

puter. Last but not least, my grateful thanks to my wife for her constant encouragement and support. I look forward to receiving comments from students, teachers and other readers to enable me to further improve this book.

Ram Ahuja

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Study of the Indian Society

Historical Moorings of the Indian Society

Chapter I

TRADITIONAL HINDU SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Traditional, Modern and Post-Modern Societies

A society may be classified as traditional, modern, or post-modern. Traditional society lays emphasis on religion (and magic) in behavioural norms and values, implying continuity (deep links) with a real or imagined past. It widely accepts rituals, sacrifices and holy feasts. Broadly speaking, traditional society is described as one in which: (1) individual's status is determined by his birth and he does not strive for social mobility; (2) individual's behaviour is governed by customs, traditions, norms and values having deep links with the past. The social practices of people vary only slightly from generation to generation; (3) social organisation (stable pattern of social relationships of individuals and sub-groups within a society that provides regularity and predictability in social interaction) is based on hierarchy; (4) kinship relations predominate in interaction and individual identifies himself with primary groups; (5) individual is given more importance in social relations than what his position actually warrants; (6) people are conservative; (7) economy is simple, i.e., tool economy (and not machine economy) prevails and is conspicuous and economic productivity above subsistence level is relatively low; and (8) mythical thought (and not logical reasoning) predominates in society.

Modernity is substantial break with traditional society. Modern society focuses on science and reason. According to Stuart Hall (Hall and

Gay, 1996; also see O' Donnell, Mike, 1977:40), the six distinctive characteristics of modern society (which also distinguish it from traditional society) are: (1) The decline of religion and rise of a secular materialistic culture (religious characteristic). (2) The replacing of feudal economy (getting services by the owner of land) by an economy in which money system provides the medium for exchange (in trade) based on large-scale production and consumption of commodities for the market, extensive ownership of private property, and accumulation of capital on a long-term basis (economic characteristic). (3) The dominance of secular political authority over state and marginalisation of religious influence from state/political matters (political characteristic). (4) The decline of social order based on simple division of labour and the development of new division of labour based on specialisation, the emergence of new classes, and changed relations between men and women (social characteristic). (5) The forming of new nations (communities-ethnic or national) having their own identities and traditions to suit their own purposes, e.g., rejection of aristocracy and monarchy by France, Britain accepting monarchy only as a symbol, Egypt rejecting monarchy and accepting democracy, and so on (cultural characteristic). (6) The rise of scientific, rationalist way of looking at the world (intellectual characteristic). Thus, while the traditional society is characterised by ritual, custom, collectivity, community ownership, status quo and continuity and simple division of labour, the modern society is characterised by rise of science, emphasis on reason and rationality, belief in progress, viewing government and the state as essential in bringing about progress, emphasis on economic development and complex division of labour, perceiving human-beings as capable of acquiring great control over nature and environment and seeing world in terms of dualisms or opposites. Post-modern society, or late modernity, concentrates on critical awareness and is concerned about the damaging effects of applied science on nature, environment and humanity. It points out risks and unintended negative consequences of the pursuit of progress. From nationalism (emphasised in modern society), it moves to the process of globalisation. Instead of giving importance to economic development (as in modern society), it gives importance to culture. Unlike modern society (which sees world in terms of opposites or dualisms), post-modern society views unities, similarities and connections as important.

Traditional Indian Society: Three Perspectives

With the above concept and characteristics of traditional society, how can

Indian society be sociologically perceived as traditional society? Three perspectives may be used in sociologically understanding the traditional Indian society: functionalist, Marxist, and social action. Durkheim's functionalist perspective is based on the approach that major social institutions and sub-systems (e.g., family, kinship, economic, etc.) exist to meet fundamental human needs (like procreation, social support, production, consumption). The Marxist perspective is based on the approach that class conflict is a fundamental social force and functioning of society is affected by classes with conflicting interests. Weber's social action perspective holds that individuals affect and create society rather than society affects and makes individuals, or that it is not society that forms and structures the 'self's' experience but the 'self' helps to create its own social experience.

The first two perspectives are structural in nature, i.e., they are primarily concerned with how society affects individual and group behaviour rather than with how individuals and groups create society. (In fact, the third perspective is also viewed as structural). Thus, the sort of issue a structural sociologist would be interested in is: how religious beliefs and values, or science and reasoning, or caste and class, or family and kinship group, or tool and industrial economies, or individual's social-structural position affect his/her chances of performing roles expected of him by the society. While functionalism stresses consensus in social behaviour, Marxism and social action perspectives stress conflict in society. Following O' Donnell (1997:6), the questions which can be constructed and answered about traditional Indian society with structural perspective are: (1) how is society constructed; (2) how does it operate; (3) how are some groups in society more powerful than others; (4) what causes social change; (5) is society based on consensus or conflict; and (6) what is the relationship of an individual to society? We will analyse traditional Indian society in terms of these six bases.

TRADITIONAL HINDU SOCIETY: BASIC TENETS AND DOCTRINES

Hindu View of Life: Karma and Dharma

Before answering the above-mentioned questions pertaining to the traditional Indian society, let us examine what was the Hindu view of life in the Vedic thought? This view was that man is altogether composed of desires (*kama*). As are his desires, so is his discretion/insight (*kratu*); as is his discretion, so are his deeds, as are his deeds, so is his destiny. Hence, if a man has left any desires in him while he lives, he takes birth again, but

no desires are left in him, he becomes one with *Brahma* (God). Under the circumstances, one must eradicate discretion (*kratu*) in order to destroy his desires. It is desire that binds a man to this world and makes him liable to birth and death. *Karma* (deed) is, thus, only a connecting link between desires and rebirth. Hence, on getting rid of desires, the mortal becomes immortal and attains salvation (*moksha*).

It will be wrong to hold that this is the only view of the Hindu philosophy. In fact, the Hindu literature presents varied approaches to ultimate reality. One approach was made at a later stage in the *Gita* to the problem of dispensing with desires. The *Gita* presents a new philosophy of life—the philosophy of *karma*. The *Gita* insisted on sublimation rather than on eradication of desires and that was to be done by knowing the true nature of *karma* (Kapadia, 1972:13-14).

The Hindu philosophy believes in the continuity of the present with the past in which it is rooted, and its projection into the future. The Hindu respect for tradition has a purpose. It seeks to achieve homogeneity and harmony of thought. The different phases merely represent differences in emphasis in different historical periods. For example, truth is *dharma* in *Satyayuga*, *yajna* (sacrifice) in *Tratayuga*, *jnana* (knowledge) in *Dwaparayuga*, and *dana* (alms) in *Kaliyuga*. The Hindu philosophy also believes in certain theological ideas such as *papa*, *punya*, *dharma*, etc. We will discuss these ideas as basic tenets of Hinduism.

Basic Tenets of Hinduism

Focusing on the basic tenets and the normative principles of Hinduism, it may be said that Hinduism believes in equality, *karma* and rebirth ideas, *moksha* (salvation) as the ultimate goal of life, toleration as individual character, non-violence as important feature of social life, and the merger of individual soul into the ultimate soul. Singh (1973:31) is of the opinion that the normative principles of Hinduism are based on beliefs, ideals and logic of permissiveness (permission that it shall be done), liberalism (generous and free views, opinions and principles), being and becoming, creation and destruction, hedonism (belief that pleasure is the chief goal), utilitarianism, and spiritual transcendence (outside the range of human experience, reason and description, etc.) Broadly speaking, the basic tenets of Hinduism may be described as below:

Theological Ideas

Hinduism believes in certain theological ideas (a series of theories about the nature of God and of the foundations of religious belief) such as *panjasma* (rebirth), immortality of *atma* (soul), *papa* (sin), *punya* (merit),

karma (deeds), *dharma* (morality), and *moksha* (salvation). The idea of *karma* teaches a Hindu that he is born into a particular social group (caste/family) because of his deeds he performed in his previous life (*purva janma*). The idea of *dharma* tells him that if he follows good deeds in the present birth, he will be born in a high social group in the next birth. The idea of *moksha* reminds him that his *papa* and *punya* will determine the release of his soul from the chain of birth and death.

Pollution and Purity

The ideas of pollution and purity are equally important in Hinduism. Though the rules of pollution and purity vary from region to region, yet they cover a large sector of life everywhere. They are important in communal relations, in touching or maintaining physical distance from the members of other group, in inter-caste marriages, and in personal life of an individual on occasions like birth, marriage, menstruation, death, offering prayers, etc. The concept of pollution is related to birth and not to cleanliness. A person has to undergo a purificatory rite, simple or elaborate, according to the seriousness of the violation of rules of purity. In such matters, it is the caste council that takes the necessary disciplinary action.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy in Hinduism exists in terms of: (a) a division in *varnas* and castes; (b) in charismatic qualities (*guna*) of individuals (the highest and most virtuous being *sattva*, that is, virtues associated with sages and the Brahmins, followed by *rajas*, that is, commitment to action and power as attributed to kings and Kshatriyas, and *tamas*, the lowest in hierarchy, associated with dullness and profane inclinations); and (c) in values regarding life-goals, like *kama* (that is, pursuit of sex and material goals of sensory enjoyments), *artha* (that is, achieving wealth), *dharma* (that is, moral obligations in social, religious and cultural realms), and *moksha* (that is, pursuit of salvation from the chain of birth and rebirth).

Idol-Worship

The most noticeable common feature of Hindu religion is its belief in idol-worship. The worshipped idol is not uniform but it varies according to the sect. Each sect keeps its idol (Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Ganesh, Hanuman, etc.), in a separate temple and worships it on specific occasions. The idea of not allowing *Maleechas* (including Muslims and untouchables) in these temples was more in the nature of protecting the temple from pollution rather than confrontation with another religion.

Monolithic Character

The major characteristic of Hinduism is that it is not a uniform monolithic (single God) religion, but a juxtaposition (placing side by side) of flexible religious sects. This flexibility is its strength, allowing the existence even of non-caste, anti-Vedic groups, denying approval of the injunctions of the *Dharmashastras*.

Tolerance

Coexisting opinions, beliefs, customs, behaviour, etc. of other religions, castes is an important feature of Hindu religion. But is Hinduism really tolerant? One view is that Hinduism is a secular and tolerant philosophy as it embraces within its fold different cults and sects, even as all Hindus swear by the common (Hindu) divinities. The segregation of communities and the relatively distinct religious identity of these led to the possibility of each group leading a comparatively separate existence. The clash could only come in the competition for patronage. This explains the notion of tolerance in Hindu religion.

But there is also a group of scholars which refers to religious intolerance of Hinduism. It refers to sectarian rivalries and conflicts. Initially, the Shaiva sect persecuted Buddhists and Jains. Buddhist monasteries were destroyed and monks were killed by Mihirakula and Shashanka in the northern India in mid-first millennium A.D. The rewriting of texts from Vaisnava perspective was another form of religious intolerance because it was done only to correct the Jaina perspective. Even among the ascetic groups, hostility was known to exist between the Dasnamis and Bairagis over the question of precedence at the Kumbh Mela. Such antagonism was not that of the 'Hindu' against another religion but that of a particular sect towards other sects.

Segregation

Yet another characteristic of Hindu religion is that it supports the segregation of castes in social relations, worship and religious beliefs. The nature of segregation depends on the status of varnas/castes which were created from the body of *purusha* (Brahmins from his mouth, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs, and Sudras from his feet). The argument given against this is that it was only certain sects and certain prominent Brahmins, the most prominent being Shankaracharya, which believed in such segregation. But this argument is not correct because all Hindus believe that membership in a particular group is determined by birth and not merit. However, it is said that various sects in Hinduism could not have flourished and would have decayed if intellectual positions

had been entirely determined by birth in a particular group.

Non-violence

Hinduism is characterised by non-violence. However, a question is raised: Does Hinduism really believe in non-violence? One school accepts that Hindus are non-violent people, but other school maintains that religious violence is not alien to Hinduism. The message given in the *Gita* is surely not non-violent. The emphasis on sacrifices is surely not based on the ideal of non-violence. But then Bhakti cult, predominant through the sub-continent by the seventeenth century, surely was against the use of violence.

It may be said that non-violence was characterised in Hinduism only after devotional and ritual aspect of Hinduism was emphasised, or *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* cults emerged after the twelfth century A.D., or devotional-liberal traditions grew in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. with the emergence of saints (*bhaktas*) like Kabir and Tulsidas in Uttar Pradesh, Guru Nanak in Punjab, Chaitanya in Bengal, Meera Bai in Rajasthan, and Tukaram and Ramdas in Maharashtra. These saints not only carried religious beliefs to the people in their own languages but they also changed the ritual-ridden religious beliefs into simple humanistic values, criticising orthodoxy.

Purusbartha: Values of Hindu Culture

Hindu culture centres round four values: *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. This four-fold value order is based on the understanding that the human personality has many needs (see, Kanak, 1955:8). Man needs food and sex, power and property, and human society and relations with the universe, i.e., human society. The satisfaction of bodily needs is *kama*. The satisfaction of needs of power and property is *artha*. The satisfaction of needs of social order is *dharma*. The satisfaction of needs of oneness with the universe is *moksha*.

Kama, in its general sense, means the desire for pleasurable experiences through the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell under the guidance of the mind. The question may be raised: Is seeking the pleasures of body good? The answer is that pain and suffering is in itself bad. Today, just as we are all agreed that misery and poverty of the masses be removed by preventing and treating their diseases, improving their economic lot, providing them housing and recreational etc., facilities, similarly body pleasures also reduce man's sufferings. For example, tasty food gives pleasure but if it causes indigestion and becomes injurious to health, we have pain of ill-health. To achieve pleasure of health, we stop taking spicy food. Thus, pain caused by one pleasure is removed by

another pleasure through the principle of selection between competing pleasures. Where the sense satisfactions are not guided by the mind, it is not *kama* at human level. Human society has developed the objects of sense satisfaction. We have developed cookery, fashions, picnic sites, gardens, music, art, and so forth. All these developments are progress in the satisfaction of *kama*. *Kama* includes sex pleasure too since it is a bodily pleasure. Freud has also held that all bodily pleasures mature into sex pleasures. Thus, *kama* is a value which refers to satisfactions through the senses.

Artha is the need of human personality to acquire power over nature and man. The conquest of Everest and control on floods, famines and epidemics is an expression of a desire for power over nature. Science is an expression of a desire for power over nature while **wealth is a form of power over nature and men**. Today we speak of power politics. The ideals of dictators like Mussolini and Hitler were not sense pleasures but power over the globe. The declaration of five nuclear powers (America, Russia, Britain, China, and France) in 1998 that they will not destroy their nuclear weapons and asking India (which had conducted Pokhran tests in May 1998 purely for national security reasons) to sign the CTBT was the expression of a desire of power over the globe. Indian culture views such desires as *artha*.

Artha is both a desire for power over nature and man and also a desire for wealth. Is this desire valuable? If yes, why do we condemn capitalism and power politics? *Artha* becomes evil when it spurns all other demands of human nature, when it is not controlled by righteousness, i.e., by consideration of others' rights, or others' needs of personality. The modern progress of America, Russia, Europe, etc. in science and industry is due to *artha*. We call their civilisations materialistic because they are engrossed in conquest over nature and man. If *artha* is allowed unrestricted play, it may destroy its own achievements and lead mankind to final extinction. The ethical principles of *dharma* must control the sensuous, economic and political cravings of man.

Dharma stands for the principle of integration that works through the entire gamut of life in the individual, in the community, and in the world at large. Anything that breaks up the **integrity of the individual and society is *adharma***. *Dharma*, thus, refers to duties which individuals must fulfill if society is not to disorganise. Just as a college/university has rules for teachers (taking classes, completing courses within a specific period, etc.) for students (attending classes, paying fees, taking examinations, etc.), and for administrative and ministerial staff (maintaining records, conducting examinations, and so on), and, adherence to rules by all the

elements keeps the system stable and any deviation leads to collapse of the entire system, in the same way all individuals in society have duties to perform. What guide these duties are customs, conventions and laws. Thinkers like Manu, Ramanuja, etc., have talked of these duties in *Dharmashastras* to regulate human relations and have considered them valuable for our existence, enjoyment and evolution.

In Indian culture, what underlines these duties, according to Kanak (1955) are: (a) *varnashram dharmas* or *vishesh dharmas* (b) *sadharan dharmas* or *samany dharmas*. The *varnashram* duties are divided in four stages of life: student life, family life, retired life, and life of renunciation. These are also related to professional roles. *Sadharan dharma* refers to common duties not attached to one stage of life or professional role, e.g., refraining from theft (*asteya*), restraint of anger (*akrodha*), forgiveness (*kshama*), refraining from injury to living-beings (*ahimsa*), cleanliness (*shoucha*), and truth (*satya*). These (*samanyu*) duties are duties of man to man.

Dharma also includes *virtues* (duties and virtues are different). 'Duty' refers to action and 'virtue' refers to inner disposition of mind. For example, preventing a person from indulging in illicit sexual acts is a duty and being free from sexual thoughts is a virtue. Since virtue is purity of mind, virtuous life is higher than performance of duty. To be good is better than to do good. Duties are performed without much thought about what makes them good. Virtue leads to *reflection* over right and wrong. Duties represent *conventional* morality and virtues represent *reflective* morality. There is a difference between a son who loves his parents and a son who just provides economic support to his parents. The latter does what the society prescribes as his duties towards his parents while the former performs many acts of kindness which are not prescribed by the society. Virtues are dynamic whereas duties are static. But duties lead to virtues. *Dharma* helps to keep society together, virtues create integrity in our minds.

Moksha refers to a state of liberation or freedom. Shankara distinguishes between *Mukhya Proyojanas* or ultimate ends and *Gouna Proyojanas* or secondary ends. Desiring anything for itself is called *Mukhya Proyojana* but achieving some for *Mukhya Proyojana* is *Gouna Proyojana*. Pleasure is a case of *Mukhya Proyojana* while training for a job, and earning of money are *Gouna Proyojana*. Shankara holds that pleasure is of two kinds: empirical pleasure and transcendental pleasure. The former comes through the medium of our body while the latter is spiritual pleasure. *Moksha* consists in the realisation of the identity of the soul with the *Brahma* or total reality.

Hindu culture prescribes two stages in attaining *moksha* (liberation):

Pravrtti Marg and *Nivrtti Marg*. The former is a stage of regularised satisfaction of bodily needs and consists in the enjoyment of desirable objects of the world, while the latter consists in developing *vairagya* or detachment from things of the world. The two stages are continuous, one leading to the other. (see, Kanak, 1955).

Asramas: Stages of Life in Realising the Ideal of Life

Asramas are the stages of life which provide training and environment for realising the ideal of our life. There are four *asramas* in all: *Brahmacharya* (student life), *Garhasthya* (family life), *Vanaprastha* (retired life), and *Sannyasa* (life of renunciation). The first two provide the training and environment for the *Pravrtti Marg* and the last two for the *Nivrtti Marg* of development. Each stage has its own specific duties (*Vishesha Dharma*s). We will discuss the duties of a *garhasthi* (householder), a student (*Brahmacharin*), a retired person, and a renunciated person separately. Just as *asramas* refer to specific duties in life, *varnas* refer to duties related to the four professional roles in life: the profession of scholarship, of defence and administration, of production and distribution, and of unskilled labour. Thus, along with *asramas*, we will analyse the *varnas* too.

Brahmacharya Ashram: It is a specific period of education for all young persons before they can grow independent to work for life. At home, a child gets education in how to eat, walk, talk, dress, meet other people, and behave in their presence. In some castes and communities, a child also learns how to plough land, make shoes, do pottery work, ironsmith's work, goldsmith's work, carpentry work, and so on. But he does not get education in reading and writing or skilled and professional training. He gets this education from teachers (*gurus*). During this period of education, he has to follow some ideals and live in a specific environment. In the ancient past, schools were boarding schools where a child was admitted at the age of 8-12 years, after following certain ceremonies and imparted knowledge, skills and crafts, general and physical education, and training in logic. What was important was 'comradeship' between the teacher and the taught, skills, knowledge and dedication of the teacher, and commitment of students to certain values and ideals. The students were taught discipline of life during this stage and were asked to take four vows of sexual purity (to check sex indulgence), simplicity in food and dress (to generate a sense of equality, fraternity and independence), respect for and obedience to the teacher (to create discipline) and enjoying self-exertion in acquiring knowledge and offering prayer (reciting hymns and meditation) for the cooperation of the divine powers. Thus, chastity, simplicity, hard work, devotion to knowledge, and spiritual reality were

the ideals of student life.

Garhasthya Ashram: This period of life covers an active period of effective membership of society and covers 25 years of life after the first 25 years of education. This is householder's life, a married life. The ideal marriage was considered one which was performed for *moksha* or final liberation and intellectual companionship through the performance of household duties, including upbringing of children and offering reverence (*shraddha*) to ancestors. Thus, by developing virtues of purity of heart, fidelity, chastity and mutual love, marriage is raised from being merely a biological association. Indian culture considers marriage not merely as an association but as absolute oneness. The marriage ceremony binds a man and a woman into a single complete being of which one half is the man and the other half is the woman. The oneness is not to last for a lifetime but it is to be continuous birth after birth. Thus, since marriage is for spiritual ends of oneness (as different from union motivated by biological and social ends), it is regarded as a *sacrament* and not as a contract.

Vanaprastha Ashram: After the responsibilities to children are over, the parents are expected to take to social welfare work, so that they do not remain entrapped in *moha* (attachment). The idea is not to retire to forests and live in a place away from human habitation but to live in villages, away from thickly populated cities. Thus, the idea of third stage is to develop a new level of interest and action and not merely a retirement into a particular place. The idea also is that people in far off places (villages) will get an opportunity to consult for their problems those who have spent their best years in that field. Even kings and rulers visited retired people for similar purposes. Thus, *vanaprastha* people were superior guides on social problems. The retirement of the old people (after 50 years of age, which is not a fixed age but is an average age which permits variations) also gives an opportunity to the youth to make experiments and contribute to the variety and richness of life. Very late retirement of the 'old' denies the opportunity to the young of initiation into new fields of activity. *Vanaprastha* stage does not expect husband and wife to break up their relationship. It is left to the option of the couple. But they are expected to lead an austere and ascetic life. The cultural importance of this third stage is that after enjoying physical pleasures when the body ages, a person experiences a sense of frustration and a sense of degeneracy. One wishes to return to bodily pleasures by artificial stimulation. By retiring, one is saved from frustrations. The decline in biological urges (sex, self-assertion, etc.) is compensated by interest in human welfare.

Sannyasa Ashram: *Sannyasa* is the final stage in life's growth. It differs from the *vanaprastha* stage in two respects—in the development of inter-

ests and in the development of motivation. While the dominant interest in *grahasthya* stage is the family, in *vanaprastha* stage it is human society as a whole, in *sanyasa* stage, the interest is the Universe with its universal consciousness. Interest in the *universal consciousness* is identification with total existence in its deepest being. As regards motivation in *grahasthya* stage, the individual is motivated to seek the interest of members of family, while in the *vanaprastha* stage, he is motivated to work for the interest of a particular group or community or human society. In both cases, if interests are achieved, the *grahasthi* and the *vanaprasthi* feel happy and experience pleasure; if not, they feel unhappy and experience pain. When motivation is related to an end, success or failure in them leads to pleasure or pain respectively. Such actions are called *interested actions*, i.e., actions inspired by fruit of action. Contrary to these, action in *sanyasa* is disinterested action. Let us take the example of speaking truth. A person may speak truth when it pays him, another person may do so even if he has to lose by it. One does it (speaks truth) viewing it as a duty or a command that comes from conscience without the calculation of gains or losses, or even at the cost of his life. Only a *sanyasi* will be motivated to perform a disinterested action which is not desirous of any fruits here or hereafter. The simple dress of a *sanyasi* symbolises the ideal of life for which he stands and lives. A *sanyasi* surrenders home and possessions because he perceives the whole Universe as his home. He is above fears, passions and hatred. Thus, *sanyasa* is not a life of inaction but a life of action risen to the highest level of motivation and widest interest.

It may, however, be noted that these stages of life are meant for average persons. These are not necessary for a genius or for an extraordinarily gifted person. Persons like Tagore, (and Charles Dickens) never went to school. Persons like Shelley and Wordsworth did not have much college education and yet they were master poets. A genius can by-pass any stage(s) and reach the highest stage.

Varnas: Four-fold Order of Society

Varna order is different from the caste system. While the latter is believed to be the greatest blot on Indian culture, since it has divided the society into conflicting camps, perpetrated harsh sufferings on a large section of the Indian people, and has made social justice difficult, or has proved socially monstrous, politically suicidal, morally obnoxious and economically disastrous, the former is the division of people into groups on the basis of aptitudes and abilities and vocations. The aptitudes and abilities are classified as those (a) for scholarship, (b) for administration and defence, (c) for production and distribution, and (d) for unskilled la-

bour. The first group of people came to be called *brahmins* who were engaged in priestly function, teaching, medicine etc.; the second group *kshatriyas*, who were engaged in fighting, ruling and administration; the third group *vaishyas* who were engaged in agriculture, trade and commerce; and the last group *sudras* who were engaged in unskilled work under the direction of the members of other three groups.

The Brahmins have the qualities of self restraint, austerity, purity, serenity, forgiveness, simplicity, wisdom and philosophic insight into truth and reality. The Kshatriyas have the qualities of courage, strength, firmness, skillfulness, charitableness, and administrative ability. The Vaishyas have the qualities of hard work, intelligence, and quick decision-making. The Sudras lack abilities and aptitudes; hence they have to work under others' direction and accept their authority and dominance.

The duties (*dharma*s) of Brahmins are: offering prayers, performing ceremonies and sacrifices, and teaching. The duties of Kshatriyas are: protecting people from external aggression and internal disturbances as well as governing them, punishing the wicked and contributing liberally for nation-building institutions. The duties of Vaishyas are: engaging in agriculture, procuring commodities from others and selling them, rearing cattle and rendering help to the poor and the needy. The duties of Sudras are to do those things which others want them to do. Sudras are not permitted to read *Vedas* or observe Vedic rites or recite *mantras* (incantations).

Since a person or a group was entitled to a *varna* membership by satisfying the qualifications, any individual or a group could find a place in any of the *varnas*, if he/it satisfied the qualifications. Thus, membership of a *varna* was not determined by birth but by qualifications. A Sudra became a Brahmin in his life by sheer merit; a Brahmin became a Sudra if he did not study the *Vedas*; and so also a Kshatriya or a Vaishya. The *Bhagavad Gita* also states that the four *varnas* are constituted on the principle of *guna*, i.e., natural and acquired qualities and character, and *karma*, i.e., calling and profession.

Some scholars have, however, maintained that *varna* system was as rigid as caste system today. A few examples of upgrading of individuals mentioned in some early religious books (say, of Vasistha who was born of a prostitute, Vyasa of a fisher-woman, Parasara of a low-born girl) were exceptions rather than a rule.

Castes

Castes in principle refer to division of people into groups on the basis of birth and giving particular privileges to some groups and denying similar

privileges to others. These groups (i.e. castes) have their own *ethos*, i.e., their own way of life, their ideas of right and wrong and their customs and manners. The motive underlying the caste system was racial and ethnic. India was subjected to racial invasion one after another. Even at the beginning of history, India consisted of people/tribes of different races—Dravidians, Mongols, Mediterraneans. Later on, people of other races—the Persians, the Greeks and the Scythians—settled down in India. When other countries (like Britain, America) faced the racial problem by extermination, conversion (including converting the way of life) and denying all human rights (e.g., denying the protection of the law), India faced it by adjustment process, i.e., mutual adjustment in a manner that each racial group was able to develop its own pattern of life. To start with, the migrant racial groups were not rigid in terms of commensal, social and marital, etc. relations, in beliefs and customs, and were elastic to shelter most of the indigenous populations of India but gradually they became rigid. Initially, the number of these groups was small but gradually, many groups changed their callings as well as way of life and assumed new names. These groups came to be known as castes (*jatis*) and their number went on increasing. Each caste, motivated to preserve its characteristic ways of life, imposed various social and economic restrictions on interaction with others. Thus emerged new and new castes, as well as the division of castes into sub-castes. By the Gupta period (300 A.D. to 500 A.D.), the caste system became very rigid and the ascendancy of Brahmins over all other castes came to be established. It was this rigidity, Brahmins' superiority and various restrictions imposed on the low caste Hindus, that came to be attacked, starting with Buddha and later on by various *Bhagtas* after the initiation of Bhakti movement. But the (caste) system remained rigid till the Britishers started, in the last quarter of the 19th century and first quarter of the 20th century, the process of industrialisation and with it urbanisation, and spread of education, and the social ideologies preached by great scholars like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Gandhi, etc., attacked the caste system. Today, the caste system has lost much of its hold on its members, though it cannot be said that the caste system has disappeared or will disappear in future. Now that the caste system has come to play a crucial role in politics and the scheduled castes and the backward castes, which form a good percentage of the total population of our country have come to enjoy certain privileges (like reservation of seats in jobs, educational institutions, legislatures, etc., and getting scholarships, age concessions and so on), and new vested interests have arisen, it appears that caste system will continue to exist in our society.

INDIAN SOCIETY THROUGH THE AGES

Impact of Cultural Renaissance and Buddhism

The Vedic philosophy of early Hinduism was influenced by Buddhism and Jainism. Though both developed as separate religions yet they had deep roots in the Hindu tradition. Jainism had the patronage of urban-mercantile community while Buddhism had princely patronage. Both emphasised the value of continuity (predestination, rebirth and transmigration) and criticised hierarchy (belief in *varna* and caste system). Both rejected the rituals of sacrifice in temples and talked of non-violence. The membership of Buddhism was open to all castes and both the sexes. Buddhism focused on soul liberation through *nirvana* (salvation), while Jainism referred to soul liberation through inculcation of a spirit of moral virtues through self-restraints. In short, it may be said that Buddhism and Jainism have an atheistic world-view whereas Hinduism is based on theistic beliefs. In a way, Buddhism and Jainism protested against some important characteristics of Hinduism like its rigid formalism, tyrannical ritualism, value system based on hierarchy, supremacy of Brahmins, and religious orthodoxy.

Hindu beliefs and values were further affected by the preachings of Shankaracharya (ninth century), Ramanujacharya (1017-1137 A.D. that is, eleventh and twelfth centuries), and Madhavacharya (fourteenth century), who established monasteries in different corners of the country for propagating monotheism. Ramanuja founded Vaishnava sect and got followers from Jains, Shaivites and low castes. The Lingayat sect in South India converted many non-Brahmins to the exclusive worship of Shiva.

The devotional schools emerged between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries which attempted to popularise some new values in the Hindu religion. Saints like Kabir (1440-1518), Guru Nanak (1469-1538), Ramananda (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), Chaitanya (1485-1534), Mira (1504-1550), Tulsidas (1532-1623), Tukaram and Ramdas, etc., emphasised equalitarian and non-hierarchical value system in Hinduism. They also made efforts towards liberalisation of the Hindu tradition and its synthesis with Islam.

Impact of Islam

Islam influenced Hindu ideals in the medieval period. Though attacks by Muslims on India had started in the tenth century but it was more from the fifteenth century onwards that the impact of Islamic culture on Hindu great tradition was observed. Islam does not believe in idol-worship. It is monotheistic and non-hierarchical, that is, it believes in