

RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY AND ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA

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Introduction

“Tell me how is it that you are rich? From whom did you receive your wealth? And he, whom did he receive it from? From his grandfather, you say, from his father. By climbing this genealogical tree are you able to show the justice of this possession? Of course you cannot; rather its beginning and root have necessarily come out of injustice”¹.

These words of St John Chrysostom, a fourth century saint, quoted in the book of Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A critique of philosophy of oppression*, articulates the injustice of a social system where there is no equal opportunity for people. Freedom in a person's life plays a very important role in the transformation of life. The religious superstructure curtails people's freedom, by making them to think that God is the cause of everything, he controls everything, and we humans have no say in whatever happens in and around us, as Rousseau puts it 'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains'. One can blossom only where there are opportunities and choices in life.

The recent report, released by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley on July 3, 2015 gives the following details:

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¹ Jose Miranda P. "Marx and the Bible; A Critique of Philosophy of Oppression" London: SCM Press Limited, 1982, 15.

- This emerging lower-middle class is very weak and this can be inferred by the fact that only 3 per cent of the rural households are graduates and only over 5 per cent are educated above the higher secondary school.²
- 90.3% members without a salaried job
- 56% Landless households
- 18.7% deprived of at least one socioeconomic parameter³

The Global Wealth Data book on the other hand reveals some startling facts. The richest 1 per cent of Indians today own nearly half (49 per cent) of India's personal wealth. The rest 99 per cent are left to share the remainder among ourselves. And that too is very unequally shared. The top 10 per cent Indians own nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of the country's personal wealth. The remaining 90 per cent share a meagre quarter. At the other end of the spectrum, of the world's poorest 20 per cent people, nearly one in four are Indians. Just to show by contrast, China's share is a mere 3 per cent. The share of India's richest 10 per cent families has grown from 66 per cent in the year 2000 to 74 per cent today. India's super-rich (top 1 per cent) who owned 37 per cent of India's personal wealth in 2000 have even more rapidly increased their share to 49 per cent.⁴ As we examine the causes, which are obviously many, religion might be one of them, considering the ethos of India,

Quite often, religion acts like a "hidden persuader," to convince one not to confront the oppressive structures either because one feels it is impossible and considers it as one's fate, or religion itself justifies the oppressive structures or gives hope of a future life. Thus religion persuades one to remain in the status that one is born in. Hobbes too further opines that the legislators want to keep the people in obedience by instilling in their minds the belief that religious precepts proceed from the gods and by making them believe that the same things, which are forbidden by the laws, are displeasing to the gods.⁵

Every aspect of life and activity is interconnected. Though religion is meant for liberation, sometimes the practical aspect of it becomes a block for the growth of a person because it curtails freedom of thought and expression. Very often religion has acted as a means of oppression, exploitation and consequent poverty. According to Marx, religious

² "Rural areas see middle class rise" *Deccan Herald*, July 4, 2015, <http://www.epaper-hub.com/india/epaper/deccan-herald.aspx#.VZdZrPmqkko>, accessed on July 4, 2015.

³ T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan. "30 p.c. of rural households landless" *The Hindu*. July 4, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/30-pc-of-rural-households-landless/article7384689.ece>. Accessed on July 4, 2015.

⁴ Mihir Shah, "Tribal alienation in an unequal India" *The Hindu*. July 4, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/tribal-alienation-in-an-unequal-india/article7384669.ece>, Accessed on July 4, 2015.

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan", Ed. C. B Mcpherson Penguin, 1975, quoted in Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*. Hutchinson University Library, 23.

hierarchies, for example, perpetuate systems of faith that at bottom protect the economic well-being of those in power.⁶ Therefore Karl Marx defines religion as a “matter of social privilege seeking legitimation and of the oppressed seeking consolation”⁷.

There are various reasons for the poverty of the people. In the past, it has been observed, that religions have been used by some sections of people to subjugate others, to maintain hierarchy and power structures. For ordinary people religion is a convincing ideology, because Ideas rule the world and not brute force. A particular idea, which fascinates the people, can change the course of a nation, even of the world.

Religion generally is in the realm of faith, belief and spirituality. We cannot look at any subject in isolation, and this applies to religion as well. When a religion manifests itself as an ideology, it spreads its tentacles over politics, economics and socio-cultural spheres.

It is a fact that there is a basic quest in each one of us to find meaning in life. This quest has often given birth to religion or a religious ideology (in the form of institutionalized religion). It has helped many to turn away from hopelessness to hope. This hope has sustained their meaning in life. It has empowered humans to do good to one another and to the world.

We see a lot of suffering, injustice and poverty too in the world. Though religion preaches love, brotherhood and compassion, and though the majority of people belong to one religion or another, yet inequality among them does not seem to be less. Religions, like rivers, are very pure at their sources. They begin with noble ideas. As they advance they become obstacles in the way of humanizing society. When religion loses its original fervour, it gives rise to obscurantist beliefs and practices. It becomes more and more dogmatic and destroys freedom of thought and expression of the believers. It becomes callous and insensitive to the needs of the people, and even becomes an instrument of conflict. Though religion gives meaning, hope and strength to do good, it has also developed structures to legitimize oppression or to perpetuate poverty.

In this paper an attempt is made to articulate systemic injustice in determining economic status of people from the perspective of religious ideology. Though all the religions have their influence on the economic condition of people, the paper sets itself in the context of India.

⁶ Ideology, <http://autocww2.colorado.edu/~toldy3/E64ContentFiles/PoliticsAndGovernment/ideology.htm>, accessed on 3 July 2015.

⁷ Libby Ahluwalia. “Understanding Philosophy of Religion: Understanding Philosophy” .Folens, 2008. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=-PCV1IVQ8PYC&printsec=frontcover#v=sonepage&q&f=false>. accessed on 3 July 2015.

Religion and Ideology

Religion, broadly speaking, is a way of life or belief based on a person's ultimate relation to the universe or God or gods. According to Milton Yinger, Religion can be defined as a “system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life”⁸. In this sense such diverse systems as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Shinto etc may be considered religions.

A religion has basically three elements: creed, code, and cult. **Creed** is faith in the revealed pattern and in the divine intelligence that gave it. **Code** is the divinely sanctioned and authorized system of human laws and morals comprising the rules of active participation in society. **Cult** is the ritual of worship, or symbolic acts, whereby the community brings its mind into accord with the mind of God, either by ceremonial dances or dramatic re-enactments of the deeds of God, or by sacrificial meals held in common between God and his people.⁹

Meredith McGuire, in his book *Religion: The Social Context*, explains the importance of religion:

Religion is one of the most powerful, deeply felt, and influential forces in human society. It has shaped people's relationships with each other, influencing family, community, economic and political life. Religious beliefs and values motivate human action, and religious groups organize their collective religious expressions. Religion is a significant aspect of social life, and the social dimension is an important part of religion.¹⁰

On the other hand an ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which reflect or shape the understanding or misconceptions of the social and political world. It serves to recommend, justify or endorse collective action aimed at preserving or changing political practices and institutions.¹¹ According to Sebastian Kappen ideology is, “the system of ideas and values that determine the pattern of behavior of a people.”¹²

Ideology can also mean a comprehensive system of concepts and beliefs, often political in nature, held by a group or an individual. Karl Marx believed that ideologies were

⁸ Meredith McGuire, “Religion; The Social Context” California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986, 23.

⁹ *Encarta Encyclopedia*, "Religion," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2006, <http://www.wsh-leszno.pl/wsh/nsjo/religion2.pdf>, accessed on 3 July 2015.

¹⁰ Meredith McGuire, 18.

¹¹ Michael Freeden. “Ideology.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV. <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/ideology>, accessed on 1 July 2015.

¹² Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*. New York: Orbis Books, 1977, 43.

false systems of political, social, and moral concepts invented and preserved by ruling classes out of self-interest.¹³

Ideology brings changes in the lives of peoples and societies. A change that is brought about by belief in an ideology is more lasting than the change brought about by physical force. This belief in ideology can be brought about either by ‘brain washing’ or by rational persuasion. An ideology can also attract adherents by the example of those who live by it.

Religion as Faith and Religion as an Ideology

The general process of a religion is that it emerges from the faith experience of a person or a faith community and subsequently remains in the realm of spirituality and spiritual experiences. However, as the community grows it becomes vulnerable to diversity and various other kinds of threats. To protect the religion from various kinds of threats, dogmas, doctrines, structures, institutions, rituals, myths, idea of salvation or liberation etc come into existence. Consequently it may remain in the realm of spirituality and faith or may move on to an ideology taking into consideration its own evolution, context, internal and external pressures etc.

Any idea, to take social roots, needs to have an organization. Religion is such an organization, which plays a very important role in the behavior of the vast majority of people in the world. It gives meaning and hope to people’s lives in the present and also hope for the future.

A Critique of Religious Ideology

Religion has been criticized since the beginning by many critics such as Atomists, Hedonists, Epicureans, Skeptics, Carvakas and even the religious reformers themselves. The propagation of atheism as a countermovement to religion is a recent phenomenon. Karl Marx called it the ‘opium of the people’. Since the sixteenth century, political philosophy has been concerned about the relation between state and religion. The Reformation brought religious diversity to European nations on a large scale.

Karl Marx says, the function of religion is to legitimize structures of social domination. He calls it ‘mystification of reality’¹⁴ and considers religion to be the greatest stumbling block in the realization of the final goal of humanity. He writes “religious suffering

¹³ Jorge Larrain, 17.

¹⁴ Pandit Moti Lal, “Did Marx Kill God” Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, 36.

is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering". And Lenin puts it thus:

Faith in a beyond arises from the helplessness of the exploited in his struggle against the exploiter, just as belief in divinities and demons arises from the helplessness of the savage in his struggle against nature.¹⁵

Quite many of the prophetic religions, like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc. were responses to the needs of the time. They condemned the oppressive structures of society. Religion exists in a social context, is shaped by that social context, and in turn, often influences it. The main goals of most of the religions were to liberate the people from the bondage of suffering and sin. Quite a lot of religions have condemned injustice, oppression, and poverty in society. But over the years interpretations, and the interpretations of the interpretations, have played a selfish game of serving the interests of those who interpret, viz. the priestly class. However, the source itself plays a great role in justifying the oppression as it is found in the caste system of Hindu society.

Summarizing the Marxian point of view, Sebastian Kappen, one of the great theologians and thinkers of India gives the following points:

- It is a form of false consciousness, a distorted vision of reality.
- It is a form of deprivation, in so far as man's essence is sought not in himself but in God.
- It causes rupture and disunity with human existence by splitting it into life on earth and life in heaven.
- The believer suffers loss of freedom; not only he becomes the slave of God but also because the same God strengthens the chains that bind him to his secular masters.¹⁶
- Whatever be the nature of alienation, it basically robs man of his selfhood and identity.

It is clear that for Marx, religion is a hindrance to economic development of the people. Religion justifies and perpetuates the unjust structures of society. Kappen agrees with the Marxist critique, yet believes that genuine religion can be a means of liberation.

Economic Poverty

Economic poverty is an economic condition in which people lack sufficient means to obtain certain minimal levels of health services, food, housing, clothing, and education

¹⁵ Jorge Larrain, 9.

¹⁶ Sebastian Kappen, "Marxian Atheism". 1983, 23.

generally recognized as necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living. What is considered adequate, however, depends on the average standard of living in a particular society.¹⁷ Economic exploitation and its concomitants, poverty and inequality have existed in one form or the other in all countries ever since the birth of organized social life.¹⁸

Gillin and Gillin defines poverty as;

“that condition which a person, either because of inadequate income or unwise expenditure does not maintain the scale of living high enough to provide for his physical and mental efficiency and to enable him and his natural dependents to function usefully according to the standards of society of which he is a member.”

The Context of India

India is a country with diverse cultures and traditions. Various kinds of religions, languages are found here. It also has abundance of natural resources, fertile land and a long sea coast. It is a country having a long history of philosophy, civilization and culture. Like most of the countries of Asia India too is a developing country. In India, poverty is seen everywhere; there is an unjust class system, the status of women is low, the literacy rate is disappointing. There are many billionaires as well as beggars. Majority of Indians are poor though there is an emerging middleclass. There is an unfathomable gap between a small minority of extremely rich and the vast majority of starving poor. It is a fact that many people die of starvation, while few others struggle to get rid of obesity. *Why are the poor, poor? What has caused them to remain unchanged for years? Why don't the people move towards finding better job opportunities? Why do the people continue to suffer in this secular country of ours, after so many years of reservations for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and the backward classes?* These are urgent questions that call for answers.

People have tried to answer these questions from the perspective of economics, political science and sociology. There are religious, philosophical as well as psychological reasons for poverty.

The poor in India in general are not the higher castes. The poor belong mainly to lower castes, namely *Sudras*, Dalits, untouchables, outcastes, tribals and women in general. The manual laborers, the small farmers, the landless laborers who generally belong to the

¹⁷ Craig Van Slyke. “Information Communication Technologies: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and applications” Vol I, Hershey, NY, 2008. 143.

¹⁸ Sebastian Kappen, “Jesus and Freedom”, 81.

lower castes and outcastes are the real poor in India. A very big percentage of the lowest castes and outcastes do not own any land and consequently they live in acute poverty. The following are the few areas of religion which have contributed to India's poverty. The paper tries to find out reasons for poverty from the perspective of religion and that too in the Indian context.

The Hindu Way of Life and Poverty

Hinduism is the dominant religion of the vast majority of the people in the Indian subcontinent. Since the beginning of its history, Hinduism has profoundly influenced the lives and thoughts of countless Indians from the cradle to the grave. It has left an indelible mark on the culture of India, on her philosophy, art, architecture, literature, and politics. Hindu religion gives equanimity of mind in prosperity and adversity, courage to face the problems of one's life, and a vision of one's ultimate spiritual destiny.¹⁹ Ours is a country with deep-rooted religious beliefs. Daily life and activities are very much influenced by the religious thought. Superstitious beliefs, cultic rituals are performed time and again in the society. There is a belief in many deities and they are related to elements of nature, like *Indra* the rain God, *Agni* god of fire, the family gods, village gods etc.

Concepts of Freedom and Predestination

There are at least two basic elements in the conceptual complex we call 'freedom', namely, rightful self-government (autonomy), and the overall ability to do, choose or achieve things, which can be called 'optionality' and is defined as the possession of open options. To be autonomous is to be free in the sense of 'self-governing' and 'independent'.²⁰

One has freedom of action when one can do what one wills, but in order to have the full benefit of optionality; it must be supplemented by freedom of choice (free will), which consists in being able to will what one wants to will, free of internal psychological impediments. Autonomy and optionality can vary independently of one another.²¹

As the paper probes into the religious causes of poverty, first and foremost it introspects about freedom of choices. Freedom of choices, and opportunities should go hand in hand. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, "Freedom means opportunity offered to each and every man [person] (by suppressing the obstacles in his [her] path, and equipping him

¹⁹ Swami Nikhilananda. "Hinduism: Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit" http://www.ramakrishna.org/catalog/archive/Spirit_of_Hinduism.htm, accessed on 1 July 2015.

²⁰ *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol VIII "Freedom and Liberty." 753.

²¹ *Ibid.*

[her] with the appropriate means) of transcending his[her] human state by extending himself [herself] to the limits of the being.”²² According to Sebastian Kappen, freedom is the chances a person has to pursue his individual ends unhindered by others. In reality such freedom amounts to license for a few to exploit many.²³ Freedom is a basic necessity for any kind of self-actualization. Lack of opportunity is one of the obstacles for poverty. Only in freedom one can make use of the opportunities.

Total freedom of thought, expression and behavior is a must for any creativity, and creativity leads to prosperity. The great economist, Amartya Sen, in an interview to *Frontline* says.

Poverty makes a person vulnerable and helpless victim deprived of social, cultural and political freedom; poverty is not just ‘low income’ and low consumption but a multiple deprivation causing premature death, chronic undernourishment, illiteracy, illness and social exclusion.²⁴

Amartya Sen believes that there is more to development than just economic growth; development in fact should focus on the expansion of people’s capabilities to achieve different valuable human functioning. E.g. how well are the income and the wealth of the society distributed among the different sections (class, race, caste, gender, and so on)? What are the social and economic opportunities available to citizens for leading a life of their choice? What are the personal and social conditions that facilitate or hinder the individual’s ability to transform resources into different functioning? What are the social and economic opportunities available to citizens in leading a life of their choice?²⁵ It also refers to the opportunities that people have to nurture and to exercise their capacities; people’s capacities could indeed be enhanced or hampered depending on the opportunities they have in their society.

There are a lot of issues that are unique to Hinduism as a concept itself blocks this freedom of choices. They are:

Fatalism

The concept of ‘fate’ (*daiva*) is already well known in the rig Veda (completed before 800 BC). Life in the early Vedic period was considered to be largely hostage to the ‘fate’ of

²² Augustine Shutte, *African Philosophy Reader*, 428.

²³ Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 81.

²⁴ Alexander, John “The Sen Difference” *Frontline*, Feb 25 2005, 4.

²⁵ Anil Kumar Thakur. “Economic Thoughts on Justice and Equality”. Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 2007, 91.

natural and psychic forces controlled by various gods (*devas*). Fate was what proceeded from the gods' (*daiva*), who were considered to be the guardians of the cosmic order and the ultimate source of prosperity. Sacrifice and prayer were the principal means to win their favour. Similar passages are found in later Vedic period as well as in Mahabharata.²⁶ In Mahabharata III, 30, 28 says "man is ignorant and not the master of his own sorrow; he goes to heaven or hell as directed by God." Here we see the complete fateful life of a creature on this earth. This belief in fate has completely taken away the responsibility from a person, for what can a person do if his or her life is already determined? Birth into a given caste is determined by *Karma*. One is expected to accept the caste and try to fulfil the role assigned to it, that is, do one's *Dharma*. Understandably, fatalism is ingrained in the people of India.²⁷

Belief in Karma

Karma means that one gets the fruit of any action for any activity that is performed within the material world; in other words, it refers to the law of action and consequent reaction.²⁸ The law of *karma* suggests that a person's mental and physical actions of the past life determine the progress of his or her life on earth in the present. Whatever actions he or she does, good or bad, impact his or her life in several ways and bring twists and turns in the course of his/her life. His or her bad actions lead to suffering and unhappiness, while his/her good actions lead to happiness and spiritual success.

The combined beliefs in *karma* and rebirth, that is, the retributive power of actions and decisions and a beginningless, though not necessarily endless, succession of births and deaths for living beings, constitute a fundamental premise of the great majority of India's religious and philosophical traditions.²⁹

This belief in *karma* leads to determinism. The impact of this belief is that people, take their social position, the caste into which they are born, and what happens to them as effects of their past *karma*. Therefore, they do not usually make an effort to change the structure or seek for economic opportunities outside of the system. In other words, the sufferings of the poor, the handicapped, could be attributed to their past *Karma*. Since Karma accepts determinism, there is a belief in people that there is nothing much one can do about

²⁶ Julian F. Woods. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Fatalism."
<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/fatalism-indian>.

²⁷ Parth Shah J. "Persistence of Poverty in India: Culture or System?" *the Freeman*, March 01 1998.
<http://fee.org/freeman/detail/the-persistence-of-poverty-in-india-culture-or-system>, accessed on July 2, 2015.

²⁸ Sanatana Dharma Foundation. "Karma" <http://www.harekrishnatemple.com/bhakta/chapter16.html>. accessed on 2 July 2015.

²⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass. "Karma and rebirth" *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 434.

what has happened in the past or what is happening now and, what is going to happen in the immediate future. For any misfortune, the immediate explanation is, *it is my karma* or *I am bound to be like this!* The present reality is a product of one's past actions and since it has already come to fruition, there is nothing much one can do about it other than looking to God for intervention or waiting for the ordeal to pass. This logic leaves an individual with a sense of desperation. This determinism leads to accepting all that comes in life without making the slightest attempt to alter it. And thus, a poor man who accepts that he is determined to be poor will remain poor because he or she cannot think beyond it.

The term 'Fatalism' is sometimes used to mean the acceptance of determinism, along with a readiness to accept the consequence that there is no such thing as human freedom. The word is also often used in connection with a theological question: whether God's supposed foreknowledge means that the future is already fixed³⁰ and often the result of it is one of resigned acceptance.

The idea of *niskamakarma*, not desiring the result and being indifferent, is a spiritual idea. However, it often leads to lack of satisfaction and worthlessness of oneself. The concept of *Karma* is also closely tied with the idea of detachment. It suggests that whoever one is and whatever one has are the result of past lives and past actions. One's current status is not only justified but is deemed hardly alterable. The idea of Karma indirectly provides support for India's caste system.³¹

Similarly the concept of *maya*, or illusion, is resulting from the conventional way of thinking. For *Advaitins* the whole world is God's play (*lila*). The concept of illusion, *maya* gives a deaf ear to the sufferings of the people. For it believes the world is illusion and all that happens is not real. Kappen in his book '*Counter Cultural Movement*' says, for what is wrong, with rape, murder, exploitation, and oppression, if the rapist and the raped, the murderer and the murdered, the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and the oppressed, are all, in the end, *Atman-Brahman*? To the one who *knows*, all such inhuman practices are but the play (*lila*) of Brahman, or the manifestation of its illusion-producing power (*maya*).³²

It does not uphold human dignity; rather, it promotes a pessimistic otherworldly emphasis.

³⁰ Edward Craig. "Fatalism" *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 224.

³¹ Parth J. Shah. "Persistence of Poverty in India: Culture or System?" *the Freeman*, March 01 1998.

<http://fee.org/freeman/detail/the-persistence-of-poverty-in-india-culture-or-system>, accessed on July 2, 2015.

³² Sebastian Kappen. "Jesus and Culture". 31.

Education in the Hindu Society

In ancient India, education was a privilege of the highest caste, namely the *Brahmins*. Since education consisted in the study of sacred texts and scriptures, the non-*Brahmins* were ritually barred from acquiring this knowledge.³³ Lower caste people were not permitted to study any subject outside their occupation. *Manusmriti* prescribed severe punishment not only for lower caste men who dared to study the *Vedas* but also for those who dared to teach them. This position continued up to the British rule. The British started to educate the masses. However, a very few from the backward classes were able to attend the schools. This was especially true of the untouchables who due to the age-old practice of untouchability could ‘go to the school but not in it’!

It is only after the British colonization that India was introduced to secular education. The Indian governments have given great importance to education. Now in India statistically we have nearly 74 percent of the people as literate. Education and consequent skill development for all has never been a tradition in India. Only a select few were given education. This has been one of the biggest reasons for the poverty.

Adding to this, the medium of education was *Sanskrit*. It was known as god’s language! It also became one of the instruments of exploitation. The ordinary people did not know it, nor were they allowed to learn it. Thus, they failed to understand the implications of the oppressive interpretations of the scripture. It was an easy instrument to keep the people submissive. They were asked to obey the *Vedas* and its rules, but they were denied to learn it.

Hinduism and the Status of Women

Women constitute a little less than 50 percent of the population in India. Therefore, they play a major role in the development of the country. The Hindu society like many other societies is patriarchal. As a result women have not been given their due place and respect in the society. In Hindu religion there are many goddesses who are extremely popular and important in the lives of the people. The ordinary Hindu would say woman is *Nari* or *Davei* worthy of respect and even worship.³⁴ However, the reality is something different. Statistics show a decreasing female ratio: there are hardly 943 females for every 1,000 males in India, Haryana being the lowest, with 879. The female infant mortality is very high in India. Many girl children do not see the light of day, because of feticide, and many die because of lack of

³³ A.E. Punit, “Profiles of Poverty in India”.B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi 1982, 113 –115.

³⁴ According to Hinduism, a woman is a form of energy (*shaktiswarupini*) or an aspect of *Shakti*. She is *mata*, the Mother Goddess, or *devi* the auspicious one.

medical care. These women who could have been alive today, but for the factors mentioned above, are what Amartya Sen calls, “missing women.” Women have a low literacy rate, and very low socio-economic and political status in society. *Sati*³⁵ was revered once upon a time. It is now banned, but there are still occurrences in some parts of northern India. Child marriages are still common in many traditional villages. Dowry deaths are increasing day by day.

South Asian feminists also document the serious negative outcomes which result from the devaluation of females within cultures defined by these caste and gender ideologies. These include female infanticide, child marriages, domestic violence, assaults, rapes, dowry-deaths, widow-immolation, and abandonment. Tasks like childcare, weeding and cleaning the fields, collecting firewood and cow dung; cleaning and sweeping of their home; fetching water; and helping to grind the coarse grains for the daily meal, are mostly placed upon the shoulders of young girls. It is a fact that in a male-dominated society, including some of the matriarchic societies; women have a very little say in any decision-making.

Women and Poverty

We have seen the discrimination of women due to patriarchal ideology. This ideology also leads to economic disparity. For example, the rural and urban Dalit women are not paid the minimum wage, and generally they find work only in times of labor scarcity. Rural women of poor households work for longer hours than their male counterparts. Although women work for long hours and add to their family income, they are not perceived as workers by other women themselves, or men; as a result, they are devalued, and rewarded and gratified less.

The law of Manu is responsible for this kind of dependency. The womenfolk do not own any money of their own; they have no income of their own. The law of inheritance of parental property is biased against them. Discrimination in work, education, status etc automatically decides the quality of the society. If women were considered equal to men both ideologically and practically the world would have been a better place to live in.

Manu instructs in his Manusmriti 9.3

“Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.”

³⁵ “*Sati*” means wife committing suicide on husband funeral pyre. It is a belief of not separating from husband even after the death.

The Hindu women were systematically oppressed and legitimately ‘protected’, to deprive them of freedom. The system prevented them from becoming self reliant.

As man’s wife, she performs four roles: 1. As his servant (*dasi*) in duty, 2. As his minister (*Iantra*) in decision making, 3. As a mother (*mata*) to his children and 4. As a lover (*rambha*) in his bed. And when she becomes old, she lives in the house of her son or sons and has to lead a very solitary and forlorn life.³⁶

There is consensus among scholars that the earliest civilization that flourished in the Indus Valley in the fourth millennium B.C. was matriarchal. Under matriarchy, property, rule and priesthood vested in women especially in the tribal mother. And religious life centered upon the worship of the “Mother Goddess”, of whom the tribal mother was the visible representative.³⁷

Parallely there occurred a change in religious symbolism. The Mother goddesses (*Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi,*) were married to male deities (*Brahma, Siva, Vishnu*) and thereby subordinated to the latter.³⁸ In architecture and sculpture the female deities were made to serve as mere background to their male counterparts.³⁹ Even, with regard to education, girls were not admitted to the *Gurukulas*. They were not even allowed to study like the boys.⁴⁰

The contents of the *Manusmriti* are particularly harsh against women and treat them with disdain and suspicion. But there are no evidences to believe that the contents of the book were followed by all sections of society. Probably the *Brahmin* women were its worst victims and suffered more compared to women of other castes.⁴¹ This means that in mainstream Hindu society, the status of most women, regardless of caste, was similar to that of *Dalits*.

The dowry system or *var-dhakisin* was unknown to the early societies. Nevertheless, it developed as one of the deficiencies of the Hindu society. Because of this evil, the girl children are not wanted in the society. It also causes dissensions in the family, especially among the couples.

³⁶ “Status And Role Of Women In Hinduism”, <http://www.echeat.com/free-essay/Status-And-Role-Of-Women-In-Hinduism-30823.aspx>, accessed on June 27, 2015.

³⁷ Sharad Paul, “Dasa Sudra Slavery”. Delhi: Allied Publishers. 1982, 37.

³⁸ D.D Kosambi, “Myth and Reality”. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962, 110.

³⁹ Sebastian Kappen, “Jesus and Culture”. Delhi: ISPCCK, 2002, 29.

⁴⁰ Ancient India had some educated women, like *Maitreyi*, the wife of *Yajnavalkya*, who were generally related to some seers and sages or wives of some great kings. But it is doubtful if ordinary women in ancient India had any role other than performing household duties and procreation.

⁴¹ Status And Role Of Women In Hinduism, <http://www.echeat.com/free-essay/Status-And-Role-Of-Women-In-Hinduism-30823.aspx>, accessed on June 27, 2015.

Widowhood brings hopelessness and helplessness. Unless one is able to withstand the criticisms by the society, one cannot go beyond the taboos of the society or at least re-marry. In ancient times, when a Hindu male died, his wife either committed *sati* on his funeral pyre or retired into a life of religious contemplation and perennial solitude.

According to Manu, a wife who remains pure after the death of her husband will join him in heaven, even if she has no children.⁴² So also the property of the dead husband goes to the son; the widow cannot inherit it.⁴³

Here one observes a clear-cut gender discrimination. The man lives like a free bird and the woman a life of solitude and suffering. A widower could remarry even if he has reached old age, but a widow cannot do that, even if she becomes a widow before puberty.

Worship and Ritual

The greater and lesser Hindu gods are worshipped in a number of concentric circles of public and private devotion. Because of the social basis of Hinduism, the most fundamental ceremonies for every Hindu are those that involve the rites of passage (*samskaras*). These begin with birth, the purification after the first menstruation (for a girl); marriage; and the blessings upon pregnancy - to produce a male child and to ensure a successful delivery. Last of all are the funeral ceremonies (cremation and, if possible, the sprinkling of ashes in a holy river such as the Ganges) followed by the yearly offerings to dead ancestors. These kinds of ceremonies go on and on. Sometimes the ceremonies are very expensive, like feeding the people in the village, building a shrine, using expensive material like ghee, milk, and abundance of fruits and other things as ritual offering. Sometimes similar ceremonies are conducted to the sacred animals too, such as monkey, cobra etc.

In the present government there is an enhanced financial support given to promote this kind of belief either with protection of cows at the cost of lives of so many people depending on by-products of cows, or cleaning Ganga at the expense of not bothering about other rivers! We have seen this done especially by the Madhya Pradesh government cancelling nutritious eggs for the school children or banning beef, which is the only cheap nutrient for all those who love beef and those who cannot afford other kinds of meat.⁴⁴

⁴² "Sacred books of the east; The Laws of Man", IX 334-5, ed., Max Muller. Quoted in Deepali Bhargava, *Manu Smriti; a sociological analysis*. Jaipur: Rawat publications, 1989, 196-97

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sonia Faleiro, "Saving the cows and Starving the Children", Deccan Herald, July 02, 2015, <http://www.epaper-hub.com/india/epaper/deccan-herald.aspx#.VZT45fmqqko>, accessed on July 4, 2015.

Along with this the concept of pure and impure has penetrated not only in food and ritual practices but also in various occupations, leading to the division of labour and dignity of labour. The jobs of the outcaste are generally considered menial. A Brahmin, in general, even if he or she were suffering in poverty would not do a job which the caste considers impure.

The Social Structures

In the Hindu society there is a unique social structure which is more culturally and religiously conditioned than based on economic status. This is called caste system; it is hierarchically arranged and is not found in other places in the world. In the caste system there is a division of labor. At the top are the *Brahmins* doing the priestly work, *Kshathriyas* involving themselves in politics, the *vaisyas* in business and *sudras* being in the service of the first three classes. These four castes could be again divided and subdivided into many sub castes. In addition to these four castes there is a section of people known as outcastes who were also known as “untouchables”. One’s behavior and social status, economic prosperity, freedom and opportunity etc. are closely related to this social system.

It is a divinized unjust social structure. In this structure there is no fair distribution of wealth. It can be seen as a historically created condition. These structures are the creation of human beings and of the institutions created by human beings in history.⁴⁵ These can be of various kinds, like caste system, patriarchy etc. These structures have been divinized and socialized by the dominant group of the society. The poor religiously accept the situation in which one is born. This unjust social structure is explained below.

Varnashrama Dharma or Caste System

Caste is an endogamous, ranked, occupationally defined group known as "*Jati*" in India.⁴⁶ It is a special phenomenon fully developed only in India and Sri-Lanka. The caste system is based upon the organization of society into four distinct classes. The criterion for this classification was originally the color of the skin and later occupation. Birth into a given caste is determined by *Karma*. One is expected to accept the caste and to fulfill the role assigned to it, that is, to do one's *Dharma*. The oppressive structures were divinized by making gods to sanction them. The caste system was a clever invention of the later Vedic

⁴⁵ “Poverty in India, Challenges and Responses”, ed., Murickan SJ, Bangalore: Xavier Board of Publications, 1988, 109–111.

⁴⁶ John H Bodley. “Cultural Anthropology; Tribes, States and the Global System”. Alta Maria Press, 2011, 327.

people, who found it to be a convenient way of perpetuating their religious distinction and social privileges.⁴⁷

To justify this, Manu has given a metaphysical dimension to this hierarchical division. He associated *tamas* (lowest of *gunas*) with plants, animals, *sudras* and barbarians. The wrestlers, actors and *Kshathriyas* come under the second *guna*, the *rajas*. And finally the *Brahmins*, *risis Brahma* etc come in the category of *Satwa* the highest of the *Gunas*.⁴⁸ Thus, Manu, the authors of scriptures, the interpreters, and the privileged castes of people justified the oppressive social structure.

Dehumanizing Tendencies

Despite certain constitutional provisions, oppression and open discrimination of the Dalits continues. This affects access to education and medical facilities, restricts settlement, mobility and employment. For instance, the most menial and often degrading tasks such as disposing of animals and cleaning human waste are always carried out by Dalits known as 'manual scavengers'. De-humanizing behavior results from the perception of Dalits as impure and polluted – 'untouchable'.⁴⁹

Pragmatically speaking, what is important for us 'here and now' is a dignified human living for the deprived sections of the people, and not an uncertain, hopeless, distant future. It is in this context that we need to interpret theo-philosophical texts so as to give a dignified, human existence to all.

In India, the vast majority of the poor belong to the lower castes and outcastes. This peculiar caste system, which has its source in religion has not only made the community poor, but also has snatched away the possibility of changing the social status. *Varnashrama dharma* has made poverty inherent; *Karma* has sustained it, and taken away freedom from a person. There is a promise of the possibility of a better living in the next birth to a person who has followed all the rituals in his or her lifetime. Centuries of psychological conditioning has made the people believe that wealth and status are associated with birth. Therefore, the poor see nothing unjust in a few people living a life of luxury while others starve.

The Caste System and Poverty

⁴⁷ Jayaram V. "Hinduism and Caste system", http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_caste.asp , accessed on July 4, 2015.

⁴⁸ "Profiles of poverty and Networks of Power", ed., Anand Amaldass. Madurai: DACA publications, 2001.

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⁴⁹ "Caste Discrimination in India", <http://abbayesu.com/caste/> accessed on July 3 2015.

Caste and poverty are intertwined. The lack of social status lies at the root of Dalit poverty. The policies of the Indian government focus on alleviating economic deprivation by providing education, employment and public services rather than freeing people from the social constraints of caste hierarchy. Entrenched social structure plays a greater role than all the above-mentioned policies. In other words, social structure is the root cause for economic poverty. One needs to transform the social structure to have economic prosperity. Good economic policies without change in social structure are like providing delicious dishes to a person whose hands and mouth are tied. Manu made it one of the foremost duties of the king to protect the structure of the society, lest it would disturb the social tranquility. He said, “The king should carefully compel the *vaisyas* and *sudras* to perform the work prescribed for them; for if these two castes swerved from their duties they would throw this whole world into confusion”⁵⁰. What Manu wanted was to perpetuate the system that would look after the material needs of *Brahmins* and *Kshathriyas*, who involved themselves in ritualism and politics. They survived because of the toil of the two lower castes. Therefore, the immediate wealth was centered on *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*. If they were to revolt, the upper castes would be extinct. Creating the fear of God in the hearts of people was one of the easy and effective methods of squeezing the wealth from the producers. The oppressive division of caste system has given rise to the poverty of the vast majority of people.

The Caste and Occupational Mobility

Eighty percent of the officers in the Indian Administrative Service, the Indian Foreign Service, and the Indian Police Service are drawn from the top ten percent of the population that is from the privileged classes.⁵¹ It is so because the caste system is hereditary; the occupational structure was also hereditary. No one had the freedom to choose the jobs that he or she desired. He or she had to do the job given to him or her even if it was not profitable. Since *purusharthas* (*Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha*) were linked with the higher caste, only they had social mobility. A *Brahmin* or a *Kshathriya* could change his occupation to agriculture, but lower caste persons could not engage in non-hereditary occupations. Sometimes a skilled and a competent person from the other castes cannot hold a high office, or involve in administration. This especially happens in village communities. The dominant castes have a vested interest in maintaining the economic backwardness of the lower castes and outcastes. The upper caste people control most of the *panchayats* and government

⁵⁰ A.E Punit “Profiles of Poverty in Indi” Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1982, 118-120.

⁵¹ Sebastian “Kappen, Jesus and Freedom”, 42.

agencies for rural development.⁵² Hence, the people were forced to take up jobs in which they were not interested. However they had to take to that work just because they had no other way of making a living.

The Caste and Income

While land ownership was, by and large, confined to the twice-born *varnas*, the actual tilling of the land was mainly the business of *sudras*, and the untouchables. The general tenor of Hinduism has been to encourage householders to enjoy material goods without deviating from the path of righteousness. A Hindu proverb says, "Fortune in full measure resides in trade and commerce, one half of that in agriculture, and one half again of that in service to the government; but the goddess of fortune quickly runs away from a beggar."⁵³ The lower castes of people, though they work more than the others, most of the time do not own anything and always depend on others. The untouchables as a community in particular have still lower socio-economic status. Thus, the lower your caste, the lower your income too.

Conclusion

The justification to this unjust system has been provided by the dominant section of the society through religion. Thus, religion becomes the expression of the dominant ideology of that particular society. Quite a lot of these existing modes of oppression, whether it is caste system or the status of women or discriminatory system of education etc., are cleverly justified by the religion.

Economic well-being is a must for self-actualisation. One's faith or religion should make one live life in a better and more meaningful way. In India religion is so much intertwined with our regular life, that it is active in every decision we take, and such a decision should enable the way of life to be more humane. However, religion seems to lead one to several misunderstandings, strife and, in this case, to economic deprivation.

Religions need to be interpreted in the context of contemporary reality. One such attempt in the Christian churches is the Liberation Theology. It is basically a social movement, and a school of thought, both of which react against human suffering due to poverty and various forms of oppression. The essence of liberation theology consists in an interpretation of Christian salvation that retains its transcendent eschatological content and

⁵² Ibid., 37.

⁵³ Swami Nikhilananda. "Hinduism: Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit"
http://www.ramakrishna.org/catalog/archive/Spirit_of_Hinduism.htm, accessed on July 1, 2015.

draws out its historical dimensions and their implications for personal life, the social sphere and the public action of the Church. Salvation contains various levels of liberation.⁵⁴ India has never been so forceful in articulating religion in the context. Some religious reformers such as Basavanna, Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati etc have brought some temporary changes. However the tentacles of religion are so strong it needs a revolution. According to Kappen,

Indian masses can achieve liberation only through a total revolution, consisting in a restructuring of both society and ideology. What is needed is nothing less than the creation of a new society in which the human person will be the highest value, one in which the good of all will consist in the full flowering of each individual, in which cooperation will replace competition, love will replace aggression, quality will replace quantity, the aesthetic will subsume the useful. It will have to be a society in which freedom will be realized not in spite of, but through one's fellowmen, in which commodities will take on the character of gifts, and the materialism of consumption will be replaced by the humanism of communion.⁵⁵

We need a new religion, which upholds human dignity, which condemns oppression and never justifies the inequality of the suffering, weaker section of people.

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⁵⁴ Roger Haight. "Liberation Theology". *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/liberation-theology>, accessed on July 1, 2015.

⁵⁵ Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 48.

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