

Caste Census— A Violation of Human Rights

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In the Parliament on 06.05.2010, daily press reports, a strange event happened. “Most political parties have supported the inclusion of an additional column for caste in the census form. Many senior cabinet ministers are in favour of the suggestion. Every party categorically demanded the inclusion of caste enumeration in the ongoing census.”

Startling was the news that even the communist parties, CP1(M) and CPI, had joined the chorus for caste mark on census returns.

Why do the perceived low-castes intend to exist on with undignified social derision? Have they not heard of Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’

‘We should know what is the basis for giving reservation, 27 percent to OBCs and 22.5 percent to SCs,’ argued one member. ‘After 1931, we don’t have authentic figures’. A corollary of this proposition is that caste-census would affect the inter-community allocation of public funds, reservation of jobs, and the like. If that be the case, caste-census would impinge on all communities one way or the other, whereas Christianity, Islam, and tribal ethos are beyond the pale of caste regime. Will it not ring the death-knell of democracy in India?

REFORM FAILURE

From the beginning of the 19th century a series of religious reforms tried to modernize Hinduism. In 1814, Rammohun Roy, a beacon of the Bengal Renaissance, worked on a synthesis of the best thought of the East and the West, Hinduism and Christianity, which only the top elites could possibly comprehend. The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 with a view to reorganize Hinduism around a canonical formation of the Veda¹, as opposed to the spell of *Manu-Smriti*²: It opposed the traditional caste identities defined on birth, and promoted a caste system based on virtue and merit, open to all, subject to the *suddhi* (baptism) for purification of faith. But neither the caste hierarchy nor the essential virtues and character ascribed to each *varna* and caste was questioned. The tenet of Arya Samaj, in effect, remained conservative at its core and self-contradictory.³

‘Caste has nothing to do with religion’. Gandhiji said. ‘It is harmful both to spiritual and national growth’. ‘Beginning from Buddha down to Rammohun Roy’, said Vivekananda, ‘everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution. But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with stench.’ Though he did not make an issue of it, Nehru was almost alone in publicly admitting agnosticism. He wrote : “The spectacle of

what is called religion, or at any rate organized religion in India and elsewhere, has filled me a stand against religion in any of the South Asian countries.'

The Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and other similar movements which started with the laudable object of reforming Hindu society, confused the main issue and organized themselves on the basis of a reform of religion. This basic misconception had two very significant results. It aroused the dormant powers of the Hindu religion which called from its ancient armoury all its weapons to defend its institutions, right or wrong. Practices which had authority neither in religion nor in tradition, came to be regarded as fundamental. Second, it made even the internal reorganization of Hindu society difficult as reformers came to be identified with the thought and practice of other religions.

How did caste originate in the first place? It was an economic-political phenomenon which mutated eventually into a social millstone. The pastoral Vedic age yielded to the agrarian era. The first major village settlement was promoted under state control. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, the prime minister in the imperial court of Chandragupta Maurya in the late 4th century BC, described in his treatise *Arthashastra* the procedure of mobilizing the tribes to be herded into crown villages to toil on farmland as virtual slaves. 'Agents provocateurs should gain access to all the tribes; discover the possible sources of jealousy, hatred, contention, among them; should disseminate the seeds of progressive dissension. Let those of higher rank, within the tribe, be discouraged from eating at a common table with, and marriage with, those of lower standing. Tribesmen of lower rank should, on the other hand, be instigated to insist upon commensality and intermarriage with the higher. The lesser should be provoked to claim equality of status in family and prowess. Public decisions and tribal custom should be brought to dissolution by insistence upon the contrary.'

The next step would ossify the caste system and make the tribes destitute ever since. A brief history of the lowly strata of society, viz. scheduled castes and of outcasts off the society, i.e. tribals, is as follows. Peace and trade during the Gupta period (AD 300-500) had stimulated village settlements by private enterprise; rural economy thrived. Meanwhile, the urban nouveau riche, so fond of Mediterranean coral, exotic wines and slaves for household service, concubines and entertainment, the art and craftsmanship of Roman-Greek world, exhausted the country's foreign exchange reserves. A critical shortage of coin-money for domestic transactions was inevitable. To solve the currency problem the crown took an ingenious step of assigning caste-balanced artisans to every village such that barter exchange within the village would do. Each village was allowed its precisely required number of blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, and other artisans, not exceeding 12 in total. Each artisan was entitled to a certain portion of harvest from the peasants. Every village thus became self-sufficient, cash-free, and disconnected from other villages and the rest of the world. As a result, the caste system was sealed firmly across the villages. The economy became stagnant under the rigid caste rules, being incapable of absorbing additional hands. Unemployment mounted. Some frustrated tribals stayed on, they became in course of time the scheduled castes (SC). Some others headed towards the wilderness of forests, they came to be designated as the modern-day official 'tribals'.⁴

BY THE THEORY OF RELATIVITY IN SOCIETY

Political parties are keen to get caste data from census, because they live on vote banks mobilized around caste groups. But why do the lowly castes insist on status quo of their status? Why don't they struggle to reclaim their legitimate place in the comity of universal brotherhood?

In a caste-based society a person's income is proportionate to his ritual standing. The social under-classes are stuck at the bottom of the economic ranks. With their daily life of living from hand to mouth, surviving under the haunting specter of starvation, the low-castes do not dare protest against their inhuman deprivation. They are forced to reconcile with their measurable existence.

India has so far maintained an equilibrium, a functional balance, with its heterogeneous social groups. It is conceivable that they may reorganize in a way that would break the tenuous balance. It may happen spontaneously propelled by internal tensions or by 'a forceful onslaught from outside'.⁵

Human nature is two-fold comprising (a) the creative intelligence which generates constructive imagination, and (b) the felt need for self-realization. An architect 'raises his structure in *imagination* before he erects it in reality'. This is an instance of positive imagination emanating from the intellect.

Moreover, the nature of man is characterized not only by an essential capacity to construct a project and erect it in reality, but also by corresponding *need* to do so for the purpose of self-realization. The downtrodden men are driven to liberate themselves from oppressive social conditions by a 'definite need' to achieve the freedom for material self-realization.⁶

Although the cultural glories of ancient Athens were real, the more the autocrats boasted of their own grandeur the less respect did they show to the women and the slaves; the social divide widened. In China, likewise, the Confucian glorification of literary scholarship degraded those who could not afford it owing to poverty, i.e. the peasantry. A parallel phenomenon occurred in India. Buddhism which was a revolt against priestcraft and ritualism and against the dishonour of any human being, unconsciously led to the humiliation of vast numbers of toilers of the soil. It would be wrong to make Buddhism responsible for this, for it had no such effect elsewhere. There was something in the caste system of India which took it in this direction. All this shows that human dignity is indivisible; one cannot truncate and parcel it for others. Unilateral progress and the associated arrogance of one section begets disregard to the others. Exclusive gratification causes social imbalance and a vicious circle.⁷

The society of India is polarized along the front-lines of caste and ethnicity. The so-called *dalits* including the inferior castes and tribals lag far behind the socio-economic elites. It is time for the 'wretched of the earth' to wake up. They are no less than any other human being. Their constructive imagination would design a new world of universal dignity and equality. And their urge for self-realization would encourage the people to proceed. This is an internal dynamics with the prospect of hope and emancipation from social oppression.

In ancient times grading of men prevailed everywhere. Popular was the three-class (Brahman, Kshatriya, Sudra) Indo-European model. History has washed it out everywhere except India. The global consciousness has taken cognizance of the Indian anomaly.

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 UNHR four months ago; and, to impart greater legal force, send them for adoption by the UN General Assembly. This could be ‘a forceful onslaught from outside’ to redeem a violation of human rights in India.⁸

References :

- 1 ‘In the period of Vedic hymns (1500 BC to 600 BC), there were classes and no castes. We do not find any reference to connubial or commensal restrictions. The occupations were by no means hereditary. The racial distinction [between Aryans and the others] faded in the background in the early Buddhist times (600 BC to 300 BC).’ S Radhakrishnan, 1940 : *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, at 372.
- 2 *The Manu-Smriti* tried to rationalize the caste-order by showing the presumed contradiction between ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ among men. But it did not say what was meant by the purity or impurity of man. Manu used the undefined term extensively, but his argument was incoherent and illogical. See Ranjit Sau, ‘Barbarians at Guard’, *Frontier*, 42(19). 22-28 November, 2009.
- 3 The Veda allows no room for caste, it envisages an egalitarian society. By contrast, the *Manu-Smriti* is all about human grading by hierarchy. The two cannot mix.
- 4 Ranjit Sau “The Tribal Question in India”, *Frontier*, (vol 42, no 46, May 30–June 5, 2010).
- 5 Gunar Myrdal, *Asian Drama*, at 1063-64.
- 6 Marx, *Capital I*, at 178.
- 7 Ranjit Sau, *The Foundation of Democracy in India*, at 134.
- 8 Ranjit Sau, “Open Letter to UNHR Council”. *Frontier*, 42(27), 17-23 January, 2010.