

Open Letter to UNHR Council

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The Geneva session of UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in September 2009 recognized the caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation. Thanks to Nepal for its courageous stand; and congratulations, for effective initiative, to Navanethem Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a South African Tamil, a granddaughter of an indentured labourer taken to South Africa from a village near Madurai. Sweden, in its capacity as the president of the European Union, said: 'caste-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on "work and descent" [the UN code for caste inequality] is an important priority for the EU.'

If this issue continues to gather momentum, UNHRC may, in its future session, adopt the "principles and guidelines," published by UNHRC four months ago; and, to impart greater legal force, send them for adoption by the UN General Assembly.

This "small" step of UNHRC is a great leap for humankind. The principles and guidelines specifically cite caste as one of the grounds on which more than 200 million people in the world [read, India] suffer discrimination. 'This type of discrimination is typically associated with the notion of *purity* and *pollution* (italics added).

Though India succeeded in its effort to keep caste out of the resolution adopted by the 2001 Durban conference on racism, this issue has since re-emerged in a different guise, without getting drawn into the debate over whether caste and race are analogous. India's stiff opposition in the Geneva session was thwarted by Nepal's breaking ranks. Bravo Nepal!

Gunnar Myrdal in his book, *Asian Drama*, wrote: '*South Asia ... is like a complex molecule among whose parts extreme tensions have been built up. Although the tensions crisscross in a manner that maintains equilibrium, it is conceivable that they might reorganize in a way that would explode the molecule. This probably would not happen spontaneously, but as a result of a forceful onslaught from outside.*'¹ Are the Nepalese minister Jeet Bahadur Darjee Gautum, and Navanethem Pillay of South Africa, that benevolent "forceful onslaught from outside" Myrdal had surmised in his book?

Recognition of caste-discrimination as a human rights violation is the first step, path-breaking and liberating, no doubt. But it is within the perimeter of caste system. The next step is going to be decisive. It will transpire below that the notion of caste is dubious, if not hilarious; therefore, its use has to be eradicated from society.

The majority society of India divides human beings, to begin with, into four kinds of so-called *varna* (a Sanskrit word meaning *colour*), namely, brahman, kshatriya, vaisya, and sudra. In support of this split, a hymn from the Rig Veda, *Purusa-Sukta* (The Hymn of Man) is referred to. In this famous hymn, the gods, not God, create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa, the primeval male who is the victim in a vedic sacrifice. Verse 12 says: splintered, his

mouth "became" the brahman, his arms were made into the kshatriya, his thighs the vaisya, and from his feet the sudras were born.²

Rig Veda does not give any rank-order of men, nor does it suggest any idea of hierarchy, let alone laying down a case for varna-discrimination. Yet, in the post-vedic period, varna became hereditary. To justify it, the following postulate was invented by theologians: Social status of a varna was proportionate to the height of its birthplace in the cosmic Man's body. So, brahmans, born of the Man's mouth, got the highest rank, followed by, accordingly, the other three varnas in descending order of birthplace. Sudras were at the lowest level as they were born at the feet.

Now consider the next two stanzas of the same hymn, keeping an eye on Earth and on god Indra, and their grade in the divine pantheon. And remember that gods are not immune from the laws of karma.

13. The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the Sun was born. Indra and agni came from his mouth; and from his vital breath the wind was born.

14. From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two *feet* came the Earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear (*italics added*).

Earth was born at the feet, the same location where the sudras did. Lowliness of birthplace, however, did not prevent Earth being worshipped with the highest esteem. Earth is not ranked lower than anyone in the pantheon; on the contrary, she being the dual of Heaven is the mother of all. Indra, the god of monsoon and of several other departments, was born at a level in the Man's body lower than that of the sun; yet it was Indra who was the leader of vedic gods. At the end of the vedic period he was dethroned and dispatched to oblivion.

Aeon later, Manu came to address the above-mentioned anomaly by introducing a novel criterion of caste hierarchy, namely, *purity and pollution*.³ His single, fundamental touchstone was this: 'The orifices of the body above the navel are all pure, but those below are impure' (5:132). To elaborate: 'A man is ... purer above the navel; therefore (sic) ... his mouth was the purest part of him' (1:92). According to the Rig Veda, the mouth of the cosmic giant, Purusa, was transformed into brahmans. Hence, Manu concludes, brahmans are at the top rung of society, followed by kshatriyas, vaisyas, and sudras in descending order, breeding innumerable castes.

But what does Manu mean by the term, purity? His sacred text, *Manusmriti*, aka The Laws of Manu, emits no light at all about this query. What constitutes purity? Maybe, his usage of the word "pure" might enlighten us. Here are several quotes:

'A woman's mouth, a girl's breast, a child's prayer, and the smoke of the sacrifice, are always pure.' 'There is nothing purer than the light of the sun, the shadow of a calf, air, water, fire, and a girl's breath.' 'Only in the case of a girl is the whole body pure.' 'A woman's mouth is always pure, as is a bird that knocks down a fruit; a cow is pure while the milk is flowing, and a dog is pure when it catches a wild animal.' 'The Sama Veda is traditionally said to belong to the ancestors, and thus the sound of it is impure.'

What's common, that has been claimed by the Manusmriti, between - the mouth of a man and the shadow of a calf; or a woman's mouth and a cow; or a girl's

breast and a bird that knocks down a fruit; or a child's prayer and a dog when it catches a wild animal; or among all these - that makes them pure? What's wrong with our ancestors such that the sound of "the Sama Veda traditionally said to belong to them" allegedly belches out impurity?⁴

Evidently, the varna-caste regime has no valid ground either in human nature or in theology. Its ideology has misused the Rig Veda and disparaged the Sama Veda. It professes an illogical conception of purity. Across the millennia, billions of human beings have suffered humiliation owing to this false belief of varna-caste.

In this context, the UNHR Council is on the correct path having recognized caste-based discrimination a human rights violation. It has yet miles to go ahead along that path.

References :

1. Myrdal, Gunnar, 1968: *Asian Drama*, Random House.
2. O'Flaherty, Wendy, 1981: *The Rig Veda*, Penguin.
3. Doniger, Wendy, 1991: *The Laws of Manu*, Penguin.
4. Sau, Ranjit, 2009: *The Foundation of Democracy in India*, K. P. Bagchi.