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Past and Present

Mukhopadhyay, P.B. Swami Satchidananda very rightfully pointed out that the plight of the Hindu in India is related to the abuses of the caste system as it exists today in Hindu society ["A Chat with Swami Satchidananda," Hinduism Today September/October, 1986 issue],

But what happened to the clean-cut system of the division of labor according to the varnas (castes)? Today, why does an upper-caste Hindu not allow his brother of the same religion to "come close" to him? This could only happen when the chatur-varna system of the division of labor is totally misunderstood and abused for either collective or individual, selfish reasons. And this is exactly what happened in the Hindu society of India. The role of the three gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas) over the human nature was either forgotten or ignored, and the castes were tabooed.

Let us see how this really happened. In the Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna advises his friend and devotee, Arjuna, on the four different varnas, created on the basis of qualifications (gunas) and the kind of work one performs (karma). Nowhere is the importance of birth or heritage mentioned by Lord Krishna. A person should be qualified first to do a job within a particular varna, which forms the basis of the division of labor in society.

Unfortunately, through the darker periods of Indian history - the cruel invasions from outside, the conversion of the Hindus and the effects during and after the Islamic and Christian, religious and political colonializations - this "sanatani" eternal system of the division of labor according to the gunas and karma was systematically abused by the priests (brahmins), the kings (kshatriyas) and the

merchants (vaishyas). The Brahmins monopolized knowledge and learning, the kings did the same with political power, and the merchants with the nation's wealth. These three predominant and privileged groups took social and economic advantage of the working class (sudras), and in turn, these four groups exploited those outside caste and made them "untouchables," whom Mahatma Gandhi renamed as the "harijans" (children of Lord Hari). Thus, this process of socio-economic exploitation by the privileged higher castes was made permanent through a system of hereditary lineage, which is neither recommended nor prescribed by any Hindu scripture. Yet, it was done in the name of religion.

Two-thousand five-hundred years ago the Buddha warned us about the evils of the caste system. In the 14th and 15th century Indian reformists like Sri Chaitanya Dev in the East, Ramanuja in the South and Sant Kabir Das, Sur Das, Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Gobind Singh in the West again and again warned humanity about the exploitations of the caste system. The followers of Sri Chaitanya Dev made a casteless society amongst themselves and still try to adhere to it. The Agamas declared the caste system an unacceptable ill to humanity. In the 19th century, persons like Raja Rammohan Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati stood against the prevailing caste system and formed the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong battle against the caste system is still known to us. Even Pope John Paul II remarked to a reporter while returning from his visit to India (New York Times, Feb. 12, 1986), "there are other systems of caste that are not called caste, but exist in the world." The struggle against the social ills like the caste system goes on.