

End of Casteism

P G Shah

A DEEP sense of frustration is traceable below the theatrical manner in which the announcement was made of the mass conversion of 75 000 members and office bearers of the Scheduled Castes Federation under the leadership of a great Indian, Dr Ambedkar. Whether this was an election stunt in connection with the formation of a new political party (the National Republic Party) or a genuine attempt at securing "liberty, equality and fraternity" history alone will tell. But to a social scientist, the event appears to be one of importance and provides an occasion for serious thinking as to whether the country is proceeding on correct lines for securing a casteless society free from exploitation. Dr Ambedkar has also announced that though he and his followers have left Hinduism and "would not take cognisance of the caste system** they would claim and retain all the privileges enjoined in the Constitution for the Scheduled Castes and will continue to fight for our first rights. "They would not lose their rights and privileges with the change of faith."

"Untouchability" was officially abolished in 1948. Its practice in any form is forbidden. Several State acts and a Central Harijan Disability Removal Act have implemented the Constitutional provision. Yet the Harijans complain about their social status. As Dr Ambedkar has stated on this occasion, "mere scholarships and the provision of a few jobs would no longer satisfy the Harijans, they want equality and self-respect" The Important point here is whether a group or a community or a caste can at all advance by being isolated for being given special privileges and preferences. The Constitutional position guaranteeing safeguards for specific groups, castes or tribes provide a double edged weapon which may destroy when it should protect. Separate housing colonies, separate wells, and even separate burning grounds for special groups are at present tolerated in a Welfare State pledged to evolve a casteless society.

It is one of the most retrograde provisions in the Constitution that distribution of social relief in the matter of education, housing or

social or economic uplift has to be conducted on the caste basis. Government of India recognises 304 scheduled tribes, 818 scheduled castes, and 1426 other backward classes for the purpose of granting scholarships and other concessions. The meaning of this special provision is that members of these 2548 caste-groups have to be certified by local Government officers to belong to the particular caste group by such local enquiries as are feasible. One result is that these caste groups will exist, prosper and continue in this country as long as the special groups are tolerated officially, even though caste may be formally abolished in the census and other official records. The position is complicated by other political considerations e.g. reservation of posts under Government and of seats in Parliament and the State assemblies. It would cause a huge furore in political circles if, in the scheme of establishment of a casteless society, all reservations by caste groups are abolished. But a social scientist, not concerned with previous political or constitutional commitments would strongly insist on the abolition of all privileges based on caste in some form or another.

It is one of the strongest paradoxes in India that untouchability persists in spite of change of religion. The present policy of selecting persons for social relief on the basis of socially low occupations has encouraged religious communities like Christian, Mohammedan and even Sikh who all believe in equality of social status for all their followers to claim relief on caste considerations. Brahmin Christians would not inter-dine or intermarry with Harijan Christians and the latter are denied a decent burial ground after death. Members of scheduled castes converted to Christianity or Islam or Sikhism, even though these religions believe in equality of status, are given the privileges open to either backward classes in some States. Dr Ambedkar, even after conversion to Buddhism and after vowing not to take cognisance of caste, insists on the continuance of all the old concessions. The result is that the number of the scheduled castes and other backward classes will never decrease but will always swell.

The only remedy for the State is to abolish concessions based on caste, if there is going to be a genuine effort to abolish casteism. But in a country like India whose education at the primary, secondary and higher levels is neither universal nor free, preference has to be shown to the backward and under-developed groups in some form or other till social and economic inequalities are removed. To continue the existing procedure on caste basis will never secure the aim of a classless and casteless society preached so forcibly by the Father of our Nation.

For securing a society in which caste will cease to be a means of either profit or exploitation the only correct remedy is

- (1) to cease to distribute social relief scholarships, and other amenities like housing or economic help on caste basis; and
- (2) to distribute the same quantity of total relief to the really poor and homeless, irrespective of caste.

The various groups of backward classes so classified at present should be assured that the money set apart for their relief will not be reduced and will be distributed without reference to caste affiliations but on the basis of economic conditions of the families needing the help.

Measures of general welfare e.g. schools, hostels colleges, dispensaries and hospitals, will be available to all communities but will be specially provided for areas or villages where they are needed most. A Welfare State, committed to the schemes and policies for the uplift of the backward groups, cannot and will not neglect them. But the masses, the social workers and the State should combine to evolve measures of social uplift based on general considerations irrespective of caste affinities. It will be only through inner evolution of the sincere feelings of equality and brotherhood among the masses that the caste differences will really disappear and a casteless society can be evolved. But an essential preliminary step is for the State to cease distributing social relief on caste basis and to refuse to recognise the two thousand and over caste groups which at present disfigure the fair name of the modern Indian nation, bent on a casteless society.

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