

Caste system mostly miss understood by the West

As The Herald Tribune, Reuters and The Associated Press reported on 28 May 2007 that "Thousands of low-caste Indian Hindus and nomadic tribespeople have converted to Buddhism here, an act that many said could help them escape the social and economic rigidity of the traditional Hindu caste system." It might be appropriate to take another look at the caste system.

It is not the first time such an event has happened. As the article (<http://www.yunusnews.com/node/81>) states: "Organizers said the ceremony was conducted in the spirit of B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable, or Dalit, who fought British colonial rule and injustice in Indian society. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution that outlawed discrimination based on caste, renounced Hinduism for Buddhism in 1956 because he believed it treated people equally." What the article does not say however is that Ambedkar, though a Dalit (which means 'crushed or suppressed, a term preferred by the Dalits over 'untouchable' or 'outcaste') was also a very prominent Politician in the struggle for independence, associated by most with Gandhi. As a politician he most certainly was respected and accepted, as a Dalit however he never felt truly taken up into society and so at the end of his life he finally decided to convert to Buddhism and as such step out of the caste system.

With him thousands of other Dalits also converted. And such conversions still take place today, as can be seen in the event reported on the 28th of May.

Questions can be asked of course as to whether such conversions truly show a true faith and an allegiance to the newly chosen religion, when the main motive seems to be to get higher esteem from society, but even more it should be asked whether they will indeed receive a higher esteem.

Other religions are certainly tolerated by Hindus. Hinduism has a long lasting traditions to accept all religious paths as different paths to the same ultimate goal. But that does not mean that the other religions are taken up into the system of Hinduism. They remain outside of the caste system. As such they are more apt to receive the name of 'outcasts' although not in the derogatory meaning the term has acquired. They are truly considered as 'not pertaining to Hinduism', while everyone that does pertain to Hinduism has to be placed into the caste system. The Dalits are those of the lowest caste, which before were not be touched, were not to be allowed inside the temples, etc. in short, they were considered as so low that one could say they were 'without a caste'. But still, they were part of the Hindu system. And as such Dalit is a better term as it refers to the oppression by their own system.

Religiously speaking from within that system, they do not belong to one of the Varnas. A Varna is one of the main caste groups that build up the bigger structure of the caste system. According to the myth they were created from different parts of the God Purusha the "cosmic man". The main four varna are known to many people. They are the priestly caste, the warriors and ruling caste, the merchant and artisan caste, and the service providing caste. The Dalits are those who do not belong to those Varnas, and as such do not originate from the Purusha, and are bound to the lowest and dirtiest jobs.

What is less known on the other hand is the fact that these four groups do not at all constitute the entire caste system. They are so to speak the 'religious backbone' of it, but they do in no way really grasp the structure. There are thousands of subdivisions to the caste system. So many even that nobody has ever been able to really map it out. The caste system has therefore no structured representation in any document. This goes to show its very subtle social nature. As a Hindu you can not go and look it all up in the municipality or the temple, you would simply know which caste (bigger and subdivided) you belong to, and you would know of the others around you and act accordingly to this knowledge. It is more a matter of being grown up in a social pattern than having clear references to your background and lineage.

Untouchability was officially abolished under India's constitution of 1950. A mass conversion to Buddhism clearly means that the political statement did not always follow with action. Even half a century later it is still there.

That does not mean it is obvious. Coming from the West you could do lot's of trips in India, and walk around in it for months without ever seeing or perceiving anything like a caste system. You can talk to loads of people who do not care about it, and for who it is a totally insignificant category in their life.

But on the other hand you could stumble on instances of caste related violence or degradation right in front of you on the street or you might talk to people who have very awful experiences with being considered untouchable.

The fact that such a seemingly outrageous system still exists appalls many westerners. But there is no better equation with the caste system than plain racism to make it understandable to them. Let us take the case of segregation in America. We have had a Martin Luther King (like Ambedkar in India) struggling for the freedom of the African American. The struggle even led up to the abolishment of segregation. Politically speaking blacks and whites have the same rights and liberties. But can we for one moment even consider that there is nowadays no racism in America?

Of course you can travel long and far in America and see nothing but shiny non racist faces, but you can also go to certain neighborhoods in big cities and see that ghettos are far from gone. Is racism clearly mapped out? Can you say what the exact structures are? No. But somebody who grows up in New York between Italians, African Americans, and Chinese, etc. will certainly simply know where to place him or herself in the system.

One could argue that race is a different thing than caste, but it suffices to understand that both concepts are just as elusive. Those things are not in the open, they are a bit 'under the skin' of the social tissue.

It is strange therefore that a westerner would find it normal to be appalled by the caste system, but most westerners would not for a moment find it normal that an Indian might look upon American society and be appalled by the fact that racism still exists more than half a century after the official abandonment of segregation.

Should it wonder then that converting to other religions does not always solve the problem of untouchability? Many African Americans turn to sports or music and become rich and revered when they are good at it, but does that always solve the problem of racism in their lives? No, taking a step to a more socially accepted role does not always get you out of the problems that are in the undercurrent of society.

An example. I myself studied at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. There many Indian Christians come to study certain master programs. A professor once told me however how shocked he was when he one day encountered a lot of anxiety and problems in his class. As it turned out, some of the Christian Indians did not want to sit next to another because they previously belonged to the casteless.

In contemporary India a lot of Dalits are very rich and a lot of Brahmins (the highest priestly caste) are very poor. Some Dalits, like Ambedkar, also get high esteem and influence in the country. Just like some African Americans earn more than most Caucasians and like some have gained esteem and influence in the whole country. But just as the latter does not mean racism is totally gone, the former does not mean the caste system is completely removed.

Even more so, the caste system had its use. It is difficult to say how it exactly originated. There are religious reasons (like the Varna idea in the Veda's), there are the social reasons (like structuring society when cities were growing), there are economic reasons (like some sort of 'social security' within the caste), and so on. The caste system is therefore, culturally or sociologically speaking, certainly not appalling at all.

But the oppression of the Dalits is of course intolerable. Also within a Hindu world view. Many great Hindu leaders like Gandhi, Ambedkar, Vivekananda, and the like have made that clear.

It is a division the West often seems not capable of making: the atrocities of untouchability are not the atrocities of the caste system. To say, like so many do "the caste system is awful" shows insufficient understanding of the concept. But to say that India should help the oppressed is of course just as normal as saying that America should tackle its racism.

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