

CASTEISM: A SCOURGE ON INDIAN SOCIETY

Dr. T. Sambasiva Rao

Research Associate, Dr Durgabai Deshmukh Centre for Women's Studies, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India
Email: ssrao_tenali@yahoo.co.in

'There is racism in India although not the way it is experienced elsewhere in the world. Casteism is the synonym for racism in India. Caste is a system of hierarchy by which people are put into rigid social categories. These categories are not based on physical features but on the religious ideology of Brahminical Hinduism (Hindutva) which holds that people are born with certain qualities (varnas) and therefore some are born superior and others inferior. Thus it advocates that one's social status is determined by birth and that one cannot simply get out of it. Caste, therefore, is a culture that ensures powers and privileges to the dominant through the subjugation and exploitation of the lower castes.

This pervasive culture has a decisive hold on Indian social behaviour and relationships. Community is always conceived as caste community, resulting in social distance and the discrimination and subjugation of the lower castes in all spheres of life. The prevalence of the practice of untouchability even today in the Indian villages, despite several laws restricting it, makes casteism more dehumanising than racism. The Dalits (Untouchables) live outside the village, are not allowed entry into temples, are served food and beverages in separate cups at teashops, and even have separate burial grounds. They are told that they are not only inferior but despicable and untouchable. This is the most inhuman expression of the Indian society's racism, called casteism.'

Commented Manchala Deenabandhu on the subject of casteism¹

INTRODUCTION

When one observes the statistics of Dalits it is very shocking to see their conditions according to statistics about one million Dalits are scavengers who are employed to clean public latrines and dispose the carcass of animals. Eighty percent of Dalits reside in rural areas and eighty six percent Dalits are landless, sixty percent Dalits are laborers, thirty seven percent Dalits are educated according to 2001 censuses Dalits population makes only sixteen percent of total Indian population.

Casteism in India has invited a lot of criticism, and is quiet appropriate. This at present should not even survive and should be flinged out. As we find it today is nothing more than a social evil. Over the years it is one of the most sensitive and a topic of controversy. This paper focuses on this social evil.

The word 'Jati' is used erratically for what the English spectator discretely labels "Tribes" and "caste. People of Africa, South America and the hills and jungles of south Asia belong to tribes. The term, "caste" is intended to the people of South Asia. This term in India has been introduced in to world dialogue. The word "caste" is, or at any rate is generally accepted to be of Portuguese.

The grasping structure of the present-day casteism has deteriorated into a means of isolating society according to mere ancestry to control certain groups, while defending or escalating the worldly contentment of the privileged. Rationally speaking, if a person is not performing any unhygienic activities, then why should he be called a Dalit, or an impervious, simply because of the family in which he was born? It is absurd that a person is labeled untouchable owing to the menial job he does. Likewise, to raise one's consciousness to a higher consciousness or occurrence of activity, one need only participate in the Vedic methods of spiritual advancement, which must be done regardless of one's rank or *varna*, whether Shudra or Brahmana.

Their segregation from the society is complete according to Alok Mukherjee, "Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's other. But this other is not only separate and different, like the member of another ethno-cultural, religious or linguistic group. This other is part of Hindu society, and yet apart from it. Inscribed in that apartness and difference is inferiority. Dalits occupy the lowest place in the Hindu hierarchical order"

Casteism-A peril to civilization

Today, the Brahmanas are proud of their position, yearn material benefit and look sneeringly at those of lower castes, they are not really eminent but are acquisitive. This means that lack proper traits of Brahmanas. They instigate disdain all through the different sections of community. Thus, these may be a handful of them but their act brings dichotomy in the society, only by birth are they called Brahmanas, but the necessary credentials they are short of. In fact, the very people that may pride themselves for their lofty social classifications, and are supposed to be the spiritual leaders of society, only designate their deficiency in qualifications by focusing on the momentary material designations when they are thought to be higher than such things. Thus, the caste system has become simply a selfish, ineffective, and disparaging system.

The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, which means breed, race, or kind. Castes are ranked, named, endogamous groups, and membership in a particular caste comes through birth. According to the Hindu sacred texts of the Rig Veda, there were four main castes and each caste performed a function in sustaining social life. Brahmins were the priests; Kshatriyas, were warriors and rulers; Vaisyas were landowners and merchants; and Sudras were artisans and servants (Federal Research Division 267). According to the code of Manu a marriage between a Brahmin woman and a Sudra man would result in a "Candala," who is described as "the lowest of men" and shares many of the attributes of the contemporary "Untouchable" (Moffit 34). Michael Moffit writes that ancient textual sources from the South suggest the existence of similarly ranked human kindred and stresses that many attributes of contemporary South Indian "Untouchables" were apparently present 1500 years ago in the Sangam period (37). "Untouchables" are generally associated with professions such as leather Since 1935 Untouchables have been called "scheduled castes." They are also called "Harijan" (The children of God). Now they call themselves Dalits, a Hindi word which means exploited or oppressed. Despite some improvements in certain aspects of Dalit life, 90% of them still live in rural areas, and more than 50% are landless laborers. In many parts of India, land is still held by the upper castes that use the dogma of the caste system to economically exploit low- ranking

Expansion of Casteism now

The British used the impervious classes as a capital for their own biased intention, and an instrument in their divide and rule policy for isolating the Hindu majority. This augmented the divisions of the caste system and made them more concrete in the people's classification with the castes. This had unenthusiastic and regressive affects on the Indian society that have not gone away. However, in 1936, the Indian government made it even worse by outlining the Scheduled Castes among the untouchables and labeled a list of such classifications. The various castes would be regarded with separate status for assembly and seats of parliament, along with special benefits for education and employment. This became adopted into the Indian Constitution which has made it a practice that has endured to date, with special laws making the labeling of untouchability as transgression. The Untouchability Act of 1955 provides the list of penalties for any such offense. Now, there are numerous and separate divisions amongst the Scheduled Castes to the point where it will never cease to exist, at least in a general way, especially in the villages. The cities are becoming somewhat more homogenized due to necessity of occupational fulfillment and education as opposed to merely growing out of such traditions.

“Untouchability” has never been mentioned in any Vedic literature nor a part of the Vedic system, but modern innovation which has no legalization. The 1931 census used the term of “Scheduled Castes” as a synonym for identifying the Panchama class. In 1970, the term “Dalit” came to be used, which is a Marathi word based in Sanskrit which means “broken or ground down,” whose connotation is the one who is subjugated. This term is now gained distinction across India.

Though Indian society has progressed in various fields, this idea of labeling a caste or class of activity to someone who's born to certain parents has been the major failure of entity and social progress in contemporary Hindu society.

Social Implication

Casteism leads to disintegration of Indian society. In fact, you could say that it has virtually killed Vedic society and has brought about the abundant divisions and social disparity that we today find in India.

Which have since become nothing more than corporeal foe of India. Did we realize our fault? According to the grapevine not. cultural bigotry is on the rise in many parts of India.

Such dichotomy that a Brahmana from one state does not trust a Brahmana from other part of India. For example, the Nambudris of Kerala loathe any other Brahmanas. A Jat boy from the Punjab will not wed a Jat girl from Uttar Pradesh. And a Patel from Kutch will despise a Patel from Ahmedabad. Thus, the problem of caste and ethnicity is making a society that fights like cats and dogs. In reality, casteism is assassinating Indian mores.

Abolition of this menace

Social revolutionaries tried to alter the modern caste system since a long time. However, Ramanujacharya, Mahathma Gandhi crusaded against the notion of untouchability. In Melkote, Karanataka, the temple doors were let open to permit everyone in, regardless of classification. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu also disregarded the limitations that were recognized by the caste system. He allied and ate with anyone who was an earnest devotee of

the Lord, considering one's intention and consciousness as being more important than the mere social classification of one's body.

So what can we do to change this evil called casteism? We can go back to the Vedic system of studying the natural tendencies of the child in its early stage of education. Then observe the child's involvement, behavior and rational welfare to begin to determine his or her direction in occupation. Then, as in any western country, as the child grows, begin testing, counseling and steering it in the proper course of education to determine if the right category has been given. Then allow that individual to grow him or herself to the fullest prospect without precincts of some mandatory caste placed on the person. But the process can simply direct a person according to his or her qualities and distinctiveness to find more accomplishment and prospective in life, and, thus, more happiness.

Steps to Overcome Casteism

The Existing Laws Be Made Stringent

Laws have been enforced against untouchability and prejudice toward those who belong to lower caste. Article forbidding untouchability (Article 17), along with Article 25(2b) to open Hindu pious institutions to all sections of Hindus, and Article 15 (4) to permit the state to do special provisions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. However, this has only made the caste system more deep-seated in society, making it more secure. Articles in Part III to ensure Right to Equality. India is a democratic country with freedom for everyone despite race, faith or gender.

Bonded Labor should be abolished

The practice of using poor villagers for cheap labor, often giving them low wages dwellings. Then giving them loans with interest that are supposed to be paid off in exchange for labor. If the loans are not paid off, then his offspring must work for years in order to pay off the loans of their fathers or grandfathers. This continues for generations which are not less than slavery. It is time for the government to get concerned to make sure that this practice comes to an end once and for all, and see to it that all financial obligations are nullified.

Protection for Children

Right to Education has to be accessed by the under privileged to allow them better equipped to overcome such a menace.

Stringent action should be taken against all those who violate the laws.

Crucial responsibility of a Religion

Spiritual organizations should address the distorted consciousness through spiritual education and practice, so that people can seriously change their view of their fellow human beings. Our vision should be at a higher plane if we consider ourselves human beings.

The above mentioned points may not uproot this problem, but it could certainly take things in the right direction and begin to change our society.

REFERENCE

1. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/echoes/echoes-17-04.html>

2. S.G.Dollegoudar(Patil),Shakuntala,B, Sparks of Dalit Dhvani in Vachana Literature, Exploring Fourth World Literatures: Tribals Adivasis,Dalits,Vol;2,ed.Raja Sekhar P, Prestige Books: New Delhi,2011.
3. Bayly, Susan. Saints, Goddesses, and Kings. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
4. Chandra Rath,Govinda.Tribal Development in India : The Works Cited
5. Cowasjee, Saros. So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand, Oxford University Press: New Dehli, 1977
6. Federal Research Division. India: A Country Study. Eds. James Heitzman and Robert L. Warden. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1995
7. Klass,Morton. Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System, Manohar Publishers & Distributors: New Delhi,2004
8. Moffit, Michael. An Untouchable Community In South India. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1979.
9. Sharma,Ursula.Caste,Viva Books Private Limited,New Delhi,2005
10. Singh, K.S, The Schedule Castes: The People of India. National Series Volume 2 of the Anthropological Survey of India. Delhi: Oxford Up, 1993.
11. Study Guide: South Asia Reading Series. Fall 1998.
12. Z Elliot,Eleanor. From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement, Manohar Publishers & Distributors: New Delhi,2005
13. Nambiar Girija, Fourth World Identities: A Comparative Study of Bama's Karukku and Sally Morgan's My Place, , Exploring Fourth World Literatures: Tribals Adivasis, Dalits, Vol;2,ed.Raja Sekhar P, Prestige Books: New Delhi,2011