

ANTAJ KANTHA

Fighting for the Untouchable community.

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PAST AND PRESENT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Historians, anthropologists and students of religion have been busy with the caste system and its origin since the beginning of indological studies in the 18th century. Various theories put forward, even though everybody agrees in underlining the system's diabolic intents. The origin of the caste system in the way it has developed up to the present day can be fixed to the beginning of the Christian era. Before that we do have mentions here and there of its existence but very likely it is only from the beginning of this era which the *varna* template takes solid roots in the Indian sub continent. In the Manu *dharmasastra* (written approximately between 200 BC and 200 AD) the system is developed and manifested in all its ideological strength. Manu states that the four *varnas* were divinely ordained from the very beginning. Quoting from the Rig Veda, Manu says that from the mouth of Purusha, the Self-Existent One, came the Brahmins, from his arms came the Kshatriyas, from his thighs came the Vaishyas, and from his feet came the Sudras. According to Manu other castes were the result of miscegenation between members of these four original *varnas*. In the years following 200AD the practice of caste and therefore untouchability was intensified and applied to more groups. As a result society was structured on the *varna* theory. Ultimately this theory paved the way to a society divided into groups based on people's birth and occupation. Pollution and purity became the criteria to distinguish and rank the different groups. This however is the ideological explanation of Manu, an explanation which students of religion and anthropologists alike have too readily taken up as the explanation of the caste system. Manu after all was the mouthpiece of the elite which had all the benefits from such a system!

Some scholars however think that perhaps religion is not as involved with the caste system as social stratification instead might be. In the early days of civilization stratification of society was done purely on the basis of "division of labour" i.e. for economic purposes. According to these scholars it was necessary for emerging city-states to promote an interactive system of production to ensure safety and sustainability for all. This division of labour guaranteed also a hierarchical ranking where elites could take away economic surplus from the labouring masses. The whole system condemned the vast majority of people to a sort of Hegelian "master-servant" relationship.

Another sort of explanation, favoured by the contemporary Indian Dalit movement and their academic mentors, tries to explain the caste system referring to the dialectic of "conqueror and conquered". Accordingly, the coming of the Aryans and the struggle which ensued with the local Dravidian populations of North India would explain the *varna* template. The Aryans because of superior warring techniques and weaponry subjugated the Dravidians which were then absorbed and ranked in the new Aryan society. Some historians have tried to prove that the fall of the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation of Harappa and Mohenjodaro was due to the invasion of the Aryans. The explanation however is anachronistic and fanciful since the Aryans came, if they ever did, a couple of centuries after the fall of the Indus cities.

Apparently the caste system and untouchability, part and parcel of the former, originated in the Indian subcontinent as a political development. Reacting to the Buddhist religious, political and, in one word, cultural hegemony, Vedic elites in the successful attempt to regain a lost political centrality invented Hinduism to counteract Buddhism, and the caste system to offset Buddhist imperial formations. The caste system was then not a religious institute but a political one. In other words the caste system was the formal structure of early medieval Indian polities, the way Indian states were built and functioned. Religion and social stratification did have a say in it but in as much as they justified and sacralised the status quo of those early Indian polities.

Be as it may, the caste system has passed through lots of historical vicissitudes and transformations. It has however maintained its roots in the Indian subcontinent showing a remarkable resilience. Unfortunately this means that even today the system's evil aspects are here among us. Untouchability is one of these dreaded aspects.

THE IMPACT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The first impact is the harsh fact of social stigma. The untouchables are considered polluting and are therefore kept at a distance. Their mere presence as well as their belongings are discarded or avoided. They are made to live separately and often cannot share such common village amenities as the well. The stigma of untouchability is

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S. M. Abul Hossain

Published by

PARITTRAN

Village –Laksmanpur

Post -Shubhashini- 9420

Upazilla – Tala District –Satkhira

Bangladesh.

Mob- 0176 08 21 58; 0176 679140

E-mail:yankee64@libero.it

parittran@yahoo.com

Editorial

Bangladesh is a small country with a great variety in its population. A long history has contributed to the formation of communities differentiated by religion, caste and to some extent, tradition. Among them a sizeable community is that of the so called *Dalit* or Outcaste, also commonly known as *Antaj*. These groups are the *Bajondars*, the *Beharas*, the *Bhagobenees*, the *Bunos*, the *Dias*, the *Dhomas*, the *Hazams*, the *Jeles*, the *Kaiputras* (or *Kaortas*), the *Namasudras*, the *Nikaris*, the *Pandra Kshatrias*, the *Parois*, the *Patnis*, the *Rajbangshirs*, the *Rishis*, the *Fosua*, the *Shahjee*, the *Shikaris*, the *Tele*. Also many of the tribal aborigines are usually included in this outcaste community. Among the *Dalits* the *Rishis* and the *Namasudras* constitute the major portion of their total population.

They live with a poor social status and are being neglected, tortured, hatred and exploited by the larger society. Their community status is such as Dr. Ambedkar stated that they are “the last, the least, the lowest and the lost.”

From time immemorial, the outcaste people have been victims of racism and casteism. Even today in thy 21st century, they are untouchable due to the existing casteism whereas the United Nations human rights declaration, the constitution of Bangladesh and the World Hindu Conference in Katmandu has abolished such casteism and classification. But the situation remains as before creating a situation of dissatisfaction and hindrance to development.

ANTAJ KANTHA is a bold publication to express the life pattern of these exploited people and a means to make known their developmental plight. We are much delighted and honoured to be able to publish this first issue of the newsletter. We expect to bring to light the socio-economic, political, cultural and other aspects of their lives.

We hope that the readers will come forward and share in the suffering of these communities living scattered throughout but still thriving with the hope of living a better life.

We solicit support from all concerned in protecting the outcaste communities, helping them develop their human potential, ensuring their rights and privileges like all common citizens of Bangladesh.

We are grateful to all who have supported us in publishing this newsletter. Equality and dignity for the *Dalits* and all other citizens of Bangladesh is what we are striving for.

Milon Das.

Editor

attributed to the traditional occupation of the *jati* and affects all members of that *jati* regardless of actually being engaged in that occupation or not. Those *jatis* who clean up, deal with dead animals or eat their meat, are ritually unclean and beyond the pale.

The vast majority of so called untouchables are actually engaged in agricultural labour. For many, their traditional occupation is simply a supplementary and temporary work over and above their main agricultural occupation. Ironically, however, the stigma remains. That agricultural labour is not in itself ritually polluting and carries no special social stigma is borne out by the fact that higher caste people do engage in it without jeopardizing their social status. In the case of untouchables this is not so.

Untouchables are very poorly compensated for their labour and thus forced to live a life of constraints. Their diet is poor; their clothes are few and rarely clean; their homes are small, fragile and unhealthy; and they are hopelessly overwhelmed with debts. Poverty and indebtedness means bondage to and dependence on the village strong man of the moment.

An important aspect of so called untouchables' life is their life style. The anthropologists have described untouchable communities' customs and ceremonies surrounding birth, death, and marriage in great detail. In many respects these resemble those of higher caste. However, two practices, both indicative of women's more equal status, do distinguish them from higher castes: giving a bride price rather than a dowry and permitting widows to remarry. Some of the vices of the untouchable community, such as personal or domestic uncleanness as well as the practice of eating carrion, are the direct consequences of severe poverty. Others such as drunkenness, frequent quarrelling, domestic violence, untrustworthiness in serving others, are together indicative of a deep inner rage which can be expressed only in forms of self-hatred, contempt for one's own people, and passive aggression *vis a vis* one's "betters".

Finally, untouchable communities have little hope for outside sympathy or support. Every reform, whether political, economic or social has adopted a *lasses-faire* attitude towards the caste system and has not basically interfered. Of course, the changes reforms introduced to tax and administer the rural life as well as to develop the economy did affect the untouchable communities, but these were not made with their welfare specifically in mind.

CASTE SYSTEM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh came into existence as an independent state only 32 years ago. Historically however it has a multifaceted heritage, enriched by its ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim roots. It is through this deeply rooted psycho-social heritage that untouchability has been ingrained into the social fabric of the country. Traditions of hierarchy and patronage, the strongholds of the caste system, remain strong among Bengalis irrespective of their caste and creed. Even religions have failed to ensure social equality due to centuries of cultural indoctrination and present political convenience. Of course many people will deny that a caste system still exists in Bangladesh. There are several reasons behind this "Caste-blindness."

It is generally understood by people that caste system is only associated with the Hindu Community. Therefore, the common belief is that besides and beyond Hinduism the caste system cannot exist. But this is not true. In reality a "Caste mentality" if not the actual caste system strongly exists among Bengali people. For example people engaged in some particular menial jobs such as cobblers, sweepers, palanquin bearers, weavers, potters are discriminated against and looked down upon by society at large. People engaged in these occupations are known as *muchis*, *methors*, *beharas*, *napits*, *jolas*, *pals* etc. all of which are derogatory words in Bengali. Social regulations are imposed upon them as to restrict inter-dining, inter marriage with other groups. Even household gods (deities) are different from those of high caste Hindus. Popular faith among Muslims (known as Sufi Islamic practices) and doctrinal faith (Known as *shariat* Islamic practices) are manifestation of this sectarian division on the Islamic religious domain. Similarly the Christian community in Bangladesh is often described as "Old Christians" "New Christians" and "Adivasi/Tribal Christians." All these sectarian discussions represent hierarchical stratifications of Bengali society which are simply a reflection of caste mentality.

Secondly in Bangladesh demographic analysis has always focused on the line of age, sex and religion. Cultural minorities, social minorities are relatively a new terminology in our social science. Political change for over half a century has played a greater role in removing these terminologies and thereby perspectives from the constitution as well as from official books and records. During British rule special provisions were made for "the scheduled caste" or "the depressed class" in the then Indian Constitution. After the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 India continued to keep provisions and gradually inserted many other clauses in its constitution to ensure the rights of the scheduled castes. However in the case of Pakistan (and the then East Pakistan) the "Basic democrats" structure of local government introduced by the then president Ayub Khan in 1960 replaced the "Caste-wise" system of government which existed in many places and did away with caste as a political organization. The consequences have been far reaching and wide. Caste blindness in the then

East Pakistan and in today's Bangladesh has been promoted by the state. Unfortunately the caste minorities neither could integrate themselves with the mainstream nor could the mainstream ensure social equality for them.

The third reason for this blindness is mass poverty. Social scientists and development planners have always tried to understand poverty from the view of needs and their fulfilment. Therefore all development initiatives were undertaken on the basis of enhancing livelihood and purchasing capacity of the poor. As a result the whole process has been counter productive for caste minority. In fact, there has hardly been any attempt to see poverty from the perspective of social inequality.

Yet caste blindness may be even wilfully procured by today's government for ideological purposes. On the one hand being Bangladesh a Muslim country to state that the caste system is still a problem is to diminish the brand of Islam lived out in the country, particularly on the international scenario. Secondly, since the caste system was basically a political structure whose pillars were patronage and hierarchy, and since today's Bangladesh's political scenario still relies on those same pillars it may even be that the caste system or mentality comes in handy to today's political needs!

SEARCHING FOR A WAY TO DALITS EMPOWERMENT: A PARTICIPATORY GROUP RESEARCH

In history, there are many examples in which Dalits' contribution at grass root level has been remarkable in all spheres of life. However, it is also remarkable that in the present struggle against discrimination Dalits do not record particular successes. To try and understand the reason for such a failure, we appointed three animators. After having trained them, they were sent to three different unions to survey the Dalit population and make contact with them. Eventually, research groups were formed in different villages. Twenty-four of them started discussing helped by their respective animators. Through these discussion sessions, the animators discovered the plight of their lives. In a second phase, the Dalits members of these groups started interrogating themselves and the animators about possible solutions to their many problems. At first, most groups manifested that the root of their problems lies in their financial constraints, believing that with cash money they could sort out everything. In fact, they added that, with money they could send their children to school, cure them when in need etc. Despite this sort of common ideas, little by little Dalits started entering a deeper sort of understanding. Week after week the discussion became more and more alive. It has to be kept in mind that most of the participants were illiterate. This of course sometimes created confusion during the discussion sessions. To further deepen their awareness, helped by their animators, the group members produced a list of their problems. They then analysed them one after the other producing a sort of hierarchised list of problems, from the most serious one to the least so. Eventually they started understanding the true picture of their poverty and of the caste system which has enslaved and still is enslaving them. But what is more they started sharpening their awareness through a continuous search for truth. To cut a long story short, Dalits began to understand that because of their ignorance, lack of schooling, of wisdom and of knowledge they have been mowed down by the blades of poverty and of the caste system. Dalits started asking fundamental questions. Dalits helped each other to find answers and in the process, new questions were born. Dalits themselves through discussion, sometimes even through quarrels felt that their lack of knowledge, information and, generally, education was the real cause at the base of their plight.

1. Social Problems

- They hate us
- Illiteracy
- We do not get justice or fair trial
- We are without power
- We cannot mix freely with other people
- Our environment is bad
- Our behaviour is questionable
- We lack unity
- We do not get respect
- Children marriage
- Question of inter-dining
- Lack of proper habitation
- We are full of superstitions
- Limitations in participating to religious festivals
- We live in places were others would not live
- Our bad attitude
- We are envious and selfish
- We are not skilled
- We lack self-respect

2. Financial Problems

- Most of us are landless
- Unwilling to take risk in doing business
- Lack of preparation for today's skills and
- We lack anything; we are not owner of anything
- Banks do not give credit to us
- We do not have capital

needs

- Difficulty in changing employment

3. Women's Problems

- Physical maltreatment
- Just salary is not given
- Sexual abuses (by influential and rich people)
- Limited freedom of expression
- They cannot have a say in trials or arbitrations
- Victims of child marriage
- Limitation in their mobility
- Women are not owner of land
- They have no right over their father's possession

4. Political Problems

The popular researchers did not point out this problem. However both the animators and the researchers felt it to be a problem. It was then discussed with the popular researchers. The outcome was as follows:

- We have not got any political idea
- We do not have any role in politics
- We sell our vote

5. Health problems

- We are unaware about health in general
- We are unaware about good nutrition
- Lack of hygienic latrines
- We know nothing on arsenic contamination
- We have not trained midwives
- No idea on primary health care
- We lack cleanliness
- Lack of knowledge on family planning
- Ignorance on taking care of pregnant women

LOBBING AND MONITORING OF LOCAL UP ELECTIONS

Parittran believes that the local government administrations are important for the overall development of citizens' political and civil participation in the democratic process. It thus strives for the involvement of outcaste people in these local administrations as a first step to de-marginalise and bring them into mainstream society. Local administrations are also a privileged instrument to redress the wrongs and injustice outcaste people have to face everyday.

Parittran in the 2003 UP election for the first time organised and carried out an awareness and education campaigns targeting outcaste people in order for them to take an active role in the local administrative election. These awareness campaigns had as their main aims the following:

- Gathering information on the level of outcaste people involvement in the election and election process;
- Increasing the level of outcaste people involvement in the election;
- Pinpointing special areas or problems for political intervention of particular importance for outcaste people;
- Raising awareness on democratic values, rights and duties of all citizens.

With the help of Flip Charts prepared by Parittran using discussion and sharing meetings with outcaste people, ODN visited 40 villages within 10 upajelas under three different districts. Participants in these orientation meetings at the village level were the village representatives and the educated populace, particularly the youngsters. These visits were carried out before the election until the last day before it. From the information gathered during the orientation meeting it came out that:

- Outcaste people do not know about the main purpose and activities of local governments;
- Outcaste people are neither informed nor involved in the activities of local governments;
- Only 5% of outcaste people think that in the developmental activities of local governments they should have an active role and place;
- Outcaste people are not interested in either standing for election or taking active part in the electoral process. The reasons being: mastery of an insufficient number of votes in any specific constituency; being outcaste they feel the separation and thus the impossibility to gain votes from higher up people; fear of political persecution; lack of unity and tendency to grouping of outcaste people;
- Outcaste people do not know the ways and regulation of the election process;
- Candidates in election do not make any promise in favour of outcaste people;
- In election time outcaste people undergo political pressure and often persecution by local candidates;
- Outcaste people, because of possible political retribution, cannot come out publicly in favour of one or the other candidate;

- Outcaste people are completely unaware of the existence of the 12 standing committees in each Union Parishad and, needless to say, their participation in them is nil.

From the information gathered on election day and afterwards the following came out:

- Out of 365 mayoral candidates in 125 unions only two belonged to outcaste communities;
- Out of 1,856 councillor candidates in the same unions only 25 belonged to different outcaste communities;
- Out of 827 reserved women councillor seats only 2 belonged to outcaste communities;
- Outcaste candidates could not carry out their electoral campaigns in an honourable and dignified manner;
- Outcaste neighbourhoods became the places for fighting out other candidates rivalries; particularly after election fear dominated those neighbourhoods;
- Before election, outcaste people were made the object of threats and intimidation;
- On election day though voters turned out in good numbers, among them outcaste voters were few;
- Those outcaste voters who did cast their vote could do so without impediment or restriction;
- After election, in many outcaste neighbourhoods political retribution is on record. Beatings, lootings and rapes took place indiscriminately. Often the losing candidate blamed the outcaste people for his defeat, even when outcaste people did cast their vote in his favour; again even the winning candidate took revenge on outcaste people if he believed that they did not support him in the election;

In practice the following is what was positively achieved:

- Awareness on the question of caste discrimination increased in all section of population;
- Outcaste people increased their awareness on their situation in society;
- Outcaste people started a process of unification understanding the value of unity against a tendency towards continuous fission;
- Outcaste people augmented the degree of self esteem;
- Outcaste people got a fundamental idea about local government, its working and processes;
- Outcaste people increased awareness on their own strength and importance in any electoral process;
- ODN in its working area got enough positive response.

Following are the limitations encountered in this endeavour:

- Impossibility to campaign consistently and extensively in any given area;
- Constant and effective communication between ODN and outcaste neighbourhood turned out to be very difficult;
- ODN was unable to challenge and protest the violence and persecution undergone by outcaste people after election;
- Where outcaste people themselves protested for the violence inflicted upon them, they did not obtain any positive results.

Case Study **“Instead of food, a good beating”**

On 25 May 2005, Milon and Ashim Das, university students, go to Patkelghata to visit Ujjol Das at his shop. Ujjol comes from the village of Tolkupi in Satkhira district. The three friends after talking and talking, feel hungry. On Milon’s proposal they all go to the “Jonata Hotel and Resturant” in Patkelghata to have their meal. While entering the Hotel they are warmly welcomed by the Hotel’s owner. After a while, Ujjol who delayed his entry because he stopped to wash his hands, joins the two friends and orders the meal. They wait for about 30 minutes but no food is served to them. In the meantime other customers, having eaten their food, come and go. Eventually Ujjol calls upon a waiter and asks why the food is not being served to them. The waiter answers straightforwardly that they cannot eat there. Asking the why of such an answer, the Hotel’s owner replies that they have exhausted their supply of food, but that was not true, of course. In fact Ujjol shows the food to the owner. The owner replies that that food was not for them. Somehow a quarrel starts, and the owner turns his language to offensive addressing the three of them with depreciative kind of Bengali (*tui*). At a certain point in the ensuing discussion, the owner of the Hotel, Mr. Proshanto, pushes the three friends out of the premises saying: “this Hotel is not for the Muchis” (Muchi is the depreciative title given to the Rishi, a so called outcaste group, originally leather workers).

Reactions to the Happening

The local influential men are informed right away of the occurrence. Their reply however is quite timid and unsatisfactory. They eventually say that they cannot do anything to change the Hotel's owner mind. The same event is then brought to the knowledge of local politicians. They assure their intervention at the same time asking the Rishi not to do anything. They will see to it! Unfortunately, a part from their assuring words they do not do anything. Eventually the same fact is brought to the knowledge of local administrators. But as it happened with the others, even the administrators cannot find scope to intervene in the dispute. As a matter of fact they say, that there is no law that can force the Hotel's owner to give food to Rishi or to any other he does not want to feed. When all possible venues are exhausted, the Caste Eradication Alliance is informed of the matter. The organisation is taking steps to address the problem.

ABOUT PARITTRAN

In the Indian Subcontinent since time immemorial a particular group of people has used religion as a weapon to utilize various social facilities for themselves. By using religion they set up a social classification of people which has become well known under the name of "**Caste System**". The social system was and continues to be deadly for a lot of people living in the Indian subcontinent.

So many people living in the south western region of Bangladesh have been victims of this cruel system. These people are known in different names like **Harijans, untouchables, outcaste people, 'Tapshil groups', ethnic minorities, 'Dalits', Scheduled castes, 'Bhu-putra', 'Bhumij'** etc.

Through the efforts of Father Luigi Paggi, and other member of the **Xaverian Missionary Society** and **Caritas** some young men and young ladies belonging to these backward groups living in the South Western coastal region of Satkhira, Khulna and Jessore have been able to get a certain degree of education. they have also been able to get aware about their own people's miserable situation and have understood that trying to change and improve it is now their duty and responsibility.

Therefore, in 1993 a group of them set up a small Students' Accession, which was called 'Parittran'. The meaning of this Bengali word is '**liberation or Salvation**'

Parittran is a promise and a movement. Parittran wants to assist neglected ethnic out caste groups for their empowerment through participatory way by developing community based people's institution.

Through this Organization those students had in mind to start a movement of the oppressed minority people towards achieving social and economical benefits, human rights and self respect.

This movement aims at:

1. Eradicating social evils such as caste and untouchability
2. Developing and Struggle for Human right.
3. Making backward people aware of the ecological problems.:

Vision: Establishing a society of equality free from social, gender and class discrepancy having equal rights and opportunities for the people.

Mission:

- Providing legal assistance to the women and the ethnic people
- Establishing the ethnic minority class in the local, national and international level
- Focusing the positive role of the ethnic groups through various media and publications
- Developing the ethnic community as small scale entrepreneur through appropriate skill development training
- Awareness for the ethnic community on health, nutrition, family welfare and environment conservation
- Establishing equal participation of male and female towards sustainable development through joint efforts and to have organizational development in them.
- Developing social awareness and social movement against early marriage, polygamy, divorce, dowry, trafficking of women and children and violence against women.
- Assisting the ethnic community so that they can become active development partners for the society.

ONGOING PROJECT:

1. A Action Research Analyses of Socio-economic Barriers of the Untouchable Community and Means of Evading These Barriers. Supported By RIB
2. Promoting the rights of ethnic minorities and women in the south-western Bangladesh. Supported By The Fund For Global Human Rights USA.

3. Pilot project for the eradication of Casteism at its roots. Supported By Caritas Diocesana Di Trivento Italy
4. Underprivileged Community Empowerment Program -1(UCEP-1). Supported By OWN
5. Social Mobilization Development of the Munda Community Supported By **Luggi paggi**
6. Environment and disaster management program. (EDM)
7. Legal aid Support-- Supported By BLAST BD