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Who Is My Neighbour in India?

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Abstract: In our country due to the caste mentality that ruled the minds and hearts of people for centuries, ill treatment of Dalits continues. I give a list of events where Dalits have been mistreated in various parts of the country, especially in North India. It seems something natural to Indians to ill treat a Dalit, as if it is his/her due; they deserve to be treated that way. That is the way the caste people seem to think and behave. It is high time that we recognize the foolishness in the caste system and give it up completely and treat every human as equal to one another. This call to equality does not go against the need to see the other as always more important than myself and give preference to other's point of view in any conflict situation.

Keywords: Dalits, Caste system, Good Samaritan, Equality.

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Introduction

The title might seem strange to those who are familiar with the New Testament and the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.25ff) but to those who are familiar with what is happening in India, especially to Dalits, the title is very relevant. After the BJP came to power at the centre in 2014, the attacks on Dalits have gone up enormously. What is happening in our country is really horrible and shameful. This makes one wonder in which century are we in, for it does not seem to be fitting our present twenty first century. Some centuries ago when caste was very strong and was ruling the country, what is happening today may have made sense. But in the present century, after the Independence of India and the promulgation of our Constitution, what is happening makes one hang his/her head in shame. There is not a single day one looks at a newspaper without seeing at least a dozen accounts of attacks on Dalits in any part, especially, of North India. “Dalits are collateral victims of Hindutva,” says French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot. He says proponents of Hindu nationalism have not transcended caste differences. Speaking to Malini Nair of *Indiaspend* about Dalit mobilization Jaffrelot says why it is exceptional and why right-wing politics will always have limited appeal to backward castes.

Situation of Dalits in India

Practically every day newspapers bring news of rapes of Dalit women. I quote a few report items: A 30-year-old Dalit woman was allegedly raped by two men in Bansdih area of Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh. A 16-year-old Dalit girl allegedly gang-raped in a moving car by four men in Ludhiana on 12th February 2017; they then dumped her near the Jalandhar Bypass and threatened her with dire consequences and made casteist remarks against her. These men were known to this girl who is a beautician; they came to her telling her that they needed her services; as she knew them, she went with them. The men then raped her in the moving car. Two days later, she told her parents, who then lodged a complaint. In Rajkot a 30

year old Dalit man was stoned to death on 12th February 2017 over a petty issue. Before he reached a hospital, he died. In Rajasthan Sohni Devi, 44, a *Jat*, chose to live with Narayan Balai, a Dalit. Devi was a widow and Balai a widower. When she died of TB the elders of the *Jat* dominated village pronounced that nobody would help cremate her. There was no one to lend a hand. He called many friends. Except one, no one came. Finally with the help of the police Balai managed to cremate his wife. In a horrific incident of brutality, a minor Dalit girl in Rajgarh (MP) was allegedly torched after she resisted rape. The perpetrator was trying to rape the victim but she fought back and resisted, so he torched her. A Dalit woman from Sultanpur was allegedly gang raped by two persons in the presence of her husband in Khutahan police station area of Jaunpur district on Sunday night. Rajasthan is a very caste driven state. In 2016, Rajasthan reported 5,134 cases of atrocities against Dalits, the third highest in the country after Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Recently there was a huge rally organized by Dalit groups in London to protest against atrocities against Dalits in many parts of India. They demanded the release of some 7000 Dalits imprisoned in Bhima-Koregaon in Maharashtra. A large number of Dalits had gathered for a celebration of the anniversary of 1 January 1818 when a small group of Dalit soldiers defeated a mighty Peshwa army. Upper caste Marathas and the police attacked this group. One was killed, and many hundreds were wounded. The protestors said that the continuing incarceration of Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad was unjustified. They called for the protection of human life, instead of caring only for cows.

Dalit Media Watch is a news channel in the internet; every issue has a minimum of 10 cases of atrocities against Dalits in the country. Every day stories of atrocities against Dalits are reported in all newspapers. Recently, in Punjab a Dalit woman's household is afraid to leave their home and go out because a Dalit girl had complained about discrimination in her school; the government took some action against the culprits. A Dalit girl has stopped going to

school out of fear of attacks by the upper caste, as she had lodged a complaint against some teachers for discrimination. The 17-year-old's mother, elder sister and father have stopped working as daily wage labourers and simply avoid going out. So scared is the family that some of their relatives stay with them during the day and night to ensure their safety. In a number of villages, the Dalits are not even allowed to use the common village toilet; and when they go to the fields, they are chased away from there. The upper caste people throw cow dung and other dirt near the house of the Dalits.

Some Concrete Cases

Many years ago, once I was travelling to Bhavanagar from Ahmedabad; the bus I got into was packed except for one seat by a young lady in front. She had a bag on that seat and when I asked her if that seat was free, she picked up her bag and gave me that seat. She was a college student; we had an interesting conversation; after about ten minutes she asked me what caste I was. I said: you are an educated lady and you believe in this crap? She was embarrassed, but wanted to know my caste. I told her I was a Dalit; then I could feel her distancing herself from me, though she could not go very far. Then I took out a book and read till I reached Bhavanagar.

Lalitha Devi is 65 and remembers how, during her childhood, when she worked in the fields of a high caste landowner, when she was thirsty she asked for water. The lady of the house would pour water into the air near Devi who had to catch it in her cupped hands to drink it. "I wasn't allowed to touch any utensil of hers because my touch would contaminate it," recalls Devi. Devi says caste discrimination or "untouchability" has lessened over the decades, particularly in the cities. But a new survey published in January (2018) had a nasty surprise: it showed that three-quarters of those surveyed in rural Rajasthan and 48 per cent – almost half – of all respondents in rural Uttar Pradesh still practice untouchability.

NACDOR's project manager in Johripur, Ganesh Gautam, like Devi, has a painful memory of caste hatred from his childhood. It

was the time when the upper castes in his village, angry over some incident, forbade Dalits from going to relieve themselves in the fields. With no toilets in their homes, the fields were the only option, but even this was denied to them. “People had to creep into the fields late at night so that no one would notice them,” he said. As an educated dalit, Gautam mixes with some upper caste people in Johripur. When an acquaintance from the Brahmin caste invited him to his son’s wedding recently, Gautam accepted the invitation. However, he added that he would only attend the wedding if the Brahmin promised to attend his nephew’s wedding a few weeks later. Both men attended the respective weddings.

“Every day I am looking at far worse figures, such as these,” said Ashok Bharti, chairman of the National Confederation of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) pointing to a sheet of paper. On it is a table showing 799 murders, 2545 rapes and 35,692 atrocities committed against Dalits in 2016. These are official figures, which he has collated. In addition to these crimes, there are the daily endless humiliations and slights heaped on Dalits, particularly in the villages: being denied access to the village well, living in segregated huts, roadside eateries that keep a different set of cups to serve tea to Dalits, Dalit children not just segregated in the classroom but forced to clean the classrooms and toilets, and upper caste classmates refuse to eat school meals cooked by a Dalit. “The most progressive institutions in India are guilty of caste bias because all institutions, including the judiciary, are reflective of Indian society and also reflect the power dynamic, and in this dynamic, Dalits have remained excluded from socio-economic empowerment,” said Bharti. The survey’s findings show that even those who had five years or more of education were just as bigoted about Dalits. It was no surprise, Bharti said.

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has taken to task a DGP of Rajasthan over the state police inaction in dealing with cases of atrocities against Dalits. He was asked to submit an action taken report about errant police officials. A 30-year-old Dalit

woman, a victim of gang-rape on July 22, 2017, was forced to commit suicide at Booth Rathoran village in Barmer after police failed to act against the accused despite the fact that the victim had named the culprits. With rising impunity, the two men allegedly began to threaten the family of the rape survivor, a mother of two. Unable to bear the constant threats and fearing for the safety of her family, the woman jumped into a water tank and drowned on September 12, 2017. Another FIR was registered for abetting the suicide of the woman but the police have taken no action.

“When they see us wearing nice clean clothes, speaking well and eating well, they engage with us,” says Tridevi, a Dalit graduate. Still, she is aware of the limits. “My upper caste friends are fine with me but their parents are wary. They keep a distance and are not very friendly when I run into them.” “The upper castes don’t want us to rise and become their equals because that way, they lose their superior status. So they will do anything to hang on to their presumed higher status,” Tridevi thinks. Recently there was a report of a Dalit being beaten in Gujarat for wearing a mustache. In recent months so many very young Dalit girls were raped and murdered in UP.

The Dalits belonging to Kancharagunta in Andhra face boycott for not obeying the diktat by Kammas against using the thoroughfare, as there is a statute of a deity on the road. But Mahendra, a Dalit disregarded the diktat and was on his way to Kandukuru town on his bike; then the Kammas stopped him and forcefully took away his vehicle keys. The Kammas couldn’t stomach the fact that the Dalits were attaining education and owning vehicles. They are agitated by the fact that the Dalits are not subservient to them anymore. As a result of the social boycott, members of the upper caste community refused to sell milk to Dalits, and denied them work in the fields.

Becoming a Neighbour to Everyone

It is a great shame that even 70 years after independence our people have not become free of the sick caste mentality; their mental powers are to be doubted, because they do not see this nonsense of high and low caste is a mere mental fabrication with no foundation in reality. But fools hold on to it and ill treat people.

It is on this background that I have raised this question given in the title. When will we Indians become human enough, rational enough to recognize the caste system which was originally a division of labour to enable the people of a village to attend to all their needs, like farming, carpentry, leather works, etc. were assigned to certain groups who would specialize in those areas and the village could survive in a healthy manner. There was no hierarchy in that system. This system was made into a divinely ordained system by the Brahmins to preserve their presumed superiority, which others accepted and the caste system survived in the country for centuries.

With our independence and the promulgation of the Constitution, we have been freed from this nonsense. But people continue holding on to the system and hence we see Dalits being ill-treated even today. We need to go beyond the caste system to recognize that all humans are equal as brothers/sisters; there is no high or low human. Jesus had made us aware of this long ago through the story of the Good Samaritan that we become a neighbour to every person in need by reaching out to that person with compassion and love, as the Good Samaritan, did in the story of Luke.

Illiteracy is one of the reasons why this system continues to be alive in our country. We look forward to all becoming sufficiently educated to realize the foolishness within the caste system and reject the whole idea of some humans are superior to others, and some are inferior to others.

In the West racism was alive which justified slavery for centuries and holding on to the superior status of the Europeans by which they justified colonialism, slavery and the wholesale genocide in Americas when the Europeans went there. The apartheid in South Africa, the practice of the superiority of the whites in America, the racist practice in Europe are as shameful as the casteist practice in India. But these do not justify what goes on in India and it is high time that we recognize the madness that we Indians have practiced for centuries and come to our senses and become

fully humans by accepting every human as dignified and deserving of respect from everyone. Every person in need is my neighbour and I need to reach out to that person in love and compassion.

Conclusion

When I was in Europe, one day I was waiting at a table in a restaurant in Strasburg; long after me, came a European on the next table. When the waiter came, he went straight to the European and I protested and walked out, making a lot of noise; then even the manager came out to pacify me and took me inside and I was served first before the one who came in after me. They seemed to think that a European had the right to be served first than an Indian which of course I did not allow. In India, all the right thinking people will have to take the initiative to make people aware of casteist practices when they occur and stop them.

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