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**THE MYTH OF CREATION IN RIGVEDA 10:90**

All the religions have their myths<sup>1</sup>, and on them they establish most of their profound convictions, values, religious beliefs, conception of truth and worldviews. Myths are symbolic expressions that codify certain ways of behaviour or find justification for human actions or patterns of social life. They are not explanations meant to satisfy scientific interests, and may not always conform to the logic of the mind. They are not complete explanation of reality, but keys to interpret it. Myths are attempts to explain certain cosmic and human rules and open immense horizons for thought and action and reveal the eternal search for truth.<sup>2</sup> According to Mircea Eliade, a myth refers to some primordial, paradigmatic event that took place 'at the beginning of time' (*ab initio*) revealing a mystery. It is related to a sacred history of what took place 'once upon a time' (*in illo tempore*), a recital of what the gods or the semi-divine beings did at the beginning of time, and establishes a truth that is absolute and infallible, which belongs to the sphere of the sacred, and therefor pre-eminently real.<sup>3</sup> Beneath the myths usually there are major issues that confront the human mind, such as, the origin of the world, human beings, social traditions, norms of behaviour, and the way in which the natural and human worlds function on a profound level, which lent the myths an archetypal character. This article is a brief analysis of the myth of creation in *Rigveda* 10:90, some of its philosophical, theological and social implications, and how it provides religious justification for the unjust social order of Hindu caste system.

**1.A background to the Rigveda**

The *Rigveda* (Sanskrit 'verses of wisdom'; *rc* means 'verses of praise'<sup>4</sup>) is the most ancient and the most important of the four Vedas<sup>5</sup> and is one of the oldest extant texts in Indo-European language. It is counted among the four revealed canonical sacred texts (*sruti*) of Hinduism, and the acceptance of which is the criterion of orthodoxy. Written in ancient Sanskrit, *Rigveda* is a collection of miscellaneous fragments of old legends, chants and hymns developed by different sages and families at different periods. Philological and linguistic evidence indicate that the *Rigveda* was composed in the north-western region of the India, roughly between 1500 BC and 900 BC.<sup>6</sup> The canon of *Rigveda* was not closed till about 500 BC and the present text was fixed about 300 BC.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The word 'myth' comes from the Greek term *muthos* meaning 'story' or 'plot'. Myth can mean a 'sacred story' or 'a symbolic narrative which deals with divine, legendary and heroic figures'. Cfr. Keith D'Souza, "Myth and Mythology", in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, Johnson J. Puthenpurackal (ed), Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 2010, 936.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Jeanine Miller, *I Veda, Armonia, Meditazione e Realizzazione*, Roma, Ubaldini Editore, 1976, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Willard R. Trask, (tr.), New York, A Harvest Book, 1959, 95-99.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Theodore N. Proferes, "Vedas and Brahmanas", in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol.2, Knut A. Jacobsen (ed.), Leiden, Brill, 2010, 27.

<sup>5</sup> It is considered as the Veda since *Yajurveda* and *Samaveda* are merely different arrangements of the Rigvedic hymns for ritual purposes, while *Atharvaveda* is an altogether later addition to the Vedic list. Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World. An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol.2, New Delhi, Harper Collins 1968, 294.

<sup>6</sup> But according to many Hindu orthodox schools of thought, the *Rigveda* was not created by any human being nor conceived by any deity but pre-existed from eternity, and was arranged in its present shape by the mythical scholar Vyasa. Cfr. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, Vol.2, 294-295. Some scholars date the *Rigveda* earlier than 1500 BC. For example, Max Muller puts the date at 1200 BC, A.B. Keith at 1400 BC, F.E. Pargiter at 1500 BC, A. Weber at 2000 BC, H. Jacobi at 4000 BC, B.G. Tilak at 5000 BC. Cfr. *Ibid.*, 294. *Rigveda* hymns show a good deal of borrowing from the Prakrit language. It is difficult to distinguish the Indo-European from the purely Indian portions. Substantial parts were composed by *sudras*, outcasts and even by women. Cfr. *Ibid.*, 295.

*Rigveda* has several passages that attempt to convey how the world and all that it contains, including human beings, came into being. These tales were originally passed down by word of mouth and were ultimately put to writing. The text is organized in ten books known as *mandalas*, ('circles') of varying length, and contain a total of 1028 hymns<sup>8</sup> (*sukta* literally, 'well recited', 'eulogy'). Some of its verses are still recited in modern Hindu prayers, putting these among the world's oldest religious texts in continued use. The *Rigveda* book 10 differs from other nine books in subject matter and language, and belongs to a later period than the rest.<sup>9</sup> The *Rigveda* 10:90, which contains the myth of creation, has only 16 verses, and it is called *Purusa sukata* (hymn in praise of the Cosmic Man).<sup>10</sup> Even today it is one of the popular hymns of Hinduism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, Vol.2, 295.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, Vol.2, 296.

<sup>10</sup> *Rigveda* does not identify the *sukta* by this name, but 90th *sukta* came to be known as *Purusha sukta* later on.

<sup>11</sup> The *Purusa sukta* finds place in various Vedic texts such as the *Atharvaveda* (19.6), *Samaveda* (6.4), *Yajurveda* (VS 31.1-6), *Taittiriya Aranyaka* (3.12,13), and is commented upon in the *Satapata Brahmana*, *Taittiriya Brahmana*, *Svetasvatara Upanisad* and *Mudgala Upanisad*. The *Purusha sukta* is also mentioned with explanations and interpretations in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* (31.1-6), the *Samaveda Samhita* (6.4), and *Athrvaveda Samhita* (19.6). Among Puranic texts, the *sukta* has also been elaborated in the *Bhagavata Purana* (2.5.35 to 2.6.1-29) and *Mahabharata* (*Mokshadharm Parva* 351 and 352). Cfr. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purusha\\_sukta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purusha_sukta) Accessed on 10 October 2011.

## 2.The myth of creation in *Rigveda* 10:90<sup>12</sup>

Cosmogony or the question of the origins of the universe has always been of interest to Indian mind and there exists a bewildering variety of speculation and theories on this theme. The

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<sup>12</sup> The myth of creation in *Rigveda* 10:90 has been translated from Vedic Sanskrit to various languages. There is a very reliable translation in English by Ralph Thomas Hotchkiss Griffith (1826-1906), with an excellent introduction to the *Rigveda* in general, and a scholarly explanation of the key terms in the footnotes. It may be noted that Griffith published the first translation of the *Rigveda* in 1889 basing himself on the translation of Friedrich Max Müller, and an improved version of it in 1896. His rendition of it in 1973 and 1976. Cfr. *Hinduism: The Rig Veda*, translated by Ralph T.H. Griffith, New York, Books of the Month Club, 1992, ix-xii, 602-603.

There is another English translation of the *Rigveda* 10:90 by Raimundo Panikkar (1918-2010) in his *The Vedic Experience. Mantramajari. An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern man and Contemporary Celebration*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977, 72-77. The advantage of this text is that the translation is very readable. He has avoided the use of Sanskrit technical terms in the translation which certainly makes the text appealing to the English speaking people who are not familiar with Sanskrit. In addition, it has a good interpretative introduction and scholarly explanatory notes on key concepts. But one gets the impression that, in the process of attempting to make the text 'modern' and 'appealing' to the reader, the translator has been quite 'liberal' in rendering the text in English.

A translation of the *Rigveda* 10:90 in English, edited by Nicol Macnicol can be considered as a standard one. The text has a scholarly introduction to the *Rigveda* in general, and a useful footnote on the concept *Purusa*. Cfr. *Hindu Scriptures. Hymns from the Rigveda, Five Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita*, Nicol Macnicol (ed.), London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938, xiv-xvi, 28-29.

Another English translation of *Rigveda* 10:90 is found in *A Philosophy in Song-Poems. Selected song-poems of the Rig Veda*, selected and translated by John. B. Chethimattam and Antonio T.de Nicolas, Bangalore, Dharmaram College, 1971, 49-50. One gets the impression that the text has been over simplified, though some key Sanskrit terms are retained. It has no specific introduction or explanatory notes. Hence this text may not be of much value for a scholar. Yet another English translation is found in Abinash Chandra Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas: Original Text and English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, New Delhi, Asia Publishing House, 1966, 285-289. It has useful but brief footnotes.

The English translation of *Rig-Veda Samhita* by Swami Satya Prakash Sarasvati and Satyakam Vidyalankar, Vol. 13, New Delhi, Veda Pratishthaka, 1987, has the hymn on pages 4483-4487, and is explained with scholarly and elaborate endnotes on pages 4751-4759.

The English version of the hymn is found also in Rajendra Verma's *Vedic Cosmology: Creation Ideas in the Ancient Vedic Religion: A Hermeneutic Study*, New Delhi, New Age International Publishers, 1996, 99-102. The author gives scholarly critical comments and explanations on the hymn on pages 103-113.

A.C. Clayton in his *The Rig-Veda and Vedic Religion: With Readings from the Vedas*, New Delhi, Banarasi Das, 1981, 164-167, explains the message of the hymn with brief footnotes.

Hermann Grassmann's German translation of the *Rigveda* 10:90 is a standard one. But he has placed the text of book 10:90 in the appendix (*Anhang*) of the *Rigveda* as it is a later interpolation. In his introduction to the text he furnishes good arguments to show why the text is to be considered as an interpolation. Cfr. Hermann Grassmann, *Rig-Veda*, Zwiter Theil (sic), Leipzig, F.A.Brockhaus, 1877, 486-487.

Hans Küng in his *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg I*, München, Pieper Verlag, 1999, 97-98, has a translation of the *Rigveda* 10:90 in German. The translation is good and each section has a title which makes the central ideas of each part clearer. Perhaps a disadvantage of the text is that Küng discusses the myth in the context of Hindu caste system, and therefore the concept of creation becomes secondary. One may note that the main purpose of the myth is not to explain how the caste system came into being but how creation took place. The caste system is only one of the things 'created' by the sacrifice of the primordial man.

The Italian translation of the *Rigveda* 10:90 by Valentino Papesso is a good text with an introduction and explanatory notes. The introduction of certain concepts in the main text itself in brackets, makes the text easily understandable. It can be considered as one of the best translations of the *Rigveda* 10:90 available in Italian. Cfr. Valentino Papesso, *Inni del Rig-Veda*, Bologna, Nicola Zanichelli, 1929, 148-151.

cosmogonic myths are the foundations of all myths.<sup>13</sup> The poets of the Vedic hymns raised questions concerning the origin of the universe, and borrowed from the biological world<sup>14</sup>, technical world<sup>15</sup>, political and military world and poetic world<sup>16</sup> as models of creation. But there is a model of creation which is more important than all those accounts mentioned in the *Rigveda*. It is the sacrificial model apparent in many of the Vedic hymns, especially in *Rigveda* 10:90 which is dated around eighth century BC. In *Rigveda* 10:90 the Cosmic Man (*Purusa*, 'male', 'man', 'person')<sup>17</sup> is sacrificed by the gods to account for creation.

### 3. The content of the myth

The Cosmic Man (*Purusa*) is described as a primeval giant having a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. All that exists is Himself, whether they existed in the past, existing in the present or yet to come into existence. He confers immortality and supports everything in the universe. Only one fourth of Himself is the universe, and within this part is both living and non-living beings. Three-fourth of Himself remains in heaven. He emanated a female creative principle (*viraj*) from which he is reborn in turn, before the world was made out of his body parts by dismemberment.

The gods and sages sacrificed the Cosmic Man and from this primal sacrifice the world and all that it contains came forth. Thus from this sacrifice originated the seasons, Vedic chants, verses, metres, magic spells, charms and formulas. The moon was born from His mind, the sun from His eyes, the heavens from His skull. From Him came beasts that live in the air, animals both wild and tame. From Him were born horses and those other animals which have a double set of incisors; cows, goats and sheep were also born from Him. The Brahmins were made from the Cosmic Man's mouth, the Ksatriyas from His arms, the Vaisiyas from His thighs, and the Sudras from His feet. Gods Indra and Agni emerged from His mouth, and from His vital breath, the wind. From His navel the atmosphere was born; from His head the heaven appeared. From His two feet came the earth, and the regions of the sky from His ear.

### 4. Some possible interpretations of the myth

The creation of the universe and the origin of human beings are important aspects in any cosmological myth. They are often set in a dim and non-specific past, which Mircea Eliade calls *in illo tempore* ('once upon a time'). All creation myths are in one sense etiological because they attempt to explain how the world was formed and from where human beings came. But we have to admit that it is not easy to interpret a myth like the *Rigveda* 10:90 which dates back to millennia. It is difficult to recapture the thought patterns, concepts and context of the Rigvedic people who created this myth. We can only make conjectures as to what they wanted convey and what went through their minds as they set out to compose it. Besides, myths are only approximations and not total explanations of reality. Hence we must give the benefit of doubt to what we might claim as the truth of the myth.

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<sup>13</sup> They are so because they reveal the creation of man, the principles that govern the cosmos and the ethical norms for human behaviour. Cfr. Julien Ries, "Il mito cosmogonico, fondamento di tutti i miti", in *Il Mito. Il suo linguaggio e il suo messaggio attraverso le civiltà*, Julian Ries (a cura di), Milano, Jaca Book, 2005, 51.

<sup>14</sup> From the biological world some of the models of creation are: heat (*tapas*) of the brooding bird, the cosmic egg (*anda*), the golden embryo (*hiranyagarbha*, *Rigveda* 10:121,1), the begetting activity of Prajapati (*Rigveda* 10:121, 9-10), the Father sky who by mating with his daughter engenders the universe and its order (*Rigveda*, 10:61,5-6).

<sup>15</sup> From the technical world the Vedic poets borrowed such ideas as, measuring (*ma*), founding (*dha*), weaving (*tan*) and fabricating (*taka*) and considered the All-maker (*Vishvakarman*) as the architect of the cosmos, the primordial artisan, the primordial carpenter or blacksmith. (*Rigveda* 10:72,2; 10:82, 2).

<sup>16</sup> The experience of the Vedic poets in political and military decision and of poetical creation gave them the model of causal speech (*vac*) as command or poetic-sacral formula (*Rigveda* 10:125, 5-6).

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Mariasusai Dhavamony, *L'Induismo*, Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 1991, 47.

#### 4.1. Affirmation of the efficacy of sacrifice

The creation myth of *Rigveda* 10:90 strongly affirms the efficacy of sacrifice. A reader of the text could ask why did the *Rigvedic* people chose the model of sacrifice to account for creation? Sacrifice was the central act of the Vedic culture and was considered indispensable for existence and the wellbeing of people, and order in nature. The early texts of the Vedas were books dealing with sacrifice. The importance of sacrifice was such that they believed that sacrifice when done correctly has the power to produce anything.<sup>18</sup> The efficacy of the sacrifice depended on the kind of offering made, and the noblest sacrifice was that of a human victim, and next came a horse.<sup>19</sup> This led the Vedic people to believe that the world itself was caused by a primordial sacrifice of a primeval being. The sacrifice is able to produce the cosmos and everything it contains. The gods and sages themselves perform the sacrifice because they believed in its efficacy and power. Thus the original creation was the result of the noblest of sacrifices with the Cosmic Man as the victim.

#### 4.2 Concept of ‘total causation’

One of the things that strikes us in the creation myth of *Rigveda* 10:90 is its comprehensiveness. Richard De Smet commenting on the myth argues that it stands for the concept of total causation.<sup>20</sup> In fact, practically all the conceivable realities of this world are considered as created from the Cosmic Man: sun, moon, heavens, earth, atmosphere, gods, demons, human beings, animals, times and seasons, Vedic hymns, rituals, art forms, and social system. Some of these realities are spiritual in nature while others are material. It is worthy of note that creation produces not only the physical elements of the universe but also a social order, namely the caste system, which is the foundation of social life according to the Hindu view.

#### 4.3 Concept of single source of creation

The *Rigveda* 10:90 speaks unequivocally of one source of creation – the Cosmic Man – and therefore of one creator. The creator contains the totality of all created realities. The Cosmic Man is a conscious being (*Purusa*), and does not need any pre-existing material to create. In fact the myth states that nothing pre-existing is needed to create, and that the Cosmic Man is the one and the only source of creation. Hans Küng calls this one source *Das Eine* (‘The One’).<sup>21</sup> Angelika Malinar argues that the creation myth indicating a single source of creation is a development connected with the emergence of a first, single and eternal principle in the Upanisad.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.4 Allusion to panentheism

In the myth of creation of *Rigveda* 10:90, one notices both difference and non-difference with regard to the creator and the creatures. The myth says that, the Cosmic Man is in everything he created and that the created universe and the Cosmic Man are one and the same thing so that there is no difference between the two. But the myth also states that the created world is only one fourth of the Cosmic Man and that three fourths remain un-manifest.<sup>23</sup> This means that the created world is different from the essence of the Cosmic Man. Such a conception protects to some extent his transcendence. Thus the myth has reference to both non-difference and difference (identity and difference) in creation, and it alludes to panentheism (*pan*=all, *en*=in, *theos*=God, ‘all-in-God’). The Cosmic Man interpenetrates every part of the created reality, but at the same time extends

<sup>18</sup> For example, in *Satapata Brahmana* 7, 12,1-8 the sacrifice of the gods revive Prajapati who had lost the vital air. When he was being heated in the *sacrificial fire*, he was restored and he became the foundation of the world.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Klaus Klostermaier, *Hinduism A Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006,37; Angelika Malinar, “Purusa”, in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol.2, Knut A.Jacobsen (ed.), Leiden, Brill, 2010, 838.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Richard De Smet, “Indian Ascertainment of the Godhead”, in *Indica*, Bombay, Heras Institute, 1979, 60. The same idea is expressed by Angelika Malinar. Cfr. Angelika Malinar, “Purusa”, 838-839.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Angelika Malinar, “Purusa”, 839.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 97.

beyond it. Such a conception of the relation between the creator and the created may not satisfy the logic of the human mind. But, as Emile Durkheim opines, in mythologies we encounter beings who simultaneously possess contradictory attributes, such as one and many, material and spiritual who can be infinitely divided without losing anything essential.<sup>24</sup> Besides, we need to remember that, myths may not always satisfy the logic of our mind.

#### 4.5 Absence of the concept of ‘creation out of nothing’

The myth under discussion explains the original creation as the result of a primeval sacrifice in which a dismemberment and distribution of the Cosmic Man is involved. Thus he is a part of all aspects of the cosmos. While creating the Cosmic Man is not changed or transformed into the various forms of life; rather, he *is* those forms. What the myth narrates is a *rearrangement* of the existing reality, namely the Cosmic Man. Such a conception points to the absence of a concept of creation ‘out of nothing’ (*ex nihilo*).

#### 4.6 Divine sanction for caste system

The Cosmic Man not only produced physical elements of the universe but also a social order. The myth of creation affirms that the four classes (castes) of Hindu society were born from the Cosmic Man. We read in *Rigveda*: “When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced”.<sup>25</sup> This passage is interpreted by several scholars as divine justification of the Hindu caste (*varna*) system. It also implies that since the priestly elite (*Brahmana*) emerged from the Creator’s mouth, they are the purest; that since the warrior elite (*Ksatriya*) emerged from His arms who became kings and princes, they are strong and meant to be soldiers; that since the ‘middle class’ of farmers artisans and merchants (*Vaisya*) emerged from his thighs, they are meant for agriculture, craft and commerce; and that since the mass of labourers, servants and menials (*Sudra*) emerged from the feet, they are meant, by Divine will, to be servants of others. These castes are hereditary and fully sanctioned by the *Rigveda*.<sup>26</sup> The first three castes are called ‘twice born’.<sup>27</sup> The fourth caste (*Sudra*), and a huge class of outcastes, the fifth caste (*panchamas*), are called ‘once born’.

*Rigveda* 10:90, 11-12 shows that the hierarchical, hereditary social groups were part of the structure of the cosmos. The social division is taken to be a universal phenomenon, deriving from the bodily nature of the Cosmic Man. It thus gives an ontological status to caste system.<sup>28</sup> Besides, the infallibility of the Veda makes the caste division immutable. Since the *Rigveda* is a revealed sacred text, it also gives a religious foundation for the hierarchical social order.<sup>29</sup> If the cosmos was in some sense sacred, so also was society which manifested its hierarchical order. The hierarchical structure of the body determines the degree of purity or pollution associated with the caste: the head as the highest part of the body was the purest, and the feet, the lowest part, the most polluted.<sup>30</sup> Other Hindu sacred literature, like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and especially the

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Carol Cosman (tr.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Rigveda*, 10:90, 11-12 as cited in *Hinduism: Rig Veda*, translated by Ralph T.H. Griffith, 603. In the *Purusha sukta* the word *varna* is not used, and it is the only hymn of the *Rigveda* where the words *Vaisya* and *Sudra* are used.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Rodney Stark, *Discovering God. The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, New York, HarperOne, 2007, 217-218; Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> The first birth is the natural birth. The second birth is a spiritual one when they receive the investiture with the sacred thread.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. Antonio Rigopoulos, *Hinduismo*, Brescia, Editrice Queriniana, 2005, 91.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 49.

*Manusmriti*, a law text dating to roughly between 200 BC and 200 AD, follow suit<sup>31</sup>, and make the caste system, as Hans Küng says, the foundation of Hindu society (*Fundament der Hindugesellschaft*)<sup>32</sup>, and impose it on people.

### 5. An Abuse of the myth to support social injustice?

A myth is a product of human psyche that attempts to establish certain fundamentals of existence, and a person's conduct is governed by them. Myths convey hidden and revealing truths about their cultures of origin.<sup>33</sup> They through their authoritativeness and the respected characters within them, establish a culture's customs, rituals, religious tenets, laws, social structures and power hierarchies. The nucleus of a myth is an intensely lived experience at the physical level or psychic level. According to functionalist anthropology, myth is a force that helps to maintain society itself and myths and religion continue to play an important part in social life.<sup>34</sup>

In Indian culture myths have a powerful sway over people, and they even subscribe to an almost literal understanding of them, employ emotion and imagination in subscribing to them, failing in the process to make critical reflection on them. Often *Rigveda* 10:90,12 has been used to justify the hierarchical nature of class division in Hindu society through the belief that they are inherently natural, deriving from the nature of the Cosmic Man himself.<sup>35</sup> Abuse has been taking place in Indian society by literally interpreting the powerful inequalities expressed in the myth in order to maintain and promote caste system.

Many scholars today maintain that *Rigveda* 10:90 belongs to eighth century BC, that it was a later interpolation and the youngest part of the *Rigveda*<sup>36</sup>, and consequently it does not accurately reflect the Vedic society. But since the text dealing with caste division of society was interpolated, we have to conclude that it was done *intentionally* in order to give it divine sanction, and to show that it was existing from the time of creation, and consequently *sacred and immutable*. One may also add that the interpolation was purposely made in the text of the *Rigveda*, and not in any of the other three Vedas, because it is the most ancient of the four Vedas. Thus the interpolation gave to the caste system religious approval and archaic nature. Consequently, the fourfold class structure became a theoretical model and ideological justification based on sacred revelation.<sup>37</sup>

It is a fact that, if a social structure is given religious sanction, it is very difficult to change it, and much less to eradicate it, and this is especially true in the Indian context. This is so because, as Mircea Eliade argues, it is a sacred reality, for it is the sacred that is pre-eminently real and not the profane.<sup>38</sup> Thus, living the caste system and imposing it in society is indispensable for all Hindus. If it is not done, it goes against the will of God, and against the fundamentals of Hinduism itself.

It has been rightly said that it is in myths that the principles and paradigms for all human conduct must be sought and recovered.<sup>39</sup> The myth of creation in *Rigveda* which sanctions the caste system, is one of the foundational myths of Hinduism. Hence, it is repeated time and again, in different versions, throughout the Hindu sacred scriptures and in other literature. The myth is designed to prove that the original caste division is natural, based on creation, and willed by God. Texts like the

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. *The Law of Manu*, G. Buhler (tr.), Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications, 2001, Book 1:87-91.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 98..

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Rodney Stark, *Discovering God*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion*, Roma, Gregorian University Press, 1973, 141.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. Richard King, *Indian Philosophy. An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 48. Benjamin Walker calls the *Rigveda* 10:90 as an interpolation and a forgery. Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World. An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol.1, New Delhi, Harper Collins 1968, 202. Richard King dates this text to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Cfr. Richard King, *Indian Philosophy*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 95-96.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 102.

*Manusmṛti* treats the myth as a *fact*, and proceed to derive from it not only the notion of a hierarchical subordination of castes, but also the basic rights and duties of all those who belong to each of the divisions.<sup>40</sup>

Many Hindus, who want to uphold the caste system, argue that it is only a division of labour. Others opine that it was originally a division of labour which degenerated into rigid caste division with its discriminatory rules of purity and pollution, but it was not so in the beginning. Some scholars maintain that since the priests were from the head of the Cosmic Man, the warriors from his arms, the merchants from his thighs, and the labourers from his feet, it may be interpreted as meaning that no one caste is more important than the other, and that society cannot survive without all parts working together. Therefore, the *Rigveda* myth underscores that, diversity of functions in society is real, that complementarity is established on the level of reality, and that reciprocity in social life is implied. In fact, Claude Levi-Strauss holds that in the caste system reciprocity is manifested by specialisation of function and it is practiced on the cultural plane.<sup>41</sup> But such a view is utopian and idealistic, and not true to fact. What one finds in Hindu society today is not reciprocity or complementarity or division of labour or diversity of functions, but discrimination, exploitation and denial of basic human rights on the basis of caste system to certain sections of society, and a deliberate abuse of the myth to justify social injustice. It may be recalled here that the *Sudras* and the outcasts were not allowed even to hear the *Rigveda* or attend a fire sacrifice.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever be the justification for upholding the caste system, the hermeneutics of the myth of the *Rigveda* 10:90,11-12 reveals the ideology of caste system: a world of hierarchical order, distinctions between human being on the basis of birth and occupations, a new anthropology of inequality and a theological justification of an unjust social system. It is also to be remembered that over time, the original four-caste system proliferated into a very complex set of more than 3000 subdivisions (*jatis*) based mainly on hereditary occupations, but also with the absorption of new tribes and groups.<sup>43</sup> Here it is worth recalling the words of Angelika Malinar who rightly argues that the biomorphic or organic model of society became most influential in providing a cosmological justification for the four-tiered caste system.<sup>44</sup>

Whether the passage dealing with the caste system in *Rigveda* 10:90,11-12 is a later interpolation or not, the myth undoubtedly supports Hindu social inequality based on caste system. The myth is wrongly interpreted to proclaim that human beings are *not* equal.<sup>45</sup> In other words, by birth into a particular caste, one is already *unequal*. The myth is conveniently interpreted in favour of the upper castes who have vested interests of denying human equality, human rights and human dignity to certain sections of people, namely, the so-called lower castes and the outcasts.

The wrong interpretation of the myth has led to various forms of discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation of persons. In the Hindu society the caste division deeply affects the rights and duties of persons, rules of purity and pollution, education, occupation, marriage, politics, economics, festivals, religious life, social life and social identity. The privilege which some people enjoy is not always due to their competence or ability, but because of their caste. According to Hans Küng, there is hardly any society that is so thoroughly structured as in India.<sup>46</sup> The Indologist, Benjamin Walker, states that a divine intention for the subordination of one class by another can find no parallel in the history of any other nation on earth except India, and that the perverse

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<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Klaus Klostermaier, *Hinduism A Short Introduction*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind, (Nature of Human Society)*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1970, 126.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Rodney Stark, *Discovering God*, 218.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Rodney Stark, *Discovering God*, 218.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. Angelika Malinar, "Purusa", 839.

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. William Stoddart, *Il Sufismo. Dottrina metafisica e Via mistica nell'Islam*, Roma: Editrice Atanor, 1985, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. Hans Küng, *Spurensuche. Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg 1*, 95.



interpretation of the *Purusa sukta* (*Rigveda* 10:90) is rendered all the more pernicious by the fact that there is evidence to show that the verse that endorses caste system is probably an interpolation and a forgery.<sup>47</sup> Hence, as Keith D'Souza argues, the myth is to be considered as a potentially abusive one as far as it supports caste system and has succeeded in dividing the communities in India.<sup>48</sup>

Clifford Geertz says that myths like language, art, ritual, are systems of significant symbols for orientation, communication and self-control, all created for man a new environment, to which he was then obliged to adapt.<sup>49</sup> While this is true, myths that support socially unacceptable systems require critical study and correct interpretation to avoid distortion and abuses that support unequal power relations, exploitation and unhealthy social behaviour. In the myth of creation of *Rigveda* 10:90, what was probably a mere division of labour in Hindu society has been misinterpreted to support caste system. Hence it needs to be divested of wrong interpretations and manipulations that support unhealthy social life and praxis.

The Christian idea that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and that they are ontologically equal, do not find endorsement in Hindu anthropology. Much of the social problems of today's Indian society is due to this inadequate, defective and discriminative anthropology which Hinduism upholds. But the caste system is one of the pillars of Hinduism, and if it is demolished, Hinduism itself might collapse. This is the reason why even some of the so-called 'enlightened' Hindus do not want to oppose the caste system; rather they try to defend it by giving it new interpretations.<sup>50</sup> Again, if in India today, the Hindu orthodox groups and fundamentalist organisations are against Christianity (and some other religions), one of the reasons is that they strike at the root of caste system by promoting the concept of ontological equality of all human beings.

## Conclusion

The *Rigveda*, the oldest of the Hindu sacred texts, cites the most common Indian creation myth in book 10:90. The Rigvedic man was wonderstruck by the intricate mysteries of nature and complex structures of social life. Since book ten is the last chapter of the *Rigveda* and an interpolation, it would be reasonable to assume that hymn 90 portrays a fairly evolved Vedic thought. The myth is rational and brilliant, clear and down to earth. It has a deep cosmological, theological, anthropological, sociological, psychological and spiritual vision. In many respects, it is a myth that is lived by many Hindus even today, and is a mirror of a peculiar social structure seeking a theological explanation and justification. From this perspective, the myth of creation in *Rigveda* 10:90 is an enduring one. But the negative side of it is that some verses of the myth have been abused to endorse an unjust social order in Hindu society called the caste system, which is one of the deepest wounds of the Indian psyche that blocks human advancement and progress of the nation, and brings dishonour, shame and discredit to Indian culture and civilisation.

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<sup>47</sup> Cfr. Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World. An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol.1, 202.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. Keith D'Souza, "Myth and Mythology", 940.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, 48.

<sup>50</sup> A typical example is Arvind Sharma who defends caste system by arguing that *all* castes (*varnas*) are contained in every individual instead of every individual being comprised within one of the castes. For details of his argument cfr. Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism for Our Times*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, 46.