

CASTELESS SOCIETY
A PLEA FOR A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

BY
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TRANSACTION No.108

“ನಾವೆಲ್ಲರೂ ಒಂದೆ ಜಾತಿ, ಒಂದೆ ಮತ,
ಒಂದೆ ಕುಲ, ನಾವು ಮನುಷ್ಯರು”
-ಎಂ. ಗೋಪಾಲಕೃಷ್ಣ ಅಡಿಗ

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It is customary for the Institute to bring out periodically scripts of important lectures delivered under its auspices in the form of "Transactions", for wider, dissemination among the public. The present publication is based on a lecture delivered by Shri Ramachandran at the Institute during March 2007. We trust it will be well received by the reading public.

THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE

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Printed by Alpha Printers, Bangalore 94480 09477

and published by the Indian Institute of World Culture,

No. 6, B.P.Wadia Road, Basavanagudi,

Bangalore - 560 004 Phone : 26678581

CASTELESS SOCIETY -A PLEA FOR A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

We have a deep-rooted social problem in the country, which is apparently peculiar to Hindu society. In no other society in the world do we find the populace grouped under some three thousand castes, with high and low gradations, all based on the accident of birth. Though coming under the broad umbrella of Hinduism, each caste has its own peculiar features and traditions. By and large, inter - caste marriages are still in the nature of exceptions, intra - caste marriages continuing to the rule. There is neither rhyme nor reason underlying the system. On the contrary, it has created needless cleavages in society, necessitating the adoption of measures to curb casteism. The system reeks with the worst form of social injustice, which assumes extreme proportions in the case of the hapless **dalits**, many of whom were obliged to endure the stigma of untouchability for centuries on end.

When and how the caste system originated I leave for our social scientists to debate upon. In this article, I am focusing attention on the firm proposition that the prevailing caste system in India is an unmitigated evil. The sooner we root out this system from our society the better it will be for us. I am, therefore, making a fervent plea that our nation should apply itself to the task of working for a totally casteless society in India.

The founders of our Constitution took a big step forward by prohibiting untouchability and all caste based discriminations. I wish they had gone one step further and proclaimed, as a directive principle of state policy, that the State shall endeavour to promote in all possible ways the emergence of a casteless society in the nation. Abolition of caste-based discriminations - very important no doubt - is not in itself adequate. We remain a crippled society unless we destroy the iniquitous system of classifying our fellow citizens in a hierarchy of different castes. I look upon the emergence of a casteless society as a vital pre-requisite for real progress.

I have had several serious discussions on this issue with some of my well-informed and learned friends. Let me first indicate the salient points brought out in the course of these discussions: Castes in India cannot be wished away. They have been a feature of Hindu society for well over two thousand years. A system that has tenaciously survived that long, despite periodic onslaughts on it, must be having some intrinsic strength of its own. There are many amongst us even today with fairly deep caste loyalties. For example, a Brahmin will not easily give up his sacred thread, nor a "shrivait" give up smearing "vibhuti" (cow-dung ash) on his brow. Such examples can easily be multiplied. In such a situation, it would be expedient to remain content with elimination of caste-based discrimination, and not attempt the impossible task of abolishing castes altogether. The prevailing atmosphere in the country is, in any case, not ripe for that kind of social revolution.

- (i) There is divine sanction for the caste system. Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita has stated that he created making of four castes (Varnas) distinct in their principles and duties. Our Manu Dharmasastra also refers to the prevalent four castes and further makes the point that this is a way of making a useful division of labour, assigning specific tasks to ear-marked sections of society. This may even be looked upon as a role model for others to emulate.
- (ii) With progressive urbanization and globalization, castes are no longer as rigid / as they used to be at one time. There is so much inter-mingling among the castes, that castes have become virtually irrelevant in day-to-day life. The system seems to be crumbling and withering on its own. We must, therefore, remain patient and await the decay of the system in the normal course of events.

- (iii) Human birth is not accidental. One is born high or low depending on one's own **karma**. One born a **dalit** today is presumably reaping the consequences of his bad karma in a previous incarnation!
- (iv) There are some useful crafts which have somehow become linked to certain castes. Abolition of castes may put such crafts in jeopardy. Weavers and jewelers are sometimes cited as examples.
- (v) The basic problem in India is economic, not social. Once we resolve the conflict between the "haves" and the "have nots" and ensure equitable distribution of wealth, the castes would fade away on their own.

I am not convinced by any of the considerations enumerated in the preceding paragraph. Let me explain.

I see no reason why we should tolerate a palpably unjust system, merely because it has survived for over two thousand years. It is not as if social reform is barred by any law of limitation.

As for the divine sanction claimed for the system, what Krishna has stated in the **Bhagavad-Gita** by no stretch of imagination, is applicable to some three thousand castes existing in our society to-day. On the contrary, Swami Dayanand Saraswati in the nineteenth century used to point out forcefully and with reason that the caste system has no real sanction in the **Vedas**. On the contrary, the prevailing caste system is antiethical both to **Vedas** wisdom and to the true spirit of Hindu philosophy, which looks upon all human beings as potentially divine and members of one vast family ("**Vasudaiva kutumbakam**"). I am very clear in my mind that the divine sanction claim for our prevailing caste system is totally untenable and unacceptable.

I shall now deal with the view that the caste system is already crumbling and withering and that we should patiently await its final decay in the normal course of events. I would have gladly counselled patience for yet another century if I were convinced that the system is really on the brink of crumbling and decay. The things that we see around us unfortunately reveal a different picture. While social inter-mingling among the members of the different castes is undoubtedly on the increase, the caste feeling is never erased from our minds. When political parties choose their candidates for contesting elections at any level, or when persons in authority make appointments to important and sensitive posts, the caste factor is never ignored. When we see such things happening before our eyes day after day, how can we accept the position that the system is crumbling? I, for one, would like to keep away from such wishful thinking.

The argument that everything happens under karma and that we should not, therefore, feel over-anxious about the plight of the dalits on the ground that they are only reaping the just consequences of their past karma betrays a woeful misunderstanding of the great law. It is like saying that we should not go to the succour of a child getting drowned in a bath tub before our eyes, on the ground that it is so ordained by karma! I accept the position that Karma is the ultimate law of the universe. But the law casts on us responsibility to act, which we cannot afford to shirk. Besides, as stated in a book of devotion ("The Voice of Silence")

*"Inaction in a deed of mercy
is action in a deadly sin"*

I am, therefore, of the view that we, in this generation, would be evading our karmic responsibility if we fail to take effective steps to eliminate a system which is rooted in social

injustice.

That certain useful crafts which are caste-linked may be in jeopardy if castes are abolished is a needless apprehension. There are splendid jewelers and weavers in other parts of the world who do not belong to any caste.

I shall now deal with the argument that the problem is basically economic and that ultimate solution lies in eradicating class conflict and ensuring equitable distribution of wealth. I am all for equitable distribution of wealth. Nor am I making the claim that the abolition of castes will solve all our problems like Alladin's wonderful lamp. But I do wish to submit that the abolition of castes would, in fact, facilitate the dawn of such a revolution in the economic front also. It is, in any case, incumbent on us to tackle both problems, social and economic. The social problem will not fade away on its own by solving the economic problem only.

The voice against the caste system is no new voice. Even as the caste system is more than two thousand years old, almost equally old is the criticism against it, as evidenced by the following citation from the "Bhavishya Purana":

*"Since members of aft four castes art children
of God, they aft Belong to the same caste.
Ml human Beings have the same father, and
the children of the same father cannot have different castes."*

One of the earliest critics of the caste system was none other than our Gautam Buddha. When a shepherd expressed disinclination to offer him milk from his **lota** saying : "I am a **sudra** and my touch defiles,"

Gautam replied :

*".....There is no caste in blood
Which runneth of one hue, nor caste in tears,
Which trickle salt with all; neither comes man
To birth with tilka-mark stamped on his brow,
Nor sacred thread on neck. Who doth right deed
Is twice-born, and who doth ill deeds vile."*

Again, Basaveswara in the twelfth century and Swami Dayanand Saraswati in the nineteenth century had raised their powerful voices against caste. Is it not incumbent on us to bring to fruition the task begun by them?

In the circumstances, I am in favour of a total social revolution to herald the emergence of a casteless society. The present Government policy of resorting to palliatives like caste-based reservation in favour of backward communities will only serve to perpetuate existing caste cleavages. Instead of superficially tinkering with the problem, we should go into the root of the problem and do away with castes altogether. There shall be no more Iyers, Iyengars, Naidus, Malas, Madigas, etc., **ad nauseum** in our society. Social justice in a casteless society will not be ignored. It will be extended to all in real economic need.

Easily said. The vital question remains : What concrete steps we must adopt to facilitate the emergence of a casteless society? We have before us the example of Mustafa Kamal Ataturk who, in one stroke, abolished all archaic practices and magically transformed Turkish society

in the beginning of the twentieth century. But, as we innately cherish democratic ideals, Ataturk's totalitarian methods would not work here. I wish to suggest the following course of action.:

- (i) The goal of a casteless society must first be accepted by our nation. Our Parliament must unreservedly declare its commitment to the goal of a casteless society.
- (ii) We could make an easy start by doing away with the caste columns in all forms of application for whatever purpose (employment, admission to educational institutions, ration cards, passport applications, etc).
- (iii) The best tool for reform is education. We should launch a vigorous campaign to educate the public that the caste system has no rational base and that we have nothing to lose but everything to gain by shedding our caste affiliations. The services of the mass media may be fully utilized for the purpose.
- (iv) There should be no let up in our efforts to ensure social justice to all citizens on the basis of their real and felt need.
- (v) At a personal level, we may avoid participation in any kind of caste-based function.

Ours is a grand and noble society setting before us the most exalted goals in life (**Dharma, Artha, Kama** and **Moksha** - the four **purusharthas**). Unfortunately, it has become adulterated with the induction of the caste system woven into it. Just as we purify our milk for human consumption by subjecting it to a process of "**Pasteurisation**" we have to purify our society too by ridding it of the poisonous germs which have crept into it in the form of birth - oriented castes. It is only through such social revolution that we will be able to restore our society to its real grandeur, as envisioned by Gurudeva Rabindranath Tagore in these oft-quoted and memorable words:

*"Where the world has not Been broken into
fragments By narrow domestic walls...
Into that heaven of freedom, my father,
Let my country awake".*
