

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PEACE

in the Context of Dalits

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A story was published on August 8, 2001 in 'Rajdhani', one of the national dailies. It might not have caught the eye of most readers, however, it caught mine. A teenage girl in her menstruation period stood on the Shivalinga (idol of lord Shiva, one of the prominent gods in Hindu religion) and announced that "I am a daughter of a blacksmith (one of the untouchable castes) and if your god has power he can destroy me. If not, from now onwards we are not going to worship it and we will not let you do the same".

Though this news did not catch much attention, it compelled me to think how such a drastic revolutionary spirit has come into a young girl of a Dalit community. I personally do not have belief in god, but even being a Dalit activist and writer I could never gather the courage to stand on an idol as this girl did in front of a large public of Dailekh district in Western Nepal.

Most of the Dalits in Nepal consider themselves Hindu and show respect and devotion to their gods and goddesses. Mostly it is unthinkable for them to show this kind of disrespect, and it is a matter of serious analysis and reflection. The social norms and values usually guide the behaviour from the early childhood. Children are told that gods and goddesses are to be respected and it requires a great deal of motivation to go against it. I believe that the girl has experienced so much injustice either herself or within her family that she was motivated to go against the social norms and values of worshipping a god like Shiva. Now such spirit of revolution is very much related with the issue of justice and eventually social justice.

Social Justice

According to Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English; 'justice is just conduct; the quality of being right and fair'.¹ The term social justice is relatively a new concept in rights theories and discourses since its creeping into use from 1850. Philosophers have not paid serious attention to this issue.² It is only after the publication of the book 'Theory of Justice by the American philosopher John Rawls in 1971, that attention was drawn to this issue and revived the discipline. Rawls states that justice is the first virtue of social institutions. He elaborates further that it is about giving people what is due to them, but not what it would be nice to have for them, not even what it would be morally good to give them.³ We can clearly see that social justice is not a charity but the rights of those who are deprived of their legitimate rights. Here, Rawls seems to be advocating for the deprived and marginalised. The justice of fairness is about choosing something being given in ignorance, or without knowing what it exactly is. He gives the example of cutting a cake. If someone cuts it, one may not know which part is good or bad. Then s/he would apply the principle of fairness, otherwise he or she would be biased. People have capacity to frame, revise and pursue a conception of good, and these are primary goods - liberties, opportunities, powers, income and wealth and self respect. Society for Rawls is a fair scheme of cooperation between free and equal citizens. He further says, that social and economic inequalities are justified if they in the long run are (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of equality of opportunity.

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1. Hornby, AS, Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English p. 460, Oxford University Press 1974.
2. Swift, Adam, p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 10.

If we accept the definition of justice as being fair to the members of a society and a country, and social justice is nothing but giving what is due to them, then we need to ask whether Dalits of Nepal have been treated fairly? The overall conclusion is no. I would like to highlight how they have been treated in the field of the economic, social and political spheres.

The Economic Sphere

Most of the Dalit groups have been allocated with a particular occupation, for example Bishwakarma or Kami groups are working with iron and metal. The Pariyar group has an occupation of sewing cloths and playing musical instruments. The Sarki group has to make leather goods and handle dead animals, and the Gandharva group has to live on singing and dancing.

If we take the Dalits of Terai, most of them are agricultural labourers. These Dalits do not get the wages that they are supposed to: They have been tilling the land for generations, and out of a population of 1 million, 44 percent is land less. The Chamar group is supposed to handle dead animals of upper caste people and for this they only get a nominal return. Dom and Halkhor are supposed to handle filth and are equally paid very little.

All members of the family have to engage in the same occupation and none of the Dalits can engage in small businesses of selling any food or drink item. Both in the hills and Terai, the pay back of services to the upper caste people are provided in the form of grain. For example a blacksmith and tailor family would get 12 kg of grain for providing service for a whole year. Most of them find it difficult to sustain their families through this income. This tradition of not paying proper labour wages has been going on for centuries and still continues in many parts of country. Thus, in the economic sphere, Dalits have been deprived of social justice.

The Social Sphere

By birth, Dalits are considered impure and polluting others. This concept is so deep rooted that even a well educated and well mannered Dalit will have difficulty to rent a house in the capital. Most of the ministers and parliamentarians, nominated from the Dalit community, have been refused to rent a house upon revealing their caste. Different excuses for this are put forward by the house owners.

Just being born to a certain caste, Dalits are subject to punishment which starts from fetching water from a public tap or well. A study carried out by Dr. Bhattachan et al. established that

there are 205 forms of discrimination against Dalits. Therefore, from a justice point of view, Dalits have been treated like criminals and they need to be compensated for the atrocities caused to them.

The Political Sphere

There is a famous saying that Dalits should be denied access to education, wealth and governance. If they are provided with that, they will be equal with other caste groups. This situation still continues, and though there is some representation in the nominated seats both at the local and national level it is just a token which is not helping to establish social justice to them. At the moment there are 2 assistant ministers from the Dalit community and two in the upper house of parliament and they have not been able to play a significant role to restore social justice to their fellow brothers and sisters.

Peace

According to Webster's Pocket Diction, 'peace' means the absence or cessation of war. As per Johan Galtung, two types of positive and negative peace exist all the time in a society. He defines negative peace as violence and the opposite of it is peace. He elaborates some characteristics of violence and peace. When there is a Darwin theory in the society ("survival of the fittest"), there will be violence for existence. At the moment, human history has passed through that stage to some extent. Likewise, when there is exploitation and repression, it creates violence. There could be cultural violence if religion treats its followers in different ways, which can be directly related with the Dalits as they are treated as untouchables by the Hindu religion. There are certain languages used for Dalits which are very much derogatory in nature and that is also a part of cultural violence.

When there is peace it is characterised by mutual aid and cooperation, intra and inter-personal growth, nonviolent liberation, peace movements, alternative defense, cultural liberation, history and future of peace. Likewise, there will be development parity and equity and the language would be humanistic.

If we apply these definitions and characteristics of peace in the context of Dalits then they hardly exist. There is absence of mutual aid and cooperation from society and state to Dalits. There is incremental growth in the case of Dalit and exponential growth in terms of non Dalit. If we see the literacy of Brahmins and Newars it is more than 70 percent that of Dalits which is just 35 percent. Poverty level of the country is 38 percent whereas more than 60 percent of Dalits are below the poverty line.

Most of the Dalits have engaged themselves in the peaceful movements to restore their rights and dignity and it has a history of five decades. Yet, that movement has not been able to achieve much. On the contrary, the ongoing insurgency has attracted a lot of Dalit youth. I am personally quite sure that the cultural and social violence that they have undergone over centuries is one of the major factors of their attraction which is well exemplified by the incident mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper.

Dalits and indigenous people of Nepal are the cultural treasure of the country. Without them the culture cannot live, unfortunately, upon maintaining their culture through occupation they have to undergo a great humiliation. As a result, a son of a blacksmith would not want to engage in the profession of his father and a son of a tailor would think in the similar way. A Damai boy would feel great humiliation when he plays the Nepali musical instrument called *Panche Baja* as he would be asked to eat separately in a marriage ceremony. In most cases instead of liberation and gaining dignity for keeping the identity of a country, Dalits have to undergo humiliation. A time will come when there will be no one left to preserve the Nepalese culture. In terms of humanistic language the preamble of the civil code (*Muluki Ain*) has words like '*Chhota*' and '*Bada*' meaning small and big. These expressions are very much based on caste, and in its verdict the supreme court denied to

change it as it was challenged by the Dalit civil society. One can ask: If the behaviour of the court - which is considered to be the protector and promoter of justice - is like this; what behaviour can we expect from other sectors?

Conclusion

According to Ted Robert Gurr - who is considered to be an authority in his theory of 'why men rebel?' - states that where there is relative deprivation, rebels or conflict emerge. In the case of Nepal, there is not only relative deprivation but gross injustices to Dalits in all fields. However, contracting the theory of Gurr, Dalits have not rebelled for their own cause. Rather they have been attracted in the current insurgency. Such insurgency shows a great violence which is opposite to the peace. In order to address the insurgency, the issue of social justice done to Dalits for a very long period has to be provided. Unless social justice is ensured to them, a lasting peace cannot be established. After all, experience has proved that a little effort is enough to make a Dalit rebel. Likewise, there is a famous quote of a great Dalit leader of India, Dr. Ambedkar: "If you make a slave realize he is a slave he will revolt." Here, if Dalits are made realise why they are Dalits, certainly they will revolt. In this way social justice and peace are synonymous. In the absence of one, the other cannot exist. ■

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