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Race Relations

Introduction: The race problem in India has never acquired that sense of urgency and sharpness that characterizes it in some other countries like, for example, South Africa or the U.S.A. It would be very pleasant to attribute this to a trait of catholicity or tolerance ingrained in the Indian temperament. Whether there is any psychological foundation for this or not, it is an undoubted fact that provocation he has had in plenty. The rich Indo-Gangetic valley has been the battle ground for horde after horde of invaders, and in most cases the invader stayed behind and became a resident. The opening of the trade routes brought in a new set of European invaders. But somehow right through it all the Indian has managed to keep alive a policy of live and let live. Hindu-Muslim riots are probably the one exception to it and here many other factors besides race entered.

Though never very intense the problem is much more diffused in India than in many other countries. A chromatic scale of many shades takes the place of the sharp antithesis between black and white. Caste adds a further complication to an already confused picture. The three main aspects are Indo-European, Hindu-Muslim and Caste-Harijan.

Within the Christian church in India these problems are to be found in miniature and perhaps on that account intensified. There are certain overall changes. The Christian is committed to a policy of universal brotherhood. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Another community—the Muslim—has also a similar commitment. The Muslim has been keenly watching the Christian to see whether he is a better exponent of the theory of universal brotherhood than himself. The Indian Christian, unlike any other Indian, had to face the British on two levels—on the political as an opponent and on the religious as a fellow worker. During the turbulent pre-Independence days he found himself asking the questions—What is my duty as an Indian? And what is my duty as a Christian? Often there was a conflict. He did not want his nationalism to lag behind; at the same time he recognized that his loyalty to Christ must come first.

Christians With Different Backgrounds In The Church: The Christian church in India is an interesting sociological unit. The international element is represented by the Missionaries; the economic by the presence of the mass movement convert. Besides, there are converts from all castes and from Muslims. Problems of internal government introduce the political factor with its unfortunate concomitant—the party system of government. All these factors are to be found in practically every church congregation in India. It is very pleasant to think of these diverse types of people bringing their varying gifts to God, as a new kind of synthesis growing out of these differences. But very often it is merely a poetic fiction.

Let us take the case of the middle-aged high caste convert to Christianity. Some of the most worth-while contributions to the cultural and thought life of the Indian Church have come from a group of such converts. They were able to achieve this because they brought their back-grounds with them. But in this allegiance to the past there is both strength as well as weakness. Man cannot change his nature in the twinkling of an eye. It is a psychological absurdity to expect a convert to give up all his pet prejudices just because he has been converted. If we allow the high caste convert the right to bring in his own background we cannot deny this right to the Harijan convert or the European missionary. Converts of the same caste naturally tend to form a small sub-group within the Church. It is too much to expect the orthodox Brahmin convert to start inter-dining immediately with Harijans. (But at least in South India he seems to have always ended by marrying a Harijan girl.)

Is the Church to produce a new social order, the mongrel offspring of conflicting principles, or issue a charter of minimum demands and allow people complete freedom outside it? This is one of the most important problems facing the Church in India today.

It would be a good idea for a group to select one or two churches in the town and see how the caste system operates within it. To the Harijan conversion to Christianity has resulted in considerable social upgrading. On the other hand the higher caste converts have lost status by becoming converts. Are they seeking to retrieve that which they have lost within the Church? Often this results in grotesque effects, in a caricature of the situation outside. For example, where else can we find such absurd names as Peter Pillai or Joseph Naidu! Cases have been reported where a caste Christian has refused to kneel by the side of a Harijan convert at the Communion table.

Has the general social trend within the Church been in the direction against caste or in favour of it? Marriages in a given church community in one or more years may be studied. How many of them have been intercaste marriages? What position in the social scale do the children of such marriages occupy? Are there any aspects of the caste system that can be retained by the Church? Retention and rejection are not purely intellectual acts. They must be the result of the Church being moved by some dynamic force. Then the discordant elements would be welded into a homogeneous community.

There is a good deal of talk among many nations about the purity of race. There is a corresponding movement in India for maintaining the purity of caste—both outside and within the Church. Are the castes of India pure castes? To what extent has there been intermingling? Here is a job for Christian anthropologists. From the psychological point of view are the children of mixed marriages better than the pure breed? What happens when the intellect of the Brahmin is wedded to the chivalry of the Rajput? Christian sociologists should take an active interest in these problems.

Regionalism: This is an off-shoot of the race problem, generally to be found only in big countries. Unfortunately all the conditions necessary for the development of regionalism in its worst form seem to be present in India. In spite of advanced means of travel, distances between states are so great that few people ever leave their state throughout their life

time. Still fewer people have travelled all over India. The North and the South are peopled by different ethnic groups. The Bengali seems to be a race apart. With the development of linguistic areas the clan feeling has been intensified. Bihar for the Biharis! Bombay for the children of Bombay! This seems to be the predominant slogan. People coming into a state from outside in search of jobs are looked upon with suspicion. Every job given to them means one less to a native. In this respect the Madrasi has earned an unenviable reputation. He has gone right up to the Punjab in search of work. He is to be found in large numbers in government offices all over India. In Poona they have a saying, 'just as flies are to be found wherever there is jaggery so also Madrasis are to be found wherever there are jobs'. He is thrifty by nature, simple in his habits and has made considerable contribution to the cultural life of the other states. All the same he is looked upon with a good deal of suspicion and distrust.

Has this regionalism or state-consciousness invaded the Christian church also? Often the South Indian Christian who goes to other states is made to feel that he is not wanted. He may be assimilated after some time but in the beginning he has a very uncomfortable time. It would be interesting to investigate the attitude of the Southern Christian to the odd Bengali or Gujarati that comes into his Church. Is he welcomed as a brother or cold-shouldered as a foreigner? What is his attitude to the large stream of refugees that have been pouring into the South from Northern India!

Another interesting point to watch—has the southern Christian developed a superiority complex because he has brought off Church union? Does he look down upon the divided North?

The theory of racial characteristics which has done inestimable harm to the cause of universal brotherhood finds its counterpart in the theory of state characteristics—the Gujarati is avaricious, the Bengali inscrutable, the Tamilian cunning and the Andhra a simpleton—crude and uncouth. Is there any psychological evidence in favour of this theory? The Church can take the lead in preventing the spread of harmful stereotypes. And to enter into this task wholeheartedly the Christian himself should not claim a monopoly of virtue. Often Christians show great surprise when a Hindu behaves decently. This form of conceit must go. They must recognize the existence of a basic morality as good as theirs among people of other religions. The characteristic contributions of Christianity are not on the moral but on the spiritual level.

Relationship Between Foreign Missionaries and Indian Christians: The attitude of the Indian Christian towards the Missionary has, during the last hundred years, gone through three stages of development roughly analagous to the Hegelian dialectic thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The first stage was a period of patronage by the Missionary, a period of the Indian Christian looking up to him as the big boss, the last word on every subject; a time of docile acquiescence. This early attitude has been fitly pilloried as the 'Mission bungalow mentality'. The second stage which coincided with the rising tide of nationalism in the country was one of bitter hostility to the Missionary. He was accused of having a superiority complex, of keeping down the Indian and of having an unsympathetic attitude towards Indian culture. Fortunately this period

of hostility had a constructive side to it. The relationship enters a new stage in the post-Independence period where the dominant desire is to meet on a footing of equality and work together for the common good. Yet the atmosphere is not altogether free from suspicion and jealousy.

The Missionaries who brought Christianity to India came with presuppositions which were not always sympathetic. They came to rescue not to learn, and they forget that they came to a country which had an ancient culture and philosophy. Though there were many brilliant exceptions, on the whole the realities of the Indian cultural situation were completely ignored or contemptuously set aside. One result of this was that the Mission bungalow was built not in the heart of the town but away from it. Under its sheltering walls the Indian Christian grew up and came of age. Persecuted by the intolerant Hindu he was glad of the shelter. There were economic causes also. The early Christians were mostly poor and were offered some kind of employment within the Mission compound. This economic dependence made him rather servile. He was unwilling to criticize the Missionary even when he knew that he was wrong, lest he should lose his job.

With the growth of nationalism the Indian Christian began to be cold shouldered by the rest of India as an ally of the enemy. All white people irrespective of nationality or political sympathies were classed as part of the ruling bureaucracy. The Indian Christian began to smart under this allegation. He was anxious to prove that he was as patriotic as any other Indian. He had also by this time acquired a certain amount of economic independence. The community could no longer be equated with the denizens of the compound. There were Christians in all walks of life. Some of them fairly high up. Then they revolted. This revolt was characterized by a violent and somewhat unreasoned criticism of everything that the Missionary said or did.

The growing spirit of nationalism placed the British Missionary in a somewhat dubious position. Often he was sympathetic towards Indian aspirations but could not speak of it as openly as he would have liked to. Most of his humanitarian undertakings in the country depended on government grants for their upkeep (partially, a good deal of money did also come from Britain) and this source of supply would have been undoubtedly cut off if they openly took sides. Other European Missionaries were in an even more delicate position. Their very presence in the country depended on the goodwill of the government. Under these circumstances it was unseemly to take sides. A few spoke but the majority kept silent. Their silence was construed into sin.

There was a constructive side to this wave of anti-missionary feeling that swept over the country. It resulted in a parallel feeling for the Indianization of Christianity. The appearance of Sadhu Sunder Singh, the growth of the Ashram movement, the founding of the Christo Sumaj and the Indian Christian Book Club all proclaimed the fact that the Indian Christian had come of age and no longer needed a nurse maid.

We are now in the third stage. Independence has cleared the atmosphere considerably of all kinds of racial hatred. The time has come for synthesis—when the Missionary and the Indian Christian can meet on a common platform and work for the glory of Christ in India.

Yet can we honestly say that all is well with this relationship? Has the Indian Christian completely purged his mind of his racial

prejudices ? It is claimed that Missionaries have not shown as great a desire for transferring responsibility to the Indian as they should. It would be disastrous if the Indian Christian should scramble for power but it will be even more of a catastrophe if an out-worn theory of racial superiority flourishes in the seclusion of the Mission compound. It would be a tragedy indeed if our Mission bungalows become the last out-posts of Imperialism in India. We do not want colour prejudice of the wrong type in this country. No Indian should claim any special privileges for himself just because he is an Indian. On the other hand, neither do we want the Missionary to subscribe to a theory of Indian leadership with mental reservations.

The Church and The Race Problem: Some suggested angles of approach: —

1. The Church must proclaim and take its stand unhesitatingly on the principle of human equality without any conditionary clauses.

2. It should be realized that Christianity stands for the fullest development of personality. Prejudices of all types impede the growth of personality. Here is a field where pastoral psychologists can help most. Prejudice and conflict are linked up together. Race conflict is but the externalization of an internal conflict between desire and duty. The pastor with psychological training can do much towards resolving these conflicts in individuals.

3. A firm stand regarding principles should be combined with a realistic approach. The Church should help individuals to face the problems of prejudice, not to hide them under some vaguely idealistic type of philosophy. Each individual must be encouraged to ask the question— How can I do my little bit to bring about a better state of affairs ? Along with large scale policies, as many contacts as possible between individuals of different nationalities should be encouraged. It would be as well to recognize that today there exists a big gap between theory and practice in the matter of race relations. This is the first step towards improvement.

4. The Church should encourage scholarship and research. Most prejudices have historic and social origins. These should be studied and understood before attempts are made to remove them.

5. The Church should initiate group activities where people of all nationalities and castes can participate without fear of patronage or insult.

Findings of the Conference

The discussion was confined to the three main topics dealt with in the introductory paper.

1. *Caste in the Indian Church*: The problem was more acute in the South than in the North and even in the South, it was not so serious in the Syrian Church; since till recently it did not make converts and was a homogeneous body. The more objectionable aspects of caste in the Church, e.g. refusing to kneel down by the side of a Harijan at Communion, separate seats for separate castes, had now completely disappeared throughout South India. Caste existed in the official circles where competitive employment and elections were concerned,

and in its worst form in Church Government. It was very common in elections for rival Christian candidates to trade on caste loyalties. It was also very difficult to send to a particular diocese a Bishop who was outside the prevailing caste group in that diocese. A foreigner was invariably preferred. The greater inter-caste tolerance found in the North in general, was reflected in Church circles also. As a reason for this the suggestion was thrown out that caste was more definitely along occupational lines there. The intense 'caste' feeling among 'depressed class' converts to Christianity (e.g. Mala and Madiga in Telugu areas) was also commented upon.

The following practical suggestions were put forward:—

(1) The Christian doctrine of work should be taken more seriously and applied as a corrective to the view that certain types of work are degrading and those who do them are polluted.

(2) Every Christian must make it a point to stand up boldly against all types of harmful caste feeling and must be prepared to suffer persecution for doing so.

(3) Steps should be taken to make the Church realize the seriousness of this problem.

(4) Widespread factual surveys under expert psychological guidance should be undertaken.

2. *Regionalism*: exists in the Church in two forms (a) the cold shouldering of Christians coming from other states, (b) Christians coming from one state to another forming exclusive minority groups. As a remedy for the second type of regionalism, people going from one state to another should make a whole-hearted attempt to identify themselves with the state of their sojourn, join the local churches, and completely purge their minds of all ideas of superiority. Christians should go from one state to another not merely in search of well-paid jobs but also on missions of good-will and evangelism. The 'division of India' created a new problem in regionalism and one needs to examine carefully the attitude of the Indian Christian to his brother in Pakistan.

3. *Indo-European relations within the Church*: The question was mooted whether Mission bungalows were becoming the last out-posts of Imperialism in India. It was felt that this was more a fear than a fact. At the same time to say that Independence had cleared the atmosphere of all suspicion and fear and that the stage was now set for the harmonious co-operation between the Indian Christian and the Missionary was to shut one's eyes to certain facts. Though outwardly unfavourable conditions had disappeared, hidden complexes still lurked in the background and if not checked would lead to harmful results. The problem of transfer of responsibility was the crux of the matter. Missionaries should not wait till competent Indians turned up to hand over responsibility, but make Indians competent by an immediate transfer, backed up by sympathetic guidance. The Missionary should not wash his hands of the whole business the moment transfer was made or stand aloof and develop an 'I told you so' attitude when catastrophe followed, but must be prepared to help even though not in office. This was not easy and needed Christian grace. It should, however, be mentioned in fairness that quite a few Missions in India have made complete transfer of responsibility and that for one reason or another the result of such an

action has always not been altogether satisfactory. Where the motive in asking for transfer of responsibility is to obtain power and position in life, the results are bound to be disastrous. The Indian Christian ought to examine his motives and realize that in the work of the Kingdom the only legitimate motive is service and self-giving.

On the social level, in the relation between the Missionary and the Indian Christian, a great deal could still be done. Even in institutions, e.g. colleges and schools, where the social gap was the narrowest there was still a lot of underground dissatisfaction.

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