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## **The Indian *Jāti*<sup>1</sup> and the European *Nation*: The Twins-Unlike Concepts of Mega-Tribal<sup>2</sup> Level**

*Abstract:* XXI Century requires new approach to mutual relations of civilizations, if we wish to avoid the fate predicted by Samuel Huntington. We have to study carefully and without prejudice our respective achievements and see whether we can run better each our own civilization. One such case is Europe and India or better the whole of South Asia. An oxymoron definition of their mutual relationship is suggested. They are “twins-unlike” civilizations, being similar on many counts but dissimilar as their ‘personalities’ go. The most fascinating confrontation in their respect is provided by comparison of two social entities: the European ‘nation’ and the India ‘caste’ as well as *umma* and *qaum*. The conclusion of this comparison is strikingly political. European Union could solve its problems with supra-national integration if Europeans remodel their sense of mega-tribal identity putting more stress on competence of their respective nations as the main national identity factor while the peoples of South Asia could solve the problem of painful division of the Subcontinent by bestowing paraphernalia of sovereignty upon the constituent parts of both India and Pakistan.

*Keywords:* *jāti*, caste, nation, mega-tribal identity.

The oft and on quoted first line of Kipling’s *Ballad of East and West*<sup>3</sup> has made many to think that the author of it was a herald of a sort of Euro-Asian apartheid which can never be bridged. But this is not so. It is enough to answer in affirmative a question whether what happens between Europe and Asia concerns already ‘two strong men’? A meeting on equal terms is possible only of equally strong partners and obviously not exclusively physical strength is meant here. There is no dearth of proofs that the era of absolute prevalence of the West over the East is *passé*. The first to contest the primacy of the West was Japan followed by the so called ‘Asian tigers’. Today we witness vigorous development of China and last but not least India is marking its

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<sup>1</sup> It is the only Indian term in writing of which we use diacritical mark for long ā, just in case a reader would wish to look up this word in Sanskrit dictionary. Otherwise the anglicised transcription has been adopted.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘mega-tribal’ is being introduced here in order to embrace both the idea of nation as well as that of caste.

<sup>3</sup> “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgement Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!” (Kipling, 1950, pp. 137–144).

presence among others in the software industry, Bangalore becoming fast the second largest 'silicon valley' of the world. If this be so, then—as Kipling wants—the two strong men already stand face to face so there is neither East nor West any more. This to my mind is the unmistakable sign of globalisation.

Nevertheless such meetings are heavily burdened with numerous misconceptions resulting from the fact that the West, following its victorious technological expansion, many a time imposed upon the East its language and consequently its own understanding or—more often than not—its misunderstanding of some basic ideas and concepts of the East, which—to start with—were wrongly defined and mistakenly named. Sometimes the scale of consequences of such errors is immense and they do not only prevent mutual understanding but also make it difficult for the intellectual elite of the East to define properly its own identity. We shall try to tackle this problem which belongs to the domain of inter-cultural studies but trespasses also into the field of sociology. To begin with we shall take one of the basic notions of Indian civilisation, which is the caste, i.e., *jāti*. Originally committed mistake in relation to Indian social reality, up to this day influences adversely not only the attitude of Westerners toward India and consequently toward their own civilisation, but also the self-appreciation of the Indian civilisation by the Indian intellectual elite itself, which to a large extent imbibed many a Western notion and a concept. This flaw up to now impoverishes both our own and our Indian friends' perception of reality at large and to a certain degree hampers or at least does not facilitate ripening of pan-European self-awareness. For apparently it is nowadays mainly through dialogue between civilisations that such ripening may take place.

Thus the immediate reason to tackle the problem of *jāti* and *nation* lies also outside India, in Europe. Nevertheless it should be of interest not only to Indians at large but also or even especially to Sanskrit scholars studying the traditional social doctrines of Indian antiquity which persist in having hold over social reality even down to this very day. The more so that it will be attempted to show how the study of the traditional social institutions of India may help in rationalising processes through which willy-nilly Europe will have to pass. The said reason is the vigorous process of European integration, which despite the current uneasy political and economical situation, will continue and—to be sure—should reach a positive result. The problems Europe—this north-western subcontinent of Eurasia—is currently facing are stupendous and while the process of unification within European Union will deepen, they are going to be even more challenging. This will be so because many nation-states find themselves under one political 'roof' or using the traditional Indian imagery under the '*shadow of one royal umbrella*.' At the moment most Europeans believe that it will be possible to co-ordinate policies of member states in such a way that they may preserve their full political sovereignty. But this is a fallacy. It becomes more and more evident while EU faces ever new and ever more demanding political exigencies close to its borders. The recent turmoil in the Arab world is the best example. But even earlier it became evident already in connection with the American war in Iraq and Afghanistan, that it is practically impossible to have one European foreign policy agreed upon by sovereign states. Even recently with Lady Ashton supposedly coordinating EU's foreign policy

some member states, including in this number Poland were not too ready to participate fully in the common policy towards Libya. At this moment an Indian reader of these words may ask a very natural question indeed: what role the experience of Indian civilisation may play in helping to solve European political problems?

In order to answer this question we have first to mark that both India or better South Asia<sup>4</sup> and Europe are twins-unlike civilisations—the oxymoron intended! Territory-wise both are huge subcontinents of Eurasia of comparable size. But while India is a monolithic land mass, Europe is a sort of ‘funny’ peninsula, riddled with many ‘Mediterranean’ seas<sup>5</sup>. In both cases climatic variety between North and South is comparable, though both are very much unlike, taking into consideration the average annual temperature, which of course is much higher in India.<sup>6</sup> Although from the point of view of the population, India scores over Europe, yet the ethnic variety of both populations is very much alike,<sup>7</sup> as indeed the variety of spoken languages. In this case linguistic variety matches ethnic variety. In India it seems to be more pronounced than in Europe, for there we deal with at least four major language families, i.e., Indo-European (or Indo-Aryan), Dravidian, Tibeto-Burmese and Munda, while in Europe Indo-European definitely prevails. The number of speakers of the Finno-Ugric family is not many. To this we may add the large variety of scripts used in India and practically only the Roman script prevalent in most of Europe, with Cyrillic used by Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Serbs and the Greek alphabet prevalent in Greece and in the Greek part of Cyprus.

Similar variety concerns customs followed and confessions professed. But at the same time in both cases most obviously we have a common denominator of classical heritage connected with Sanskrit, Prakrit and Pali languages in India and Latin, Greek and Hebrew in Europe. It even goes much further back to that remote epoch when the hypothetical Indo-Europeans were one people speaking one language<sup>8</sup> and up till now we cannot liberate ourselves from the patterns of thought which were established then.<sup>9</sup> This may be going too far back, yet without undue emphasis we may suggest that in the global village it may carry some emotionally important meaning.

Passing on to the history of both civilisations we see that it is very comparably indeed ridden by wars and strife but at the same time marked by fabulous development

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<sup>4</sup> South Asia is a sub-region of Asia comprising the modern states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC]. It covers about 5143,5 thousand square kilometers. *Uniwersalna Encyklopedia* 2006, p. 96–7.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Jelonek (1966) mentions 27 such inland seas.

<sup>6</sup> In the Indian Subcontinent the maximal one is +26,8°C and minimal is +18.10°C. In case of the European Subcontinent it is +17.11°C and –8.08°C (*Geograficzny atlas świata*, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> The population of the Indian subcontinent [SAARC countries] as in 2005 is 1462,671 thousand (*Uniwersalna Encyklopedia* 2006, p. 96–7). It is three times as large as that of Europe (513,000,000 [1994] without the European part of the erstwhile USSR [*Geograficzny atlas świata*, 1997]).

<sup>8</sup> “Without placing too much reliance on the actual absolute figures produced by glottochronology, we may note that the lexicostatistician, Norman Bird, has reported a strong co-occurrence of Indic with Iranian words: 85 per cent of Iranian words from his list have Indic equivalences... 77 percent of Hittite words in the list have co-occurrences with Indic roots too.” Renfrew 1987, p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Mallory 1989, p. 272.

of culture, science and technical skills and also by periods of unity and peace. In both cases also we have very distinct common value-systems and common aesthetic sensitivity though at the same time they are very different in character from each other.

We may thus safely conclude that both Europe and India may be considered twins who—not unlike those of the Bollywood films—were separated of yore<sup>10</sup> and nursed into adulthood by two different mothers: Mother Europe and Mother India.<sup>11</sup> Consequently they have become very much unlike as ‘personalities,’ at the same time being very much alike so far as their basic structure goes. It has been necessary to resort to the above argument in order to establish a viable premise for comparison, which is justified on the one hand by similarity while on the other differences make it exciting and edifying.

At this turn we have to explain reasons of our temerity to deal, without proper training in social sciences, with what appears to be largely a sociological problem. Yet, we trust that an outsider philologist may sometimes succeed in drawing attention to problems which Western science may tend to overlook. Here I mean the indigenous ancient Indian achievement in social sciences. The social structure of traditional Hindu society, well argued by indigenous scholarship<sup>12</sup> has been a domain of careful study also outside India for a very long time. It is enough to mention the classic *Homo hierarchicus* by Louis Dumont, published in 1966 and listing already on twenty pages books and articles mainly dealing with this topic. Ever since this bibliography multiplied and today it will probably include close to one thousand books not to count numberless articles in scientific journals. But we are not aware of any effort to treat indigenous Indian sociological concepts as valid points of reference in the evaluation of Western social reality. In such circumstances it is certainly very risky to venture into this field with a new concept of comparative nature at that. We decided to take this risk because in the given circumstances publication is the only way to verify the viability of the said concept.

The initial inspiration came from the field of linguistics. It was among others Dumont who refers the Indo-European provenance of the word *jāti* which means ‘birth’ (*naissance*).<sup>13</sup> We may add that it is derivative of the verb  $\sqrt{jan}$  meaning ‘to generate, beget, produce, create, cause.’<sup>14</sup> Now, as the French word as well as its English counterpart ‘Nativity’, which are cognate terms of the word ‘nation’ indicate, that this word being derivative of the Latin (*g*)*nascor*, *natus*, which means ‘to be born’ has to

<sup>10</sup> East Anatolia may be considered part “of the early ‘homeland’ of people speaking a very early form of Indo-European, around 7000 BC.” Renfrew 1987, pp. 174, 266, 269, 272.

<sup>11</sup> According to Popko, the forefathers of Aryas left Anatolia and sometime during second millennium BC reached India. This might have happened after last glacial period and that it is difficult to determine the motive that made them leave more hospitable region for less hospitable one. Thus the hypothesis that deluge might have been responsible for the dispersion of Indo-Europeans acquires considerable probability. Popko, 2003, pp. 145–148

<sup>12</sup> We keep in mind here the ancient sphere of scientific enquiry called *dharmasāstra* and the classic treatise entitled *Mānavadharmasāstra*.

<sup>13</sup> Dumont 1966, p. 55 & 161.

<sup>14</sup> Monier-Williams 1899, p. 410. It may be added that in modern Bengali language *jāti* means also ‘nation’.

carry that meaning too, since the Latin word *natio* denotes ‘tribe’, ‘generation’, ‘category of people.’<sup>15</sup> It appears therefore that the birth factor must have been crucial in coining these two terms in both civilisations. Could they then denote social categories somehow corresponding with each other? Our contention is that they play similar role in their respective civilisations bestowing upon their members comparable sense of belonging and comparable awareness of the group identity albeit appealing to different sensitivities (*sic!*). Thus we feel that the question as to how comes that Europe finds it so difficult to create one polity while India covering most of South Asia, on the whole finds one common polity quite congenial may be answered convincingly while invoking unusual correspondence of the notions of *jāti* and ‘nation.’ We may add that it is not easy for Europeans to define state in terms of civilisation rather than in terms of nation, while for Indians the same is perfectly natural and legitimate. Here of course the political correctness would suggest the view that there is one Indian nation and therefore the Republic of India is the nation-state like any one in Europe. Yet, such an assumption cannot be accepted. It suffices to have a cursory look at the ways nation is thought about in Europe. Ernest Gellner offers two, what he calls, provisional definitions of nation, which he considers on the whole to be an elusive concept. The first one includes sharing the same culture, i.e., system of ideas, signs, associations, ways of behaving and communicating. To our mind this definition to a large extent applies to civilization as well. The second appears to have also a subjective tinge and consists of mutual recognition by members of one nation of their membership. Since these—he holds—are nations that make man. According to him

nations are the artifacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation, and not the other shared attributes, whatever they might be, which separate that category from non-members.<sup>16</sup>

Further on Gellner draws our attention to cultural homogeneity that according to him is demanded by nationalism. He concludes “that a homogeneity imposed by objective, inescapable imperative eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism.”<sup>17</sup> We would suggest that four underlined aspects of Gellner’s opinion could be understood as the four main standard identifiers of a nation in Europe—more or less universally acknowledged, which in principle are: one language spoken throughout entire territory, native state executing sovereign rights over it and safeguarding mutual rights and duties, as well as the cultural and we would add ethnic

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<sup>15</sup> Nation c. 1300, from O.Fr. *nacion*, from L. *nationem* (nom. *natio*) “nation, stock, race,” lit. “that which has been born,” from *natus*, pp. of *nasci* “be born” (Old L. *gnasci*; see *genus*). Political sense has gradually taken over from racial meaning “large group of people with common ancestry.” Older sense preserved in application to N.Amer. Indian peoples (1640s). Nation-building first attested 1907 (implied in nation-builder). [<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nation>] (29.04.2011).

<sup>16</sup> Gellner 1983, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit. p. 39.

homogeneity. About the last one Europeans are less explicit after the morbid experience of the II World War, but it still plays a considerable role in our perception of nation-state.

Now looking at India we notice that in spite of efforts to introduce one language, this identifying factor has been lacking up to this very day, nothing to say about ethnic homogeneity which is unthinkable for a population of more than one billion people. Yet this by no means makes the Indian state less viable because of considerable cultural or better 'civilizational' homogeneity, which the Subcontinent owes to the Hindu society organised according to *varna-jāti* principle prevalent in the Indian heartland.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand one can hardly talk in the Indian context about Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil or for that matter Uttarpradeshi nations, although these entities are characterised by distinct common territory, language and even full-fledged though not sovereign but only autonomous state governments. Yet again ethnic homogeneity does not hold in all these cases. Still if the last criterion is not treated too rigorously, as indeed it is not any more in Europe, these Indian states on the surface seem to correspond perfectly to European nation-states. But while the citizens of the last are so attached to the idea of political sovereignty that they up till recently were ready to wage wars for its sake, the citizens of Indian states consider themselves just Indians and with some peripheral exceptions, which to my mind only confirm the rule, do not clamour for sovereignty being satisfied with the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of India. Consequently the question arises which factor is responsible for strong pan-Indian identity of the Indian people and which factor makes it so difficult for the people of Europe to transcend their narrower national identities in order to identify themselves in addition as Europeans.

Before we attempt to answer this question, let us try first to assess the social system of Europe, which we shall call national in contradistinction to the caste (rather strictly speaking: *varna-jāti*) social system of India. We shall try to look at it as if from the outside—a perspective which the author of this text acquired during fourteen years long stay in India. We shall also take into account the painful experience of the XX century history of Europe.

The idea of a nation-state appeared there only after the French Revolution in XIX century. According to Baszkiewicz modern national awareness connecting nation and state was born during the time of Napoleon and mistakes committed by the French emperor contributed overwhelmingly towards its strengthening while development of industrial civilisation additionally forged national bonds.<sup>19</sup> Tikekar also holds that

<sup>18</sup> It is true that in India, cultural homogeneity *sometimes* cuts across linguistic diversity: Hindus speak the same language' even when they do not speak the same language It is true that in India, cultural homogeneity *sometimes* cuts across linguistic diversity: Hindus 'speak the same language' even when they do not speak the same language (Gellner 1983, p. 109, Kedourie 1970, p. 20).

<sup>19</sup> Jan Baszkiewicz in his excellent essay in the Polish language entitled *State and Nation in Europe at the turn of XVIII and XIX centuries* gives also a brief account of how the idea fared in Europe and in the United States of America. He mentions two schools of thought concerning the idea of nation; one of Johann Gottfried Herder holding that nation is formed by phenomena independent of human will and often not even realised consciously, like common destiny, culture, customs and mother tongue. The other is the French school, which holds that nation is inherited from the past and forms itself as a result of conscious processes expressing human will and political will as well (Baszkiewicz 2005, p. 237).

development of modern nation state was linked to the industrial revolution, capitalism and a drive to create a common national culture and a common language. Along with capitalism the nation state has been a dominant Eurocentric paradigm for collective political organization and economic development as Europe experienced symbiotic development of 'state, nation and market.'<sup>20</sup>

The comparative latecomers as nation-states to the political scene of Europe were Germany preceded by Italy. The so called First World War being indeed a more or less domestic European war was the first massive evidence that a concept of nation-state is not a good proposal. Yet, this warning went unheeded by Europeans and they needed yet another bloody lesson of the so called Second World War—this time the name being more justified since Europeans managed to get many more outsiders than before involved in their domestic slaughter. Further on the throes, through which the Balkans<sup>21</sup> has gone not so long ago, is the fresh case of the same illness which affects Europe. Other examples are not lacking.

The basic premise of the argument that follows is that the mega-tribal identity of the Europeans found its expression and fulfilment in the shape of a nation-state. Common language and by implication common culture, territory and state-machinery have become indispensable 'identity factors' of such nation-state, to be supplemented with one more such identifier which we have already mentioned, i.e., ethnic homogeneity. Let it be repeated that nowadays after the morbid experience of the Holocaust during World War II, it is not any more politically correct to speak about nation in terms of its ethnic homogeneity and normally the term nation is understood much more as tantamount to the Latin *civitas*, i.e., citizenship. We in Europe conveniently forget about the etymology of it although, what we may call 'womb factor,' has invariably been very powerful in the self-perception of the nationhood.

In as much as officialdom tries to ignore it, in so much an average representative of each European nation treats it as a fairly important feature of national identity. If anyone would doubt this opinion, let him talk to the representatives of minorities in Europe—Gypsies, Jews, Arabs or Turks for that matter! Most certainly we have done a lot to make this discriminatory aspect of our social practice less obnoxious although it still is very much present. At the same time a strong doubt persists not only regarding the question whether it can be totally eliminated but whether it should be eliminated, since in a way it is only a broader aspect of family identity, the social *bona fide* of which no one even tries to question. For can we question the positive import of tribal identity which bestows upon us a sense of belonging and of loyalty due to blood relations? Hearing a familiar name we become positively alert to the fact that the bearer of this name belongs to our tribe. He might share our values and we may even find common relatives. What is then wrong with the European mega-tribes called nations that this aspect of their identity is shamefully excluded from modern

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<sup>20</sup> Tikekar 2008, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> The Balkan wars were a series of conflicts that led to the disintegration of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Occurring over a decade-long period between 1991 and 2001, these conflicts ultimately affected all six former Yugoslav republics—allegiances were largely split along republic borders. All of the conflicts had underlying ethnic, political and religious origins [<http://www.squidoo.com/Bosnia>] (29.05.2011).

socio-political discourse? What accounts for the fact that the etymology of the word 'nation' is consequently ignored?

Well, the reason lies in the nation-state concept, or to put it even more explicitly in the concept of one nation, one state and one leader (*Ein Volk, ein Reich und ein Führer*). This idea has been greatly discredited in the aftermath of the Second World War which was churned up with the slogans of the Nordic racial purity of Germanic peoples. It triggered a morbid process of putting into practice a maniacal theory that those of other races and especially those in Europe who tried to assert their homogenous nationhood even while they could neither claim their exclusive territory, common language nor their own state, have to be exterminated. No doubt we think here about the Jews and the Gypsies whose fate left a shameful stigma on the European civilisation, which cannot shun her responsibility for what happens now in the Middle East between Arabs and Jews who were practically evicted out of Europe. Even up till now similar problems have been haunting Europe in the Balkans, in Chechnya, Bask country and till recently the Northern Ireland. Europe finds it quite difficult to cope with these challenges. It smacks of a derision when we invoke Christian values of neighbourly love and universal unity in Christ but are unable tolerate people ethnically and culturally different and even shorn of ambitions to create their separate state, when they wish only to share the same territory with us, although there is enough space for all of us. Let us repeat with emphasis that this incapacity of European civilisation stems from the fact of a deeply ingrained fear that each and every mega-tribe called nation sooner or later will have to claim their separate territory neatly drawn on the map and carefully fenced out with barbed wire in real space; will wish to organise their own state administration and will introduce their own official language and finally purge such state of every alien ethnic element. May the Indian reader of this lines rest assured that this type of thinking is still fairly widespread in Europe and it is because of this that the Jews found it impossible to live as a distinct, though stateless nation in Europe, while in India they lived in peace for centuries as a separate caste (*jāti*)! Consequently they had to return after more than a millennium to their original homeland thus creating a new problem not only for the Middle East but for the entire world. The process of European unification may become an antidote to the illness diagnosed above but Europeans lack a proper perspective to apply suitable treatment. The social reality of India can provide such perspective.

The point of departure for the argument proposed is that the mega-tribal identity of Indians realised itself in the form of a *jāti*, i.e., a caste. Competence or occupation<sup>22</sup> has become the paramount identifier of it, closely followed by the notion of ritual purity which—we would insist—is an aftermath of the idea of competence considered as a primary criterion. Since we have to remember that originally the central point of reference so far as the competence of different members of the society went, was the sacrifice, i.e., *yajna*—an absolutely pivotal concept for the *varna* social system of which *jāti* is an integral component. It is the character of the involvement in sacrifice

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<sup>22</sup> Dirks 2001, p. 49.



understood both as a liturgical act as well as the mechanism of entire existence, which determines particular competence of each and every participant and also determines the required degree of his ritualistic purity. This is the proper meaning of the *varna* passages of the Vedic hymn entitled '*Man (Purusha)*,'<sup>23</sup> which by deriving *Brahmins* from the mouth of *Purusha*, a *Kshatriyas*—from his arms, a *Vaishyas*—from his thighs and a *Shudras*—from his feet established the criteria of competence, which are valid universally. Since there can be little doubt that men occupy their given position in the society because of what they know, because of the power they wield, because of their economical means and last but certainly not least because of what they can do using their physical strength and the skill of their hands. While the three following *varnas* are self-explanatory, the first one requires certain elucidation. The name proper of the member of this *varna*, i.e., *Brahmin*, means 'the one who possesses *brahman*.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, the one who knows the *Veda*, which at that time was tantamount to knowledge as such. The term *vidvan* (knower) constitutes its equivalent. In the light of what has been said so far, it should be stressed that considering the *Purushasukta* a stratagem of cunning *Brahmins*, which was meant to ensure this *varna*'s paramount control over the rest of the society, is not correct. It simply testifies to the fact that subsequent malpractice of the system overshadowed its honest theoretical premises, one of which most obviously was the organic interdependence of all the four *varnas*, exactly the way the four enumerated parts of the body of *Purusha* are interdependent. The *varna* society was conceived as an organic whole, a harmoniously co-operating social entity resembling modern societies, within which people are grouped according to their competence and of which trade unions are a modern expression and governments by system of licences and diplomas ensure that only competent persons will be allowed to be active in professional walks of life. We may remember that the sacrificial fire of the ancient Aryans, a huge liturgical undertaking, required clear division of duties. There should be those who know the purpose for which it is lit and can elucidate it in words as well as know that fire is latent in dry pieces of wood, which require rubbing in order to generate it. There should also be those who would be responsible for organising the work, for securing and preparing the ground for sacrifice and for protecting it from any external threat. Further on, there have to be those, who would supply commodities, which are to be cooked (offered as oblation!) and fuel. Finally those also are unavoidable, who will do all the menial jobs involved and remove the remnants considered impure. If we translate this scheme into contemporary conditions, we may say that *Shudras* would be all those working nowadays in what broadly we know as services. *Vaishyas* would be all those running economy, finances and trade. *Kshatriyas* would be those responsible for administration, security and defence as well as government, so in their ranks active politicians will also be counted. Finally *Brahmins* will be all those, who due to the knowledge they possess function in education, research and in the field of science serving the entire society with their advise also as philosophers and priests, and most naturally acting as its intellectual and spiritual

<sup>23</sup> For *Purushasukta* (RV. X.90. 11–12) see Panikkar 1977, pp. 72–77.

<sup>24</sup> The meaning implied here is 'the sacred word,' 'the Veda,' 'a sacred text.'

leaders. This is precisely stated in the *Bhagavadgita* when Lord *Krishna* says: “I have created the four varnas according to the division of attributes and actions.”<sup>25</sup>

At this stage we have to bring up the notion of *varnadharma*. Yet, first of all the term *dharma* alone has to be properly understood.<sup>26</sup> A common English equivalent of this term is religion. Those better informed would opt for virtue or law. None of these does real justice to the term. “Dharma is the nature of thing” holds the Jaina treatise entitled the *Karttikeyanupreksha*.<sup>27</sup> It is this definition which makes this term all-embracing one. Everyone knows that any Sanskrit-English dictionary would offer at least two–three dozens of English equivalents of this term.<sup>28</sup> On closer scrutiny practically all of them may be reduced—or better—derived from this basic meaning, even the Buddhist *dharmas* or *dhamma*. Another important definition of the term comes probably from Shankaracarya<sup>29</sup> and it runs as follows: “what upholds the worlds is dharma.”<sup>30</sup> Most obviously ‘the nature of things’ upholds worlds. All whatever surrounds us is endowed with its proper nature. Liquidity is the nature of water, heat—the nature of fire and speech—the nature of men. And what is the nature of human society? What is its *dharma*? Yes, it is *varna* and *jāti*. It is hoped that after what has been said above such thesis will not appear presumptuous. The indisputable authority of the *Bhagavadgita* already referred to can be invoked in support of such contention. To this we may add the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi himself who wrote in the *Harijan* (September 28, 1934):

The very first mention of varna in the Vedas likens the four varnas to the four main parts of the body. Is the head superior to the arms, the belly and the feet, or the feet superior to the other three? What will happen to the body, if these members began a quarrel about the rank? The law of varna is one of absolute equality among all the creatures of God.<sup>31</sup>

Further on he wrote (March 25, 1939) that “varna does not connote superiority, it connotes different functions and different duties.”<sup>32</sup>

All this granted one serious objection has to be raised. This objection is very strongly voiced indeed by the Western critics of the system. It assumes the form of an outright and most vehement criticism and opposition in India especially on the part of those who are termed ‘untouchables’. The objection concerns the fact that belonging to this or that *varna* is a birth right. In order to try to understand how it has come about we have to analyse another aspect of the traditional Indian social fabric, i.e., *jāti*—commonly known as caste.

<sup>25</sup> Edgerton 1965, p. 24 (IV.13). This translation is rather cryptic if not mistaken for it interprets *chaturvarnyam* as “the fours caste-system.” This is wrong for *varna* is not caste but it is a fourfold categorisation of castes according to competence and ritualistic purity. Caste is called *jāti* in Sanskrit.

<sup>26</sup> Byrski 2006–7, p. 63–70.

<sup>27</sup> *This Jaina treatise formulates this definition as follows: dharmah vastusvabhāvah.* Svāmi-Kumāra 1997, p. 364 (XII.478).

<sup>28</sup> See Monier-Williams 1899, p. 510.

<sup>29</sup> The famous Indian philosopher (788–820 CE).

<sup>30</sup> Sanskrit: *dhārayati lokān iti dharmah.*

<sup>31</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, 1985, p. 360.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

*Varnas*, i.e., very broad groups of society defined by competence, primarily based on the premises determined by the exigencies of the sacrificial ritual found solid grounding in the *jāti*, i.e., caste.<sup>33</sup> Philology is such a discipline of humanities that pays paramount attention to language and text. Words, their etymology and semantic significance are very important in this field. Thus it is crucial to see what these two words really mean. *Jāti* as a derivative of the Sanskrit verb ‘to be born’ means ‘birth,’ ‘production’ and also a particular group of people into which one is born. The easiest way to explain that is to refer to the body which is given to man at the moment of conception. The nature of our body is well known. We know well what to do in order that it may serve us roughly speaking these hundred years, which are given to man as natural, maximal longevity of his life. Acting according to this knowledge is our *dharma*, our duty. Now, what would be the nature of human multitude, which we call society? What society has as its nature—its *svabhava*? What is it that should be sustained (*dhrita*) in order that it guarantees the optimal conditions for individuals, who create it?

Such system in ancient India, which we have already alluded to above, was called *varnadharma*. Among other meanings of the term *varna* ‘property’ also is included.<sup>34</sup> This is a category of competence *par excellence*. As we have already mentioned there are four *varnas* of the traditional Indian society and for their existence the *Purushasukta* of the *Rigveda* is usually held to book because it sanctifies this ‘clever stratagem’ aimed at the creation of hierarchic order and securing for *Brahmins* a dominant position. With the notable exception of Mahatma Gandhi rarely indeed the organic interrelation of social functions is pointed to as the main idea of the hymn. Not so often also attention has been given to the otherwise obvious fact that the four functions or if we continue to call them as above—the four competences enumerated have obvious universal import. It was a study of Polish scholar Stefan Kurowski entitled *The Theory of Kratoses* in which he, while trying to rationalise and explain the social processes that resulted in the Solidarity movement in Poland and consequently in the downfall of communism in our country, formulated the thesis that those processes resulted from natural tension between knowledge and work, which are more productive when diffused, i.e., when more and more people are participating and power and wealth, which always tend to be centralised or to be concentrated. From this observation there was just one step to formulating an idea of four basic competences of *homo socialis*. These competences determine particular social roles of individuals such as work, power, wealth and knowledge. We can easily notice that they correspond perfectly with the vision of the *Purushasukta* and by the way, most probably it was not

<sup>33</sup> Singh 2003, *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> Joanna Jurewicz drew my attention yet to one more meaning of this word, i.e., a letter, sound, vowel, syllable and word, which may have been substantial in the context discussed. Categorization of human competences of course requires suitable terminology. As *varnas* denote order of sounds, so applied to human beings they signify social order. Writes she in a paper to be published soon in “*Oriental Studies—Past and Present*.” Proceeding of the International Conference of Oriental Studies, Warsaw, 2010, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, vol. 65, 1, 2012. “...the use of the word *varnas* to denote social classes could be motivated not only by the anthropological features of the people but also by thinking about language as the social phenomenon. The social states are the *varnas*, sounds of the God’s language...”

the source of inspiration for the author of this concept. The only difference is that knowledge is mentioned last on the list of the Polish scholar.<sup>35</sup>

In the light of what has been said above, the universal character of these criteria does not provoke objections. Modern societies are organised according to this principle as well and social roles are most obviously determined by what one knows (scholars, intellectuals, teachers, experts, engineers, free professions), by what one is able to achieve thanks to the power at one's disposal (politicians, administrators, military, police), by what means (financial mainly) one possesses (business people and manufacturers) and finally by what one can do offering his services in more or less physical sense (workers and servants of any kind). Practically the only objection that can be levelled against the *varna* system is connected with its hereditary character. Was it not because of that, the system could have been perfectly acceptable. Let us then try to see the logic behind the notion of heredity, which provokes so much criticism both in and outside India.

Now it is high time to have a closer look at the concept of *jāti*. As it is well known this term in European languages has been replaced by the word 'caste.' The "culprits" were for sure the Portuguese, who used this word at home with respect to their social divisions and found it a convenient appellation for the Indian *jāti*.<sup>36</sup> But the term 'caste' is also a cognate one of the Latin '*castus*', which means 'pure'. One wonders whether cleanliness both in the purely hygienic sense as in the ritualistic one, which constitutes a very important aspect of the idea of caste and one of the two most important parameters of its identity, was not also at play in this case? Was it not this very aspect that impressed the first Portuguese who, when confronted with the Indian social system might have been struck by the sensitivity of Indians in this respect? Pure-impure, touchable-untouchable are the notions that to this very day determine behaviour of many people in India. So it is not surprising that several centuries back this could have struck so much that anonymous Portuguese, who decided then, that the word '*castus*' will be the most appropriate one to call the social group otherwise called by the Indians themselves a *jāti*. To repeat—this term—an obvious derivate of the verb  $\sqrt{jan}$ —to be born, in contradistinction to the term 'caste', refers specifically to the genetic factor and most naturally implies also genetic purity of birth. Still, the most important aspect of its meaning is some sort of the genetic interrelation of all members of the group. Thus such kind of community is implied here, which with regard to primitive societies is called a tribe. It seems therefore, that in the context of the Indian civilisation the primitive idea of tribal community lays at the basis of the notion of caste. We shall call it a mega-tribal community, since most obviously it transcends such notions like that of a family or a clan as well as a tribe itself. It is precisely as in the case of the European idea of a nation. One of the important additional differences is the fact of lesser numeric strength and territorial spread of caste as compared to nation. It would be decidedly a mistake to treat caste as

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<sup>35</sup> Kurowski, 1983, *passim*. The Greek term *kratos* means "strength, power, rule." See also: Byrski 1980-1, p. 654-661.

<sup>36</sup> Rothermund 2010, p. 199.

something imposed *per force* and to be rejected as soon as a possibility of rejection appears. The caste system does not owe its existence to violence or coercion directed against men free by nature. If we would treat caste in this way, we would have to treat nation in the same manner. In both cases we do not select our identity but it is given to us by the fact of being born from the womb of our mothers, who belong to particular social group be it nation or *jāti*. The acceptance of such identity is an aftermath of the fact that man is “a slave of the womb”. Until now—thanks God—there is only this unique way of entering society by every human being! So it hardly can be ignored.

One of the very important reasons of the persistence of the institution of caste has been the fact that the Indian civilisation until modern times did not replace oral transmission of knowledge with the written (or printed) one. In such way it became an additional bond, which cemented the Indian *jāti*. For it has been within its framework that not only the DNA was being inherited but also it guaranteed the optimal mode of transmission of particular competence beginning with early childhood. The positive aspects of caste should not of course divert our attention from the negative ones, which can hardly be condoned. One of such aspects is that all those aboriginal tribes forced to assume competences treated by the caste society as impure and ignoble like sanitation etc. are subjected to abysmal humiliation. Although they have right to exist still they are often treated like animals or even worse than animals. But even then they have hardly been threatened with total extermination. The so called untouchables about whom we think here are a proof that the elites of the Vedic society could not properly discern the message of the *Purushasukta*. It does not provide sanction for eliminating any group of men from the scheme of the mystic body of *Purusha* and it forcefully establishes each and every man as *chaturvarnya*, i.e., possessing of four competencies—as long as he has capacity to speak and to ignite fire! The social division of competences is the result of projection of competences of individuals that make up society and of the need to have highest possible degree of specialisation and efficiency.

These disabilities of the caste social system are well matched by the disabilities of the national social system of Europe. The mega-tribes of Europe, which because of some reason or other did not manage to acquire all three parameters of national identity, i.e., state, territory and language and wanted to function as castes (Jews and Gypsies for instance) in the last count were threatened with total extermination, for which indeed not only the Nazis have been responsible but a sort of deification of the idea of nation-state, which is still pretty pandemic in Europe. If this is not enough we can add to the list two World Wars and of course their numerous victims that were sacrificed on the altar of insatiable divinity of the (un)holy nation-state.

The carelessness of the Portuguese and other Europeans, applying the language of their own ideas to the description of other civilisation, I hold responsible for convincing the Westernised Indian elites that the caste system is evil to the backbone and that it should be eliminated. In a similar way the English managed to convince many Indians that *dharma* is just religion and that—for that matter—we can separate it from politics, as if politics could have been deprived of its *dharma*, i.e., its proper nature. In order to understand the predicament of India it suffices to imagine what sort of trauma Europeans would have to go through if someone would manage to

convince our elites that nations are integrally bad and they have to be eliminated, if only because so much injustice has been committed in their name. Since in both cases it is totally impossible, we have to look for other solutions of the problems that our civilisations face. The integration of nation-states within the European Union is the way we in Europe try to cope with the problem of practical deification of nation-state that triggered innumerable conflicts including two world wars. In India on the other hand it is needed to change attitude towards the basic parameter of mega-tribal identity, i.e., mutual relationship of *varnas* and *jātis*. Traditionally four *varnas* represent the criteria of competence according to which *jātis* are classified and grouped. Since nowadays the transfer of competence is no more taking place exclusively through oral communication, there is no need any more to effect such transfer within genetically interconnected group of people, i.e., caste, which previously guaranteed optimal achievement in this respect. But it does not need to invalidate *varnas* as criteria of competence. Since, as we have already mentioned, each and every individual human being is endowed with these four competences so is each and every segment of society. Thus any meaningful reform of traditional Hindu society should envisage a possibility of applying the criterion of *varna* within each *jāti*. This already happens as indeed it has been happening all along within nations<sup>37</sup> and it would be enough to show that this process does not contradict the traditional system but is only its adaptation to the new situation. First and foremost it should be done and is being already *jāti* done through the process of educating intellectual elite (i.e., three upper *varnas*) within those *jātis* that have traditionally been deprived of such elite. Self respect of each *jāti* will depend on their ability to generate and internal *varna* system. In short the remedy is proper interaction of the two principles—*varna* and *jāti*. We have to realise that the role of the *varna* principle does not exhaust itself while it is applied to any society taken as a whole. But it applies itself continually when any group of people tries to organise itself for the sake of participation in the doings of civil society. This as a matter of fact is now happening in India. Participation in the democratic procedures results in making the intellectual elites emerge in each and every caste and consequently a pride of belonging to it—no matter what its traditional position had been. Dalits, known earlier as untouchables, are the best extreme example, since originally they were refused the status of full-fledged human beings.<sup>38</sup> Yet, by no means is it the only one. It seems therefore that the reform of the so-called cast system is already taking place. What it requires is awareness that the Vedic *Purusha* while sacrificing himself and thus fashioning out of himself human society, even more forcefully acknowledged the fact that each and every human being is by its very nature *chaturvarnya*. If so then the feet of God out of which *shudras* were

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<sup>37</sup> Our Indian friends should know that the role, which the Nazis ascribed to Poles, was that of menials exclusively and that they did their level best during World War II to eliminate the three upper *varnas* of our society physically in order to turn us into slaves. In the Indian context, in the past this used to be achieved by forbidding lowest castes even to listen to the Vedas being recited—Vedas, which were tantamount to knowledge.

<sup>38</sup> Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) responsible for drafting the Constitution of India and Kocheril Raman Narayanan (1921–2005) the tenth President of the Republic of India, both were Dalits (untouchables) highly respected.

created do not deserve lesser respect than those created out of His head, arms or thighs.

Apart from Hindu social reform, there is one more problem that desperately awaits solution in India. This is the apparent divergence of interests of the two major communities of the Indian Subcontinent: Hindu and Muslim. This problem in our view is also directly connected with the way both communities perceive their mega-tribal identity. Enough has been said above about the self-awareness of mega-tribal identity of the Hindus. We hold that in their case it is the caste that canalises all requirements of belonging to a genetically interrelated group of people and thus permits them to enjoy what could be called 'the security of identity'. What then could guarantee such security to Muslims? We submit that Muslims see as the indispensable parameters of their mega-tribal identity and security the Muslim state exercising sovereignty over particular territory and in somewhat special sense—the language (of the Holy Koran). It is for us rather obvious that this alongside the fear that becoming powerless minority in the democratic political system, which in their eyes is tantamount to the autocratic rule of majority, were two main reasons for the demand of separate state. Already in XIX century Sayyid Ahmed Khan [1817–1898] voiced such an opinion:

Now suppose that all the English were to leave India. Then who would be the rulers of India? Is it possible that two qaums—the Muslim and Hindu—could sit on the same throne? Most certainly no! It is necessary that one of them will conquer the other and thrust it down.<sup>39</sup>

It was of course quite easy to answer the question, which one of the two would stand better chance to be thrust down. The problem was further complicated since because of their religion preaching equality of men, Muslims refused to accept the inequality of caste status. Especially since so far as their eating habits go, (they would not be prepared to give up eating beef), they practically could be considered only as outcasts by the orthodox Hindus. This situation seems to defy any remedy. Yet, in this respect it is the political model in the form of a union fashioned on the pattern of EU, which to our mind could offer acceptable solution by harmonising local sovereignty within continental political cooperation, thus giving Muslims assurance that their way of life regulated by *shariat* law will not be endangered.

Although in 1947 the Republic of India was divided in a way similar to Europe into several states based upon the linguistic principle and although each of these states got its clearly delimited territory as well as the self-government of considerable autonomy, still none of the states within the heartland of traditional caste system significantly clamoured for sovereignty. Such a demand was made only by Muslims, by Sikhs and by some frontier tribes, which do not owe any allegiance to the caste system. Would Marathas, Gujaratis, Bengalis or Tamilians have had entertained real national ambitions in the sense ascribed to such ambitions in Europe, India would not have survived as a democratic state. She would have either disintegrated into so many sovereign states or else would have turned into an autocratic totalitarian state long ago. As we tried to show these ambitions are in traditional Indian society placed elsewhere,

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<sup>39</sup> Gandhi 1990, p. 36.

i.e., in the *jātis*. It is therefore without any threat to the real unity of the Republic of India, that her Parliament by its sovereign decision could bestow upon the present states the paraphernalia of sovereignty, remodelling the Federal Republic of today into the South Asian Union<sup>40</sup> of tomorrow. In such way the problem of Kashmir would be automatically solved. For such unilateral decision of the Indian Parliament could evoke similar response from the Pakistani Parliament to do the same with respect to the four constituent provinces of that country that nowadays enjoy only limited autonomy but by no means have been fully integrated into one monolithic nation. If the political thinking on both sides of the frontier and the Line of Control quickened by the disastrous earthquake some time ago could become capable of considering such solutions, the perennial problem of the Subcontinent would be solved. For the postulated South Asian Union would in its capacity of a *rashtra* (*civitas*)<sup>41</sup> guarantee in equal measure security for the Hindu and the Muslim mega-tribal identity.

In this context there is yet one more very urgent and purely political challenge that India has to face. It is the so called 'Chinese necklace' patiently and persistently built around India in Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan by Chinese Peoples Republic. If India wishes to score over China and win upper hand in wooing her smaller neighbours, she has to prove her sincere belief in democracy and in fair treatment of smaller states in international relations. I am absolutely sure that India's smaller neighbours seeing Kashmir, Meghalaya, Mizoram etc. enjoying sovereign rights within South Asian Union and observing the burgeoning, huge free market within that Union, would willingly opt for joining it rather than be dominated by autocratic China. Still one more reward will be in store for both India and Pakistan. Over night they will gain so many votes in the United Nations. Then South Asian Union in concert with European Union could demand for the two Unions permanent seats in the Security Council, which may be occupied by rotation by the member states of both Unions!

Now, since we mentioned the North-Western Subcontinent of Eurasia called Europe, we are bound to notice that while the process of enlargement of the European Union continues and its inner cohesion grows although not without occasional setbacks, the European civilisation as a whole will have to become the main identity factor. In this light we have to reconsider the unquestioned so far prevalence in our thinking of locating our mega-tribal identity, which we call national in such ideas as sovereign state, sharply delimited territory and even our separate language. Especially that

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<sup>40</sup> This idea in somewhat different terms has been considered by Ranjit Kumar 2005, *passim*. The author suggests that the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation may be remade into South Asian Union. But the difference in size and power between India and all other member states of SAARC, including Pakistan precludes the success of this project.

<sup>41</sup> Very much welcome support in such an understanding of this term comes from Professor G. U. Thite, who holds that "there is no word for "nation" in Sanskrit. The word "rashtra" means state and not nation." This information I found on the jacket of *Kātyāyan-Śrautasūtra*, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi 2006. Yet, I would insist that the proper word for 'nation' in Sanskrit is *jāti*, although it does not mean that its understanding in India and in Europe is identical, but both cater to the same need of mega-tribal social security.



Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth... Nations are not inscribed into the nature of things, they do not constitute a political version of the doctrine of natural kind. Nor were national states the manifest ultimate destiny of ethnic or cultural groups.<sup>42</sup>

What then can be considered instead? It seems that the only identity factor, which would not threaten the European *civitas* with disruption, would be competence—something that stood the test of time in India although it did not emerge unscathed. The caste mentality is well satisfied with supra national (read: *para-jāti*) state. Caste does not require for itself a separate state. It requires a responsible one, which would guarantee to it its distinct identity and possibility to act within its proper competence. Such view-point seems to be endorsed by Gellner when commenting on educational system he writes that

The task with which that system is entrusted is to turn out worthy, loyal and competent members of the total society whose occupancy of posts within it will not be hampered by factional loyalties to sub-groups within the total community.<sup>43</sup>

The Swiss have a simple task. Their competence in banking, making cheese and watches as well as providing security guard to the Roman Pope is well known. Besides they do not use one language. So even if they are deprived of fully sovereign state and their frontiers from international ones turn into administrative ones, their identity will not be threatened. The same maybe said about any European nation provided it attaches more importance to its competences than to its frontiers. In a way it already began to happen in the domain of sports. Competence of our sportsmen feeds more and more our national pride and this trend spreads slowly to other domains of human activity.

So the time has come to reformulate and revalue determinants of our identity. Sovereign nation-states are blood drenched. Frontiers have been delimited with thousands of corpses of fallen soldiers. Let us hope that in the name of competence we shall not fight—we shall simply compete, while trying to avoid the pitfalls of the Indian caste system with its scorn for the lowly and with its inability to integrate those who define their identity differently—the sin equally stigmatising the national system of Europe, which brought about the Holocaust. In spite of its obvious blemishes, the caste system proved its competence in safeguarding mega-tribal identity during last over three thousand years. Let us then discard mental stereotypes and try to look at it impartially.

The European and Asian languages clutch themselves sometimes in a blind confrontation leading astray entire civilisations and making the true mutual understanding difficult. Providing proper form of inter-cultural communication among civilisations is a challenge of the XXI Century. There have to be established proper equivalences between the European languages used in Asia and Asian languages, which could eliminate such misnomers as calling *jāti*—caste and not nation and *dharma*—religion and not nature of things or eventually even culture. We do not advocate any

<sup>42</sup> Gellner 1983, p. 48–9.

<sup>43</sup> Op. cit. p. 64.

automatic transplantation of social institutions—by no means! It is not the Indian caste system that may be grafted upon European society but it is the way Hindus managed to safeguard during millennia their mega-tribal identities that should be of utmost interest to us Europeans.

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