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Abstract: Caste is a social formation peculiar to Indian Society. Whereas societies all over the world, with the possible exception of tribal societies, show similarities in terms of the hierarchical ranking of class formations, Indian society, in addition to class differentiation, shows a unique pattern of caste stratification which often, not always, overlaps with class formation. Caste in its origins may, in effect, have been a kind of functional differentiation within society and therefore analogues to class. However, in the course of ages, it acquired racial and religious overtones which predicated it rigidly on birth-determined status with the accompanying notion of ritual purity and impurity. The result was an ambiguous social phenomenon. On the one hand, the votaries of '*Varnasram*' claim that Indian society acquired an adaptive and integrative genius within a pluralistic set-up, and this enabled it to last through the vicissitudes of history. On the other hand, critics of caste argue that it has been a factor of disintegration rather than integration, and that caste segregation and exclusivity has hindered the emergence of civil society in contemporary India.

Keywords: Caste system, Indian caste, varnasram, Caste system in Christianity

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Christianity and Caste

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1. The Issue

Caste is a social formation peculiar to Indian Society. Whereas societies all over the world, with the possible exception of tribal societies, show similarities in terms of the hierarchical ranking of class formations, Indian society, in addition to class differentiation, shows a unique pattern of caste stratification which often, not always, overlaps with class formation. Caste in its origins may in effect have been a kind of functional differentiation within society and therefore analogues to class. However, in the course of ages, it acquired racial and religious overtones which predicated it rigidly on birth-determined status with the accompanying notion of ritual purity and impurity. The result was an ambiguous social phenomenon. On the one hand, the votaries of '*Varnāśram*' claim that Indian society acquired an adaptive and integrative genius within a pluralistic set-up, and this enabled it to last through the vicissitudes of history. On the other hand, critics of caste argue that it has been a factor of disintegration rather than integration, and that caste segregation and exclusivity has hindered the emergence of civil society in contemporary India.

The mentality associated with caste is perhaps more problematic than the structures of caste which today are

crumbling anyway before the onslaught of modernisation. Caste-mindedness, which resides in the subconscious most of the time, asserts itself in subtle and not-so-subtle forms in private and public life. The devious logic of caste-mindedness is that all humans are not in fact born equal, and hence are not entitled to equal consideration and treatment. What then happens to the principle of equality under the law on which a modern polity is founded? The caste mindset contravenes constitutionalism, with its cardinal tenets of republicanism, civil liberties, fundamental rights, egalitarianism and secularism. This mismatch invariably proves costly in social and political terms. Culture and economy are also vulnerable to the depredations of caste as vast reservoirs of talent remain untapped within the body of society, unless they are released through affirmative action. An achieving society self-consciously seeks out merit and gives it every encouragement whereas an ascriptive society prides in its status and tradition.

The bottomline of the debate on caste is the concept of human being that one chooses to have. Is it a 'univocal' concept or an 'equivocal' one? A univocal concept is one that accepts human nature as fundamentally the same world-wide, with the same dignity,

rights and responsibilities. An equivocal concept on the other hand does not believe in the essential commonality of human nature and grades humanity in terms of levels of relative worth. To the extent that these contrasting concepts are operationalised in real life, we shall have very different social results. The univocal concept helps the emergence of a society that is more open, participative and egalitarian. All sections of the community feel a sense of belonging and have a common stake in the welfare of the whole. They are, therefore, more likely to contribute to the total social product whether in terms of culture or of economic output. The equivocal concept on the other hand consigns large sections of the community to second, third and fourth class citizenship. It inhibits creativity and social mobility which are essential for innovation and achievement. A healthy sense of competition is pre-empted as a result. The consequence of social stratification is a stagnant and reactionary society that is more rooted in the past than oriented to the future.

2. The Christian Response

What is the Christian outlook in this regard? To answer this question we need to go back to the sources of Christian doctrine and practice, and examine to what extent these have been reflected in the Indian context. As for Christian doctrine, we read in the book of Genesis that “God created man... male and female he created them” (1:27). We are further told that “God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and thus man became a living being” (2:7).

The creation narrative goes on to say that “God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, he took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh. God built the rib He had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed: “‘This at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh! This is to be called woman for this was taken from man.’ This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body” (2:23-24).

The above quotations from Genesis contain in a nutshell the Christian view of human nature though expressed in an anthropomorphic and allegorical manner. Human dignity flows from the fact that God has created him or her in His own image and likeness. As a ‘mini-god’, a human person has the unique faculties of reason and will, and therefore, of self-expression and self-determination. His fundamental rights and civil liberties are rooted in his basic constitution as a sovereign person whose life is a free gift of the Creator himself. Liberty, equality and fraternity are therefore germane to his nature and may not be alienated or violated by any power under God. All civil and political authorities are mandated to uphold human dignity and rights through good and just governance. The State does not do its citizens any special favour by safeguarding their life and liberty. It is only discharging its sacred duty by them.

The second of the above quotations from Genesis brings home to us the astounding fact that each one of us is a unique configuration of organic

compounds with a breath of the divine sustaining us. This puts us in solidarity with one another and makes us responsible for one another. We are ever so ephemeral and vulnerable as mortals, yet ever so special as being animated by the same Divine Spirit. There is no question of some being more equal than others, at least as far as the constitution of human nature itself is concerned, though there may be a wide variation among individuals and groups in terms of capabilities and socio-environmental conditioning. Genesis also asserts, in a very poetic and graphic way, the equality of man and woman who share the same origin, and, therefore, the same dignity and destiny. This has important implications for gender justice as scriptural sanction is often sought to rationalise male domination in domestic and societal affairs.

A brief sampling of quotations from the New Testament will serve to illustrate the overall Christian view of human nature and human society. This view is a non-discriminatory one, the only basic discrimination constantly made being that between those who live by love and those who do not. The Apostle Peter, while addressing the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius, says “The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34-35).

In another context, the Apostle Paul, while addressing the Council of the Areopagus in Athens, speaks in a similar vein when he says, “Since the

God who made the world and everything in it is Himself Lord of heaven and earth, He does not make His home in shrines made by human hands. Nor is He dependent on anything that human hands can do for Him, since He can never be in need of anything; on the contrary, it is He who gives everything – including life and breath – to everyone. From one single stock He not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but He decreed how long each nation shall flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be. And He did this so that all nations might seek the deity and, by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him. Yet in fact He is not far from any one of us, since it is in Him that we live, and move, and exist, as indeed some of your own writers have said: ‘We are His children’” (Acts 17:24-28). In his letter to the Romans, Paul again emphasises: “Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God. The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God” (Rom 8:14-16). Consequently, Paul exhorts his followers, “If you love your fellowmen, you have carried out your obligations. All the commandments; ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet’, and so on, are summed up in this single command: ‘You must love your neighbour as yourself;’ Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to everyone of the commandments”

(Rom 13:8-10). The same exhortation to love is found in the First Letter of John: "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never know God because God is love (I Jn 4:7-8).

Social differentiation is one thing, which is both unavoidable and in many ways a source of human enrichment; but discrimination among various categories of human beings is totally alien to the Christian spirit. Paul recognises this fact when he states: "... if all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many, but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand 'I do not need you', nor can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you'" (I Cor 12: 18-21). Paul takes the principle of non-discrimination to an extreme when addressing the churches of Galatia in the following terms: "... there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28). And in the Letter of James we read, "... as soon as you make distinctions between classes of people, you are committing sin ..." (James 2:9).

3. Church and Caste

The non-discriminatory character and participative spirit of the early Christian communities in the Middle East are brought out in a brief pen-sketch in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read: "The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among them-

selves according to what each one needed" (Acts 2: 44-45). This and the earlier biblical citations serve as a background to our understanding of the pristine Christian social outlook which influenced Church teachings in the centuries that followed down to our own day.

However, as happens most of the time in human affairs there is a considerable gap between precept and practice, and this holds good of the Church too. In the course of its long history, the Church has come to be stratified and structured in a hierarchical straitjacket. There is not only differentiation but often discrimination among hierarchy, clergy and laity. There is an inbuilt gender bias against women which precludes them from ordination and priestly ministry. Add to this, in India caste incubus has affected sections of the Christian community as through some kind of social osmosis. During the early missionary era, only converts from the Brahmin caste were normally ordained to the priesthood. There have been incidents occasionally reported from the not-so-distant past of so-called Brahmin priests refusing to concelebrate Holy Mass with priests of non-Brahmin descent. So persistent was the caste factor as faced by the foreign missionaries that they were often constrained to limit their ministry to one or other caste, excluding the others. Thus Francis Xavier restricted his apostolate to the coastal *paravas* of low caste, virtually shunning the upper castes. On the other hand, Robert de Nobili cultivated the Brahmins exclusively and adopted their lifestyle. The same was the case with John de Britto. In present-day Goa, it is not

uncommon to have matrimonial alliances forged within the same caste. And in Kerala, which tradition holds to have welcomed the Apostle Thomas and history has documented as having welcomed Vasco da Gama, the herald of the missionary era, we find that Syrian Christians place themselves high up in the social hierarchy both within and outside Church circles. In South India generally, where a large proportion of Indian Christians are concentrated, it is estimated that some sixty to seventy percent of the community comprises converts from the lower castes, the so-called Dalit Christians. In certain dioceses, separate burial grounds are reported to have been set aside for the Dalit Christians. A generation or two ago, it was not uncommon for certain Churches in Mumbai to have separate pews for Koli and Kunbi Christians, belonging to the fishing and agricultural communities respectively. In Vasai, there are Christians who consider themselves *Samvedi* (*Sāma Veda*) Christians and therefore of Brahmin status.

4. Reservation and Christians

Following the decision of the Government of India to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in respect of the so-called 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), there have been stirrings within the Indian Christian community to have benefits of reservation extended to the deprived sections of the community, particularly the Dalit Christians, or Christians of Scheduled Caste origin. The development has obliged Church leaders to turn the spotlight within, and take cognisance of areas of discrimination and neglect within

the Christian community which professes egalitarianism. Pressures have been building up within the communities to take positive steps to end this discrimination, which runs counter to Gospel values. At the same time, demands are being made on the government to render the Dalit Christians eligible for the socio-economic benefits available to the Scheduled Castes under the policy of affirmative action.

Those who are opposed to the extension of Scheduled Caste reservation benefits to the Dalit Christians maintain that as Christianity does not believe in caste, the question of Scheduled Caste Christians does not arise, and thus extending the benefits of reservation to them is ruled out. If such categorisation is extended to the Christian community, caste structures would be introduced into the Church itself, which would be a paradoxical and undesirable consequence. The rejoinder to this argument is that while Christianity in India has explicitly outlawed untouchability, yet the Constitution provides reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This reservation cannot be on the basis of religion as that would mean a clear violation of the provisions of the Constitution itself. Thus it can be on the basis of socio-economic criteria whereby backwardness is established. It may also be pointed out here that Christians belonging to the Scheduled Tribes qualify for the benefits of reservation along with the non-Christians of Scheduled Caste origin for similar benefits. Moreover, OBC Christians, along with other minorities, are entitled to the benefits of reservation as per the Mandal Commission recommendations.

Thus it is only Scheduled Caste Christians who are left in a limbo as far as the benefits of reservation go. This is inexplicable if the ground for reservation is socio-economic backwardness which cuts across religious denominational boundaries. If, however, the ground is religion, it clearly is in contravention of the letter and spirit of the Constitution. There is reason to believe that the latter is the case in view of the fact that Scheduled Caste Christians who re-convert to Hinduism have the benefits of reservation restored to them while they are deprived of the same benefits as long as they remain within the Christian fold.

Another interesting phenomenon is that Scheduled Caste Sikhs and Buddhists enjoy the benefits of reservation despite the fact that neither Sikhism nor Buddhism believes in caste and both faiths in fact explicitly repudiate caste. Thus the argument that because Christians do not believe in caste, Scheduled Caste Christians are not entitled to the benefits of reservation falls flat on its face. A basic question that needs to be asked is: Is it not the responsibility of a government that runs a professedly secular, welfare state to promote the upliftment of all sections of its citizens, of whatever caste or creed, particularly the weaker sections? What has a religious label to do with this? To take the stand that it is for the Church leaders to uplift the weaker sections of their own community rather than call upon the government to do so, is a specious one in that the bishops are spiritual leaders, and cannot be saddled with additional secular responsibilities which are pri-

marily the preserve of the civil authorities. The same argument would apply to the spiritual/religious leaders of other communities, majority or minority, as well.

The long and short of the foregoing discussion is that as a civic community we need to take stock of the situation in which we find ourselves at present socially and politically. Are we promoting distributive justice in a rational and transparent manner among all sections of the polity? Are we applying secular, socio-economic criteria in extending reservations to the weaker sections? Or are we mixing up communal and casteist considerations in what should be a humanistic, egalitarian enterprise devolving on the public authorities? The principle laid down by the Supreme Court that those who constitute the 'creamy layer' of the backward castes, who are otherwise entitled to the benefits of reservation, are to be excluded from such entitlement, points the way to a non-discriminatory policy of affirmative action in the cause of social justice. It is the degree of socio-economic backwardness that must be the determining factor in entitlement to reservation and no other. Thus whether a deprived person belongs to the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Neo-Buddhist or any other community or sect is irrelevant to the issue at hand.

A pertinent question can be raised here as to whether the Church, by calling for reservations for the Dalit Christians, is not thereby exacerbating the caste problem in India rather than contributing to its solution. In reply it might be said that what the Church is doing is

to call upon the government to follow a non-discriminatory public policy vis-à-vis the deprived sections of all communities, not excluding the Christian community. The only way to combat casteism is to establish unambiguous criteria for backwardness that can be applied across the board to all sections of the national community. Perhaps a 'basic needs' line, that could also be called the 'human dignity' line, should be drawn, below which no individual or group within the national community must be allowed to descend. Such a line would be the cut-off for determining entitlements to reservations and other concessions. A formula for phasing out such benefits and concessions also needs to be worked out in respect of those individuals and groups who have graduated into self-help status. No vested interests should be permitted to develop under the guise of reservation, which has unfortunately been the case up to the present.

Whatever reservations one might have about the recommendations of the Mandal commission, one positive outcome of the 'Mandalisation' of Indian Society has been the progressive secularisation of caste structures, through their use as vehicles of socio-political mobilisation. Many backward castes have become upwardly mobile in the process. The stranglehold of the upper castes has been broken and their claims to hegemony have been debunked. Even the pro-Hindutva parties and outfits that have mostly been dominated by the upper castes have had to come to terms with the likes of Kalyan Singh, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, all hailing from the backward castes.

Mandalisation has led to the desacralisation of Indian politics, and this has served as an antidote to what was perceived as the Sanskritization of the lower castes in their bid to ascend higher up in the caste hierarchy. Today the articulation of caste interests, together with their aggregation across caste boundaries through a process of political bargaining, takes place on purely secular terms, while the space for narrowly based religious discourse and transactions has progressively shrunk, the Mandir movement notwithstanding.

5. Conclusion

The Indian Christian Church cannot remain unaffected by the ferment and metamorphosis taking place in the rest of the Indian Society. As part and parcel of the national community, it has to define itself vis-à-vis the wider society, seek out a legitimate role for itself, put forth its reasonable claims on the polity and assume its just share of benefits and burdens of common citizenship. It should avoid seeking special privileges and exemptions for itself save such as it would advocate for all sections of society without discrimination. It should not fight shy of participating actively in cultural, economic and political life as Indian Christians. The laity and clergy alike are free citizens of a free country and cannot shirk their social responsibilities. The Church, like any other organisation, institution, political party or group, has both the right and the duty to take a stand on public issues, particularly where ethical values are involved, as these constitute the bedrock of its mission. Christian institutions, whether educational or chari-

table, have been by and large cosmopolitan both in their clientele and in their staffing patterns, and this fact alone has been no mean contribution to national integration across barriers of caste and creed. It is to be hoped that as Indian

Christianity sheds its minority complex, it will play an increasingly pro-active role, in association with other progressive forces, in exorcising the demon of caste from our body politic.