) according to the differentiation of Guna (attributes) and Karma (actions).”

This in itself certainly does not refute the idea that caste was by birth, because within the framework of *varnashrama dharma* it was assumed that *guna* is determined by birth. This is particularly true when “karma” is included, for we should remember that the term is nearly always connected with the notion of rebirth: theoretical role of karma was to justify a person's fate or caste in his/her present life according to deeds performed in former lives. In traditional Brahmanic theory (and also much of Buddhism and Jainism), karma is indissolubly linked with the notion of rebirth of a soul.

Suppose, though, “varna” was decided by merit would this justify such a forefold division of society? Can we even imagine a society in which “varna” is decided by merit?! Presumably for every male child (women are not mentioned here) there would be a period of examination, in which somehow it would be determined what his main attributes or *guna* are as the basis for assigning him to a *varna* category. After this there would be a rigid separation: no person declared to be a *sudra* would be allowed much learning (certainly not the Vedic scriptures); nor would he be allowed to bear arms or engage in business. His or her work would be only to serve. The point is, that if we think about it seriously, the notion of “caste-by-merit” is also abhorrent, for it divides up the human essence, and forbids any kind of all around

personal development. People are forever either "brahman" or "vaisya" or "ksatriya" or "sudra." And it is impossible to imagine how such a system could be socially enforced.

However this is speculation: caste was never by "merit." Rather, "merit" was assumed to follow caste-by-birth. Caste in early society, as it was propagated in the *varnashrama dharma theory*, certainly implied birth into a particular *varna* and *jati*. Throughout there is the notion that the human essence is differentiated into irreconcilable categories; that some people are "by essence" (by *guna*, in other words) determined to be servants and others are "by essence" capable of bearing arms and ruling. Thus Manu writes, "Even if he is set free by his master, a servant [ie a sudra. G.O.] is not set free from slavery; for since that is innate in him, who can take it from him?" (*The Laws of Manu*, tr. Wendy Doniger, Penguin, 1991: 196). Manu also makes it clear that it is part of the duty of a king to enforce *Varnashrama dharma*: "The king should make a commoner (vaisya) engage in trade, lend money; farm the land, or keep livestock; and (he should make) the servant [sudra] the slave of the twice-born" (195).

Birth was determinant of *guna*; and this meant that a person born into a particular *jati* with its particular caste-defined occupation was bound to a certain occupation and status because he/she was assumed to have the "qualities" or "merit" appropriate to his/her birth.

The clearest proof that caste was by birth is the prohibition of *varna samkara* or inter-varna and inter-caste marriage. *Varna-samkara*, or the mixture of castes, was the greatest sin of a *varnashrama* society, as we have seen. It was viewed as leading to all kinds of social evils. The prohibition of intermarriage meant that above all, a girls' purity should be carefully controlled: marriages ended up being arranged for boys and girls at an early age. The caste purity had to be ensured.

As we have argued, the caste system never came into existence all at once, though it was propagated from a fairly early period. Brahmanic theory had to deal with a complex society and with much resistance and rebellion against caste (much of it in the early period expressed through the shramanic schools of thought). Furthermore, the actually existing society as it was developing, with many different castes emerging out of the various ethnic and cultural groups in the subcontinent, did not exactly fit the *varnashrama* model. There were two sorts of anomalies in the society that had to be coped with by the arising varna-theory.

One was the existence of people of low birth, who did succeed in becoming well-known sages, writers, leaders, rulers. However, the multitude of examples of people of

"low" birth as original sages given by the Hindu Council report are not relevant to their argument, because the report does not show that their "caste" was determined by their action. Instead, all these examples show that the caste system and varna ideology had not been fully established in the social reality of the times. The existence of many mixtures does not prove caste by merit; where there was caste it was by birth; where there was varna it was by birth. Where birth was not relevant, there was simply no caste or varna operating.

In fact, the Brahmanic interpreters tried to explain away the actual heritage of people of mixed unions. They argue that they are "really" high caste. For instance, the Kauravas and Pandavas were not considered ksatriya by "merit"; rather Vyas was not the "real" [legal] father of Pandu and Drishtacharya; he was only their progenitor. The legal father – because the mothers were the widows of recognized ksatriyas – was their legitimate ksatriya husband, the son of Shantanu, even though he had been killed. This was what the law books and ideologists stressed: the Kauravas and Pandavas were ksatriya by lineage.⁴

The other important anomaly that Brahmanic theory had to deal with in ancient India was the fact that there were in fact numerous *jatis* or castes and not simply the four *varnas*. The lawbooks or *Dharmasastras* sought to interpret this by depicting many actually existing castes as results of intermarriage between people of different *varnas*. Throughout texts like the *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*, all the existing various "jatis" are interpreted as results of unions of "mixed" *varnas*, and there are endless ways in which the laws of birth are applied, in regard to inheritance, profession, punishments for different crimes (which are different for different *varnas*) and so on. Thus the law books recognized the reality that people of mixed caste/varna existed, but tried to classify these and treat them according to their birth. *Anuloma* marriages ("with the grain," in which the husband was of superior varna) were recognized as better than *pratiloma* unions ("against the grain" in which the woman was higher), and the lowest group of all, the Candala, the archetypical untouchable, was said to originate from a Brahman wife and a Sudra husband (*Arthashastra*, p. 392). Reading chapter 10 of the *Manusmriti* will give an idea of the complex number of actual *jatis* and the way in which orthodox theory sought to deal with them.

Indeed, throughout the law books or *dharma sastras*, this characterization of *varna samkara* holds. The actually existing multitude of "low" castes are considered to be products of such illegitimate unions between human beings of different *varnas*. Thus Manu and others have

complex descriptions of various named groups or jatis, which are all classified as products of unions between members of different varnas. "Among all the classes, only (children) who are born 'with the grain,' (or) in wives who are equal (in class) and have their maidenheads intact (at marriage) should be considered members of the caste. They say that sons begotten by twice-born men on wives of the very next (lower) class are similar (to their fathers) but despised for the flaw in their mothers" (*Laws of Manu*, 234-5). Then various "castes" or jatis which are said to be products of mixed union are named, and Manu goes on to say,

"All of those castes who are excluded from the world of those who were born from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet are traditionally regarded as aliens, whether they speak barbarian languages or Aryan languages. Those who are traditionally regarded as outcastes (born) of the twice-born and as born of degradation should make their living by their innate activities, which are reviled by the twice-born" (*Laws of Manu*, 241).

Such activities include the management of horses, medical healing, killing fish, carpentry, slaughter of animals that live in the forests, playing the drum, leather-working.

To the *Arthashastra*, similarly, only a ksatriya by birth could be a proper king. "Ever victorious and never conquered shall be that *kshatriya*, who is nurtured by Brahmans, made prosperous by the counsels of able ministers and has, as his weapons, the precepts of the *shastras*" (177). Kings, during the Vedic period, were required to do expiation for having contact with, e.g. visiting the houses, of sudras (*Satapatha Br.* 5.3.2.2.4, reference from Witzel), and we have numerous examples of inscriptions in which kings (for instance the Satavahanas) boasted of having prevented *varna-samkara*.

Finally, the clearest example of the denigration of untouchables comes in one of the supposedly philosophical Upanisads. The *Chandogya Upanisad* states that

"...those who are of pleasant conduct here, the prospect [in rebirth] is indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of a Kshatriya or the womb of a Vaishya. But those who are of stinking conduct here, the prospect [in rebirth] is indeed that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog [who is despised even today] or the womb of a swine, or the womb of a Candala" (5.10.7)⁵

Dogs, along with pigs, are still considered very dirty animals in India; the passage makes it clear the way in which Dalits – and most of the sudra group – are considered. But pigs are in fact clean animals – cleaner

than those who gave form to such philosophies of inequality.

THE PUNISHMENT OF MERIT

The fact that *varna samkara* was considered an evil itself shows that the "original" caste could not have been by merit. Further, within Brahmanic theory, stories about the punishment of merit were inserted into the epics and legends to show that caste should be followed. The idea of birth-assigned status was embodied in many popular tales, well known to Dalits (and all Indians) today; yet these have gone unmentioned in the Hindu Council report. These stories illustrate the punishment that is given to individuals who showed "merit" beyond their assigned station in life.

One of the most famous is the story of Shambuka, the sudra boy in the kingdom of Rama who engaged in *tapascharya* (austerities); because of this "crime" a son of a Brahman in this ideal Hindu society, this "Ram raj" fell sick and died; the father went to Rama, who then executed Shambuka for his crime of transcending the caste hierarchy. As a king, Rama was bound by duty to uphold the laws of caste and varna, and these forbade a sudra from aspiring to any religious life.

There is also the famous story of Ekalavya, surely a primary example of merit being unable to substitute for birth. He was a tribal boy, who went to Dronacharya and asked to be taught archery. Drona rejected him as a student because he was not Ksatriya by birth. Then Ekalavya went and made a mud statue of Dronacharya, and did his guru-obedience before this, and taught himself archery. He became such a great archer that he could defeat even Arjuna, the hero of the "true" Ksatriyas. Drona resolved to prevent this from recurring, and asked Ekalavya how he had learned. When Ekalavya said that Drona had in fact become his guru, then Drona said, "very well, you owe me *guru-dakshina*" (the gift owed to a teacher). "Of course," said the innocent Ekalavya. And then Drona asked for his thumb! Today, Dalits understand that the story illustrates the way in which a mental slavery has been imposed on them for so long. And they understand that far from merit being given full scope, "merit" that goes beyond the order of caste is punished.

Just as important is the story of King Bali. He was, according to all accounts, a great and good king, enforcing dharma, benevolent and just. He is remembered as such today in much of India, especially rural India. Then what was his "crime"? Only that he was not born a ksatriya or a *deva* (god) – he was an *asura*, or "demon." An *asura* who enforced dharma could not be endured! His "birth" was

wrong. So Vishnu became an avatar as Waman, a Brahman boy, to trick Bali and send him down to hell. Ekalavya, Shambuka, and Bali Raja in fact represent the indigenous people of India whose merit was being crushed and defeated.

Why does the Hindu Council report discuss Valmiki and Vyasa but not Ekalavya and Shambuka? In fact, the Ramayana and Mahabharata are both epics that are part of the heritage of all Indians. Their sources are the folk legends of the people. This means that as they have been absorbed into the greater traditions, many versions have developed. There is, for example, a Jain and Buddhist version of the Ramayana, as well as popular folk versions. These differ in many ways; for instance especially in the folk tales there are many stories which show Sita refusing to return to Rama after he had thrown her out of Ayodhya. What we have to remember, is that the "orthodox" version that is favoured today has been that of the Brahmanic theorists; and this stressed the sacredness of '*jatidharma*', '*kuladharmā*' and the great social order of '*varna-shrama dharma*', in which people are punished for actions, even good ones, that go beyond their assigned role in the caste hierarchy. It was for this reason that stories like those of Ekalavya and Shambuka were included in the orthodox versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Once Brahmanism triumphed in India, the kings who followed its dictates were bound to enforce the prevention of '*varna-samkara*', banning intercaste marriage. A very famous historical example is that of the kingdom of Kalyana, in what is now Karnataka. In the 12th century a monotheistic, anti-caste religious movement arose under the leadership of Basavanna. Women were given full scope religiously, once they wore the linga, the symbol of God, along with men. Caste was denied. However, when a marriage was arranged between a Dalit boy and a Brahman girl, the parents of the offending couple were executed by being dragged behind elephants – and Basavanna could not prevent this, though he was a minister in the government. Basava himself was Brahman by birth, but he had rejected the sacred thread which is the symbol of the caste hierarchy. Only the "twice-born" men can wear the thread; and the thread itself is different from those considered to be Brahmans, Ksatriyas and Vaishyas. Then where is "merit" in all of this?

The report quotes from Chinese travelers such as Hsuan Tsang (Xuanxang), who praised the honesty of India's people. But such travelers also reported on the caste system, and on the way in which people were segregated. For instance, the 5th century pilgrim Fa Hsien described "Candalas" as living in separate villages, and Hsuan Tsang in the early years of the 7th century reports

that, besides the four many varnas, "there are other classes of many kinds that intermarry according to their several callings. It would be difficult to speak of these in detail." He notes that "butchers, fishers, dancers, executioners, and scavengers and so on have their abodes without the city. In coming and going these persons are bound to keep on the left side of the road until they arrive at their homes" (Translations in Beal, Part I, pages 82 and 74). Although Buddhism was still very influential at this time, residential segregation by caste was clearly a social reality.

WHAT DID THE MUSLIMS HAVE TO DO WITH CASTE?

According to the Hindu Council, what we see in caste by birth is a "distortion" from an original equalitarian ideal. And what caused this distortion? The answer is a familiar one: blame it on the Muslims (and Christians) and their invasions. According to the report, caste made it possible for India to survive these invasions. "Facing the need to preserve the Hindu community and its traditional values, a more rigid hereditary caste system emerged, thereby facilitating the propagation of unadulterated Hindu beliefs and culture from one generation to the next."

But how did caste made it possible to do this? The report does not say. Indeed, it is illogical, because in the supposedly "more rigid" (but actually original system), sudras, that is the majority, were forbidden to read the most sacred books of "Hindu" culture, the Vedas. They were also forbidden to bear arms; only ksatriyas were supposed to fight. Thus the society was actually disarmed before invasions; they were unable to fight them off, and after the conquest only a small elite were left to "preserve" the ancient values. In fact, what was facilitated was the preservation of their culture by the Brahmans, who taught all others to mindlessly follow the '*varnashrama dharma*'.

All societies in the world have faced waves of conquest, but only south Asia has given birth to the caste system. The reason is not only the mixture of many different ethnic groups, but the formulation and holding to a theory that supported birth-defined ascription of caste. It was the particular role of Brahmanic theory that was unique to the Indian subcontinent.

The rigidity of caste has nothing to do with Muslim invasions. It was rigid in theory long before Muslims even existed, and it remained the most rigid and severe in practice in areas such as Nepal (and to a lesser extent south India) which were not affected by Muslim conquest or influence. In fact the Muslim conquest opened up society to some extent. Most of the Muslim rulers were not interested in equality; they themselves wanted to claim high status (descent from Arabs, Persians or

Mughals), and within Muslim society itself a modified and weakened version of caste emerged. However, because of the very pluralism, they did not and could not enforce it either Muslim or Brahmanic laws as rigidly as earlier unchallenged brahmanic-influenced rulers. Further, the Sufi tradition and the ideas of equality in Islam did spread, and the ongoing influence of Buddhism, even underground, was there. Thus waves of bhakti devotionism and equalitarianism emerged, contesting priestly ritualism and opposing caste, though it has to be noted that none of the radical bhakti sants identified themselves as "Hindu" and some of the most famous were Muslim by birth, such as Kabir and many of the followers of the Varkari movement in Maharashtra.

It also has to be noted that it was after the triumph of Brahmanism and caste, that is after the 6-7th century CE, that the economic and social decline of India began. The earlier millennium, when either Buddhism had been hegemonic or there was no clear brahmanic hegemony, had been a period of intellectual and physical adventure: India at the center of world trade, a flourishing civilization. Brahmanism forbade traveling across the "black waters", forbade dealing with the mlechhas; it sought to keep a closed off social system. If this was "survival," then very little was gained. Nothing, certainly, was gained by the vast majority of Sudras and Untouchables.

The Hindu Council report also blames the British census taking and classification for setting up the current categories of caste. In fact, the British did fall prey to this – but the role of their Brahman advisors in interpreting Indian society for them was crucial. It was these they listened to, and with this and the growing racism that was becoming prevalent in the conditions of 19th century imperialism, caste was given a new racial interpretation.

What about caste within Islam and Christianity? All religious groups on the Indian subcontinent, including Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism have been influenced by the caste system. Yet the simple fact is that this is an influence, from outside, from the fact that their converts could not completely reject the dogmas of the society around them. If we follow the simple logic that outside the Indian subcontinent, Islam and Christianity have no caste in them, then we realize that what exists in India is from external sources: it is not encouraged by the basic teachings of these religions. It is up to the Church and the ulema in India to purge their society of the remnants of caste and untouchability.

CASTE AND SLAVERY

The Hindu Council report argues that the caste system

allowed various cultural-ethnic groups to be absorbed and not killed off and thereby made slavery unnecessary. As noted, there were indeed forms of slavery in ancient India, as the Vedic texts show.

For example, slaves could be called Purusa, who is just one of the 'five domestic animals', and is called a biped cattle (Katha Samh. 10.11: 138.20. Panc. Br. 2-14.6 etc.,) They could be given away as presents, for example as payment for offerings carried out by Brahmins (Katha Samh. 9.9: 111.3, 9.11: 113.112, Tait. Br. 2.2.5.2, Sat.Br.13.6.2.18, 13.7.1.13; Panc. Br. 1.8.14). They also could be sold (Maitr. Samh. 1.7.5: 113.14, 2.3.5 : 2.32.8, Katha S. 11.8: 154.8, Taitt.S. 1.5.2.1, 2.2.10.4, 2.3.11.1, Satapatha Br. 3.6.2.8, 11.1.8.4 etc. Frequently, female slaves (Dasi) are mentioned, e.g., Taitt.S. 7.5.10.1, Satapatha Br. 14.9.1.10. Chand Up. 5.13.1-2, Ait B. 2.19.1 (as concubine), KausBr. 12.3 etc. Like male slaves, they could be given to Brahmins as payment for rituals (see already Rgveda 1.126.3, 6-7, Gandhari), and Maitr.S., 2.2.13: 2.25; Satapatha Br 13.5.4.27, Samavidhana Br. 3.5.3 (all references provided by Witzel).

With regard to "labour law", the *Arthashastra* disproves the assertion that there was no slavery in ancient India: "The King shall enforce the laws regarding slaves and bonded labour.... An Arya minor [i.e. a Hindu child of any of the four varnas] shall never be sold or mortgaged into slavery...." (447). The *Manusmriti* discusses the issue in fair detail. Slavery was in fact a very prevalent custom in ancient India.

More important, however, as it developed the caste system made open slavery for labour unnecessary because it performed the same function: it provided a pool of labour bound to work at particular tasks for low or even no reward. Caste was indeed slavery, and when the British came to India many interpreted the position of Dalit agricultural labourers, who provided crucial agrarian labour in the rich lands of the river deltas in the coastal areas of the south, as "agrestic servitude." Above all, economically caste functioned to enslave labour.

This does not justify the slave system, particularly the brutal slavery of Africans in near-modern times. However, just as the U.S. and England ended slavery, it is time to annihilate the form it has taken in Indian history, and destroy caste once and for all in India and the world.

CASTE AND RACISM

"it is now accepted by a vast number of historians and anthropologists that all non-African races, including Europeans, are actually migrants originating from the Indian subcontinent" (Hindu Council report, p. 19).

This is an astounding statement. It is a frequent assertion by Hindutva followers that "Aryans" originated in India⁶, so it is not surprising that it should appear in the report. However, it clearly shows the racism of high-caste Hindu belief and the linkages between caste and race.

When Dalits went to Durban in 2001 for the United Nations conference on racial discrimination, the Indian government and upper-caste spokesmen opposed the idea of any connection between caste and race. Though there are important differences, both are social constructions which divide human beings on the basis of attributed qualities, and put one group in bondage to another.

Neither "caste" nor "race" are biological realities. Both are social constructs. In particular, modern genetics (DNA analysis) now shows clearly that human beings today have common ancestors and a common origin – in Africa, from which humanity spread throughout the world. The use of the term "race" is unacceptable today; instead humans can be identified in terms of different ethnic or cultural groups; biologically there are only very insignificant differences.

Here the Buddha was right, over two thousand years ago. Yet the connection between "caste" and "race" exists, in the ideology of caste itself. The idea that the different varnas and jatis had inherently different essences (or *guna*) which made them truly fit for specific occupations, was part of varnashrama dharma ideology. The term "jati" was used for species among plants and animals, and is so used even today. Applied to human beings it shows the racism of the caste system.

Yet the Hindu Council report does not accept the oneness of humanity. Instead, it wants to divide peoples into "African" and "non-African" peoples, that is, into "black" and "white" – and to include Indians among the "whites." The only difference from their nineteenth century forbearers is that they are now counting "Dravidians" and other linguistic groups as part of the "whites." In any case, it is a clear revelation of the racism of their thinking. The notion that "nonAfrican" (Europeans, Indians) etc have a different origin has to be clearly identified and rejected.

CONCLUSION

The Hindu Council report on "The Caste System" has little of real scholarship in it, and very little touch with the historical and social realities of ancient or contemporary Indian caste. The logic of its argument requires ignoring much of the evidence of the law books or *dharma shastras*, interpreting the lack of hegemony of

caste in ancient India and the actual realities of people of various births and groups coming into different professions, as an indication of "caste by merit." As we have argued on the contrary, caste or *varnashrama dharma* was an ideal of Brahmanism, of the Sanskrit "sacred literature," which was being put forward but not really fully enforced in the society for centuries. It was in reality Buddhism, Jainism and similar shramana philosophies which promoted an open society. But the Hindu Council report systematically ignores these religions, and writes as if it were only the Vedic or Brahmanic ideology which was prevalent in ancient India.

The Hindu Council arguments also rely on translations which are inaccurate, vague and often distorting in meaning in crucial points. While they accuse their critics of distortion, the reality is the opposite. The contemporary "Hindu" translations of the *Gita*, the *Upanisad* and other texts try to hide the way in which these lauded works of literature proclaim caste at crucial points.

Caste is an ongoing reality in India, reflected in the fact that the vast majority of marriages still take place within the jati, and that employment and occupation to a large degree follow caste. Now it is a question of statistical correlation; nevertheless those of "lower" varna in the hierarchy tend very strongly to be poorer and in lower positions; in the still hierarchical society of India they remain subject to many humiliations. Furthermore, the most severe strictures on the former Untouchables still apply to Dalits, including denial of water in villages; refusal of social interaction; the frequent existence of separate tea-cups in hotels, and the most severe forms of social boycotts. Children in schools have been known to refuse the food cooked by Dalit cooks, even though it is free and often their most solid nourishment of the day. And the strictures on sexual relations and marriages within the caste are enforced, often with great brutality. Many of the famous cases of "atrocities", such as Chunder in Andhra Pradesh, resulted from the belief that Dalit boys were flirting with caste Hindu girls. This indicates that the prohibition on *varna samkara* – the mixture of castes — still has a strong hold on people's minds today.

The Hindu Council report argues that caste today has functioned as a "club" in which people associate with one another presumably by choice. Yet there were some social clubs in the past which were notorious for banning women, non-whites, people of low birth etc. If caste is a "club" it is this kind of club! However, it would be more accurate to say that while caste may have functioned as a club for the elite, for those of "low" birth it has been for centuries a prison-house, a place of disdained and forced labour.

Finally, the self-interest of the elite lies behind this maintenance of the varna order. However, the moral and intellectual foundation for this is found, to some degree or another, in all of the scriptures considered sacred to Brahmanism. People should be wary of the exalted ideas found in these scriptures, and note the way in which they have given legitimisation to the most brutal social customs. Pandita Ramabai, a famous convert to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th century, expressed the situation in this way, referring in particular to women and with the background of her lifelong work in India and to her numerous wanderings throughout the country:

I beg of my Western sisters not to be satisfied with looking on the outside beauty of the grand philosophies, and not to be charmed with hearing the long and interesting discourses of our educated men, but to open the trap-doors of the great monuments of ancient Hindu intellectuals, and enter into the dark cellars where they will see the real workings of the philosophies which they admire so much (Ramabai 1997: 312).

From the very beginning a large section of society has resisted the imposition of caste; today the majority of Dalits and others "low" in the hierarchy disdain it and call for its full eradication. Today, when such assertion is going on, we have to ask why is it that the Hindu Council calls only for its "reform" and the restoration of a presumed original purity! All the lovers of liberty, equality and fraternity must join together in this task of eradication, remembering the heroes of India's social revolution, from Buddha, Mahavir and Carvak to Phule, Periyar, Iyothee Thass and Babasaheb Ambedkar.

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NOTES

1. Just recently the Jain community of Gujarat has forced the withdrawal of a Government Anti-Conversion Bill because it classifies Jains as a "Hindu sect." (Asian Age, 10 March 2008).
2. The Note is in the original.
3. That is, Slave could be called Purusa, who is just one of the 'five domestic animals', and is called a biped cattle (Katha Samh. 10.11: 138.20. Panc. Br. 2-14.6 etc.) (Cf. however, also TaitBr. 3.8.5.3 which mentions both Dasa and Purusa next to possession of domestic animals and food items, and Dasas and Bharya, Chand. Up. 7.24.2, Jaim Br. 2.196.) They could be given away as presents, for example as payment for offerings carried out by Brahmins (Katha Samh. 9.9: 111.3, 9.11: 113.112, Tait. Br. 2.2.5.2, Sat.Br.13.6.2.18, 13.7.1.13; Panc. Br. 1.8.14). They also could be sold (Maitr. Samh. 1.7.5: 113.14, 2.3.5 : 2.32.8, Katha S. 11.8: 154.8, Taitt.S. 1.5.2.1, 2.2.10.4, 2.3.11.1, Satapatha Br. 3.6.2.8, 11.1.8.4 etc. Frequently, female slaves (Dasi) are mentioned, e.g., Taitt.S. 7.5.10.1, Satapatha Br. 14.9.1.10. Chand Up. 5.13.1-2, Ait B. 2.19.1 (as concubine), KausBr. 12.3 etc. Like male slaves, they could be given to Brahmins as payment for rituals (see already Rgveda 1.126.3, 6-7, Gandhari), and Maitr.S., 2.2.13: 2.,25; Satapatha Br 13.5.4.27, Samavidhana Br. 3.5.3. (References provided by Michael Witzel).
4. During the bhakti period, the existence of saints of low birth was "explained away" by hagiographers who said that in former lives they had been Brahmins but had committed some error or sin.
5. Translation by Michael Witzel; this and the other texts his note cites are considered sruti, that is the most holy of the texts, "heard" and not simply "written," and more authoritative than the later dharma shastras or the Gita.
6. Though when the "Aryan racial theory" was first put forward by Europeans in the 19th century, the first response of the Brahman elite was to accept this. For instance, the leader and theorist Lokmanya Tilak wrote a book on "The Arctic Home of the Vedas." It was only in the 1930s that this changed; undoubtedly under pressure from non-Brahmins and Dalits who rejoiced in the claim to be original inhabitants. Now the elite wants to have both the Aryan-European identity and a claim to be indigenous.