MY TURN
Category : January 1988
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1988

MY TURN

The Caste System In South India

Krishnaswami, V. The history of Europe, the history of the world, does not present another instance of a caste system so rigid and so enduring as the caste system of India. The number of castes has increased to many hundreds in modern times. Every aboriginal tribe coming under the Hindu influence has formed a caste of its own, and every trade guild, too, has crystalized into a caste.

Almost everyone in India knows about the caste system. Many in India condemn it or criticize it as a whole. There is hardly anyone left in the country who approves of it in all its ramifications and development. But there are many who accept its basic theory, and a large number of Hindus adhere to it. But today the caste system is seriously threatened and its very basis has been attacked. This is because of some powerful elements present in Hindu society to reform itself.

The change that is taking place is due essentially to basic economic changes that have shaken up the whole fabric of Indian society and are likely to upset it fully. Thought patterns are changing so much that it is impossible for the caste system to endure. The solution of the problem may take different forms in different countries. Changes are taking place despite our likes and dislikes, yet and it is certainly within our power to mold these changes and direct them in the proper way. But we cannot just disrupt society and hope for something better without having some vision of the future we are working for. In the constructive schemes that we may make, we have to pay attention to the human material we have to deal with. Therefore, it is desirable to examine and understand the old Indian social structure which so powerfully influenced the people in India.

There is a certain amount of rigidity among castes and this is strictly adhered to as far as possible. If inter-dining is taboo, then much more so are marriages between castes, but some mixed marriages do take place. The caste system in India has, to some extent, managed to preserve distinct types, especially among higher castes.

The autonomous village community and the caste system are two of the special features of the old Indian social structure. The third is the joint family, where all members are joint sharers in the common property, and the inheritance goes by survivorship. But the joint family system is rapidly breaking up in the country and individualistic attitudes are developing, leading not only to far-reaching changes in the economic background of life but also to new problems of behavior.

The ultimate failure and weakness of the caste system and the Indian social structure are that they degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunity to get out of that poor condition-educationally, culturally or economically. The degradation has brought deterioration across the board, including in its path even the upper classes. The caste system survived because it represents the general power-relationship of society.

If India is to march forward, it should aim at equality for all. Not only must equal opportunities be given to all but special opportunities must be given to backward groups to enable them to catch up with those who are ahead of them. Any such attempt made in the country will release enormous energy and transform it with amazing speed.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.