

# Barbarians at Guard

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Some parts of Namil Nadu have become battle fields between two groups: one seeks to enter the temple, the other resists. The latest scene occurred in Chettipulam hamlet at the coastal area. Last month, 300 devotees, accompanied by cadres of CPM and activists of a front led by an MLA, came to a temple to perform worship. The temple was found locked for the day.

There is widespread, deep-rooted discrimination against the so-called dalits in TN. The parties have compromised their ideology and encouraged caste-based vote-banks. The last two decades have witnessed bloody conflicts. Those who prevent by force the faithful from performing his piety at temple are barbarians, a central committee member of the CPM thought; and so he launched a temple-entry movement a year ago. He is, however, expected to be aware that access to temple might upgrade a devotee's status, but that would be only within the given unequal social system. The real question is: Is the caste regime tenable? Isn't the fundamental transformation of the unjust social order called for?

In politics, winning election often appears as the final goal, no matter what. Every means is engaged to appease the voters; all sectarian interests are attended to; immediate electoral benefits are counted, irrespective of long-term consequences and of national concerns. Would the aforesaid central committee member of the CPM fall in that line?

The conception of varna and caste is false; it has no valid basis in theology or in logic. The majority community of India divides human beings, to begin with, into four kinds of varna (a Sanskrit word meaning colour), namely, brahman, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra. In support of this split, a hymn from the Rig Veda, Purusa-Sukta (The Hymn of Man) is referred to. In this famous hymn, the gods, not God, create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa, the primeval male who is the victim in a vedic sacrifice. Verse 12 says : his mouth "became" the brahman, his arms were made into the kshatriya, his thighs the vaisya, and from his feet the sudras were born.

Rig Veda does not provide hierarchy of human beings. Yet, in the post-vedic period, varnas were graded. To justify it, the following postulate was invented by theologians: Social status of a varna was proportionate to the height of its birthplace in the cosmic Man's body. So, brahmans, born of the Man's mouth, got the highest rank, followed by other three varnas in descending order of birthplace. Sudras were at the lowest level as they were born at the feet.

Now consider the next two stanzas of the same hymn, keeping an eye on Earth and on god Indra, and their position in the divine pantheon. And remember that gods are not immune from the laws of karma, and they are inferior to man in respect of attaining nirvana.

*13. The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the Sun was born. Indra and agni came from his mouth; and from his vital breath the wind was born. 14. From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the Earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear (italics added).*

Earth was born at the feet, the same location where the sudras did. Despite that lowliness of origin, Earth is worshipped with esteem. Earth is not ranked lower than anyone in the pantheon; on the contrary, she being the dual of Heaven is the mother of all. Indra, the god of monsoon and of several other heavenly departments, was born at a level in the Man's body lower than that of the sun; yet it was Indra who was the leader of vedic gods.

Aeon later, Manu came to address the above-mentioned anomaly by introducing a novel criterion of caste status, namely, purity and pollution. His single, fundamental touchstone was this : "The orifices of the body above the navel are all pure, but those below are impure" (5 :132). To elaborate : 'A man is...purer above the navel; therefore (sic)...his mouth was the purest part of him' (1:92). According to the Rig Veda, the mouth of the cosmic giant, Purusa, was transformed into brahmans. Hence, Manu concludes, brahmans are at the top rung of society, followed by kshatriyas, vaisyas, and sudras in descending order, each breeding innumerable castes.

But what does Manu mean by the term, purity? His sacred text, *Manusmriti*, aka The Laws of Manu, is silent on it. What constitutes purity? Maybe, his usage of the word "pure" might enlighten people. In logic, if A and B are equal by some measure, and so are B and C, then by the rule of transitivity, A and C are equal. Now, here are a few quotes from Manu :

*'A woman's mouth, a girl's breast, a child's prayer, and the smoke of the sacrifice, are always pure. "There is nothing purer than the light of the sun, the shadow of a calf, air, water, fire, and a girl's breath." Only in the case of a girl is the whole body pure. A woman's mouth is always pure, as is a bird that knocks down a fruit: a cow is pure while the milk is flowing, and a dog is pure when it catches a wild animal.' 'The Sama Veda is traditionally said to belong to the ancestors, and thus the sound of it is impure.'*

What is common between—the mouth of a man and the shadow of a calf; or a woman's mouth and a cow; or a girl's breast and a bird that knocks down a fruit; or a child's prayer and a dog when it catches a wild animal; or among all these—that makes them all pure? What is wrong with the ancestors such that the sound of "the Sama Veda traditionally said to belong to them" allegedly belches out impurity?

The varna-caste system has no valid ground either in human nature or in theology, or in terms of logic. Its ideology has misused the Rig Veda and disparaged the Sama Veda. It professes an illogical conception of purity.

The Geneva session of UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in September 2009 recognized caste hierarchy as an offence of human rights violation. Sweden, in its capacity as the president of European Union, declared: "caste-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on 'work and descent' [the UN code for caste inequality] is an important priority for the EU." In due course, the practice of varna-caste regime might be challenged by the UNHRC, and the UN General Assembly.

The ideology of CPM derives from the materialist interpretation of history, which does not admit the theology of Creation. Man is a species subject to Darwinian evolution through the process of random mutation and natural selection, not a gift of some deities. For transient electoral advantage, would CPM surrender its core principles, as it has done on several occasions in different contexts? Would it indulge in caste politics? Instead, should it not struggle for the elimination of entrenched social exploitation, which entails grave economic deprivation, too? □□□