

*Review*

# Understanding India's sociological diversity, unity in diversity and caste system in contextualizing a global conservation model

Babul Roy

Social Studies Division, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Sewa Bhawan, R. K. Puram, Sector-I, New Delhi - 110066, India. E-mail: [babul\\_roy@hotmail.com](mailto:babul_roy@hotmail.com).

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This essay relates to the issues of sociological and cultural diversity in India vis-à-vis the global emerging issues of sociological and cultural diversity conservation. The Caste system upon which India's tradition of diversity or unity in diversity is essentially rooted requires a fresh attention in the emerging perspective of sociological and cultural diversity conservation. The argument here, however, is not a Caste favoritism or revivalism, but that there is still need for further understanding of the system. Although the caste system in India is a unique one, in essence the traditional multiplicity of India's social and cultural contents pivoted around Caste system is essentially comparable to the now emerging multiculturalism around the world. Both, the Indian traditional situation of sociological and cultural diversity and the now emerging situation of multiculturalism elsewhere in the world face a common problem in negotiating modern liberal democratic values and universal individual freedom. For last 50 years, the independent India is trying to overcome the problem, and therefore, the Indian successful account could be an instant model for the rest of the world.

**Key words:** India, cultural diversity, caste system, multiculturalism, conservation, public policy.

## INTRODUCTION

If the historical growth and spread of civilization has brought inevitable losses to native cultures all through the world, the emergence of nationstate, first in Europe and then elsewhere has systematically wiped out subaltern variations (Dimitrov, 2000; Pang, 2005; Skrinis, 2005). Of late, the problem become enormous, as globalization becomes a phenomenon of first ever rapid homogenization process. On the contrary, it is quite a different story that globalization has rendered most European nationstates to become heterogeneous resulted from recent international migration. Rapid extinction of various indigenous tribal communities, what until a decade before had been concerns to Anthropologists alone, is now inviting considerations from different quarters (Roy, 2010). The gross eradication of human cultural and linguistic diversity has drawn critical attentions from all quarters, which eventually took the shape of serious conservation initiative (Maffi, 2005). In the spirit of giving equal and rightful existence to the people of different cultural, religious and racial origins,

the policy of multiculturalism (Canada first adopted multiculturalism as official policy in 1971) has assumed a central concern, originally evolved to address the problem of integrating immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers (Rex and Singh, 2003). Of late, „debate“ is current on the issue of multicultural public policy on the question of adjusting different nationstates within the new political entity of European Union. Multiculturalism, however, assumed a new connotation in the context of growing awareness about indigenous tribal cultures and their conservation. Although Indian tradition of „cultural diversity“ and „unity in diversity“ has received curious attentions, many had been skeptical about India emerging a nationstate. In post-modern era when everywhere we are experiencing rapid process of elimination of traditional indigenous cultures, India's still surviving diversity gives the most promising ground to test any future global policy on diversity conservation.

Recently, Sen (2005) rediscovered India's unique tradition, what according to him could be an instant model

for rest of the world experimenting with multicultural public policy. This article furthered a discussion on this issue. India having more than 10,000 distinct communities (Castes and Tribes), several religious sects and sub-groups, over a hundred major linguistic categories is unique in the name of diversity<sup>1</sup> (Singh, 1996). Over them there exists a super-arching frame binding everything together. India's tradition of unity in diversity has received due acknowledgement. On the contrary, Caste system structuring the basis of Hindu India on which the tradition of unity in diversity is reliant has been subjected to fervent criticisms for being the root cause of all institutionalized inequalities. Srinivas (2003) reasserted the same, while commenting on a possible model of effective uprooting of the Caste system. When India's diversity and the tradition of unity in diversity are essentially rooted to its unique Caste divided arrangement, we still have some debate left on „obituary on Caste“, if not on „Caste as a system of institutionalized exploitation“ or „Castism“ at all. This article revisits Caste system. Census of India records on Castes, tribes, races until 1931 Census are the only available documentations, as ever made at pan India level. This article is largely relied on my experiences gathered from anthropological/ethnographic field works conducted in different parts of India during the last two decades and on various published sources, primarily the Census of India publications.

### CASTE SYSTEM: DUMONT REVISITED

No other single theoretical work on Indian Caste system has ever been as influential as *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) by Louis Dumont. Dumont interpreted Indian Caste system to function around the concept of hierarchy scaled on pollution and purity. The dichotomy of pollution/purity dialectically put some Castes on the lower rung of extreme denial. Despite such stigmas attached Indian Caste system remarkably survived for over 2,000 years. According to Weber (1958: 122), the poor and oppressed Indians readily accept their lot, because by so doing they know that their condition will be improved in the next life. However, such symbolic notions remained

powerful and uncontested for such a long period may justifiably raise question. The concept of „karma“ or „dharma“ is rarely used by common people and particularly by low Castes who often do not even know their meaning (Kolenda, 1964: 77; Deliege, 1993: 533). According to Deliege (1993), untouchable myth contests the position of untouchables within the Caste system, but not the system itself, whose ideological foundations it continues to uphold. Such ambiguity is undoubtedly a striking example of the insidiousness of Caste notions, even among the system's most obvious victims (that is untouchables). Deliege (1992: 166, 170) observed that the position of untouchables is ambiguous, who are neither fully marginalized nor fully part of the society. Although untouchables refuse to consider themselves as „impure“, they, however, do not reject the notions of ritual pollution altogether and apply these to the Castes below them. And practically there is none among the Castes who consider themselves at the ultimate bottom in the system.

Worshipping Gods by Brahmans on one hand and scavenging activities (for example handling carcass, night soil etc.) by the untouchables on the other do well fit to the two extremes of hierarchy and pollution/purity model, but problematic involving the numerous Castes in between. Census of India 1901, attempted classification of Castes according to social precedence, what, after Dumont would be appropriate to call „social hierarchy“. This practice received wide criticisms and never was applied again in Census or in any other exercise. In most cases, classification on the basis of public opinion could not be possible but was forced upon on the basis of certain superimposed ethnological attributes (for example taking kachcha and pakka foods, lotah water etc.)<sup>2</sup> (Census, 1901: Rajputana: 130, 131; Central India: 214). In Travancore, such classification was abandoned, partly that the status-regulating features found to be very irregularly distributed over the several Castes and it was not easy to assign exact value to each of them and partly such a practice would hurt the feelings of several sections of people (Census of India, 1901; Travancore: 258). Das and Uberoi (1971) argued that service relations between middle ranking Hindu Castes in a village are not hierarchical, but are rather reciprocal and equal. Gupta (1984) disputes the idea that in a village there is only one

<sup>1</sup> Anthropological Survey of India's recently conducted 'People of India Project' has registered a list of 17,096 entries of Castes, communities, sub-groups, surnames and other names. Of these 17,096 entries, 8,530 are Castes/communities, 3,123 sub-groups, 2,729 surnames, 2,614 names of deities, place names and titles (Communities, Segments, Synonyms, Surnames and Titles (Singh, 1996), POI, National Series, Vol. VIII: 8). The actual number of endogamous social unites expectedly would be much larger.

<sup>2</sup> Food prepared on clarified butter of cow's milk is called pakka (ritually pure) foods, otherwise they are kachcha. Upper Castes may take pakka foods prepared by certain Lower Castes, when they avoid kachcha foods from them. Lotah water (water served in a lotah) is shared by Caste members of equal status, while among the unequal mere touch imbibes pollution to drinking water.

Caste hierarchy based on a single cultural variable. There may be several hierarchies because there are many Castes and a number of cultural variables (Kolenda, 2006: 4963; Srinivas, 1962, 2002: 66).

Disjunction between „status“ and „power“ in Caste system hierarchy is another important distinction suggested by Dumont (1991). The ritual superiority of Brahmins, even though their political and economic status is low, hardly has ever been challenged. Caste hierarchy rules are quite clearly understandable involving the two extremes of the system, but quite blurred involving host of mid-range categories. Likewise, separation of power and status is less comprehensive involving Castes in the middle order. While criticizing Dumont, Berreman (Gupta, 1991: 86, 87) suggested power-status opposition to be a false dichotomy.

## METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION

Human behavior is always ambivalent even though looks monolithic (Gilmore, 1996), and that the social meaning is more complex and dynamic that the structuralism of binary opposition only falsely rigidifies one or the other meaning (Roy, 2003: 18, 19). Accommodating different Castes in the scheme of hierarchy of pollution/purity concept is a too simplified scheme. Failure of Dumontian model addressing „formal structural issues“ in capturing „detail practical realities“ of Caste India speaks that we need a different methodological orientation. Complexity of Indian situation makes generalization a difficult proposition, which could be understood from the following realisms of methodological significance:

- a) Historically, Indian society had never passed through any comprehensive homogenization process, although occasionally here and there efforts were certainly made to standardized norms. The 9th Century/AD Adi Shankaracharya's reforms of Hinduism and his introduction of the concept of Char Dham (that is four Hindu pilgrimage centers) demarcating the four geographical extremes of Indian mainland territory greatly contributed in bounding the Hindu society and religion across the space into a crystallized entity as found today.
- b) Without having any centralized system of control, Indian great tradition or higher/ formal values never had been uniformly enforced across the region. On the other hand local or little tradition has been continuously created and added to the content of Indian cultural pool.
- c) Great Vs little tradition (such as pan Hindu religious scriptures/texts Vs Hindu folk/local traditions) is not only a simple dichotomy, but different shades of them at different regional perspectives rendered Indian society to

be a very complex sociological phenomenon. There exist some three hundred versions of Ramayana (one of the important and popular Hindu religious scriptures) although popular opinion considers them as to be various deviations/degradations of the original Valmiki-Ramayana (Richman, 1991).

## REVIEWING CASTE SYSTEM

### Varna and Caste

Varna (scriptures defined fourfold hierarchical divisions of the Hindu society) and Caste (any one of the several endogamous groups accommodated within the framework of the Varna system) are quite interchangeably used in Caste writings. They are not the same. Yet, they are intimately associated with one another. Certainly, there would be no Caste without the Varna. Examples of Caste like system or quasi-Caste system are found elsewhere in the world, particularly in American and African nations, where Caste like endogamous groups are identified on the basis of distinct physical features or color (Banks, 2006; Berreman, 1960, 1972, 1973; Cottrol, 2004). In Indian system, the Castes are not only sociologically discrete entity but are also intimately bound together through religious, social and economic services and values. Thus, Caste system is a characteristic social grouping of Hindu India.

Different theories have been suggested for the origin of Varna and Caste system, such as: traditional view based on the Code of Manu; occupational explanation forwarded by Nesfield; tribal and religious explanation by Ibbetson; family or gentile explanation by Senart; racial and hypergamous explanation by Risley (Hutton, 1991: 433). Historically, the origin of Varna/Caste is centered on the invading Aryans and indigenous Dasyus. Aryans believed to have had three class systems – the priestly class, the ruling/warrior class and the agricultural/trading class. The original three orders mentioned in Rig-Veda (Srinivas, 1962, 2002: 63 to 65) suggest to be evolved from the three Aryan classes. The fourth Varna (for example the Sudra) consisting of different artisans and occupational Castes possibly had been derived from the indigenous „Dasyus“, whom the Aryans concurred (Encyclopaedia Britannica, volume 5: 24 to 33). Mixing of Aryans and Dasyus and the origin of Varna system are evident from several facts: i) „Varna“ or „barna“ literally meaning „color“ possibly have an implicit connotation for racial distinctions between (white) Aryans and (black/brown) Dasyus, ii) there are evidences suggesting presence of some kind of three class system among the Indo-European speakers (that is Aryans), iii) there are

references in Vedic literatures and Sastras pointing Sudra to be of „non-Aryan“ origin, iv) according to Varna rules, the first three Varna do clearly form one group in opposition to the 4th Varna, the Sudras, as they enjoy certain privileges from which Sudras are excluded. The dichotomy of Aryans/Dasyus apparently is highly simplistic presentation of the fact. More and more recent investigations are now rejecting the earlier and more popular version of invading Aryan hordes. And it would be quite unrealistic to assume Indian sub-continent was homogeneous, inhabited by only one community called „Dasyus“. But, perhaps neither the Aryans (the immigrants/invaders) nor the Dasyus (the indigenous people) constituted a homogeneous group (Deshpande, 2006: 120, 121). Secondly, any theoretical possibility of forcing the whole of the Dasyus into 4th Varna (that is at the bottom of the hierarchical class system) could not be a plausible proposition.

Discovery of Indus Valley Civilization confirms indigenous people were not inferior to the Aryans. Any proposition that Dasyus had been forced into the 4th Varna, therefore, would be too unrealistic. And by all probabilities, under such a situation the Dasyus would have been continued to live a separate ethnic entity than wholeheartedly accept Aryanism. The evolution of Varna system must be understood from the point of how the Aryans and Dasyus (not necessarily homogeneous ethnic group) gradually got assimilated into oneness, that is into one single Hindu ethnic group. The process, obviously, must be a long and complex one conditioned by multiple historical process and factors that any investigation can facilitate only to certain conjectures (Deshpande, 1993, 2006: 101). To quote from Thapar (2006:35): „Hierarchies, differentiations and regulations are part of the social process in complex societies and evolve in localized exchanges. They cannot be explained away by resort to the presence of conquerors as they were in earlier studies, nor by being described as indigenous and therefore harmonious. Local hierarchies also undergo mutation. But when there is an insistence on making a system universal, such as the imposition of caste rules over extensive areas, then it has to be assumed that this reflects historical changes of a substantial kind, involving a diversity of groups not all of whom were in agreement.“

### Variations in Varna and Castes

Caste system exhibits wide range of regional variations as Srinivas (1962, 2002: 7, 8) observed: „The Caste system of even a small region is extraordinarily complex and it does not fit into the *Varna*-frame except at one or two points. For instance, the local caste-group claiming to

be Kshatriya may be a tribal or near-tribal group or a low caste which acquired political power as recently as a hundred years ago. The local trading caste again might be similar in its culture to one in the „Shudra“ category and far removed from the Sanskritized Vaishya of the Varna system. Finally, castes included in the Shudra category might not only be servants, but landowners wielding a lot of power over everyone including local Brahmins.“ Attempt to classify Castes according to social precedence (that is hierarchy) in 1901 Census (the first ever such exercise carried out throughout the then undivided India) lead to mere arbitrary groupings of Castes on the basis of locally appropriate certain attributes. Existence of four Varna in such groupings could not be found from anywhere. The exercise itself speaks volume about wide regional variation in Varna and Caste hierarchy system. The text book model of the four-fold classification of Varna in some sense is found in the North – the heartland of Hindu India, whereas in Dravidian south (including Srilanka), the Castes are mainly grouped into the opposition of Brahmins and Non-Brahmins. So is the case in Himalayan States (for example Nepal) and in eastern and extreme north-eastern India. In south, there are no genuine Kshatriyas and Vaishyas; these two categories only refer to the local Castes recently claimed Kshatriyas or Vaishyas status by virtue of their occupation and marital tradition, and the claim is seriously disputed by the others (Srinivas, 1962, 2002: 66). The Caste often is neither homogeneous across the region nor strictly conform to the ascribed roles.

In Bengal, the different merchant Castes (Banik meaning merchant in Bengali) like Teli (oil extractor/seller), Saha (general trading groups), Sunri (liquor seller), Gandha-Banik (perfume dealer), Shankha-Banik (conch-shell ornaments dealer), Sarna-Banik (gold ornament dealer) etc. are neither do constitute a single group nor are of equivalent status. In Assam, the Kalita is an influential cultivating Caste, unique to this region. In social precedence Kalita comes just after the Kayasta (writer's Caste). Namasudra, originally fisherman and boatman, now a cultivating Caste in Bengal, enjoy a lower hierarchical position. The Ganak (astrologer) enjoys higher social position in Assam than in Bengal. Regional variations on the degree of Caste based social disabilities and hierarchy is quite evident. And the practice of social disabilities is often quite opposite to the rule of Caste hierarchy. In Shedol district of Madhya Pradesh, the Pao is a land-owning influential Tribe who are fast transforming into a Caste. They enjoy superior/dominant status over other Castes, even over the local Brahmins. Although the Brahmins enjoy certain symbolic privileges (for example they are given less amount of punishment for the same offence), the real

socio-political and economic power is with the influential Paos<sup>3</sup>. Sarkar (1985) discussed antithetical activities practiced by the Bhaina tribe of Madhya Pradesh with respect to other tribes and Castes, both hierarchically above and below them. Mutual exclusion in taking foods and drinks involving Castes and tribes irrespective of social hierarchy is a good account described by Sarkar. However, I do not fully agree with his interpretation that the practice of non-acceptance of cooked-food and water by the Bhaina tribe from the higher Castes (even from the Brahmin) as to be a ploy to hit back or to undermine the community whom they held responsible for their decline in power and prestige. Functioning of such collective psychology derived from historical events in such a conscious manner is more unrealistic. Instead, according to me it is the local economic and political situation that determined such idioms of local social hierarchy.

The practices of mutual exclusion are widely prevalent throughout the central India region. The Gond and Baiga tribes and the Panka (weavers), Lodhi (cultivators), and Dhobi (washer-men) Castes do maintain mutual exclusion. These groups observe certain amount of touch pollution (involving drinking water, cooking utensils etc.) or exclusion in sharing cooked-food and water with each other. Observance of mutual touch pollution or exclusion ignoring the rule of hierarchy is a peculiar phenomenon found in Central India, which possibly exist elsewhere. Caste like system in Israel involving two intermarrying ethnic groups is reported to be following a similar practice of mutual exclusion<sup>4</sup> (Meir, 1997; Thein, 2007).

### Dynamism in caste system

Disproportionate size of different Castes (as occupational groups), wide regional variations of Castes, absence of racial purity involving any Caste<sup>5</sup> etc evidently suggest

for intermingling of population rather at ease. Without any centralized organization, Caste system most expectedly ever remained a fluid system. Creation of new Castes by way of fission of existing Castes is inherent to the system. The Varna rule allows one directional (from top to bottom) occupational mobility, which is an important process of new Caste/Sub-Caste formation inherent to the system. However, opening up of new economic opportunity certainly remained the most important practical reason for new Caste formation. Census of India recording on Caste supports dynamism in Caste system. In each Census, hundreds of new unclassified Caste returns, although many of which as clan/territory/surname etc. are in fact wrongly reported as Caste names, suggest constant changing and evolving of social identities in India. Upward mobility within Caste system has received special attention after M. N. Srinivas' concept of „Sanskritization“, which is a process according to which „...a low Caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, “twice-born” Caste (that is top two Castes in the four-fold classification of Varna). Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the Caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant Caste by the local community” (Srinivas, 1966, 1990: 6). Later on, Srinivas himself broadened the model by introducing the concept of „Dominant Caste“, according to which the low Caste, or tribal or other group follow the practices of dominant Caste (not necessarily a twice-born Caste) in their region in their effort to elevate social status.

The sanskritization and the dominant caste model capture both the symbolic and the practical or materialistic aspirations of Caste movement. In pre-independent Census of India, increasingly more number of Caste claims seeking higher Caste status has been recorded in successive Censuses. The 1931 Census, the last Caste Census<sup>6</sup>, had recorded the maximum number

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Pao: A lesser known scheduled tribe of Madhya Pradesh’, A study report by Dr. S. S. Saha, submitted to the Social Studies Division, Office of the Registrar General, India (1985).

<sup>4</sup> From Israel such a sociological phenomenon of ‘dual stratification’ has been reported where the two groups or the two endogamous castes view each other as inferior and themselves as superior. The Bedouin ‘asli’ see themselves as a kind of gentry and the ‘fellahin’ they see as slave caste. Whereas there is a section of the ‘fellahin’ tribes who accepted the western Israeli state’s invitation earlier and settled down earlier and acquired university education and higher-status jobs sooner than the ‘asli’ see the ‘asli’ as backward and primitive (Meir, 1997; Thein, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Although Caste system in India might have originated from merging of alien ethnic groups distinctively based on color (some kind of racial distinctions of white Aryans vs. black/dark complexion native Indians) and/or linguistic and cultural attributes (that is Aryan vs. native Indian cultures), the Anthropologists

have utterly failed to identify races in Indian population per se in Indian population separated by Caste system (Beteille, 2001), ‘Race and Caste’, The Hindu, Reprinted in ‘Ideology and Social Science’. At the same time there is no conspicuous linguistic and cultural component differentiating one Caste from another, although it is more likely that every Caste have developed some specific cultural ethos and mores. The situation is quite different from the examples of Caste like system (more appropriately quasi-Caste system) found elsewhere in the world, particularly in American and African nations, where Caste like endogamous groups were in existence, if not continued today, on the basis of distinct physical features or color (that is racial elements), (Banks, 2006; Berreman, 1960, 1972, 1973; Cottrol, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> In 1941, Census was not conducted in full scale for political reason, and after India’s independence Caste based Census has been abandoned as a policy adopted by the National Government. However, in 2011 the Government of

of such claims. Although organized/corporate Caste movement is a modern phenomenon, but perhaps was not totally absent in ancient India. According to Srinivas (1989), in pre-British India fluidity of political system and the availability of marginal land that could be brought under fresh plowing had been the two most potent sources of Caste mobility. Creation of new Caste also relates to specific historical events and processes. There is a very interesting example of the origin of a Brahmin Caste called „b-lo-wa Brahman“ in lower Assam districts as recorded by the present author while doing field work for „Village India“ project sponsored by IGNC and UNESCO. The story goes back to the medieval history of Maomariya invasion of Assam. As the invading Maomariya warriors spared the Brahmans, a section of a weaving community had adopted the white thread used in weaving mill as sacred thread pretending to be Brahmin. The white thread used in the weaving mill is in the shape of the local Assamese letter „B“; hence the community so emerged came to be known as b-lo-wa Brahman, meaning „adoption of „b“.

Any radical move of claiming a superior status (for example a degraded Untouchable Caste claimed Kshatriya status) must be only in the form of deliberate organized movement. But, as a general phenomenon, Caste mobility most likely has been an indirect and spontaneous process. Under variety of situations, members of a Caste inhabiting a village or locality may unknowingly acquire certain customary or ritual, technological or material, economic or occupational differences. Such a group may continue to live without any conscious knowledge that they have been drifted away from their parent stalk until the local society formally recognized them as a separate Caste (or a sub-Caste within the parent Caste). From Bose (1996: 73 to 86) keen observation among Telis (oil extractor/seller Caste) in Seraikela we get a very interesting field example of how sub-Castes could possibly be formed from an existing Caste. Bose narrated different sub-Castes of Telis on the basis of differences of technology and craft practices on the one hand and social and commensal practices on the other. „Caste“, as it is largely understood or broadly identified, as an occupational category is quite distinct from „Caste“ as a real functional endogamous unit. For instance, Dhobi is an occupational name referring to a pan-Indian Caste, but in each region

endogamous groups under the broad name „Dhobi“ exist. Even within the same State, the Dhobis speaking a common language are not the same across the region. Caste as an occupational category is a cluster of several endogamous units. What usually we address a Caste and what a Caste largely identifies itself is only the broad occupational category. Thus, the internal dynamics in the system largely remained unnoticed.

Castes identified with one or the other occupational name remained stable as new Caste/Caste group is formed only rarely with the adoption of totally new occupation. Caste status being relative, which is reckoned only with reference to certain other Castes, whenever a Caste improves its social status with reference to others correspondingly the referent Castes come down the scale. Thus, the hierarchy of Caste structure remains unaltered. The upward and downward mobility are the two sides of the same coin. In the following section, we will discuss the historical process of creation of untouchable Castes: The ultimate downward movements of the system.

### **Caste system prejudice: Structural contingency or historical anomalies?**

Inequity in „Varna“ system could be traced back to Rig Vedic time<sup>7</sup> (Dube, 2001). But, the Varna rules defined in scriptures<sup>8</sup> only at a much later date. According to the Varna rules; there is no 5th Varna (that is all untouchable out-Caste Hindus) as such, but those thrown out of the Caste system are accommodated into this category. All untouchables theoretically have come into being through this process. In practice, the situation might have not been so simple. Without any centralized control or system how the Varna rules actually were enforced throughout the country is a problem that need to be addressed. Arguably, without being forced or compelled, the 5th category cannot get into its current demographic proportion (accounting about one fourth of the Hindu

<sup>7</sup> According to ‘Purusha Sukta’ of the Rig-Veda, the four Varna have originated from the self-sacrifice of Purusha – the Primeval Being. The Brahman born from the head or mouth, the Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaishya from the thighs and the Shudra from the feet of the Purusha. In the cultural body-image, the head, the arms, the thighs and the feet are ranked in descending order (Dube, 2001: 50) of importance/function as well as of purity. It is, however, still could be debated that such hierarchical distinctions of body parts might not be the original meaning; head, arms, thighs and feet – each serves specific function of equal importance and had originally been used only to refer the mere divisions of labor.

<sup>8</sup> The sacred laws of the Āryas (Tr. by Georg Bühler), (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe02/sbe0200.htm>).

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India has launched a combined survey called ‘Socio Economic and Caste Census’ throughout the country, which is currently in progress. This survey is independent to the decadal Census of India; the later one is conducted under the Government of India’s Census Act, 1948.

India) merely being created through such scarcely occurred social ostracism process, as defined in scriptures. The fact that it would ever remain undocumented that how and to what extent down the history some groups within the Caste system had utilized the Caste-system model to discriminate others for their vested interest. Wide regional variation asserts Caste system prejudices, in practice, to be more historically accredited local realities. Scavenging or handling carcasses are obvious pollutant occupations to be linked to the fundamentals of pollution/purity. The social position of Castes at the bottom of the pollution scale is well defined by Verna rules. But, relatively low social position for Castes having occupations (for example collection of flower and garland making for religious purposes by Castes Mali and Malakar) that are not even dialectically pollutant suggests status to be rather arbitrary and historically achieved from the interplay of various local forces<sup>9</sup> (Upadhyay, 1990). In medieval India, with the emergence of feudalism, the Brahmins (the traditionally literate Caste) in many areas got appointed as revenue collectors by virtue of their being literate (in many villages in Orissa or in elsewhere families still enjoy privilege for their forefathers once had been revenue collectors). They eventually acquired full-fledged „Jamindari-ship“ consolidating their traditional ritual superiority with economic and administrative powers.

In British India, the Brahmins had first taken to modern education, as a natural extension of their traditional jurisprudence of scripture reading, and eventually gained an upper hand in economic and political matters. With the emergence of agro-based market economy and agricultural marketing, certain land-owning Castes consolidated their position further. On the contrary, industrialization has affected the vast majority of traditional artisan Castes as their crafts became obsolete and eventually declined in economic scale. Many involuntarily dragged into the class of landless agricultural/industrial laborers, while some perhaps compelled to adopt degraded Caste occupation. Plausibly, down the history with great structural changes in economic and political situations the Caste system arrangement underwent drastic alternation from time to time. The scavenging Castes (the greater pie of untouchables) are clearly a phenomenon of

<sup>9</sup> The Harijans in Himalaya, who are traditionally called by a generic name 'silpkar', includes several occupational castes like oil extractor, carpenter, tailor, and copper and ironworkers. Their caste hierarchy position, unlike the Harijans elsewhere in India, is rooted to local political and social bias rather than in traditional Hindu belief of pollution/purity (Upadhyay, 1990: 44).

industrialization and recent urbanization processes. Presumably, there were not much leather works, even in medieval India, to support such a huge number of nearly half of the India's total Scheduled Caste population<sup>10</sup> (counting about 16% of the India's total population or roughly one fourth of India's total Caste Hindu population) as Chamar or allied groups. Similarly, traditional rural India not knowing sewage and sanitary system, which obviously came up with the advent of British rule in India and subsequent urbanization, does not explain the huge number of scavenging Castes. According to 2001 Census<sup>11</sup>, in smaller northeastern Indian States namely: Tripura, Orissa, Assam and West Bengal, the percentage of Chamar/Muchi population is merely in the range of 2 to 6% to the total Scheduled Caste population of the concerned State, while it is in the high range of 40 to 70% in larger States of heartland India namely: Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Chhattisgarh. It is again important to note that in Bengal and Assam, there is no local Chamar Caste. There could be a possibility that at some point of time sudden growth in leather industry in the belt of Indian heartland had generated huge economic opportunity attracting Chamar population from all over India.

Another equally plausible explanation could be that members from different Castes, sub-Castes, or tribes, in large numbers, were (consciously forced or indirectly compelled) taken into leather works who eventually assumed a common Caste name of Chamar. Mencher (1974, 991: 96 to 98) while agreeing that the present-day Chamars have probably been recruited from a number of tribes, local Castes etc. argued that in rural areas the major function of the large Untouchable Castes both in the past and today has been to serve as a source of poorly paid agricultural labor. Although, apparently no Caste would take up degraded occupation willingly,

<sup>10</sup> Hindu Castes suffered from untouchability stigma and at the bottom of the developmental index were recorded under the heading of 'Depressed Castes' in Census of India prior to 1931 Census. In 1931 Census, the term 'Depressed Caste' had been dropped and in place the term 'Exterior Caste' was used. Subsequently, to provide special administrative benefits in the effort of bringing the Depressed or Exterior Castes at par with other social groups, the then Colonial Government of India enlisted them in the list of Scheduled Castes in the year 1942. The independent India framed Constitution with specific provisions for the Scheduled Caste population (Articles 341 of the Constitution of India). Under this Constitutional provision, the list of Scheduled Castes is to be notified by the President of Indian Union. Accordingly, the first list of Scheduled Castes was notified vide the Presidential Notification called 'Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950', which is, in fact, an extension of the 1942 list of Scheduled Castes.

<sup>11</sup> Primary Census Abstract for Individual Scheduled Castes, 2001 Census: table A to 10; released in CD formed by the Office of the Registrar General, India, 2A Mansingh Road, New Delhi - 110011 (India).

however, they could be forced or attracted by economic and political drives. In post independent India, increasing demands for getting entry in the list of Scheduled Castes to avail reservation benefits suggest that economic opportunity could attract people from across the Caste demarcations. There is no doubt that the largely symbolic model of Caste discrimination might had been used in time and again by ruling or dominating Castes to suppress/exploit weaker ones. Such discrimination/exploitation possibly had become serious during the feudal regime and became far more so with the advent of market economy and capitalist mode of production. The dominating Castes not necessarily always come from the upper social strata. History perhaps forever will elude our judgment, as any story of lower Castes becoming dominant (politically/economically) unfortunately lost from the history because of their invariably assuming one or the other upper Caste tagging, albeit many instances of lower Caste assuming higher social status (usually Kshatriya) are recorded in Caste literatures.

### UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Diversity and unity in India have long been recognized in literatures. To describe the same, I cannot do better than to quote some excerpts from one of the architects of modern India Pandit Nehru's "Discovery of India", as under: "The diversity of India is tremendous; it is obvious; it lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits...Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged" (Nehru, 1946, 1993: 61, 62). India's „sociological diversity“ and its characteristic „unity in diversity“ cannot be seen outside Indian's unique institutions of Varna and Caste system. The Varna/Caste system probably emerged historically by accommodating different sociological entities. Each Caste is a discrete and somewhat independent social unit (being endogamous, having distinctive traditions, manners, practices, hereditary occupation etc.), but at the same time is notionally bound hierarchically and functionally at practical/local level through the chain of enduring socio-economic and religious services (Jajmani system). In such an array of heterogeneous assortment of Hindu social structure, any new group may quite easily sneak into the system simply by participating in the chain of

services. The most important fact is that a group can enter into such an arrangement while still maintaining its unique distinctive identity<sup>12</sup>. Here lays the secret of India's characteristic accommodating power<sup>13</sup>. Indian society basically has never gone en-mass transformation by any internal or external stimuli of change.

The changed/ transformed India gets automatically detach from the rest for a separate existence, but while still being a part to the large. No reformer's trick ever penetrated deep into Indian life as a whole. Thus, old and reformed are continuing side-by-side. Conflicting ideas and ideologies emerged in different historical contexts are continuing giving Indian tradition to be an amazing mixture of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, spirituality and skepticism. The resiliency of Indian culture lay not only in its stable segmentary social system, as existed at any point of time, but also in its dynamic social system rooted to a continuous process of segmentation, accommodation, and evolution. India's time tested unity in diversity is endowed to its unique social arrangement and processes. The flexibility dimension has allowed Indian social structure to undergo transformation at different levels and at different historical time adding further variations.

### INDIAN NATIONSTATE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY NEGOTIATION

The process of modern nationstate formation throughout the world has undoubtedly played significant role in elimination of subaltern cultural and linguistic realities (Dimitrov, 2000; Pang, 2005; Skrinis, 2005). Sociologists

<sup>12</sup> In Bagurihati, a village in Nalbari district of Lower Assam, Muslims get an uncontested economic opportunity in certain occupations like fishing, mason work (particularly toilet construction), agricultural laborer etc., which either no Hindu Caste claim as Caste occupation or only a very small number of Caste population (not enough to cater the requirement) are involved with such occupations. This must be a common situation elsewhere in the state attracting large scale migration of population from neighboring country of Bangladesh and from neighboring States of Indian Union. In Bagurihati, the Muslim population secured a place like other Hindu Assamese Castes participating in economic activities and thus contributing to the functioning of the village economy [‘Report’ on the village Bagurihati (Nalbari: Assam) for the project ‘Village India’ < <http://ignca.nic.in/viir0001.htm> > submitted to the Indira Gandhi National Centre of Arts, New Delhi (2000)].

<sup>13</sup> A very interesting incidence of accommodation recently has been reported from a tiny village in Kutch. The local inhabitants of the village are now worshipping 72 Europeans called jakhs. These Europeans, according to a folk - legend, once landed at jakhau-port (from which Jakhs derived) sometimes in 18th century and fought a battle liberating people from the tyranny of Rao Punro, a local king (The Times of India, sep. 10th, 2006). This is really a rare instance of inducting Europeans into the local Hindu pantheon.

have now documented that minority movements usually took over the very discourse of the centralized homogenous nationstate which marginalized them, and the ideology of language as homogenous, autonomous and bounded units is widely held to be a product of the rise of the nationalism (Muehlmann, 2005). Once, many had been skeptical, if India having so many different languages, cultures and religions could ever be a nation. Of the two extremes of nationalists, one strongly advocate that only one religion, one cultural identity could make India a strong modern nation, while the other, although acknowledged India's diversity, felt strongly to strengthen „unity“ amidst India's diversity by synthesizing a common „National Culture“<sup>14</sup> (Husain, 2006). Gottlob (2007) made a critical appraisal on the two opposite models of Indian nationalism. The secular nationalists lead by Nehru acknowledged the historicity of India's unity in diversity. However, falling much on the line of (centralized) western nationstate model and in the attempt to establish the western model of industrialized production in India with the help of secular state, the problem of a concept of universality becomes evident that consists in mere generalization of a specific particularity. It has been argued that the generalized concept of the nation has failed to grasp the specificity of Indian condition, so there is a need for an alternative model of nationalism compatible to India's historical unity in diversity.

Construction of Indian nationalism accommodating various regional identities still is an undergoing process. And when the discourse between Nehruvian secular model and the various so called communal models are still contesting, further reconciliation between unity and diversity is still relevant. Nevertheless, when diversity is widely recognized as number one enemy to nationstate formation, the post-independent Indian nationalism created reasonably enough space for diversity.

### **ON THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONSERVATION**

Cultural diversity conservation involves far more complicated policy discourse than conservation of biodiversity. In fact, these are completely two separate domains to be seriously compared. Biodiversity

conservation, conceptualized in 1980's soon turned into popular conservation movement and activism world-wide; while the concept of cultural and linguistic diversity, introduced a decade later has failed to evoke that much concern. It has been argued that the reason for public indifference is not a matter of simple time lag, but rooted to more fundamental and structural causes in modern political, social and educational system (Annamalai, 2004). Nevertheless, even in early 1940's when the cultural diversity loss not yet assumed a problem, Karl Popper in his argument for „Open Society“ set the conditional requirement of „cultural pluralism“ and „multiculturalism“ for the success of a reasonably equitable open society (Karl Popper's various writings on Open Society). In contemporary world, multiculturalism in public policy assumed a significant policy impetus in recognition of ethnicity, cultural and linguistic diversity. Biodiversity conservation recognized continuing of diversity as a process instead as a product (McNeely, 1994). The situation involving cultural issue is essentially the same. Any argument for conservation of social, cultural, religious and linguistic resources can not advocate rejection of the very process of diversifications that has given rise to the current existing forms. Sen (2006: 4883, 4884) argued on policies of multiculturalism adopted in European nations very much on that line. According to Sen, Akbar's focus on freedom of religious choice contrasts with the growing focus on preserving – even freezing – religious diversity for its own sake which are very visible in current British policies. Sen has been critical regarding the practice of multiculturalism in the form of „separatism“ and the „freezing of diversity“ and suggested that there may indeed be something to learn from medieval India's Akbar's understanding of the demands of a healthy multi-religious and multicultural public policy.

The policy of multiculturalism adopted in most European nations perhaps still needs corrections. The situation is far more complex in India and in Asian and African nations, where multiculturalism is not just the issue of living in coexistence of different cultures of equal level resulted from recent international migration, but also different traditional cultures of different stages of progress. The problem is enormous. Can folk and tribal wisdom survive in front of far dominating and cherished institutionalized forms of knowledge backed by 21st Century Globalization and electronic power? Can folk and tribal culture survive if their very ethos and philosophies encapsulated in their wisdom are ignored? These questions may challenge our policies of cultural and linguistic diversity conservation. Although in post modern world „conservation“ involving environmental debates have acquired new semantics, but „conservation“ is

<sup>14</sup> S. Abid Husain's received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 for his book 'The National Culture of India' (2006), originally in Urdu, which is a potent literary contribution to the school of Indian nationalism that acknowledges India's diversity and at the same time felt strongly to strengthen 'unity' amidst India's diversity by synthesizing a common 'National Culture'.

crudely equivalent to „conservatism“. Our modern science, philosophy, arts and music are hard earned products of ideological battles fought against conservative regimes down the history. Any negotiation for „conservation“ over sweeping all round transformation/change no way, however, should exhume „conservatism“. Likewise, any praise for diversity involving Castes, ethnicity etc. should not encourage Castism or racism at all. Negotiating contrasting ideological oppositions is a utopia of cat-rat sharing a common parlor. Can our Church teach „Biblical Doctrine“ and tolerate „Paganism“ at the same time? The problem is structurally inherent. While negotiating two contrasting domains – such as universal and local or unity and diversity – it would ever remain a puzzle that who is speaking for whom. Under such a situation one can easily turn the current to one’s favor by essentialist opportunistic construction.

Balancing of universal and local (or hegemonic seize of nationstate and parochial sentiment of subaltern nationalism) and of unity and diversity (or greater knowledge and little traditions) must be a constant process of negotiation.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study’s argument is that can Indian example of negotiating complex sociological diversity with her emerging into a strong modern democratic nation state be a model for the rest of the world now experimenting with multiculturalism? India’s sociological diversity is essentially embedded to her much disreputable Caste system. Here, we have found that India’s Caste system is still a very poorly understood phenomenon and need to be further analyzed, more particularly in view of our current necessity of cultural and linguistic diversity conservation. Keeping in view of the complexity of Indian situation, methodologically, one has to be extra-careful. Not only in understanding Caste system, but in general there has been gross generalization of more complex Indian reality situation. Take the example of the widow burning practice. This was undoubtedly the cruelest forms of women torture and subjugation ever recorded in human history, but arguably had never been a wide spread practice in India. Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great epics that remained influential defining Indian moral codes for Centuries, set no precedence of widow burning. Yet, this has been quite extensively referred time and again to portrait India feature. Much harm has been done by Western exotic writings – a fact has been rightly understood and explicitly talked about by Amartya Sen in “Argumentative Indian” (2005). Sen

arguably has drawn our attention on the less popular other side of Indian features that is rich enough in tradition of pluralism and multiculturalism, toleration of intellectual heterodoxy, philosophy of scepticism and materialism, and tradition of public arguments. And perhaps it is the first of its kind that aptly portrait the rational and argumentative Indian much against the mainstream image of Indian traditions overwhelmingly focused on religion or spirituality.

Sen has been very lucid to analyze the conspicuous absence of „villain“ in Satyajee Ray’s movies, according to him Ray was not interested to find out an easy solution for a problem, quite befittingly to the complexity of the reality situation. This has great methodological significance in sociological investigation. In India, any dispute if accidentally involves two different religions or Castes most often acquire communal color subduing the real issue in question. Instead of making Caste or Caste system as a scapegoat to blame any incidence of social injustice, the real reason must to be understood to genuinely address the problem. Coming back to our question on Caste system, no argument left that all historically derived Caste system prejudices and all kinds of inter-ethnic discriminations and inequality must go. Yet, cultural diversity encapsulated in Caste system requires a fresh attention. And that any better understanding of Caste system only could reject Caste system prejudice or Casteism more consciously and successfully. Sociological and anthropological research remained preoccupied with understandings of Caste system as a hierarchical model of institutionalized social oppression and exploitation. On the other hand research works only rarely devoted to understand and document the various elements of culture and sub-culture within each Caste. Every single Caste, more particularly every single endogamous group within a Caste has passed through its own historical process of development, and invariably is a repository of distinctive folklores, myths, ethos and values. Take the example of Hindu wedding ceremony of Bengal, every district of undivided pre-independent Bengal has got unique pattern of wedding celebration, rich and colorful of immense ethnographic and ethnological significance. Scientific documentation of rich folkloric tradition of each Caste of each region not only would lead to our better understanding of Caste India, but also would contribute to our general knowledge of human culture. The world-wide emergence of social and economic inequality caused first by feudalism and then by capitalist mode of production could not be understood at all in Indian situation for being masked by Caste system.

The notional Caste system perhaps has always been used or misused in enforcing and protecting interests of

influential ruling or dominant Castes. Opportunistic exploitation of Casteism continued in some form or the other in post-independent India with mere role reversal. What once the upper or the dominant Caste leaders took benefits in the name of Caste, the dalit-leaders (dalit in Hindi stands for Scheduled Castes) are now emulating. The phenomenon of Caste has slowly found a vicious entry into the vicious circle of post independent Indian national politics. Political lobbies are growing stronger with further pressing of demands favoring Castes or Caste issues of political significance only. Everybody is interested to incorporate new names into the Indian Constitutional list of Scheduled Castes, as such move can masters immediate electoral benefits, while none is ever found interested to review Caste situation for delisting any name – also envisaged in the Constitution, as such a move hardly would garner any benefit. Opportunist and essentialist construct of Casteism inherent to the system would ever remain a challenge, which would be essentially similar in negotiating contrasting oppositions in cultural diversity conservation. Any positive discourse on Caste and Caste system, however, does not deny of reality that social exploitations/discriminations are inherent to the system. Andre Beteille (2006: 21 to 119) dwells upon the problem of sustaining Indian tradition of unity in diversity in the face of India emerging in 21st century on principles of equality and democratic institutions. As he wrote: "...the Indian tradition was not only the most pluralistic known to human history, it was also the most hierarchical...Just as the accommodation of diversity did not go with equality, it also did not go with individual freedom...The challenge today is to maintain the diversity and the spirit of accommodation inherited from the past while repudiating hierarchy and creating more space for individual freedom." Diversity and equality always remained a problem to go hand-in-hand. Anthropological literatures documented human social stratification in true sense to be a phenomenon of recent history emerged with the advent of market economy and capital gain.

No matter how a society is homogeneous, differentiation is created one way or other as the limited resources (such as economic, social and political) are inequitably distributed/ shared and the successful groups consolidate their identity to perpetuate their acquired status and interests. The situation became a problem only when the inequality gap disproportionately widens and some institutional norms articulated justifying the existing condition of inequality, as happened in Caste system or in formally recognized class stratification. What can be argued at best is that how equality to the extent of minimum descent living of all people can be achieved in our contemporary liberal society. The modern India"s

problem of maintaining diversity while repudiating hierarchy or inequality, at least to a reasonable extent, essentially could be the same as to what the Western world is now facing with the problem of negotiating „multiculturalism“ with modern values of liberal democratic policy and individual freedom. The traditional segmented Indian system that hitherto sustained and still continues to sustain India"s social and cultural diversity, however, has its natural shortcomings. After five decades of successful constitutional democratic process, India has become pragmatic enough in negotiating her sociological diversities with modern values. However, undoubtedly scope is still there for perfection.

The future equitable India would require relying more on consciously taken decision, than relying purely on traditional structural contingency. Although the caste system in India is a unique one, in essence the traditional multiplicity of India"s social and cultural contents in many ways is comparable to the now emerging multiculturalism elsewhere. Here, the success story of the Indian example of negotiating opposing forces (that is universalization and parochialization), traditions (that is great and little traditions) and ethnics (for example Caste, linguistic, racial, and religious groups), while accommodating modern values (for example equality, individual freedom etc.), could be a well tested model for cultural diversity conservation and multiculturalism practices in the contemporary world.

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