



# **The Conceit of Reason *versus* the Cunning of History**

Modernity and Caste in India

**Sanjeeb Mukherjee**

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*Research and Development*



Centre for Social Theory  
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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgement.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Reason versus History .....	2
The Persistence of Caste.....	3
Caste and the Imaginaries of the Nation and Democracy .....	6
The Magic Metaphor in Indian Thought .....	8
References .....	9



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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the central question as to how and why caste still survives under conditions of democracy and modernity and what do we make of it. I try to explain this phenomenon by viewing it in the larger context of a fundamental conflict between the ambition of reason to reorder the self and society and the resistance to this project by the real history. The result always is open and unpredictable. This also forces us to think of what to do with our pasts; can we really make a clean break with it or does it leave deep traces?

Most scholars agree that the old hierarchical caste order is on its way out, but individual castes have not only thrived, but have engaged with democracy and modernity in crucial ways. This engagement has established a kind of equality of castes as jatis and not as varnas. Within castes the individual aided by the rights discourse has emerged which in many ways given birth to a civil society within castes. Not that this transformation has fully happened, but modernity has undermined the legitimacy of the old ideologies and social order and has produced powerful tendencies in this direction. Finally, an argument is made to reimagine the nation not as an essential unity but as a union of diversities, which would include castes in a major way.

# The Conceit of Reason versus the Cunning of History

## Modernity and Caste in India

*And from everything a little remains  
Oh, open the bottle of lotions  
and smother  
the cruel, unbearable odour of memory.  
Still, horribly, from everything a little remains,  
....  
under the libraries, asylums, victorious churches  
under yourself and under your feet already hard  
under the ties of family, the ties of class,  
from everything a little always remains.  
Sometimes a button. Sometimes a rat.*

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1996)

### INTRODUCTION

In spite of all the oppression, inequality and injustice, caste continues to surprise us by its sheer ability to adapt, change and survive for over more than two millennia. The challenges posed by Buddhism, Islam, Bhakti, colonialism, modernity, nationalism, democracy, Ambedkar and Marxism have failed to destroy caste. Almost every book on caste starts with the admission that in spite of nationalism, democracy and modernity, caste somehow not only survives, but has an uncanny ability to continue and reinvent itself. We seem to be unable to crack the code called caste. After independence caste was considered to be the official enemy and the main stumbling block to the growth of progress and modernity. India today is the world's largest democracy, an emerging global capitalist economy and a nation state aspiring to join the super power club in the Security Council of the United Nations. Yet, caste persists. How do we address this puzzle and what do we make of the relationship between modernity and caste?

The philosophical principles of modernity and caste are contrary to each other and it was believed that caste is a thing of the past and would inevitably be obliterated by the new rationality of modern times. After briefly discussing this conflict I shall explore why caste does not dissolve and yet does not remain the same under the impact of modernity and democracy. My central explanation rests around the conflict between the *conceit of reason*, which seeks to reorder the world in its image and the *cunning of history*, which resists this reason, that enables our pasts to negotiate with change. What results is something undetermined and unpredictable and this is what makes life and history so full of wonder. My point is to ask the question: what do we do with our pasts? It is not a plea to glorify everything in history, but to be more sensitive to the limits of reason.



The idea of the free and equal, rational and atomic individual is the foundation of modernity (Taylor, 1975). Society and state in this worldview can only result from a contract between these individuals. These individuals are free in more senses than one can imagine. They are free of the burden of history, of their birth or pasts or ascribed identities. They are also free of any connection or obligation towards nature. The atomic idea of the self is even outside society. Everything is a matter of choice and contract. Nature exists outside humans to be mastered with the help of science. This makes modern individuals empty in a serious sense. Caste, on the other hand, assumes the priority of the community over the individual who belongs to it. Birth and the obligations of caste are not matters of choice; they pre-fix our identities. Hierarchy and inequality are of the essence of caste. With such a structure of social organisation and a sense of self, caste, we would assume, would seriously come in the way of capitalism, nationalism, the modern state and democracy. Modernity requires a new identity in order to work it. How and why does caste persist? Of course, caste has changed; but it has always changed and yet it seems to defy all attempts to end it.

## **REASON VERSUS HISTORY**

Modernity (Taylor, 1975) seeks the right to rule the world through the route of reason. Reason and science is the basis for making truth claims about history, society, nature and the self. Philosophy, whose prime subject is truth, now claims a privileged status as the new ruler. Modern history seeks to unearth the truth about our pasts and also the way it moves forward towards progress and reason. Natural sciences enable us to accumulate knowledge about nature, which is the foundation for man's conquest over nature. Finally, reason claims to found a new subject whose essence is reason and in virtue of this capacity is sovereign, free and equal. This self is outside nature and history. Yet, they are all the same as they partake in a common essence, namely, reason. This truth being rational and scientific can be demonstrated and hence is superior to all other truths, based on revelation or meditation. And truth must prevail and thus modernity is born. For truth and reason to rule we have to make a clean break with the past and the model was the French Revolution. The past or history has to be destroyed and a new homogeneous ever-present has to be inaugurated for there is no future as well; becoming more modern is the only option. Reason defines itself as consistency and hence anything that is contrary to its principles has no reason to exist. The claim of the communist party to rule exclusively and totally is only an extension of the principle of modernity that truth based on reason and science should be supreme.

Universalism is the logic of modernity and hence the dream of both liberals and Marxists was the creation of a universal social and political order for the entire human species. Locke, Kant and Marx equally shared this rational hope that the future of the human race can only be one and hence all particulars, including the nation, would cease to exist.

Yet, the nation, nationalism and the nation-state is the only legitimate form of modern politics. Both Marxism and globalisation are unable to transcend the national barrier. Partha Chatterjee (1986) and John Dunn (1979) take two opposite views on the relationship between modernity and the nation. My argument is that the reason for this failure is the inability of modernity to create history in its image. There are two kinds of failures, one is contingent failures, which can be overcome and secondly, historic failures, which are impossible to fully overcome. The existence of the nation form is a failure of the second kind. Secondly, the relationship between reason and history can exist at two planes: a philosophical conflict, where the principles of modernity are at variance with real history, for example, the idea of the nation as a prior collective for which individuals should ideally be prepared to die and

kill others is fundamentally opposed to the value modernity places on the sovereign and rational, free and equal individual. However, in real history, in spite of this contradiction they may coexist and come to terms with each other, as is the case in the world today. Partha Chatterjee holds that modern reason has subdued the nation, whereas John Dunn believes that reason has not been able to tame the nation and hence they are at odds.

I wish to describe this claim of reason as the conceit of reason; for, in reality, the infinite forces of real history, which we may call the cunning of history, have resisted the imperious design of reason. Its cunning does not lie in any secret and inexorable pattern but the very absence of any pattern. This makes history open, undetermined and mocks at our imperial desire to control and direct it in the path of truth and reason. Dipesh Chakraborty has described this process as our anxieties about the past or history. (Chakraborty, 2001). The regimes of modernity impose an intricate web of tools and techniques to discipline and normalise the self in order to produce the modern individual as Foucault (1979) has so brilliantly shown. Yet, such grand desires are everywhere resisted and have failed to establish their cherished utopias. For example, however much religions, state and medical sciences may claim to teach us the straight way to fornicate, people have refused it and imagined other ways of sexual pleasure.

The conceit of reason lies in its project of creating a present which has no links with the past; it wants to make a clean break and write reason on a *tabula rasa*. Our languages, cultures and memories are continuities, which of course, change all the time but we can never break with that heritage. The pasts are always part of our present and hence flow into our futures as well. Modern reason is not the only force which wants to shape history in its image; earlier ideologies too attempted this and in our case Brahmanism tried to impose its reason on society through its philosophy of *dharma*, *karma* and *varna*. In the rest of the paper I would try to show how caste, particularly as *jati*, has resisted both Brahmanism as well as modernity and has upheld alternative philosophies and practices.

The central question is what do we do with our pasts? Do we sit upon history like the way architects and engineers take to their drawing boards? Cleansing history to create utopias has never had their intended effect. Histories have proved to be far more resilient and intractable. This resilience of history (in the plural) is also the staying power of multiple rationalities of the past. To modernity all our pasts were guided by a single logic and that is the truth of history. Orientalists even denied this logic to our history and claimed that India was static; its village communities based on caste never changed and hence we were denied any history (Thapar, 2002). Marxists would explain the strong traces of the past as a proof of the incomplete transition in India due to the weakness of our capitalism and hence only the communist party armed with the right knowledge can complete the march of history along the tracks of reason (Chakraborty, 2001).

Philosophically privileging democracy over philosophy, as Richard Rorty (1990) argues, can only challenge the conceit of reason and its truth claims. Democracy questions the monopoly over truth by any single authority, be it pure reason or the communist party. In any society besides the dominant rationalities there are others which contest it, making for contending reasons to coexist. Democracy is essentially an open category, which enables different subject positions. Truth claims, on the other hand, closes the world.

## **THE PERSISTENCE OF CASTE**

The persistence of caste in India is due to the resistance of both upper as well as subaltern castes to the rationality of modernity. However, upper castes have over time come to terms with bourgeois modernity and have transformed themselves to fit into newer modes of domination based on nationalism and

capitalism. Untouchability, practiced by upper castes, was the only thorn to be removed. However, it is largely the casteism of the oppressed castes that have been seen to be coming in the way of modernity and nationalism and sully our democracy. Believers in modernity would fault the oppressed for demanding reservations or voting on caste lines and thus keeping alive the 'cancer of caste'.

Most sociologists search for an essence in the caste system; in other words it is the search for a single rationality as the motor of caste and its persistence. If we look at the caste system through Brahmanical eyes, as Dumont (1971) seems to have done, we would find a single essence or logic reflecting their will to power. But if the system is seen through the perspective of other castes we would find a different worldview (Chatterjee, 1989). Not only are there different and contradictory philosophies; these have all changed throughout history. The fact that caste has changed and adapted, it has survived. It has shown some inherent need and strength, which accounts for its persistence. The transition from *varna* to *jati* is itself a rejection of the power of Brahmanical ideology. K.M. Sen distinguishes between the theory and the reality of castes. He writes, 'The division of society into four castes has in all probability always been theoretical, for, from the earliest times, we find references to a much more complicated caste structure.' (Sen 2005).

Gopal Guru (2005) has shown the importance of the politics of naming in his discussion of the category *dalit*. In fact, only the twice-born castes call themselves by their *varna* names and there is no caste which calls itself *sudra*, the name given to it by *Brahmins*. This itself shows the rejection of *varna* ideology in a fundamental sense. For example, out of 2,100 OBC *jatis* listed by the Mandal Commission Report on Backward Classes, not one *jati* calls itself *sudra*. The only exception is the mention of two *jatis* in Assam, namely, Sudra Das and Dey. Obviously they have been described by others as *Sudra* to distinguish them from non-*sudra* Das and Dey. The second example from Karnataka also refers to a *jati* called Sudir or Sudra. Here *sudra* is mentioned because it is a variation of the word *sudir*. To the twice born all *jatis* engaged in manual work or labour were characterised by *sudra* or the fourth *varna*, but what we actually get is several thousand *jatis* and no one calls themselves *sudras*. Secondly, most of these *jatis* have their own culture, customs and even gods. Of course, Hinduism has absorbed most of their gods and customs, but that has to be distinguished from Brahmanism or even Brahmanical Hinduism. *Jatis* were the celebration of differences as against the unified order proposed by Brahmanism. Nicholas Dirks (2003) too has argued that caste is deeply political and has seen major contestations over its interpretation, practices and role in history.

Caste is a kind of constituent power of the people, which nationalism and modernity seeks to dissolve and thus disempower the people. Caste is a source of popular power and its dissolution would never make possible the rise of lower caste and class power in Indian democracy. This has been described as the rise of caste solidarity or horizontal mobilisation by sociologists (Jodhka, 2015). Satadal Dasgupta (1986) has shown how subaltern castes have a strong democratic and deliberative tradition. The transition from caste to nation would not only dissolve the constituent power of the subaltern people but would also destroy a whole system of premodern knowledges, practices and cultures. Most of these are intricately tied to their livelihood, which is being threatened by the expansion of capitalism based on a technology that is ecologically unsustainable. This is not a plea for freezing our pasts, but a challenge to create new imaginaries of democracy and justice, which is rooted in subaltern histories and cultures. Nor is this an advocacy of shutting out the modern from the lives of the people; it is an argument to engage with modernity or any other thing from one's own position and as equals. It is a call for a democratic engagement and change not from a position of victimhood and self-denial, but a position of self-respect and strength.

There are two aspects of caste: one is caste as self and the other is caste in its relationship with other castes. The latter has attracted far greater attention and is the centerpiece of designating hierarchy as the essence of caste (Dumont, 1971). This is historically true and sanctioned by Brahmanism, but it leaves aside the internal life of any caste, particularly of dominated castes. Caste as self has an autonomous existence and is internally largely egalitarian, except for the privileges of sex and age. But both sex and age are not socially created; they are biological and hence products of luck. Age and sex unlike gender or age determined hierarchies, are not socially constructed and, thus cannot be construed as sources of privilege per se. Castes have rebelled and resisted domination from outside by other castes. Thus the experience of caste is not one entirely of domination and oppression, but also one of empowerment, agency and autonomy (Chatterjee, 1989). These are the sources of what goes into the contribution of the cunning of history's resistance to the conceit of Brahmanical reason. This also accounts for the diversity of beliefs and practices of non-Brahmanical castes in every aspect of life, from eating habits to their Gods and customs.

In the total architecture of caste society the Brahmins could establish their firm hegemony and I use the term hegemony in more than Gramsci's idea. Brahmanical hegemony was accepted largely by all castes; coercion, of course, played a key part in its reproduction, but this was not seen as illegitimate. There was a transition from Brahmanism to Hinduism and in the latter the *jatis* were absorbed and the overall ritual supremacy of the Brahmin was accepted (Doniger, 2011). But the persistence of caste was also due to the autonomy which all castes legitimately asserted and claimed. Subaltern castes displayed an autonomy, which in no way upholds Ranajit Guha's thesis that the consciousness of the oppressed is negative in character. This autonomy is the source of pride and power of the oppressed castes and the resource for resistance and the persistence of caste, for example, *Mahar* or even other subaltern caste pride has been widely recognised (Zelliot, 2001; Chatterjee, 1989). However autonomous castes might be internally, they disciplined their members to accept the common code of their caste. The modern idea of the individual and rights were for a long time absent. But now with the recognition of individual rights and democracy castes have conceptually become voluntary and individuals have the right to exit any caste or religion.

The Constitution of India is essentially liberal, democratic and national. Hence it admits only two kinds of identities – individual and national. It also recognises religious and linguistic minorities, but primarily to protect them from being swamped by the majority. It has no place for caste except as an exception to amend historical wrongs and injustices against dalits and tribes. Given the modernist philosophy of the Constitution and the upper-caste bias of the judiciary, the forces of democracy compelled Parliament to make the First Amendment to ensure reservations or other such action to benefit scheduled castes and tribes or for socially and educationally backward classes of citizens. Mark the clear distinction the Constitution makes between former untouchable castes and other backward classes. It does not use the word caste for the second case and hence it could easily refer to people of all religions. The Constitution also guarantees the right to equality and equal opportunity by denying any discrimination 'on grounds *only* of religion, race, caste, sex' etc (See Art 15(1) and Art 16(1)). Since then there has been a series of acts and amendments to ensure entitlements on the basis of caste only. This is particularly true of the other backward classes, who for the purposes of affirmative action, were defined largely in caste terms. In fact, perhaps inadvertently, many sociologists and scholars use the term OBC to mean other backward castes, whereas the Constitution clearly defines OBC as class and not caste. For example, Nicholas Dirks (2003) writes 'Kaka Kalelkar was asked to head the Backward Classes Commission to investigate the possibility of establishing reservations for Other Backward Castes (or

OBCs).’ Both Ambedkar and N.K. Bose believed that backward classes are identical with backward castes, though the Constitution clearly distinguished the two (Dirks, 2003). Dipankar Gupta (1997) in a recent article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* expands OBC as Other Backward Castes. This is clearly a gross violation of the Constitution ; yet it happily exists and expands. The reason simply is the forced recognition modernity has to make of the real history of castes.

Even Ambedkar’s long struggle to annihilate the caste system and create a democracy based on the liberal idea of the free and equal citizen ended by creating a new and powerful caste of dalits, composed of former untouchable and oppressed castes. Even his rejection of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism could not end the caste system. His struggle in fact fundamentally changed the nature of the caste system by creating the possibility of claiming that all castes are equal and have equal rights and dignity and the right to justice. Though Gandhi’s position on the caste system was diametrically opposed to Ambedkar’s, nonetheless his efforts to bring about reforms and rechristen the untouchables as *harijans* also went a long way in the making of India’s fifth caste. Finally, within each caste, the Constitutional guarantee of the rights to freedom and equality has in a sense transformed caste into a modern civil society (Jodhka, 2015). Not that all this has been actualised, but this is the road opened by the struggle of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Drawing on Srinivas’s observations, Shah (2007) has forcefully argued that the hierarchical caste system is largely dead, yet individual castes survive. From the Brahmanical *chaturvarna*, modernity and democracy has established a new *pancha-varna*, but more of it in my conclusion.

## **CASTE AND THE IMAGINARIES OF THE NATION AND DEMOCRACY**

Though philosophically the nation is opposed to modernity, but in real history in the west, they have compromised and the pasts have been tamed and disciplined into an expressive national essence, which strives to realise itself. However, internally the nation accepts the principles of modernity, namely, the rational, atomic, free and equal individual as the fundamental unit. In moments of crisis, like wars or revolutions, the nation assumes supremacy, but in normal times the liberal individual rules. Elite intellectuals too imagined India to possess a deep unity in the midst of all apparent diversity. This essential unity, it was believed, has flowered over time and finally in 1947 became sovereign. All other identities were considered to be divisive of national unity and integrity and the most commonly identified enemies were caste and community. They were things of the past and had to quietly die a natural death. But as we saw earlier these goals are reason’s will to power and its desire to completely take charge of history and futures. India failed to become a homogeneous nation-state. Fear and anxiety overtook the nation-state in the face of these ‘divisive forces’.

My contention is instead of seeing this as a failure we might recognise the voices of history and come up with a new imaginary of the nation to counter the conceit of reason to impose a homogeneity on society. Instead of looking for a hidden essence and unity, we need to reimagine India as a *union of diversities*, where the union is free, fair and equal. It is a democratic way of imagining and constructing a political community by recognising our pasts and diversities. It is a thing to be achieved and fought for and not the flowering of a pre-existing unity as being the essence of India. Central to the diversities that exist are caste, community, nationality, language and culture and all these should go into the constitution of the nation.

In the modern world states are legitimised by the consent which people give to the rulers to rule on their behalf. Unlike most of the third world, India was successful in retaining a democracy. But it was always feared that democracy would be undermined and abused if its participants do not rationally



deliberate and decide collective issues. Caste and other loyalties were not only divisive, but they put blind loyalty towards one's own caste over rational individual decisions. It would thus create permanent friends and enemies, blind loyalties and propensities for violence to resolve issues. And if this were to continue, either democracy and modernity would succeed and caste would disappear or caste would destroy the working of our democracy. This was the fear expressed by nearly all scholars (Ambedkar, 2002; Panikkar, 2004).

Modernity sought to reconstitute the self out of its belief and will, that only the free and equal individual citizen subject can work the new order. Such utopian projects can succeed temporarily only through massive state violence and disciplining of the population. In fact, the success of democracy in India was largely due to the role that caste played in politics (Kothari, 1970). Parties like the left, which totally ignored caste could not make much headway. Real politics recognised the need to engage with the given reality and caste showed great ingenuity to negotiate this difficult terrain. I would argue that this experiment was both a huge success and a colossal failure at the same time. The success of democracy, the growth of caste egalitarianism and the ascendancy of oppressed castes to power, point to the success of both democracy and the ability of castes to negotiate with it (Jodhka, 2015). Whereas the abysmal condition of the poor and oppressed, most of who belong to the lowest rungs of the caste order, are glowing examples of the failure of any project of justice and more important it points to the absence of any imaginary of justice. This is primarily an intellectual and political failure.

In fact Ambedkar (2002) had warned long ago that without economic and social democracy political democracy would collapse and that is exactly what happened in most of the third world. But India remains an exception. Contrary to the standard Marxist argument that the bourgeoisie does not enjoy hegemony and hence its rule is not based on consent, but largely on coercion, I wish to ask if regular elections is not the most accurate barometer for ascertaining the consent of the people, what else ensures consent? The participation of the people in the democratic process ensures consent and legitimises the state and yet people are deprived of the minimum requirements of justice. I would describe this phenomenon as the political hegemony which the elites and political parties have managed to establish. Since the mid 1960s this political hegemony is being challenged by lower classes and castes with increasing success and now in many states parties representing the people have established their political hegemony, whether it is the left or Mamata Banerjee or Mayawati. Yet all these states vie with others for claiming to offer the best conditions for corporate investment. For the left we have to wait for the revolution and for others the TINA factor operates. To them there is really no alternative to capitalism. This as I said earlier, is an intellectual failure, especially those who claim to speak on behalf of the people. They have failed to recognise the processes of real history, of the economic possibilities, which can emerge from within the people themselves. If the people could so well work a democracy with the help of their caste capital, why could we not imagine a new route to justice and development based on the cultural, intellectual and physical resources of the people?

Marxists in particular believed that caste was part of the feudal order and its continuation would act as a barrier to the growth of capitalism in India. Caste would also hinder their fight for a just social order by creating divisions within the labouring classes.

Most of the deep fears of the elites proved unfounded. Caste came to stay, but so did our democracy and the nation-state, but they were distinctly different from their western counterparts. The transition to capitalism, which was thought to be fraught with difficulties under a democracy, did actually happen. In fact, it is almost unprecedented in human history for a country to undergo capitalist transformation under a liberal democracy.

The project of reason (Bilgrami, 2014) to reorder the world has been the most violent centuries in human history and the modern nation-state has been at the helm of this tragedy and the overwhelming portion of this genocide has been inflicted on its own people. Capitalism and communism have been equal partners in this utopian desire to change the world and in the process kill millions of its own people. Constructing new subjectivities have not only been gruesome; they were successfully resisted by historically constituted cultures and subjectivities. However, the cost of these grand projects has been phenomenal. Rich and diverse cultures, languages, subjectivities and livelihoods have been lost forever. Nature has been ravaged by modern science and technology. For the first time the future of the human race itself is under intense threat.

No claim to truth can legislate a new social order or its subjects into existence or out of it. That does not mean an acceptance of whatever exists or putting an end to utopian thinking. It calls for a democracy of utopias and imaginaries which are at home in real history.

## THE MAGIC METAPHOR IN INDIAN THOUGHT

While discussing the caste or *varna* system, Manu (1991) writes, ‘The priest, the ruler and the commoner are the three twice born classes, but the fourth, the servant, has only one birth, *and there is no fifth*’ (italics added). Yet there is a magic metaphor in our thinking: it is the number five. I suspect it is materially grounded in the fact that we have five fingers and five senses. Each of our fingers and senses are different and distinctive and none can claim to be superior or privileged. They are all equal, but each is different. As far as our senses and fingers are concerned the number five also means the whole set. This makes five a magic metaphor to denote inclusivity, equality, distinctiveness and representativity. In fact, moving from the real to the metaphoric, five means a system of representation, which is inclusive of all the components of a system. This is unlike the modern method of representation based on a majority determined by numbers. Numbers is fine as long as all of them are identical. Of course, modernity seeks to make us all homogeneous subjects and hence representing diversity is no longer an issue. This is a kind of a second order conceit of reason. In the first instance, reason created a world in its image and now believing that it has successfully done its job, it could device a system of representation which assumes all its subjects to be the same.

Sanskrit and most North Indian language dictionaries have a large number of entries prefixed by the word five. The most important word still in use is *panchayat*, but there are many more. In Sanskrit some of them are: *panchakol*, *panchagavya*, *panchaganga*, *panchagupta*, *panchatatva*, *panchatap*, *panchapatra*, *panhabhoot*, *panchamakar*, *panchamangya*, *pancharatna*, *panchavati*, *panchavan*, *panchasuna*, *panchagni*, *panchang*, *panchamrit*, *panchikaran*, *panchupchar*, *pancharatra*, *panchavidham* etc. In Bengali I find words as diverse as *panchabhoot*, ... to *panchphoron* interspersed with idioms like five fingers are never the same, or reach out to five ears etc. Recently I heard a new word *panchavadya* and it was in the news because traditionally the fifth musical instrument in temples was played by the dalits who were prevented from performing. According to Swami Ranganathananda (2009) the *Manisha Panchakam* —a collection of five verses, containing the essence of *Advaita Vedanta* by Shankaracharya, where he argues in favour of treating the untouchables as equals.

The Brahmanical idea of caste-based society was even metaphorically exclusive. In its arrogant desire for purity it admitted only four *varnas* —the *chaturvarna* and excluded the rest as outcastes or untouchables. As Manu (1991) says ‘*and there is no fifth*’. As I pointed out earlier that Ambedkar wanted to destroy the caste system for its gross inequality and injustice, but his struggle ended with creating a new caste, which even got a new name, namely, the dalits. Likewise the Indian Constitution recognised

a new caste described as 'scheduled castes'. He in a sense fundamentally transformed the caste system into what I would call a *panchavarna*. Varna, I would agree was already transformed by the innumerable *jatis*, but for historical and rhetorical reasons I would go for the term *panchavarna*.

India's Constitution and democracy have enabled all castes to claim equality, both formal before the law and substantial, which is still elusive. Can we imagine a utopia where all castes are equal and equally free to live or not live and change their cultures, practices, knowledges and livelihoods and where each individual is free to leave their caste and religion? This is, I believe, what democracy is all about. Not that it has been achieved, but it is the most powerful force of our time and the most important source of legitimacy. Whatever does not conform to democracy and democratic rights have to be fought against and whatever emerges out of these struggles should be seen as the work of the cunning of history. It is this democratic imagination, which could allow us to think of India not as a unity in diversity but as a free, fair and equal union of diversities.

Finally the greatest challenge facing us is the question of justice. In spite of all our success in building a democracy, all this pales into insignificance not only because of the absence of justice, but because of the gross and violent forms of injustices backed by the state and the dominant castes and classes that continue to be practiced. This democracy cannot survive unless we fight for social and economic justice, but that fight cannot be one for the realisation of some grand scientific truth or theory, rather one that is grounded in our history and subjectivities. One crucial meaning of *dharma* is justice, but Brahmanical hegemony has defined it to mean realising it only in our next lives. This idea of *dharma* has to be turned upside down to achieve justice here and now. This is the most vital intellectual and political challenge facing us.

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