

THE USE OF DALITS AND RACISM IN ANTI-HINDU PROPAGANDA:

How to deal with clever Christian missionaries

The ongoing commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire (1807) is being used by Christian missionary circles as an occasion for Hindu-bashing through the theme of caste oppression as a still-existing form of slavery. Hindu polemicists typically react by highlighting the human-rights abuses committed by Christians or in the name of Christianity through the centuries: witch-burning, persecution of pagans and heretics, racism, apartheid and of course the slave trade itself. The intended implication is that Christians are morally in no position to berate Hindus for their social injustices and had better not meddle in inter-Hindu matters. This may be a correct and convincing position to take in front of a neutral or as yet uninformed audience, but with Christians who know their religion, it is hopelessly ineffective.

Whereas Christian missionaries have invested heavily in studying Hindu society and its subsets as defined by language, caste or social class, most Hindus including anti-conversion activists are unfamiliar with the Christian mentality. Hindu polemicists listen to their own and each other's words and then think: how great, how clever. But if you want to get a message across to an audience, you should listen to the effect you're having on this audience. So, as an ex-Christian and still daily in touch with Christian circles, I would like to point out certain beliefs and attitudes that immunize Christians against the charge of being no better than Hindus with their caste oppression.

First of all, the historical facts and present eyesores which you want to shove into their faces and of which you expect that they will shock & awe Christians into silence about caste, are already widely known and acknowledged. On the 900th anniversary of the Crusades, a perfectly justified Christian reaction against Muslim imperialism, numerous Christians indulged a guilt trip and said sorry to the Muslims. But most of all, they impressed it upon themselves (far more thoroughly than you could hope to do) what evil sinners they had been back then, and how this should spur them into being nice to today's Muslims. To Christians, past sins are a matter for repentance vis- -vis God, but ultimately only the normal course of things, since we're all sinners. So they are not uptight about having sins on their record and won't be blackmailed about this.

Secondly, repentance about sins past is proven precisely by a commitment to avoid and combat similar sins in the present. It is not enough to say your confession of sins, you have to resolve to undo the sins' consequences and go out of your way to remove them from this world. So, precisely *because* Christians have been guilty of slave-trading etc., they have a duty to combat similar inequality now. And this must not be limited to their own backyard, for sins are both by commission as by omission, i.e. standing by passively when others get away with committing them. *Because* of their past sins, they feel obliged to meddle in your sins today. Just as after abolishing the slave trade and then slavery itself in the British Empire, the British felt obliged to go out and impose its abolition on the Ottomans, the Arabs and others. This is a moral imperative. In missionary-speak: "We have been part of the problem so now we must become part of the solution."

Hindus could have guilt-tripped modern Westerners into leaving the injustices of Hindu society alone if they had been Africans or Muslims. More perceptive Westerners would not be inhibited versus these two either (Muslims traded black, white and Indian slaves; while Africans enslaved and sold off their own brethren to Arab and European slave-traders), but most of them, and especially politicians, don't dare to speak against those two groups. But Hindus are a different matter altogether.

Hindu polemicists talk about "white racism" as if they are totally oblivious to the torrent of anti-racist re-education that has swept Western society in the past half century. The problem is not just that Hindus cultivate an anachronistic world-view, apparently drawing a good feeling about themselves from pretending to live in the colonial age and occupying the moral high ground of the anti-colonial struggle. This is bad enough, for movements based on self-deception stand defeated from the very start; but in the present case, it also blinds them to the transformation of anti-racism from a force working in favour of the standing of non-European peoples to one that actually makes things worse for them. Or at least for those among them who have a solid reputation of racism, viz. the Hindus.

It is precisely anti-racism that makes Westerners self-righteous vis-à-vis Hindus. Whereas social injustice in Western or even in Muslim society is duly recognized, it doesn't have the extreme stigma of the caste system because the latter is conceived as a form of racism. In the past, I have argued left and right that the basis of caste is not racial, but who am I? International organizations and influential observers keep on repeating that the caste system is a huge instance of racial apartheid. And this much must be conceded, that it is at any rate hereditary inequality, so that castes can be considered as micro-races. The mega-scale and mega-age of Hindu society add to the image of the caste system as the most monstrous racism in world history.

Indeed, if caste is arguably (though few would argue even this much) preferable to outright slavery, even anti-racists consider it a few notches worse than the apartheid as it existed in South Africa. The whites oppressed the blacks, but they also provided some elementary services to them, such as modern medicine and "the liberating message of Christianity", they gave black elites the sop of becoming government officials in the "homelands", they did not totally neglect them. For all its exploitative ruthlessness in practice, the apartheid philosophy (like post-slavery colonial policies elsewhere in Africa) was not to ignore the blacks but to treat them as children who would benefit from white supervision. By contrast, the international image of caste society is one of extreme callousness, in which upper-caste people see lower-caste people dying on their doorstep and remain unmoved. Apartheid was an institution within which human exceptions existed, with some whites sympathizing with the blacks,-- whereas in the international perception, caste is so ugly and cruel because it is totally heartfelt, with the upper-caste people persisting in caste-racist discrimination even after its formal abolition as an institution. Doesn't everybody outside India "know" that a Mother Teresa was needed to pick up the paupers from the gutter where the smug upper-caste Hindus left them to rot?

As Mark Tully has testified: "Whenever I go and give a talk on Hinduism, and when I say something nice about it, invariably someone from the audience will object: 'I think Hinduism is a disgusting religion because of the caste system.'" And this from modern people sufficiently educated to know that all societies have their problems and iniquities, their own not excepted. In their perception, the uniquely evil thing about Hindu caste-racism is how deep it has gripped and moulded the Hindu mind, by virtue of being a religiously-justified doctrine, not just a worldly circumstance but entirely intertwined with deep philosophical stuff about dharma and karma. Christianity has in fact managed to shed slavery because slavery is not of the essence of Christianity, or so the perception goes; whereas caste is of the very essence of Hinduism.

Another common anachronism in the Hindu position is to identify the Christian missionary apparatus as "white". This does of course have a basis in historical reality but is becoming increasingly inaccurate. Christian missionaries in Asia are now typically Koreans or Filipinos or Keralites, not whites. And don't say that they are only the infantry: in most Churches you see them rising through the ranks. Remember how in the Anglican Church, conservative African bishops formed a formidable bloc opposing the Anglo-American progressives on issues of women priests and acceptance of homosexuality. At any rate, these non-white converts have interiorized the faith and the missionary zeal, just as the white North-Europeans (the demographic mainstay of the US Baptists and other missionary powerhouses) had at one time interiorized Christianity after learning it from Mediterranean missionaries, who in turn had it from the Jewish-born "first Christians". It is no use denying that Christianity has morphed across racial frontiers several times already, and that it is repeating this process right now. Even the remaining white Church leaders are clever enough to send coloured

Church spokesmen to interreligious forums where race could be an issue, so Hindus won't be able to use the anti-white line against them.

As for the anti-caste mobilization, millions of blacks too have accepted the idea that caste is a form of slavery and racism. Just as millions of Scheduled Caste converts who had never thought of caste in terms of race have by now interiorized the idea that caste is the ultimate in racism. You won't shock them into silence with references to white injustice. On the contrary, to them the struggle against caste oppression is simply the continuation of the historical struggle against slavery and apartheid.

So, that in my opinion is what Hindus are up against. The Christian missionaries are nothing if not clever. They sail with the opinion winds and have ably made the switch from colonial racism to postcolonial anti-racism, and now they are using this new line with good effect against Hindu society. Digging up the dirt on "white Christian" history will only evoke a yawn, as that dirt has been dished out already all over the official textbooks and media in Christian countries. If Hindus want to stop the gains continually made by the Christians in the battle for the souls, there is no alternative to the laborious task of (1) informing the world about the more complex and less extreme reality of the caste system in history and in the present; (2) actually reforming society to the point where caste oppression is only a memory,-- and ensuring that the world knows about this; and (3) refocusing the Hindu-Christian struggle to its proper doctrinal level, where the defining Christian teachings can be exposed as the unhistorical claims and irrational beliefs that they really are. Plus, of course, reaching out to the converts who are willing or eager to return to the Hindu fold. These are big and demanding jobs, but carry a better promise of success than locking yourself in a smug self-assurance of how evil Christians are.

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