



## **Hinduism, Critics of Hinduism and Revival of Hinduism in India's Body Politic: An Exploratory Examination**

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**Received:** 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2022

**Accepted:** 25<sup>th</sup> March 2022

**Published:** 10<sup>th</sup> April 2022

### **ABSTRACT**

Though nominally a secular state, under BJP rule, Hinduism in India has seen a greater prominence in politics and society than at any time in the post-independence era. As such, it is worthwhile examining how, in certain core aspects, Hinduism may affect the key variables of economic and social development. This is a neglected area that has largely been ignored by international institutions, especially by UN agencies and the World Bank. This exploratory paper provides some historical context and focuses particularly on the impact of caste on India's body politic and development. It examines the arguments of those that suggest that Hinduism may have positive effects and those that suggest otherwise. It concludes by arguing that negative effects far outweigh any putative benefits.

**Keywords:** Hinduism, India, caste, development, gender inequality

## INTRODUCTION

### The Relationship Between Caste and Development

The present dominance of the avowedly Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India has brought the issue of Hinduism in its various facets to the fore. India is proclaimed as a secular state with secular laws but, under BJP rule, with its ambition of making India a Hindu nation, Hinduism has seen a greater prominence in politics and society than at any time in the post-independence era. Accordingly, this is an opportune moment to examine how, in certain core aspects, Hinduism may affect the key variables of economic and social development. This is a neglected area that has largely been ignored by international institutions, especially by UN agencies and the World Bank. This exploratory paper provides some historical context and focuses particularly on the impact of caste on development.

Central to Hinduism is the *karma-samsara-moksha* doctrine whereby all beings are reincarnated into the world (*samsara*) repeatedly; one's present life is the result of past actions or deeds (*karma*) and present actions determine future lives; this process of endless rebirth is characterised by suffering (*dukkha*); and liberation or salvation (*moksha*) from this suffering is achieved through minimising action and gaining spiritual knowledge (Warrier, 2007, p. 139). The self is peripatetic, part of the infinite universe, and can take any form or shape in search of *moksha*.

In Hinduism's doctrine of Creation, humans belong to a hierarchy of four (*chatur*) main castes (*varnas*) which are occupational and social categories. Their manifestation and importance has left an indelible mark and still resonates with great force in modern India. The highest caste is the *Brahmin* which emerged from the mouth of the creator – this is the priestly caste with the authority to learn and teach the *Vedas* and to look after the spiritual needs of society. Next is the *Kshatriya*, which emerged from the hands of the creator – this is the warrior caste that traditionally held the reins of secular power with the duty to protect the people from external aggression and to maintain internal order. The third caste is the *Vaishya* that stems from the thighs of the creator; this is the mercantile caste involved in wealth creation, that is, trade, commerce and farming. Finally, there is the *Shudra* caste which stems from the feet of the creator whose duty is to serve the other castes and is not permitted to accumulate wealth (Oommen, 1992, p. 69; Narayanan, 2003, p. 189).

Interestingly, the *chatuvarna* scheme does not categorise the ‘Untouchables’ who comprise up to 15 per cent of the Hindu population. Why this is so is not entirely clear. Oommen, for example, argues that they were not considered part of the Aryan Hindus, that is, the migrants who established their hegemony over India, or because they were stigmatised Hindus who fell from grace as they indulged in what was deemed deviant behaviour. Another plausible reason given is that they were completely ignored by doctrine because of their insignificance. Also not taken into account are the tribes (animists or ‘backward Hindus’) who consider themselves the original inhabitants of India (*adivasis*) and comprise 5 to 10 per cent of the population. Oommen points to the utter marginalisation of the Untouchables and tribes, who comprise between 20-25 percent of the “Hindu” population, as they are not accounted for in the doctrine of creation (Oommen, *op. cit.*, p. 69).

The key elements of the caste system can be summarised as the concepts of purity and pollution. Accordingly, interpersonal relationships among individuals are dictated in terms of blood, food and occupation; and by rituals related to them being divided into pure and impure. It is obligatory for each Hindu to confine his/her relationship and interaction within the restricted circle called *jati* so as to maintain purity in marriage and relationships, in exchanges of food, and in the pursuit of occupations (Shah, 2004, p. 6). It is reasonable to think that these elements – especially the restrictions on members of each *jati* which have a segregationist quality to them – indubitably affect the variables of social and economic development.

A case, however, can be made that Hinduism does not act as an obstacle to economic development and indeed certain scriptures are conducive to it. For example, the following statement in the *Gita* emphasises the importance of work activity:

To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruit; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be any attachment to inaction... Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment (cited in Uppal, 1986, p. 25).

Whether an injunction to ‘perform work that has to be done’ necessarily amounts to productive work is debatable but certainly this is *prima facie* a ruling against indolence. As will be discussed below, the centrality of *Karma* is thought of as being key to the argument that Hinduism is incompatible with economic advancement and modernity. However, it can also be viewed as a strong incentive to activity because the efforts in this life are a direct determinant of one’s future life. Moreover, the *Kama* (note that this is different to *Karma*)

‘urges the fulfilment of common desires of the body (food, drink, and sex) through means achieved from *Artha* [which guides the acquisition and use of material means for sustaining life]. If the desires of the body are unlimited, the *Kama* could promote greater pursuit of material means and higher consumption; the two cornerstones of economic activity’; furthermore, the *Panchatantra* attributes evils to lack of money; hence encouraging effort to make money (*ibid.* pp. 29, 26).

India’s founding father, M.K. Gandhi, a devout Hindu, was supportive of the caste system and made this clear in several statements. For example, in 1921, Gandhi defended the hereditary nature of caste and argued that without the caste system, chaos would ensue: ‘to destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder’ (cited in Roy, 2014, p. 25). The consequences of caste on India’s development and efficiency were of little concern to Gandhi – indeed A.K Saran (1963, p. 90) argues that the Gandhian economy was closed and primitive and that Gandhi was hostile to India’s industrialisation.

Whereas Gandhi’s is an ideological and religious defence, the economist Deepak Lal in *The Hindu Equilibrium* provides a strictly economic rationale for the caste system – which is not to say he supports it. Lal makes the interesting point that the basis of the caste system as it evolved was not so much the four major castes but the interrelationships and adjustments of numerous sub-castes (*jatis*) which were based on occupational specialisation but, importantly, mobility was possible and did occur within the inter-or-intra-caste hierarchy. Whole castes were able to move up the social hierarchy by adopting a different occupation or moving to a different region. This had the beneficial impact on the wider economy by allowing the supply of labour in different occupations to change as demand, technology, and resources altered.

This applied also to the Brahmins as recognised by the *Smriti* which ‘carefully define what a man may legitimately do when he cannot earn a living by the calling normally followed by his class, and by these provisions, Brahmins might pursue all manner of trades and professions’ (Lal, 1988, pp. 24, 25). Be that as it may, the caste system became ferociously rigid; as Lal (*loc. cit.*) acknowledges that by the end of the sixth century CE, caste had triumphed over tribe and sect so became the primary identity and status of Hindus giving rise to a social structure that survives to the present day.

Lal surmises that the caste system was created to deal with the particular economic problems of settled agriculture in north India and was adopted primarily for its ideological usefulness in establishing and maintaining a peasant society and polity in South India. He claims that it was probably a second-best optimal response to the problems faced by the ancient Indians concerning i) endemic political instability, ii) obtaining a secure labour supply for labour-intensive settled agriculture in the Indo-Gangetic plains, and iii) the uncertainty concerning the outputs and inputs of their major form of economic activity – tropical agriculture – arising from the vagaries of the monsoon (Suleman, Mehmood, Iqbal & Ashraf, 2021). Lal argues that ‘the socio-economic system established by the ancient Hindus provided them with a standard of living which, though low by modern standards, remained relatively high by the standards of bygone years, for many centuries’; and, therefore, claims that until recently, the mass of Hindus had little incentive to alter a system which in this historical perspective has more than proved its worth. ‘It is this *relative economic success of the caste system for 2,000 years of Indian history which is extraordinary and requires explanation* [Lal’s emphasis], rather than its possible contribution to the relative decline in the subcontinent’s standard of living because of the possible impediments it may have put in the way of the adoption of modern technology and ideas in the past 400 years’ (*ibid.*, pp. 69, 72, 3, 73)

These are most contentious claims and Lal does not provide much evidence for them. It is true that according to data compiled by Angus Maddison, India’s GDP per capita was in line with the world average up till the year 1700 (\$550 in comparison with the world average of \$616). However, by 1,500 CE, it lagged significantly behind Western Europe: \$550 versus \$771, and by 1,700 CE the gap had increased further: \$550 to \$997 (Maddison, 2007, table A.7, p. 382). So, this throws some doubt on the thesis that the caste system had ‘more than proved its worth’.

A better understanding for the endurance of the caste system lies in the ability of the Brahmins to control the lower castes with the aid of the *karma-samsara-moksha* doctrine. But on what grounds were the ‘cast-less’ Untouchables deemed to be content with a system that relegated them to a de facto sub-human status? Lal does not consider this – indeed he largely ignores the case of the Untouchables altogether. Any rational explanation – one rooted in the material circumstances of the people – must conclude that the Untouchables were likely to have been far from content with their lot; indeed, would have desired significant change in their conditions. If this were the case, why they did not manage to rise up and throw off the yoke of their degradation? This is certainly a puzzling phenomenon, but any credible explanation must

be rooted in the naked control and repression they were subjected to. And it is precisely this severe factionalism within Hinduism that made India easy prey for the conquering Muslims and later the British. Furthermore, the ossified divisions within Hinduism subsequently made the work of the new rulers so much easier as it facilitated ‘divide and rule’ politics.

An oft-made observation made about religious texts is that they are invariably contradictory and so can be used to support any manner of assertions, and this applies no less to Hindu scriptures. There is an argument that not only is Hinduism devoid of the Protestant ethic’s spirit of capitalism, but it is also crucial in *retarding* economic development. A most forceful proponent of this view is William Kapp who provides three major reasons as to why this is the case. First, the notions of *cyclical time and cosmic causation*: these increase the feeling of helplessness and hence diminution in the power of human beings to control nature. Thus, rather than stress on social action to ameliorate or remove adverse conditions, emphasis is laid on endurance, contentment, submission and withdrawal (Kapp, 1963, pp. 41-43).

Second, the ideal of *desireless action and low level of aspiration*. This is self-explanatory in that it acts as a disincentive to improvements and entrepreneurship. The third reason Kapp provides is *caste, social segmentation and the ‘faction society’*. In narrow economic terms, caste strongly interferes with the workings of the labour market. ‘By organizing society into closed economically non-competitive groups, caste frustrates the creative powers and lowers the aspirations of large numbers of people, thereby causing a serious waste of individual capacities and labour resources. Caste puts a premium on traditional occupations by preventing the development of personal initiative; it works against the emergence of a relationship between individual aptitude, performance and earnings ... caste much more than its Western counterpart – racial discrimination and segregation – has always been an important obstacle to socio-economic change ...’ (*ibid.*, pp. 46-47).

Hindu culture is group oriented so that allegiance to the joint family trumps that of an individualistic personality which, owing to its rigid, conformist, and hierarchical structure, further helps to cement the status quo. However, Oommen (*op. cit.*, p. 73) offers a counter view to the effect that the joint family can promote development by the sharing of a common building for residence – hence avoiding unproductive expenditure, by raising and pooling capital, and providing social security for the old, infirm, and unemployed – which supposedly allows for the state to divert resources for development. To what extent these familial attributes actually do aid in development is highly debatable and without extensive data, the

*prima facie* fact remains that they have not been conducive to development and, moreover, in those countries and societies which have developed and modernised, the joint family has withered away.

Max Weber undertook major studies of religion in India and China as a means of understanding why the spirit of capitalism did not originate in these countries. In his *Religion of India*, he robustly provides the following reasoning:

In modern times it has not always been easy but eventually it has been possible to employ Indian caste labour in modern factories. And even earlier it was possible to exploit the labour of Indian artisans capitalistically in the forms usual elsewhere in colonial areas, after the finished mechanism of modern capitalism once could be imported from Europe. *Even if all this has come about, it must still be considered extremely unlikely that the modern organization of industrial capitalism would ever have originated on the basis of the caste system* (emphasis added). A ritual law in which every change of occupation, every change in work technique, may result in ritual degradation is certainly not capable of giving birth to economic and technical revolutions from within itself, or even of facilitating the first germination of capitalism in its midst (Weber, 1958 [1916], p. 112).

Weber was right to be concerned about the severe deleterious impact that the caste system has on the creative and productive aspects of society; a point that has been repeatedly made by Indian critics of Hinduism and the caste system.

Undoubtedly the most influential critic of Hinduism is B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was born an 'Untouchable' and converted to Buddhism. He provides a penetrating evisceration of the caste system on which he strongly opposed India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi. In his 1936 essay *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar highlights not only the iniquities but also the economic inefficiencies of caste. He takes issue with the defence of the caste system being another name for division of labour so if division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society, it is argued that there is nothing wrong with it. But Ambedkar provides a cogent rebuttal by asserting that the caste system is not merely a division of labour but is also *a division of labourers*. While civilised society requires division of labour, in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. The caste system is hierarchical whereby division of labour is accompanied by the gradation of labourers and not based on aptitudes.

Furthermore, for Ambedkar, the caste system is inherently inefficient in that social and individual efficiency require individuals to develop their capacities to the point of competency so as to choose their careers on the basis of individual sentiments and preferences. The caste system violates this fundamental principle resulting in the stratification of occupations, that is, it does not allow Hindus to take to occupations where they are wanted, if they do not belong to them by heredity. Ambedkar provides a striking example: ‘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’. The impermissibility of readjustment of occupations, or rigid inflexibility in the labour market, is a direct cause of much unemployment. The division of labour is based on the dogma of predestination.

Moreover, given that many occupations in India are regarded as degraded by the Hindus, they provoke those who are engaged in them to aversion. Ambedkar describes this ‘as a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations, which arises solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon those who follow them, owing to the slight and stigma cast upon them by the Hindu religion’. He asks: ‘What efficiency can there be in a system under which neither men's hearts nor their minds are in their work’? – and concludes by arguing that in economic terms, caste is a harmful institution, given that it is predicated on ‘the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules’ (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 233-236).

Alongside Ambedkar, another uncompromising opponent of Gandhi on the question of Hinduism and caste was the Tamil E.V. Ramaswami Naicker-Periyar (or Periyar for short) (1879-1973). In line with other critics of Hinduism, Periyar's animus was against Brahminism but, most unusually for an Indian of his time, he opposed *all* religion arguing that it is the main impediment to social and political progress and is used by Brahmins to dominate others (Diehl, 1977, p. 37). He denounced Hinduism relentlessly and mercilessly: ‘Hinduism is not a religion. It is founded by a small group for their own power interest and built on the ignorance, illiteracy, and exploiting (*sic*) of the people’ (cited in *ibid.*, p. 41). Hence, Periyar called for the total eradication of Hinduism, a point of view he made clear to Gandhi. The latter demurred on the grounds that Hinduism is not fixed in doctrines so can be changed and that the humanisation of society and social change can occur within its structures. But, unsurprisingly, Periyar had no truck with this view which he thought would cement continued Brahmin leadership (*ibid.*, p. 87).



Periyar founded the Self-Respect Movement with the aim of bringing about social revolution; a revolution that would eradicate religion and replace it with rationalism. His reasoning was forthright: religion implies superstition and fear; it prevents progress, suppresses man, exploits the suppressed classes, and makes men lazy as well as cowards. By contrast rationalism and atheism liberate man: ‘rationalism through education will conquer superstition and ignorance and improve justice and morality in society (*ibid.*, p. 55, 56). Also unusual was Periyar’s advocacy of women’s rights and for the equality of men and women; accordingly, he opposed Hinduism’s dowry system which puts a burden on the bride’s family (*ibid.*, pp. 65-68).

Though Periyar does not provide an in-depth programme of social and economic reform, his belief that overcoming of superstition and ignorance is a *sine qua non* for social and economic advancement and the eradication of poverty has much merit as it accords with the necessity of a rational outlook for modernity as stressed by Weber.

### **The Impact of The Caste System on Modern India**

Despite tough legislation against discrimination on the grounds of caste, its pernicious influence on Indian society – as highlighted by the likes of Ambedkar and Periyar – remains to the present day. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen in *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions* point out that caste ‘continues to be an instrument of power in Indian society even where the caste system has lost some of its earlier barbarity and brutality’ and highlight the fact of the dominance of the upper castes (and absence of Dalits, Adivasis and other disadvantaged communities) in media houses, corporate boards, judicial institutions, and even in cricket, the most popular sport (Drèze and Sen, 2014, pp. 219, 222).

In a household survey of 29,000 households in India, Vani Borooah finds that at least one-third of the average income between Hindu and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST)<sup>i</sup> households was due to discrimination, that is, in India, inequality and poverty are not doled out fairly. Indeed, the treatment of SC/ST persons by Hindus explicitly assumes that they are inferior to “caste” Hindus. The consequences are profound for SC/ST families: in villages, they may be denied access to Hindu wells; in village schools, their children are often made to sit away from caste Hindu children and are routinely referred to as *bhangis* (persons who clean toilets); their women are frequently humiliated and violated and their houses are located in the low-lying (and, therefore, most liable to flooding) parts of villages. Consequently, SC/ST persons, compared to Hindus, are more likely to be ill, less likely to be adequately educated, more likely to cultivate marginal land and more likely to live in a climate of fear

and oppression. Barooah concludes that the quality and quantity of their economic, educational, and psychosocial endowments are likely to be considerably inferior to that of Hindus (Barooah, 2005, pp. 411-412).

In a market economy, the caste system induces a segmentation of the markets caused by factor immobility as people are prevented from moving to occupations based on individual choice, skills, and preferences. Accordingly, there is extreme rigidity in the labour market whereby labour and capital do not move from one occupation to another even if the wage rate and return on investment are higher in the alternative occupation (Thorat and Newman, 2010, p. 10). When countless millions are trapped in the occupations owing to accident of birth, efficient resource allocation is hindered, and the economy as a whole suffers. Moreover, in marked contradistinction with the Protestant work ethic, the caste system is contemptuous of physical labour, some of which – the preserve of Untouchables – is deemed degrading. There is, therefore, a lack of dignity in physical work, hence a disincentive to work (*ibid.*, p. 11). We can think of this as India's development growth trap directly caused by Hinduism's caste system.

Economic efficiency is also affected by reduced job commitment and efforts of workers who perceive themselves to be victims of discrimination and by reducing the magnitude of investment in human capital by discriminated groups. In caste-based segmented markets, economic efficiency is thus lower than in the model of a perfectly competitive market economy. Factor immobility also leads to unemployment which is typically associated with the customary rules governing employment in various occupations. By not permitting the free movement of labour between occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much voluntary unemployment of the Higher Castes (HCs) and involuntary unemployment for lower castes. The HC Hindu would generally prefer to be voluntarily unemployed for some time than to take up an occupation that is considered polluting. For the lower castes, the restriction on taking up other castes' occupations will compel them to remain involuntarily unemployed.

In a survey of caste ownership of private enterprise, Thorat, Kundu, and Sadana (2010, p. 326) find a systematic denial of property rights – the right to undertake production and business, except in areas that are considered impure and polluting – to lower caste Hindus, and especially Untouchables. This is in accordance with various other indicators of discriminatory behaviour by higher castes. Data concerning the precise impact of the denial of capital to deprived sectors of society is not available but suffice to say that a more

equitable reallocation of capital in the form of loans and grants will likely improve returns and economic performance in the long run.

The caste basis also determines rates of poverty. A survey by Smita Das on the impact of caste and religion on poverty status between the period 1993-4 and 2004 found that a large percentage of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) are casual labourers in both the rural and urban sectors. Hence, the percentage of lower caste workers employed in regular jobs is much lower than that of the Hindus and Christians. The survey also found that in terms of levels of poverty, the STs, SCs, and Muslims turn out to be the most deprived groups; the STs are the poorest on all measures of poverty, followed by the SCs and the Muslims (Das, 2010, p. 365). This provides compelling evidence of the blatantly discriminatory nature of a society dominated by Hinduism.

In the introduction to their edited collection, Thorat and Newman (p. 29) conclude that India faces a profound legacy of historic discrimination that has placed the lower caste, tribals, religious minorities, and women at tremendous disadvantage in developing the human capital needed to compete on an equal footing with the best-prepared members of society.

Looking at the balance sheet of the putative positives and negatives of the caste system, any objective assessment of the *economic* impact indicates that it is strongly negative. That said, it is difficult to gauge with reasonable accuracy the ‘drag effect’ of caste on India’s economy over the course of history given that, doubtless because of the highly sensitive nature of the subject matter, detailed studies to investigate this link have not been undertaken.

### **Hinduism and Gender Inequality**

Caste structures and religious dogma served doubly to hurt women. Not only did Hindu thought and scriptures relegate females to a lowly status, they were also assigned the low caste standing of Sudras, irrespective of the caste into which they were actually born. Accordingly, they lacked legal and property rights, since they and their children were in essence chattels to be bought and sold or cast off at the whim of the male having the right of ownership in them (Carroll, 1983, pp. 15, 18).

Of all Hinduism’s various texts, it is *Manav Dharam Shastra (Manusmriti)* – also known as the Laws of Manu – which is responsible for gender discrimination in India. Hirday Patwari argues that Hindu apologists consider the Manusmriti as the divine code of conduct and, accordingly, the status of women as depicted in the text has been interpreted as Hindu divine

law. While defending Manusmriti as divine code of conduct for all including women, apologists often quote the verse: [3/56] (*where women are provided place of honor, gods are pleased and reside there in that household*), but they deliberately forget all those verses that are full of prejudice, hatred and discrimination against women. Examples include:

5/150. A female child, young woman or old woman is not supposed to work independently even at her place of residence

5/151. Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently.

5/157. Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands.

2/158. Women have no divine right to perform any religious ritual, nor make vows or observe a fast. Her only duty is to obey and please her husband and she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven (cited in Patwari, 2011).

Theodora Carroll makes the claim that verses such as these give sufficient cause to lay the blame on the *Manusmriti* for perpetuating the discriminatory and hostile attitude and practice towards females (and indeed lower castes). Moreover, she accuses modern religious leaders of continuing to use the code of Manu as justification for restricting women's rights and education on the basis that the masses cannot be persuaded to discard myths and prejudices about females, menstruation and pregnancy, caste and dietary habits or contraception (Suleman & Rahman, 2020). Thus, modern laws find it difficult to overcome ancient laws, especially when the priesthood's status and power are thereby challenged. Carroll proceeds to adopt a maximalist position that 'the Laws of Manu effectively removed any semblance of independence and made females totally dependent upon the males of their family – father, husband, or son. The Laws prohibited women from learning sacred texts, including the Vedas or performing sacramental rites, believing that women were incapable of independence and learning'. (Carroll, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 52).

To what extent Carroll's damning assessment was accurate (her work was published in 1983) is debatable. What is a valid point is that in lesser educated societies, with high levels of illiteracy and poverty, the grip of religious thinking and religious leaders and institutions

tends to be stronger? But as educational levels rise and development proceeds, such a grip invariably loosens (see, for example, Bullivant [2018] in regard to young adults and religion in 22 European countries). Nevertheless, even though secular laws of the land trump religious laws such as the Laws of Manu, the legacy of Hinduism's misogyny remains to the present day.

Despite the fact that gender relations have improved over the years, the situation of women in India remains deeply problematic as severe gender bias and inequality is the norm – Carroll would doubtless view this as confirmation of her harsh appraisal. Female mortality is higher than male mortality as females receive inferior health care and nutrition. Drèze and Sen point out that India's patriarchal forms of social and cultural relations pervade every aspect of India's body fabric. These include property inheritance, curtailment of freedom of movement, violence against women, and selective abortion. There is, however, a regional difference as states in the North and West of India show greater incidence of gender discrimination (*op. cit.*, pp. 226, p. 225).

Drèze and Sen acknowledge that gender discrimination flows from traditional values and are considered part of the 'natural order' – but do not go on to implicate religion in general and Hinduism in particular. Given the all-pervasive reach of religion in India in all facets of society, the influence of not just Hinduism, but also of the other main religions is crucial to the understanding and explanation of this disturbing bias. The importance of male children stems from the *Upanishads* where it is stipulated that the 'world of men is attainable only through a son (*putra*)'. The duties of a dying father can be transferred to a son and it is only a son who can perform the last religious rites for a father so as to enable him to reach heaven – hence the importance of sons to the afterlife. Accordingly, there is great preference for boys and girls/women are given low status, and female infanticide is rife (Sunder, 2011, p. 204).

While India's male labour participation is high at 76%, female labour participation at 21% is low by global standards though a little above Muslim majority countries (data is for 2019; World Bank, 2021, Table 2.2). Just as with caste discrimination, the subordinate position of women, and attendant waste of talent and energies, necessarily has had a profoundly adverse affect on India's economy and society – *we aver that Hinduism is surely implicated in this outcome*. Moreover, rather than challenging this dispiriting reality, the leading authorities of Hinduism have defended this 'natural order' and, by so doing, have been a major obstacle to India's advancement (Suleman, Arafah, Abbas, & Delukman, 2021).

## Hinduism and Corruption

In regard to corruption, India ranks 86 out of 183 countries in the 2020 *Global Corruption Perceptions Index* (Transparency International, 2021) suggesting that while corruption is a serious problem with a deleterious impact on the economy and society, India has average levels by global standards. The question naturally arises as to whether Hinduism provides a conducive environment for corruption or whether its ethical stance and attendant mores discourage it. Or is it silent on the issue?

This is a subject that has received insufficient attention even to the present day, a fact noted in the 1960s by Gunnar Myrdal in his study *Asian Drama* on poverty and development in South Asia, especially in India. Myrdal stresses the prevalence of corruption and highlights its causes and effects. He points out that corruption worsened after independence (in 1947) in comparison with the colonial era and permeated the higher echelons of officials and politicians and that public works departments and government agencies were particularly corrupt. Myrdal observes that in India as in other South Asian countries, ‘basic loyalties were to families, villages, or groups held together on the basis of religion, language, ethnic origin, or caste rather than to the community as a whole ... In South Asia, the stronger loyalty to such smaller groups invites nepotism, in itself a form of corruption, and in general encourages moral laxity’ (Myrdal, 1972, pp. 168, 170).

A rare scholarly exception is Shanthakumari Sunder’s *Values and Influence of Religion in Public Administration* (2011). This is a study of corruption in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in which a chapter is devoted to Hindu ethics and their influence on society at large and on the IAS in particular. Sunder cites S.S Gill proffering the following links between Hinduism and corruption: ‘Most Hindu gods are all too human, indulging like earthlings in dalliance, adultery, and deceit ... It is reasonable to infer that these influences on public morality could not have been very wholesome ... Our culture and social mores have something to do with this public apathy and individual indifference ... Corruption was a persistent element of administration in India’ (cited in Sunder, 2011, pp. xxii-xxiii).

The fundamental charge Sunder makes is that Hinduism is an amoral philosophy that begets immoral behaviour. This stems from the fact that at the *sannyasin* stage virtues are assumed and the virtues prescribed to reach this stage are seen as a ladder to reach self-knowledge, and not as morals required to lead a daily good life by the common man. Thus, virtue is not an end but only a means to attain the end of achieving self-knowledge, which alone is important.

This limits the application of virtue, because it is only prescribed for those keen on attaining self-knowledge and it is open only to the Brahmins and the other two upper classes to practice, consequently excluding 85 percent of the lower classes from its application in practical life. These lead Sunder to stress that such a philosophy lays a firm foundation for non-ethical life in the running of the day to day affairs of the world, including administration (*ibid.*, pp. 200-201).

As already noted, under the doctrine of *Karma*, present actions determine the nature of one's future incarnations so this is *prima facie* an incentive to behave well and strive to do good. But in reality, this moral injunction is limited by the fact that Hindu gods are seen as amoral, meaning that they are above the considerations of good and bad, hence there cannot be any significant moral development under such a religion. Sunder argues that a major reason for the seemingly unethical conduct of the politicians, leaders of society, businessmen and officers is rooted in the *Upanishads* according to which 'there is no theoretical or practical consideration of morality and it is "a-ethical" in character'. Such ethical relativism leads to corruption being tolerated and accepted as a fact of life where being religious and corrupt at the same time is deemed unproblematic. For example, a corrupt industrialist can redeem himself by making a generous donation to a temple or feeding poor people (*ibid.*, pp. 198, 199, 210, 215).

Sunder also lays great store on the harm done to successive generations by the ancient treatise *Arthashastra*, written by Kautilya, the prime minister of the king Chandragupta Maurya around 3CE. The treatise assumes that corruption among officials in the service of the king is akin to a law of nature as highlighted in the following passage:

Just as it is impossible not to taste the honey or the poison that finds itself at the tip of the tongue, so it is impossible for a government servant not to eat up, at least, a bit of the king's revenue. Just as fish moving under water cannot possibly be found either as drinking or not drinking water, so government servants employed in the government work cannot be found out (while) taking money (for themselves). It is possible to mark the movements of birds flying high up in the sky; but not so is it possible to ascertain the movement of government servants of hidden purpose (cited in Sunder, *ibid.*, p. 225).

Sunder argues that some of the advice proffered by Kautilya 'reeks of treason, treachery, deceit, witchcraft, employing of illegal means ...'. To what extent the legacy of a 1,700 year old tract still lingers in modern, post-colonial India is of course difficult to evaluate, but it is

incumbent on responsible, democratic government and institutions to robustly challenge and disregard it. This requires the shunning or marginalising of such religious tracts but given the persistent influence of the priests and a certain amount kow-towing to them by devout politicians and opinion formers, this can be difficult to satisfactorily achieve.

Whilst deeming the legacy of the Muslim Moghuls as inconsequential, Sunder is effusive towards British rule arguing that the British introduced modern, scientific knowledge and technology, and provided the values of equality before the law, love for freedom and compassion for the poor and downtrodden. English education prepared the Indians for administrative positions and opened up the treasures of the wisdom of the European countries and helped transform India from feudalism to a modern democracy, and that – echoing Myrdal – under British rule, corruption was less and well under control in India (*ibid.*, pp. 236-237).

These are naturally contentious claims and critics are likely to dismiss them as little more than craven orientalist thinking. Be that as it may, it does not detract from the fact that the colonisation of a vast country and population – leaving aside the immorality of colonialism – was based on superior military capabilities that derived from advanced science, technology, and manufacturing techniques. Moreover, efficient administration methods based on rational calculation with a relatively small number of people<sup>ii</sup> was of paramount importance and seemingly emanated from the protestant work ethic. Angus Maddison (2007, pp. 121-122) makes the claim that ‘if the British had not ruled India from the mid-eighteenth century to late-nineteenth century, it seems unlikely that a modernizing elite or the legal and institutional framework for its operation would have emerged from the ruins of the Moghul empire’.

But why did this supposed positive legacy of British rule not persist in India? Indeed in many important ways it did as was acknowledged by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005:

Today, with the balance and perspective offered by the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight, it is possible for an Indian Prime Minister to assert that India's experience with Britain had its beneficial consequences too. Our notions of the rule of law, of a constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratories have all been fashioned in the crucible where an age-old civilisation met the dominant Empire of the day. These are all elements which we still value and cherish. Our



judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy, and our police are all great institutions, derived from British-Indian administration and they have served the country well. Of all the legacies of the Raj, none is more important than the English language and the modern school system (Singh, 2005).

Yet, despite this startlingly warm tribute to the former colonial power by a former prime minister, there is good reason to think that these positive factors – whilst acknowledging that measuring their impact with sufficient accuracy is extraordinarily difficult – were not decisively sufficient to overcome the drag effects of Hinduism and other minority religions on India's development. Religion matters and continues to play a major role in the lives of Indians and our argument is that this has a problematic influence on the economy and society writ large. But in certain key respects, progress has been made – for example, in the Freedom House *Freedom in the World 2021* ratings, India is designated as 'partly free' (the ratings are a combination of political rights and civil liberties) and ranks only ranks 142 (out of 180 countries) in the *World Press Freedom Index 2021* produced by Reporters without Borders.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his influential work of 1955, *The Theory of Economic Growth*, W Arthur Lewis asks 'how compatible is economic growth with various types of religious attitude?' Lewis makes the foundational point that growth requires devoting minds to finding ways of increasing productivity. Whilst some religions teach that salvation can be reached through the discipline of hard and conscientious work and do elevate the pursuit of efficiency into a moral virtue, 'most religions also teach that it is better to give the mind to spiritual contemplation than to the ceaseless search for ways of increasing income or reducing cost; and practically all religions discourage the desire for material things' (Lewis, 1955, pp. 101, 102).

Moreover, economic growth demands a willingness to experiment as a means of improving technology, which lead to changes in social relations and social attitudes. This leads to the conclusion that, by and large, strongly religious societies militate against advances in *science, technology, and innovation* which are axiomatically thought as being the *sine qua non* for economic and social advancement. Lewis logically arrives at the following conclusion:

Some religious codes are more compatible with economic growth than others. If a religion lays stress upon material values, upon work, upon thrift and productive investment, upon honesty in commercial relations, upon experimentation and risk bearing, and upon equality of

opportunity, it will be helpful to growth, whereas in so far as it is hostile to these things, it tends to inhibit growth (*ibid.* P. 105).

Given that in India, Hinduism is profoundly important to many aspects of society, and strongly moulds people's lives, it inevitably has a great impact on the trajectory of society in terms of growth and development. This was a core lesson stressed by Gunnar Myrdal study in his study of South Asia – *Asian Drama* – noted earlier:

[R]eligion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia. *The writer knows of no instance of present-day South Asia where religion has induced social change. Least of all does it foster realization of the modernization ideals.* From a planning point of view, this inertia related to religion, like other obstacles, must be overcome by policies for inducing changes, formulated in a plan for development. But the religiously sanctioned beliefs and valuations not only act as obstacles among the people to getting the plan accepted but also as inhibitions in the planners themselves insofar as they share them, or are afraid to counteract them (Myrdal, 1972, p. 40) [emphasis added].

On balance, the present writer is in agreement with these insights of Lewis and Myrdal. We are also in agreement with the thrust of William Kapp's argument that casteism and factionalism have been the most important obstacles to modernisation and secularisation and they have their root in Hindu culture which 'shares with other pre-scientific civilizations a basic acceptance of cyclical time and cosmic causation and the related interpenetration of the supernatural with the temporal-social. This is in open conflict with a secularized society and the scientific temper. India has never experienced the religious, political, scientific, intellectual, and technological reorientation which prepared the West for the intellectual, agrarian, and industrial revolution of the last centuries' (Kapp, 1963, p. 62).

However, almost half a century after Kapp's book was published, India has advanced in a myriad of ways including in science and technology. But here the case can be made that this necessitated the pushing back against the influence of Hindu – and other religious – ideas and beliefs, at least in educated circles. However, if the BJP pushes forward with its Hindu nationalist agenda with the goal of making India a Hindu nation, then inevitably the various Hindu texts we have referred to, will increase in prominence. Our argument is that this will have a deleterious impact on India's development and on wider society. Casteism, factionalism or what is commonly termed communalism though already pervasive will become further entrenched. These have hitherto contributed to the entrapment of far too many

Indians in dire poverty with poor life chances and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>i</sup> Scheduled Castes are also known as 'Dalits', and were previously labelled as 'Untouchables' and 'Harijans'; Scheduled Tribes are also known as 'Adivasis'. These are the two lowest castes and receive recognition in the Indian constitution; under affirmative action policies, jobs are reserved for them.

<sup>ii</sup> The British were never more than 0.05 per cent of the population. In 1805, there were 31,000 British in India (22,000 in the army and 2,000 in civilian government); by 1931, this had risen to 168,000 (60,000 in the army and police, 4,000 in civilian government, 26,000 in the private sector and 78,000 family dependents) (Maddison, 2007, p. 119).