

Leaving Hinduism to Embrace Equality

by Ankur Betageri (November 2015)

Prejudice is not the consequence of its object's actions or attributes. It is not some objective dislike of the object's real nature. Classically, no matter what the object does, whether "X" or "not X", the bigot defames him for it. Prejudice's source is the holder of the beliefs himself, his cognitive models and his culture. Prejudice is a manifestation of people's (individual and collective) search for *meaning*. It makes little sense to discuss the real nature of a bigotry's object... when trying to understand the genesis and maintenance of beliefs. To do so would surely be to muddle the understanding of prejudice.

—Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*

One of the main sources of disharmony in Indian society is the eternal antagonism between the Brahminists and the Dalits. The Brahminist (defined as anyone who subscribes to and derives his social status from the varna hierarchy) is compelled to undermine the respect of the Dalit (defined as anyone who is negatively affected by the varna hierarchy) and the Dalit is also compelled to undermine the respect of the Brahminist. But why is it like this? Why should they quarrel constantly without ever winning or losing the fight? Why is there this tension in the Indian society?

Understanding the source of, or reason for, the tension may not reduce it but it may help us in thinking of newer ways to solve the problem.

Because of the varna hierarchy the Brahminists have made the disrespect of Dalits the condition of their respect, and conversely if Dalits have to assert their self-respect they have to disrespect the varna hierarchy and the Brahminists who derive their respect from this hierarchy. This system of the varna makes it almost impossible for the Brahminists and the Dalits to respect themselves, or feel pride in their caste-status, without disrespecting or

denigrating the status of the other. So they trade insults and mock each other's status, always thinking that if only the other party was a little more fair-minded and magnanimous this ugly power struggle wouldn't be happening. But in thinking like this, both the Brahminists and Dalits are wrong: they are fighting out of *necessity* and what makes their fight necessary is the ideology of varna hierarchy which determines their social consciousness.

What is the solution to this? The rejection of varna hierarchy and the religion which imposes varna hierarchy, that is Brahminism, which (post nineteenth century) has been called Hinduism. This is what Ambedkar suggested though he knew very well that it was easier said than done. The Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya varnas (especially the men, since women of all varnas, not being "twice-born," are not considered their equal) among the Brahminists do not feel any compulsion to reject Brahminism or the varna hierarchy. In fact, they like the varna hierarchy; like a well-furnished living room it makes them feel nice and comfortable and secure. But this living room (which has cracks widening on all its walls, and whose walls and pillars are always collapsing, and which are constantly being repaired and plastered) they have built on top of the not-so-comfortable houses of the Dalits. Now if the Dalits are to get the sun, see the sky and feel the breeze on their faces they have to break down this living room.

Some Brahminists disturbed by the inequality in the Hindu society (who, going by our definition, are Dalits, since they are "negatively affected" by the varna system) have left this shaky and collapsing living room and have built their homes on the earth next to the houses of the Dalits. This act of transcending the varna hierarchy, of accepting the equality of fellow human beings, and living in harmony with them makes them neither Brahminists or Dalits but modern emancipated subjects. But not everybody wants to let go of the perceived good fortune of living on the top floor that the Brahminical religion has granted them. These people want to crush the Dalits and everyone else who protests against their domination. They pelt stones at them, beat them up and threaten them with dire consequences if they do not stop shaking the living room of Brahminists. They ask them to accept their place in the Brahminical "scheme of things." "We allow some of your people to come up to the room through the staircase of Reservations," they say. "You should be happy with that, and shut up! The lower house is where you were born and that is where you shall stay." And then the fight goes on, with the Dalits shaking up their room and breaking

its walls, and the Brahminists pelting stones and sticks and sometimes even firing bullets. But none of this ever ends the war: it is constant, eternal and monotonous.

“All we are asking of them is to accept their lot and let us live in peace,” the Brahminists say. “We are only asking them to treat us equally, are we asking for too much?” the Dalits ask. But the Dalits cannot live a life of dignity without destroying the position that is forced upon them, and the Brahminists cannot treat them equally without destroying the mindset which makes them feel superior and nice.

One option that the Dalits (and here I mean specifically the scheduled castes) have always considered is converting to Buddhism or Sikhism, and though even these religions, especially Sikhism, are infected by caste system, when it comes to equality almost any religion in the world is better than Hinduism. But if they convert to any religion other than these, like Islam or Christianity, they lose out on government reservations. The law here is slightly coercive: it forces them to choose between total freedom of religion and reservations, and if they want one, they will have to let go of the other. But what about those Dalits who want to reject Hinduism without converting to Sikhism or Buddhism—can they retain the constitutionally granted Scheduled Caste status? The reason I am proposing such a rejection is because this would help Dalits assert their unique cultural identity without any kind of social cringe being imposed on that assertion. Within the hegemonic cultural system of Hinduism (and also to some extent Sikhism) which constantly stigmatize, threaten, oppress and erase the Dalit identity into invisibility, the positive and healthy assertion of Dalit identity becomes almost impossible. And assertion of one’s cultural identity is crucial to the emancipation of a community as this makes the community develop a genuine sense of pride about its culture making it reasonably resilient and resistant to external attacks and negative characterization by other religious or caste cultures.

But for Dalit castes to reclaim and rediscover their unique culture they will have to wrench themselves away from the foreign and repressive Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist religious cultures. So is it possible for a Dalit community to leave Hinduism without converting to Sikhism or Buddhism? I am no legal expert but I think this is possible. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution named “Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion”

guarantees, more than the freedom of religion, the freedom to act according to one's conscience (as long, of course, as it does not infringe on another's freedom). So if the conscience of a Dalit tells him not to compromise on his dignity and self-respect, he can let go of a religious identity which seriously compromises them. There is plenty of evidence that the Hindus and Sikhs still practice untouchability, stigmatize Dalit communities, break their cultural confidence and blemish their identities, but what about Buddhism—why am I asking Dalits to distance themselves from Buddhism as well? My reason may not be convincing given Ambedkar's famous (but tentative) thesis that the Dalits are essentially Buddhists—that those who were banished from the mainstream society as “untouchables” were essentially Buddhists who defied Brahminical dominance. Also Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism after decades' long consideration of the matter is something that needs to be understood. My only tentative objection to conversion to Buddhism (which can of course be refuted) is that Buddhism is also a sophisticated and hegemonic religious culture which swallows the unique cultural identity of the Dalit community. A Dalit caste which mass converts to Buddhism will only be an oppressed community which has found refuge in a larger identity, the respect and status gained, being largely extrinsic, may not help the community to develop an authentic sense of pride. But if the community can make a genuine historic link to its Buddhist roots, assuming such roots exists, then this problem does not occur. Since the origin of untouchability and the classing of certain communities as untouchables is still not very clear, the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism cannot be simplistically understood as *ghar wapsi* or the act of returning home. So while conversion to Buddhism is certainly better than staying in Hinduism or converting to Sikhism, just stepping out of Hinduism and asserting one's own cultural community identity may be better than converting to any religion. It would also help Dalits mobilize themselves politically, as coming together as Dalits is always more empowering and beneficial than coming together as the oppressed communities of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. But wouldn't stepping out of Hinduism without converting to Sikhism or Buddhism make Dalits ineligible for affirmative action? If my understanding of Article 25 and its recent interpretations by the Indian judiciary is correct then the answer is no, one can step out of Hinduism and still be the beneficiary of affirmative action.

A Bombay High Court [ruling](#) in 2014 has upheld the progressive nature of Article 25 by asking the state not to force any individual to specify his religion in

any form or declaration made to the government. This means the SC/ST and OBC identities are supra-religious political identities given to socially disadvantaged castes and communities to overcome the traditional disadvantages imposed on them by the varna ideology of Hindu religion. So declaring oneself 'not-Hindu' is one way in which anyone who senses any kind of disrespect from the Hindu religion can protest against the repressive varna ideology of Hinduism thereby enabling himself to positively assert his cultural identity. If every Hindu who is even slightly disrespected or disturbed by Hinduism starts leaving Hinduism by publically declaring that he is not Hindu (a status update on Facebook or on Twitter with #IAmNotHindu would make the announcement public) then we can see a genuine progressive change towards equality in the Indian society.

Some may dismiss this proposal as superficial and meaningless as it can never touch the lives of "real" Dalits who not only have no access to the internet but being deprived of education cannot even participate in the creation of an emancipatory Dalit discourse. I think this is a cynical view; I see real and substantial benefits accruing to the Dalit communities if they manage to get out of the toxic and corrosive influence of the Hindu varna system. And to declare oneself not Hindu is one way of challenging and resisting the fascistic and unjust regime of the varna hierarchy.

The great thinker U.R. Ananthamurthy said that the longing for equality is the most fervent religious prayer in the modern world. Indians who for millennia have derived their social status by denigrating other castes and communities should open their minds and hear this prayer reverberating in the collective heart of humanity. I really think it is time Indians made a conscious choice to come out clean on the issue of caste. Those who are for the caste system and who feel it gives them a positive identity should declare themselves Hindu and those who feel that it gives them a negative identity should declare themselves not Hindu. And those who declare themselves not Hindu should assert and celebrate their cultural community identity. Cultural expression and resistance is the only way through which Dalits can reclaim their humanity, dignity and self-respect and as long as they stay within the confines of Hinduism these will be denied to them.

Hinduism is so structured that it cannot integrate Dalits – or even Shudras, Vaishyas and women – without making them feel bad about themselves. The only

varnas and gender who can feel genuine pride in being Hindus are Brahmin and Kshatriya males; the rest are just hangers on to give a special status to these people. These hangers on should decide whether they want to receive the social status that is doled out to them by religion or whether they are capable of determining their own status—an opportunity denied to them in traditional Brahminical society but provided to them by the modern secular republic of India.

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