

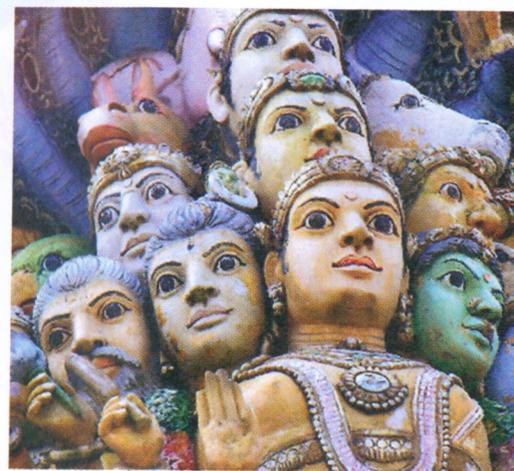
Is Caste Intrinsic to Hinduism?

by Anantanand Rambachan

IN A RECENT ARTICLE, “UNTOUCHABLE AND UNTHINKABLE,” THE *ECONOMIST* (October 4, 2007) described the caste system as “possibly the world’s ugliest social system.” The article went on to speak of caste as “sanctified” by the Hindu tradition and cites the violent punishments recommended in an ancient law code (*Manusmriti*) for lower caste persons who transgress caste boundaries. The suggestion here is that caste is intrinsic to Hinduism; a caste-free Hinduism, in other words, is a contradiction in terms. The argument that Hinduism and caste are inextricably related is one that I struggle with and often engage. Last year, I was a Hindu guest at the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In one of the sessions focused on interreligious dialogue, the participation of Hindus in the Assembly was loudly criticized and condemned by a Christian bishop from India. The bishop was a Dalit (the oppressed), the name preferred by many relegated to the lowest rungs on the hierarchical caste ladder and regarded as untouchables. He chastised the WCC for giving legitimacy to his oppressors and their religion. Hinduism, in his experience, is inherently oppressive and bereft of any redeemable features. The only legitimate response to Hinduism, in his view, is to work for its extinction.

How do I as a Hindu and a Hindu scholar respond to this challenge and characterization of my tradition? First, by acknowledging the inhumanity, injustice, and oppression of the caste system and the fact that, although not inseparable from Hinduism, the system has indeed been widely legitimized by the tradition and its practitioners. As Hindus, we must desist from apologetically explaining away the caste system as a creation of foreigners or as simply a response to foreign presence in India. The fact is that, by 400 CE, standard features of the caste system such as physical segregation and prohibitions on socializing and intermarriage were firmly in place. Today, in spite of laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste, we must admit that the phenomenon of untouchability persists in contemporary India and that too many Hindus still continue to define the meaning of Hindu identity over and against those who are deemed polluting and, for this reason, are marginalized. It is necessary to move from defensive apologies to self-criticism. We need to see caste as one historical expression of a system of human oppression and domination that sanctified itself in the garb of religious validation. Hindus are not exempt from this susceptibility to the corruption of power and the tendency to affirm self-value by devaluing others.

Second, although caste has sought and continues to seek legitimacy by appeal to the authority of tradition, there is a theological vision at the heart of Hinduism that invalidates the assumptions of inequality, impurity, and indignity that are the foundations of caste belief and practice. Nourished by this theological vision, there is a chorus of Hindu prophetic voices, ancient and modern, protesting the practice of caste as a betrayal of Hinduism’s highest teachings. Some protesters, like the Buddha (6th century BCE) and Mahavir (6th century BCE), became the inspiration for the founding of alternative religious traditions



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such as Buddhism and Jainism. They promised, not always successfully, communities that were free from caste prejudice and injustice. Others such as Tiruvalluvar (2nd century BCE), Tirumular (6th century CE), Basaveshwara (12th century CE), Ramananda (15th CE), Kabir (16th century CE), and Ek-nath (16th CE) spoke of human brotherhood and the equality of all before God. Their impact, however, was limited by regional linguistic differences. The equality they advocated was an ideal of the religious and not always the secular sphere. Many of these teachers were of a pacific turn of mind, tolerant in outlook, and eschewed controversy and conflict. Social reform was peripheral to the reconstitution of religious belief and many emphasized an otherworldly attitude to life. Contemporary protesters against caste such as Narayan Guru (1854–1928) and Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883) became the founders of successful, but circumscribed, regional movements. The Hindu tradition awaits an all-embracing effort to repudiate and overcome caste.

Activists of the National Conference of Dalit, or low caste, listen to their leader's speech during a rally, in New Delhi, India, Dec. 5, 2006. They held the rally to press their demands of a time-bound program for distributing land to low caste and landless people and creation of special low caste departments in all Indian government ministries.

From the perspective of Hinduism, it is clear that the highest value is attributed to God. As the single, unique, uncreated, and imperishable source of all that exists, the reality of God surpasses everything that is subject to time and to change. God's existence is independent; everything is contingent and dependent on God. Along with affirming the existence of the one God before all else, the Hindu tradition understands God alone to be the source of all creation. In creation, God enters into every created form and it is the presence of God that gives value and significance to the human being. The dignity and worth of the human being is the consequence of the fact that she embodies the infinite divine spirit.

The Hindu understanding of divine immanence is all-inclusive. "God," as the Bhagavad Gita (13:28) puts it, "exists equally in all beings." The significance that Hinduism grants to the truth of life's unity in God may be appreciated from the fact that its discernment is considered the hallmark of wisdom and liberation. We are invited to recognize the sameness of the divine in ourselves and in all beings. The Bhagavad Gita (18:20) commends the knowledge that enables us to see the one undivided and imperishable Reality in all beings. A false and inferior way of understanding reality is to regard beings as isolated, separate, and independent. Although the social and political implications of this truth are not detailed in the classical texts, the requirements are unmistakable. When the implications for human relationships are enunciated, they are done so in terms of equality. As the Bhagavad Gita (5:19) states it: "Even here on earth, those whose minds are impartial overcome birth. God is perfect and the same in all beings. Therefore, they always abide in God."

The teaching on divine immanence and the consequent equal worth of all human beings must inspire and impel us to identify and overcome the exploitative and oppressive caste structures of Hindu society. Hindus cannot be content only with offering concessions to those who have been disadvantaged and who have not traditionally enjoyed the privileges accorded members of the upper castes. While supporting such measures, the tradition must also get to the heart of the matter by questioning the very legitimacy of a hierarchical social system that assigns different privileges and value to human beings on the basis of exclusive notions of purity and impurity. The role of religious doctrine and ritual in providing legitimacy for the system of caste must be examined. A self-critical sincerity is needed to acknowledge the ways in which many, especially those from the so-called untouchable castes, experience the tradition as oppressive and as negating their dignity

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and self-worth. The fact that the religion into which one is born may not be liberative must be admitted. The acknowledgment of past and present injustices by those who have enjoyed the benefits of caste is a necessary step. There must also be the will for the reform and reconstruction of Hindu society on the basis of those central insights and values of Hinduism that promote justice, dignity, and the equal worth of human beings.

Discerning the unitive presence of God in all creation results in a deeper identity and affinity with all. It leads, in the understanding of the Bhagavad Gita (6:32), to the empathetic owning of the pain and suffering of the Other as one's own. It challenges attitudes of indifference towards the suffering of others with whom we do not identify because of caste boundaries. It enables us to see all beings as constituting a single community and provides a theological basis for a compassionate and inclusive community where the worth and dignity of every human being is affirmed and where justice, at all levels, is sought. Caste inflicts suffering on millions of our fellow humans and the "Hindu" tradition insists that we see this suffering as our own. Hindus must respond to caste as an urgent problem, as fundamentally incompatible with its most profound teachings and necessitating a unanimous and unequivocal repudiation. The meaning of being Hindu must not continue to require the demeaning of another human being. ■

Anantanand Rambachan is professor and chair of the Department of Religion at St. Olaf College and is the author of several books, including Accomplishing the Accomplished, The Limits of Scripture, and The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity.

Spirit and Science in the Vedanta

by Michael Nagler

IN AUGUST OF 1932, MAHATMA GANDHI WAS IN PRISON WHEN NEWS REACHED him that the "Paramount Power," the British Raj, planned to introduce separate electorates for the untouchables and the caste Hindus. Believing that this would amount to a "vivisection" of India, what was he to do? On September 13th he stunned the nation by announcing that he would embark on a fast unto death the following week until the hateful measure was withdrawn. The "epic fast," as it came to be called, succeeded brilliantly, but it had come close to costing him his life. To those who asked what had possessed him to do it, Gandhi calmly replied that he had heard the voice of God. Even in India, there were those who said that Gandhi was hallucinating. But he said:

The claim that I have made is neither extraordinary nor exclusive. God will rule the lives of all those who have surrendered themselves without reservation to him. Here is no question of hallucination. I have stated a simple, scientific law which can be verified by anyone who will undertake the necessary preparations, which

