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IMPACT ON CASTE IN INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: Markets, Caste, Dalit, Manu, reforms, economic, capitalism, purity, Brahman, social order, affirmative action

In this paper, I study the impact of economic reforms in India, and its impact on the centuries-old caste order. Specifically, I argue that capitalism, like caste, is a social order and therefore uniquely qualified to subvert and destroy the caste system from the inside, as opposed to the State, which is a political order and intervenes in the caste society from the outside. The fourfold caste system in India, as preached by Manu and practised for millennia thereafter, is based on the twin principles of blood purity and occupational purity, whereas Dalits, or the untouchables, are left outside of the caste system. We surveyed the backgrounds of the employees of multinational fast-food outlet in a large mall in eastern Delhi, the capital of India, the housekeeping staff and a few street food joints just outside of the mall. We find that the new capitalist economy, with an emphasis on wealth creation, is disrupting the caste system wherein a large number of the workers at the fast food outlet are upper castes, as in the housekeeping department, effectively destroying occupational purity.

We also surveyed the Dalit section of Barkotha village in Azamgarh district, one of the poorest in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The results show that a number of members of the Dalit community now work in urban centers and that their earnings have considerably lifted the living standards – using traditional markers of economic status – of those in the village. Capitalism, as a social and economic force, has the capacity of finally destroying the caste system in India. I propose more extensive research on this phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been sixty years since India's Independence, fifteen since 1991's balance of payments crisis threatened to collapse India's economy and economic reforms were introduced. This paper shall focus on the impact of these economic reforms on another institution, one which, despite being outlawed sixty years ago, continues to survive, even thrive: one of the most difficult formulations of Indian society, caste order. While there exists a substantial body of scholarship on Indian economic reform, there is barely a letter to the editor, let alone a paper, article or book that examines the impact of economic reform on the caste order. Regardless of one's stance on economic reform, such reform continues, unstoppable, and it is important to note that it pushes the State to vacate critical areas it has long occupied, particularly the sphere of social change in India.

Irrespective of one's stance on economic and social reform, there is consensus that the caste order must go. As economic reforms become a lived reality, we must now engage the question of their impact on caste.

First, we must acquaint ourselves with what 'caste' really is, particularly as a social ordering, a structural device, of Hinduism (as implied by the term "Caste Hindu Order"); this is a largely accepted point of view given that most Hindu scriptures mandate the Caste Order. As a student at Columbia University in New York in the early part of the 20th century, Dr. Bhim Rao 'Babasaheb' Ambedkar, one of India's leading scholars on the caste system, wrote a paper titled

“Castes in India.” A crusader against the caste order and a Dalit himself, Dr. Ambedkar critiqued and rejected all Hindu scriptures, singling out the *Manusmriti*, which he burnt on December 25, 1927, at Mahad, in his native, western state of Maharashtra. Even today, ‘*Manusmriti Dahan Divas*’ (*Manusmriti* Immolation Day) is celebrated by Dalits across India.

Why did Dr. Ambedkar pick this text in particular? The *Manusmriti* may be considered “the constitution” of the caste order: it codifies an already existing hierarchic fourfold caste order and accords it divine sanction. Despite being the least read of all the caste Hindu scriptures (at least among the general public), what is written in *Manusmriti* is practiced extensively in society. Moreover, a number of illustrious public personalities in India have held the *Manusmriti* in reverence. Rabindranath Tagore, who won and later returned the Nobel Prize for Literature, wanted Manu’s codes to be changed to fit into modern times.¹ Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the first vice president and second president of independent India, endorsed Tagore’s viewpoint.² The social reformer and Hindu revivalist Dayanand Saraswati held the view that “the Code of Manu [is] beyond space, time, caste and creed.”³ Swami Vivekananda, another famous spiritual and religious leader at the turn of the 20th century, had a strong penchant for the observance of Manu’s laws⁴

While we are condemning the *Manusmriti* for creating the structural basis of the caste order, we must also examine what the order itself entails. Dr. Ambedkar in his famous

¹ C.M. Das, *Philosophy of Ravindra Tagore* (Deep & Deep Publications), pp 211-12.

² Jaya Mukherjee, *Tagore & Radhakrishnan*, (Janaki Prakshan), pp 107-08.

³ Dr. Ved Prakash, *Philosophy of Dayanand*, ((Indo-Vision Pvt Ltd), pp 239-240.

⁴ R. C. Majumdar, ed. *Swami Vivekanand Centenary Memorial Volume*, pp 253-258.

“Annihilation of Caste”¹ explains the very foundation of caste order: “Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers.*” He explains this statement further:

Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments. Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour – it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers.

Contrasting the inflexible and lineage-based caste system with the adaptability and skill-oriented training valued by industry, Dr. Ambedkar notes the characteristics of the caste order:

This division of labour is not spontaneous, it is not based on natural aptitudes. Social and individual efficiency require us to develop the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose and to make his own career. This principle is violated in the Caste System insofar as it involves an attempt to appoint tasks to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the social status of the parents. Looked at from another point of view this stratification of occupations which is the result of the Caste System is positively pernicious. Industry is never static. It undergoes rapid and abrupt changes. With such changes an individual must be free to change his occupation. Without such freedom to adjust

¹ Dr. BR Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches, Volume I*, Government of Maharashtra

himself to changing circumstances it would be impossible for him to gain his livelihood. Now the Caste System will not allow Hindus to take to occupations where they are wanted if they do not belong to them by heredity. If a Hindu is seen to starve rather than take to new occupations not assigned to his Caste, the reason is to be found in the Caste System. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country.

Even a brief investigation of *Manusmriti* shows how accurate Dr. Ambedkar was in his understanding of the Caste Order.

THE CASTE ORDER

A close reading of the *Manusmriti* yields a deeper understanding of caste order, including its legal, religious, and social implications. It categorizes the members of society into hierarchies and explains their legal duties; it describes the beginning of the universe, the origin of all living beings, and the divine logic underpinning them; and it governs social interactions, including how a guest ought to be treated and how humanity ought to relate to nature. Furthermore, the *Manusmriti* lays the conditions for the growth and endurance of the caste order as system of [Hindu] *dharma*. Let us now examine what those conditions are and the source of their authority.

Of the 2685 verses of the *Manusmriti*¹ that lay down rules for caste order, 130 relate directly to securing 'blood purity' through marriages and sex, while 50 are concerned with 'occupational purity'. There is an equal, if not larger, number of verses indirectly dealing with the twin principles of 'blood and occupational purity'. In fact, one might argue that no other issue is dealt with more meticulously than those of blood and occupational purity. The 50 verses dealing with occupational purity are so laid out in the text that they evolve into the very hub of the text around which all other verses rotate. One needs to read just a few of them to understand this.

The *Manusmriti* begins with the *rishis* (sages) asking Manu: "Deign, divine one, to declare to us precisely and in due order the sacred laws of each of the four [chief castes/*varnas*] and of the intermediate ones."² This opening suggests that the text is intended primarily to elaborate the rights and duties of the four chief *varnas*/caste. What, in fact, are these sacred caste-specific laws?

After explaining the evolution of the universe, Manu states, "But, in order to protect to universe, He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate [duties and] occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet."³ As Manu's monologue continues, the entire law book graduates into a treatise on maintaining the blood and occupational purity of the four *varnas*. As a book of jurisprudence, the text also focuses on the nature of the punishment to be meted out to those who violate the principles of blood and occupational purity, and, in doing this, describes a host of potential violations. It is interesting to note that

¹ George Buhler, trans. *Laws of Manu*, online edition
www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/dharma/manusmriti.asp

² Ibid, Verse 1, Chapter 1

³ Ibid, Verse 87, Chapter 1

Brahmans, being the guardians of the fourfold *varna* system, enjoy numerous immunities after committing crimes. They are invariably charged mildly compared to the other three *varnas*—Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras—for committing crimes of a similar nature or magnitude. There is, however, one notable exception: blood purity. Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas are given similar punishments for violating strictures of blood purity: “A Brahman who approaches unguarded females [of the] Kshatriya or Vaishya, or Shudra female, shall be fined 500 [*panas*]; but [for intercourse with] a female [of the lowest caste], one thousand.”¹ Manu is so focused on maintaining blood purity that he makes no special exceptions for Brahmans: “Twice born men, who in their folly wed wives of the low [Shudra] caste soon degrade their families and their children to the state of Shudra,” he says, with the additional warning that “a Brahman who takes a Shudra wife to his bed, will [after death] sink into hell; if he begets a child by her, he will lose the rank of a Brahman.” Violating norms of blood purity can bring repercussions beyond one’s own lifetime.

Turning his attention to preserving occupational purity, Manu is similarly stringent: “It is better [to discharge] one’s own duty incompletely than completely that of another; for he who lives according to the law of another [caste] is instantly excluded from his own.”²

Manu does accord some flexibility, albeit with a caveat, to members of the higher, “twice-born” castes that are unable to sustain themselves by occupations prescribed for them. On one hand, he describes a demotion in status based on occupation: “By [selling] flesh, salt, and *lac* a

¹ George Buhler, trans. *Laws of Manu*, online edition

www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/dharma/manusmriti.asp

² Ibid, Verse 97, Chapter 10

Brahman at once becomes an outcast; by selling milk he becomes [equal to] a Shudra in three days/ But, by willingly selling in this world other [forbidden] commodities, a Brahman assumes after seven nights the character of a Vaishya.”¹ At the same time, it is upward mobilization that is categorically prohibited: “A Kshatriya who has fallen into distress may subsist by all these [means]; but he must never arrogantly adopt the mode of life [prescribed for his] betters.”² In fact, this is the only place where Manu orders a demotion of the violators’ caste status in their own lifetimes; in the rest of the *Manusmriti*, the punishments prescribed for the higher, “twice-born” castes and, in particular, the Brahmins include demotion in the next birth or degradation of their children’s status, but not their own in this lifetime.

Meanwhile, what if a person of a lower caste—generally a Shudra—departs from Manu’s ordained occupations? The *Manusmriti* explains: “A man of low caste who through covetousness lives by the occupations of a higher one, the king shall deprive of his property and banish [him].”³

As we can see, the *Manusmriti* builds a caste order on the twin principle of blood and occupational purity, and, accordingly, caste hierarchies are nothing but a reflection of occupational hierarchies.

One could argue, quite legitimately, that since the *Manusmriti* was written over 1500 years ago, and since many changes have taken place since then, it is pointless to base one’s argument

¹ George Buhler, trans. *Laws of Manu*, online edition
www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/dharma/manusmriti.asp

² Ibid, Verse 96, Chapter 10

³ Ibid, Verse 96, Chapter 10

on the text itself. But that line of reasoning is facetious, akin to saying that because the *Holy Bible* is a very old book, it has become irrelevant. Certainly, changes have taken place since the *Manusmriti* was composed, but what is the extent of these changes?

If we examine Manu's codes further, the occupations mandated for the top three *varnas*/castes—Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—have a distinct pattern: all of the occupations assigned to them are generally non-manual, non-service, and non-productive in nature. In other words, Brahmans and Kshatriyas are, for example, not expected to use their hands in growing food grains, raising cattle, and trading. A Brahman, in general, should not serve any human being. When he conducts a religious ritual, he serves the gods. When he teaches, he teaches about God. He thus serves only God. He doesn't produce any thing which can be consumed by humans or animals. Neither does the Kshatriya. His duty is to rule and to protect people under his territory. Vaishyas, as the third lowest in the *varna*/caste hierarchy, trade and produce grains and thus are closer to serving humans. Shudras, meanwhile, are supposed to only produce goods for human consumption, manufacture goods, and serve the other three (higher) *varnas*/castes. Within this scheme, since Shudras (today's OBCs) were an essential part of the *varna*/caste order, and hence 'pure,' so to speak, they had some chance of infiltrating into occupations of the top three *varnas*. The top three *varnas*, on the other hand, in times of distress, could climb down from occupations authored for Shudras, but at the cost of losing their social status.

In contrast, the occupations mandated for out-castes (i.e. Dalits) are completely manual in nature and 'impure' by description. Regarding blood purity, the less said, the better: inter-caste

marriages are still exceptional, while honor killing are daily news even today. As *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper of London reported on January 13, 2004: "Not just in Punjab and Haryana, but in western Uttar Pradesh as well, women are being put to death if they 'violate' the honour of their family and community by marrying a person outside her own caste, community or religion." ¹

Even the changes that have occurred since the *Manusmriti* was codified mirror its spirit. For instance, there are fewer Brahman industrialists despite the fact that they have been the most privileged caste. Similarly, there are not very many Kshatriya industrialists despite the fact that they have been traditional rulers. Nor are there large numbers of Vaishyas in the army, police, and academia, although they have been traditionally full of resources. As a matter of fact, the top three *varnas* still do not take up occupations mandated for Shudras and Dalits. Shudras are still largely agriculturalists, while Dalits are not even in the discourse.

Despite any changes society may have undergone, we still need to reflect on the following questions: Before the economic reforms of 1991, did Brahmans sweep floors, clean toilets or sell meat for a living though there might have been be a fair number of Brahmans poorer than those of other castes who were sweeping floors, cleaning toilets and selling meat? Similarly, did Kshatriyas farm the land of a Dalit, wash utensils in houses (even, at least, in a Brahman household), or clean toilets for a living though there might have been many Kshatriyas much poorer than those non-Kshatriyas performing these duties? Did Vaishyas color cow leather, sweep roads, conduct Hindu rituals, or work at cemeteries for a living though there might be

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, January 13, 2004

many Vaishyas much poorer than others in these professions? Did Shudras skin dead cows, repair shoes, or clean drains for living although there might be many Shudras much poorer than others in those occupations?

If the answer is largely no, perhaps it will illuminate how the caste system has endured through many millennia. Notably, while examples of Brahmans taking up occupations below those mandated to them are rare, there are numerous examples of Brahmans in distress begging, stealing, and even taking to prostitution for a living. The same is true for the other three *varnas*/castes. Caste status, moreover, remains salient over other markers of status, for there are also numerous instances of Brahman parents marrying their daughters to a police constable of their own caste but refusing a Dalit who holds a more senior ranking, such as superintendent of police. Again, that is true for the other three *varnas*/castes as well.

Defying blood purity is emancipation, and that is why Dalits continue to take pride in marrying non-Dalits. What this indicates is that if the caste order has to be eliminated, it must start by doing away with the twin principles of occupational and blood purity. In other words, all occupations and individuals must become caste neutral. But why, despite more than fifty years of State activism, has this goal not yet been realized?

[WHY THE STATE COULD NOT ANNIHILATE CASTE](#)

The preamble of a book often sets the agenda of the book. Accordingly, the preamble of the Indian Constitution sets an agenda for the Indian State and Indian society. It begins with the cry

for justice—social, economic, and political justice. The second line talks of liberty—of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. The third line decrees equality—of status and of opportunity. The final line calls for fraternity – assuring the dignity of the individual. In other words, the preamble is drafted in a manner that sees India as a justice-deficient, hierarchically structured caste society. Within this context, it was the State’s mandate to restructure society and to make India caste-free by outlawing untouchability. Despite these efforts, untouchability, as well as the caste order, continues to be practiced. Despite all its modern jurisprudence and executive power, the State could make India neither caste-neutral nor caste-free. But the question remains: did the State fail in its duty of making India caste-free, or have we, the people, actually failed in understanding the institution of the State?

Dr. Ambedkar was very clear on this matter. One of the biggest issues he had with the Congress party and Gandhiji was over caste. The Congress held that political power could tackle caste, whereas Dr. Ambedkar thought that caste would have to disintegrate from within. Through his writings, he pointed out the limitations of legislation or the power of the State in dealing with issues that are essentially social in nature. He argued:

As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society. If social conscience is such that it is prepared to recognize the rights which law chooses to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no Law, no Parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word

What is the use of the fundamental rights to the Negroes in America, to the Jews in Germany, and to the Untouchables in India? As Burke said, there is no method found for punishing the multitude. Law can punish a single solitary recalcitrant criminal. It can never operate against a whole body of people who are determined to defy it. Social conscience — to use the language of Coleridge — that calm incorruptible legislator of the soul without whom all other powers would meet in mere oppugnancy — is the only safeguard of all rights fundamental or non-fundamental..¹

Questioning the importance given to political apparatuses, he argues in the same essay: “The thesis that political reform should precede social reform becomes on the face of it an absurd proposition, unless the idea is that the Government is to protect those who have vested rights and to penalize those who have none.” To further explain his arguments, Dr. Ambedkar appends this near prophetic statement: “A Democratic form of government presupposes a Democratic form of society. The formal framework of Democracy is of no value, and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy. The politicals never realized that democracy was not a form of government. It was essentially a form of Society.” With Dr. Ambedkar’s prophetic observation of castes being “division[s] of labourers” and Manu’s divinely sanctioned law that all *varnas*/castes must observe the twin principles of occupational and blood purity, why did we expect the State to do what was beyond its jurisdiction? Even as a matter of common sense, how can the State as political entity replace the caste order, primarily a social entity? How can an external force like the State enter into the womb of the caste society to destroy it from within?

¹ Ranade, *Gandhi and Jinnah* (Thaker & Co., Ltd. Bombay, 1943).

At best, the State can offer affirmative action policies to ensure that Dalits and Adivasis are proportionally represented in government and private sector jobs and legislature. But how far can the State go? At the best of times, say, in 1990, the total jobs nationally in the public sector stood at less than 20 million, of which Dalits and Adivasis could claim no more than 450,000 jobs. The State can extend similar affirmative action programs in the private sector, which it must do if the private sector doesn't do it on its own. But, again, how far can the State go? Jobs in India's organized sector are less than 10 million, of which Dalits and Adivasis can claim about 250,000. It is important to remember here that the Dalit population alone is 161 million. The State can at best create a tiny Dalit middle class, which is necessary, and thus ought to be fostered by the State. But this neither makes India caste-free nor does it eliminate discrimination. The State with all its might has not been able to prevent discrimination within its own organizations. Most Dalit officers and employees have stories to tell of discrimination during their tenure. Unless caste is made ineffectual, inoperable, and irrelevant in public life, discrimination will continue.

But to return to the fundamental question, is there any other force that can eliminate occupation and blood purity, thereby making caste-neutral? The State could not do it because it was beyond its domain.

How can the State deal with issues of occupational and blood purity? Can the State, for instance, legislate and execute the idea that a certain percentage of Brahmans must take to cleaning toilets and sweeping floors? Can it ensure that a certain percentage of Kshatriyas must marry Dalits? Can it enforce the idea that a certain percentage of Vaishyas must skin dead cows?

Can it legislate and execute the idea that a certain percentage of Shudras must start washing dishes in Dalit homes? Why should we blame a bull for not giving milk even after we fed it with that expectation? How, then, will the caste order – one of the ugliest social institutions this planet has seen – go?

CAN THE MARKET ANNIHILATE CASTE?

Indeed, we maintain that the market has the potential for neutralizing caste in India's public life and finally leading India into a caste-free zone. Unlike the State, but like caste itself, the market is a social entity and, as a result, is capable of replacing caste. Unlike the State, the market operates from within caste society, as an internal force, and hence has the inherent capacity to rip apart the very fabric of the caste order. To most Indians, the market is about economic growth and profit. They are often unaware that the market is also essentially a cultural package which is capable of confronting and dismantling old cultures. The market culture ushers in a new regime of aspirations, a regime that does far more than just redefine the markers of good living.

Under this new market-fostered culture, the individual needs more than the bare necessities he required earlier. Goods that were not needed earlier are now indispensable. Men, women and children in this culture need more than their compelling necessities; thus, the foundations of demand are laid. To match these new aspirations, a person needs to work more or take up professions which he otherwise may not have done. From a self-contented state, man transforms into a being with unending material desires. He is now overwhelmed by the new

culture and gradually turns into an aggressive consumer, where buying becomes a sport. More buying triggers demand, which in turn triggers manufacturing (and supply). This process results in industrialization, and urbanization becomes the first baby the market produces. It is no wonder, then, that more than people, it was capitalism which fought feudalism because it was capitalism which led industrialization. As feudalism met its demise, so did many atrocious social customs and practices.

After World War II, capitalism acquired a new objective: to re-industrialize the already industrialized world. Aggressive consumerism met re-industrialization, producing the service sector as its first offspring. During this entire process, the market creates what I call 'mass distress.' This, in turn, leads to the emancipation of the citizens of the marketplace, most specifically in pluralistic societies; these citizens are then free to transcend their loyalties to groups, ethnicities, and nationalities.

For example, an American consumer's loyalty toward Ford or General Motors can be compromised, if Toyota cars become cheaper and more fuel efficient--why, in this case, should the American consumer suffer from nationalism? In the pre-Wal-Mart [1962], pre-McDonald [1955], pre-satellite TV [1962], and pre-Coca Cola-in-a-can [1955] era, American blacks were not allowed into nightclubs. Post-consumerist capitalism, black customers are served even in strip clubs. The Civil Rights movement did bring great changes, but it could only seek desegregation. But what if white strippers still avoided taking black males for lap dances? Market-anchored distress would leave the dancer with no choice but to earn as much money as she could, even if it meant serving a black male. Thus, market-authored mass distress produces a new society where

citizens betray their old loyalties in favor of money. Making money becomes a mass movement in order to fight the mass distress continually produced by the market. In the process, a new society comes into being, replacing localism and provincial traditions. Given its innate capability for creating mass distress, the market economy is more suited to India than any other society in the world, given that India needs to emancipate itself from the social ghetto of caste.

Civilizationally, a caste society teaches man to live with a minimum of needs; thus, the caste Hindu tries to score a moral point over the materialistic West. When Gandhiji created the slogan, 'Simple Living, High Thinking,' he was actually only further invoking the essence of caste society. In such a society, people could value social capital over material capital. The basic markers of caste status remained non-negotiable and non-purchasable. A Brahman, therefore, despite being poor, could still walk with his head held high as he had his sacred thread around his torso or sandalwood paste on his forehead. A Kshatriya, despite his poverty, could still walk with pride, twirling his upturned moustache, which was the marker of his caste.

By definition, the market economy ought to be doing two things together: one, setting newer, materialistic markers of status and, two, creating mass distress by hyping aspirations. The expected result will be that higher castes will 'betray' Manu by taking up occupations considered impure or lowly and expanding the economy enough to accommodate Dalits in newer occupations. Over a decade and half has passed since India reluctantly embraced the market economy in 1991, but we still don't know whether traditional beneficiaries of caste order are betraying Manu and if Dalits are defying Manu by quitting caste-based occupations that they have been placed into against their will.

BETRAYING MANU

The story of Chhatrapati Shivaji, a legendary Indian king who fought the Mughal Empire, reveals the centrality of caste order. After the Battle of Sinhagad in 1670, Shivaji became the undisputed king of the Maratha Empire. Despite his achievements as an outstanding military leader and strategist, he had to rise in the caste hierarchy to become a Kshatriya, something that was not possible unless a Brahman ritualized his Kshatriya status. A poor, rather insignificant Brahman named Pandit Ganga Bhatt was brought in from Kashi to declare that Shivaji's ancestors were Kshatriyas. After being thus ritually anointed as a Kshatriya, Shivaji was crowned in 1674 as a Chhatrapati – King of Kings.

In contrast to this upward “promotion” in caste status, an opposite trend is seen in India today. Earlier this year, the state of Rajasthan witnessed a massive Gujjar (a Shudra caste that is low in the hierarchy) uprising asking to be listed as Adivasi (indigenous tribal) status in order to be eligible for affirmative action programs. The UK-based daily newspaper *The Guardian* headlined its May 30 story “Caste demands demotion to win state jobs.”¹ Similarly, a June 1 article in the *International Herald Tribune* entitled “Fighting their way to the bottom in India,” commented: “A fight for the right to be downwardly mobile exploded this week in north India, as a powerful community of Indian shepherds asserted that the best way to rise up in modern society was to take a step down in the regimented class hierarchy.”²

¹ *The Guardian*, May 30, 2007

² *International Herald Tribune*, June 1, 2007

The Brahmans have always viewed reservations in jobs and educational institutions with contempt. But all of a sudden, even the Brahmans of Rajasthan are demanding reservations. “Brahmins in Rajasthan have nothing – no jobs, no land and no means of survival. We are not doing well economically,” Bhanwarlal Sharma, President of the Rajasthan Brahmin Mahasabha, was quoted as saying in *The Hindustan Times*.¹ At least 14 Other Backward Classes (OBC) castes are demanding Dalit status in Uttar Pradesh. Jats in Rajasthan successfully demoted their own rank when they got onto the OBC list in 1999. “There has been a 90 percent increase in the number of centrally notified OBCs from 1,257 castes in 1993 to 2,297 in 2006,” found a May 25 report in *The Times of India*.² Additionally, several hundred castes are approaching The National Commission for Scheduled Castes to be included in the Dalit (Scheduled Caste) list. This new phenomenon of seeking demotion in the caste hierarchy was unheard of in earlier Indian history.

Why has this spectacular process of seeking self-demotion begun, and why has it begun now and not, say, before 1991?

It does not require any distinctive genius to explain why castes are seeking the demotion of their status in the caste order. Once listed in the OBC or Dalit category, members of that caste group are entitled to affirmative action jobs under the State, thus increasing their chances of getting jobs. Post-1991, India has come to be known for its globalization-regulated economic reforms. Can we then argue that it is the forces of the market that are compelling caste members

¹ *The Hindustan Times*, June 26, 2007

² *The Times of India*, May 25, 2006

to seek demotion of their rank in the caste hierarchy? If this is true, if the situation does illustrate market-driven mass distress, then there should be similar signs of demotion in occupational hierarchy as well. To find out if that is happening, we decided to conduct field research in two places in Anand Vihar, one of Delhi's urban suburbs.

BETRAYING MANU IN A DELHI MALL

There are two questions to which we sought answers: (1) Is the logic of the market turning the traditional beneficiaries of Manu into his betrayers? (2) Are they seeking occupational demotion in order to adjust to the call of the market? For the purposes of this paper, we settled on a mall in an eastern suburb of Delhi; officially, the suburb is in the state of Uttar Pradesh but is generally considered a satellite town of the national capital. The mall serves middle and lower-middle class neighborhoods of East Delhi and employs a number of janitors who clean toilets and sweep the floors. The mall also houses several restaurants, including a multinational fast-food franchise outlet.

We submitted identical questionnaires to the managers of both the mall and the fast food outlet in August 2007.¹ While the mall initially refused to entertain our request, we finally obtained the following information.

¹ Questionnaire submitted to manager of mall: See Appendix I

TABLE – I: HOUSEKEEPING EMPLOYEES AT THE MALL

Total number of workers cleaning toilets/floors	40
Number of workers with cleaning/sweeping as family occupation	12
Number of migrant workers (from Nepal)	6
Number of workers from rural India	>20
Number of workers with cell phones	Most

Eliminating the 12 workers with cleaning/sweeping as a family occupation, and the six migrant workers from Nepal, we see that 55 percent (22 workers) are non-Dalits, including Brahmans, who have betrayed Manu. In order to get some perspective, we also conducted a short survey of the caste backgrounds of the sweepers and garbage removers who cleaned the streets outside the mall. We found that not only were they all Dalits (Valmikis), but also that they were paid more than the janitors in the mall – over Rs 100 a day, with 4 to 6 hours of work a day, as against Rs. 3,500- 4,000 a month at the mall, while working 12 hours a day.

Our second survey questionnaire was handed to the manager of the fast food outlet that was located within the mall.¹ The results were as follows:

¹ Questionnaire submitted to manager of fast food outlet inside the mall: See Appendix II

TABLE – II: EMPLOYEE DETAILS AT FAST FOOD OUTLET

Total number of employees	60
Employees with English as a medium of instruction in school	40
Employees with cell phones	60
Employees with cars at home	48
Employees whose parents work(ed) in a food establishment	0
Employees with own transportation	Most
Employees younger than 30	Most
Fulltime employee turnover	Very low

From the above data, it is safe to conclude that all the 40 workers with English as a medium of instruction in school are upper castes, including Brahmins, who are now betraying Manu; in other words none of them are Dalits. The fast food outlet has introduced a new culture where students take up work to support their personal expenses. Earlier, barring giving private tuitions, students coming from upper caste/middle class background in India would never take up part-time work in restaurants. Before 1991, candidates with English-medium schooling would despise working in restaurants and would much rather look for a career with the government. During our conversation with the manager and staff, we also found that all the employees, including managers, are trained in all kinds of work – from cooking to billing to serving, and even sweeping floors. In fact, anyone would sweep the floor, as and when required.

OUTSIDE THE MALL

Along the street that runs past the mall there are plenty of makeshift shops selling food and *paan* (betel leaves to chew), cigarettes, etc. Their primary clientele comprises hand rickshaw pullers, auto-rickshaw/taxi drivers, and day laborers. We spoke to three shop owners selling eatables. Two of them were lower castes (Shudras), and one was a Muslim, all of them with little or no education. Of the two *paan* shop owners, one was of a lower caste, and the other was likely an upper caste, possibly a Brahman. They all might be earning approximately the same amount of money as most employees at the fast food outlet. We interviewed all the shop owners whether, if offered, they would exchange jobs with the employees of the fast food place; all answered in the affirmative. We spoke to few of the fast food outlet's employees whether, if offered, they would like to exchange jobs with shop owners outside the mall; they all said no. I think it is safe to conclude that the fast food outlet represents a new phenomenon, a new culture, part of a new economy whereas the shops outside the mall are traditional.

DEFYING MANU IN BARKOTHA VILLAGE

Is the logic of the market empowering Dalits to defy Manu, too? Prima facie, it is at least likely. However, it also appears that, in some respects, the market is making Manu even stronger. In 1995, India's Union Public Service Commission advertised 645 vacancies in the national Civil Services. The figure fell to 453 by 2004. The 29.76 percent fall means that job opportunities under the State are shrinking. The UPSC is just one example. Since jobs under the

State have been the most fundamental tool of Dalits empowerment, they are hit the hardest because the market is seeking the privatization of public enterprises as well as the downsizing of the workforce in the public sectors. With the shrinking job opportunities, the Dalit middle class, too, is shrinking. This, of course, fits into Manu's original scheme very well. Keeping the Dalits' continued oppression in mind, the private sector should have embraced affirmative action for Dalits as they insisted on the market in leading India's public life. But what is happening to the Dalit masses, who have little access to education and remain tied to the world the *Manusmriti* dictated?

To see for ourselves how Dalits were doing, we decided to visit *Barkotha*, a village situated some 300 kilometers (about 186 miles) east of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. In the district of Azamgarh, a backward district in the state, Barkotha is located some 20 km (about 12.4 miles) north of the district headquarter town Azamgarh. Despite a co-educational graduate level college half a kilometer away, an undergraduate college for women, and a co-educational Intermediate College for women, Barkotha has remained a backward, predominantly Dalit village. We designed a survey questionnaire for the residents of the village and got the following results.

TABLE – III: Demographic Changes

	1990	July 2007
Total number of Dalit families/family members	44	79
Independent cultivators/farmers	6	6
Landless agricultural laborers	15	0
Share croppers	00	08
Government jobs	07	06
Migrated to urban centers as industrial workers	12	70
Worked locally as artisan business persons	01	08

TABLE – IV: Economic Changes in the Village

	1990	2007
<i>Pucca</i> (brick and mortar) houses	04	58 (incl. 21 built by the government)
Families with TV sets	00	26
Families with electric fans	00	65
Families with phones	00	19
Families with pressure cookers	01	45
Families with cooking gas connections	00	02
Families with motorcycles/scooters	00	04

Number of grocery stores in the village	00	01
Villagers using packaged salt/branded tea/branded soap/shampoo	Few	Almost all
People eating broken-grain rice	50%	None

Based on the findings, it is fairly obvious that what must have been a dream until about 17 years ago is now a lived reality in almost half the village — be it using shampoo, living in *pucca* houses (made of brick and cement, as opposed to mud), owning a TV, or even cooking food using gas.

Despite four decades – 1950 through 1990 – of State-led welfare programs, over one third, or 34.09 percent, of Dalit families in the village worked as landless agricultural laborers to sustain themselves. The landless agricultural laborers are one of the most exploited and humiliated population groups in India, and most of them are either Dalit/Adivasis or lower OBCs. By July 2007, not a single Dalit in the village Barkotha worked as a landless agricultural laborer. What happened in that period? There are a few possibilities.

Due to the large-scale expansion of the economy, a whopping 70 Dalits belonging to 68 Dalit families of the village migrated to urban centers to work in factories or via the indirect opportunities created around factories. That's roughly one person from each family. Also, because of the migration of workers, agriculture is facing a labor shortage and a resultant upward wage pressure. The landlords, therefore, are now giving land on a sharecropping basis. Sharecropping came into fashion in the 1980s in eastern Uttar Pradesh, but Dalits were the least

likely to become sharecroppers as they lacked agricultural tools and capital. Now, due to remittances from migrant workers, the other members of the family are becoming sharecroppers. Eight Dalit families in the village Barkotha have thus turned into sharecroppers. Because of the gradual but slow expansion of the service sector in the countryside, at least six Dalit families are now in newer occupations, including small businesses. Because of remittances from migrant workers, poverty is ending, and the lifestyle is changing. No one eats broken rice, once a staple, anymore, and most Dalit houses are pleasantly unrecognizable from their 1990 condition. In other words, Dalits in Barkotha village now have access to symbols of rural affluence.

But is all this happening on a mass scale? The Census of India gives some hints. According to the Indian Census report of 1971, of the total Dalit workforce, 82.43 percent were in the primary sector (agriculture). By 1991, 77 percent of all Dalit workers remained in the primary sector. In other words, during those two decades, 5.43 percent of those Dalits moved away from repressive primary sector to the two other sectors of economy.

But during 1991 through 2001, a whopping 11.4 percent – almost twice that of the total over two decades, but in half the time – of agriculture-employed Dalits were emancipated from the repressive primary sector. During the period of economic reforms, the countryside has undergone a major upheaval hitherto unseen in the known history of India.

THE MARKET AND CASTE-NEUTRAL TOOLS

For argument's sake, we can ask why the market-driven mass distress is not attracting non-Dalits to clean streets outside the mall, and why workers at the fast food outlet are not prepared to exchange jobs with shopkeepers outside the mall.

The answer can be as simple as the question is. As argued earlier, the market is more a new culture than anything else; it comes with its own set of tools, which are often caste-neutral. Compare the brooms the street sweepers or traditional sweepers use with the ones deployed in the mall. The sweeper or toilet cleaner in the mall becomes a 'housekeeper' or 'janitor' for a host of reasons. The broom s/he uses is a near-machine, distinct and different from the traditional broom; additionally, these workers use gloves, wear a full uniform, complete with trousers, shirt, cap and shoes. Along with a new tool which neutralizes caste, the sweeper turns into a housekeeper, looking more like a paramedic than a traditional sweeper. In one stroke, the market has liberated the broom from its caste identity, and the occupation has become caste-neutral.

Similarly, the workers at the fast food franchise do not cook food on a traditional stove. When they cook, they deal with machines, as the cooking range is distinct and different from that the traditional kitchen. They, too, are in uniform, and they, too, use semi-machines to clean the floor of the restaurant. They don't serve customers, for the simple reason that customers in there are referred to as 'guests.' In addition to all that, the mall provides an ambience akin to Europe or America, unknown to the caste order. There are a number of other caste neutral

occupations which the market has introduced, and many more caste-based occupations are being liberated from their caste identities. The new market culture is accomplishing twin tasks together – it is creating mass distress where making money is becoming a mass movement, and creating caste neutral tools which are being taken up even by Brahmans.

MARKET AND INEQUALITY

The Census of India 2001 and the Barkotha findings clearly show a shift of Dalits away from the oppressive primary agricultural sector to other, relatively socially liberal sectors. Barkotha also shows a dramatic rise in the relative affluence of Dalit homes, and also the entry of Dalits into caste-neutral occupations. What the State could not deliver to the Dalits of Barkotha in four long decades, the market has delivered them that in less than two (1991-2007) decades.

But the question of equality remains a critical issue. Even going by Barkotha's example, Dalits are not turning into large entrepreneurs. This IS A question proponents of the market have to address. If the market economy of the US can share affluence with a class of blacks through supplier/dealer/workforce diversity programs, why can't India's market economy replicate the American model? The other aspect of equality, more a delusion than any real dream, of making every one equal in all respects, deserves critical attention.

If, in a market economy, India's Tata Group were to add a billion dollars to their profit every day, what would it mean to a Tata family member in his or her daily life? What difference would it make? Will that person eat more, dress more, or buy more cars and more houses? In the case

of the Barkotha Dalits, even one extra dollar a day might lift a family out of the jaws of abject poverty. They could start eating three meals a day and could buy new clothes. They could buy a bicycle, a TV set, or a phone, and start sending their children to school. In less than a year, all of them might even start building *pucca* houses. While our survey shows that Barkotha Dalits remain unequal to the Tatas, perhaps even more unequal than they were before 1991, But almost all of those 79 Dalit families have come out from the hell that is poverty.

CONCLUSION

Due to market-regulated privatization, disinvestment, and downsizing of the workforce under the State; the Dalit middle class is becoming smaller. There is, therefore, a compelling need to expand diversity practices and programs in the private sector as well. Due to the mass distress being created by the market, non-Dalits, including Brahmans, are betraying Manu as mandated markers of status are undergoing radical changes. Due to the massive economic expansion inevitable under a functioning market-based system, poverty is receding from Dalit homes, and Dalits at the grassroots level are entering into socially respectable occupations. This is a change unprecedented in scale and never even seen in India before. In short, a market-governed India is moving from caste-based to a class-based society.

Our conclusion is based on the village Barkotha, Census 2001, and the Delhi mall. We therefore need to undertake a large occupation census in the countryside and many malls, an exercise so far unknown in academe, the results of which will certainly be groundbreaking and far-reaching.

APPENDIX-I

Questionnaire submitted to manager of mall:

1. What is the total number of workers engaged in cleaning/sweeping floors?
2. What are their last names (surnames)?
3. What are their educational qualifications?
4. What are their ages?
5. How many of them have cleaning toilets/sweeping as family occupations?
6. How many of them are from the countryside/rural areas?
7. How many of them come from traditional priestly (Brahman) families?
8. How many of them have cell phones?
9. How of them come to work on motorcycles?
10. How many of them have worked there for a year or more?

APPENDIX-II

Questionnaire submitted to manager of fast food outlet inside the mall:

1. What is the total number of staff members?
2. What are their surnames?
3. What are their educational qualifications?
4. What was the medium (language of instruction) of their schooling?
6. What are their ages?
7. What are their genders?
6. Do any of them have parents that worked in restaurants?
7. Do their parents own a car?
8. How many of them have cell phones?
9. How many of them come to work on motorcycles?
10. How many of them have worked there for a year or more?