DYNAMICS OF INDIAN SOCIAL REFORM

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Dr. D. Anjaneyulu, a well-known journalist and author now settled in Madras was invited to deliver Shri J. Srinivasan Memorial Lecture in May, 1982. He chose to speak on the Dynamics of Indian Social Reform. His paper is valuable because it traces the historical development and places it in the modern context.

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By D. Anjaneyulu

The Constitution of India is admittedly one of the best of its kind in the world. Framed by some of the best legal and political minds of the country, it is not only comprehensive in its scope, precise in its' definition and minute in its detail, but forward-looking in its social and economic philosophy.

(That it had proved a veritable lasers' paradise during the last thirty-two years and more is a different matter.)

The Constitution, like our political leaders in a different context, promises, nay assures, almost all things to all the citizens — Economic equality, soda! justice, including the right to work, education, public assistance and so on and so forth, besides all the various freedoms under the Fundamental Rights.

The Directive Principles of State Policy, which obviously bear the impress of Jawaharlal Nehru's idealism, have proved an exercise in the declaration of good intentions. They point towards the establishment of an egalitarian society, moving towards a socialist pattern, from each according to his ability to each according to his need, to a state of affairs in which nobody starves and everyone is happy.

Nor have we lagged behind any others in individual acts of legislation, with wide-ranging social and economic implications. Or, so at least it would seem to us from a look at the impressive Statute book in the different States.

We have a wide variety of legislative measures on prohibition, social equality, primary education, land ceilings, environmental hygiene, protection of forests, preservation of wild life (promotion of life not so wild), ecological balance, economic imbalance, emotional integration, linguistic disintegration and a hundred other things, which may not be of equal interest to you and me.

One should not forget to mention the Child Marriage Prohibition Act (popularly known as the Sarada Act) which has celebrated its golden jubilee and the Dowry Prohibition Act, which is yet to celebrate its Silver Jubilee. It is, however, difficult to make an exhaustive list of all the measures intended to safeguard the position of women, children, backward classes, religious, linguistic and cultural minorities, besides the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, all of whom are now- a-days covered by the omnibus expression, weaker sections of society.

If a Constitution could make us all free, equal and progressive, our Constitution should have made us so, more speedily, effectively and completely than any other.

If legislation could make us reasonable and responsible, moral and truthful, our myriad-minded legislators, and working over-time on it, should have made us so many times over.

If political leaders could make us patriotic and public-spirited, by their exhortations from the platform, we should by now be the most public-spirited in the modem world as well as the ancient.

First, let us take the position of women in our society, as they form half of the population, maybe the better half. There are some women leaders, who are as much or even more agitated about the decreasing male-female ratio in the population as about the crimes against women. Let the demographic problem rest at that for the time being.

Looking at the other aspects, how do Indian women compare with those of the. Rest of the world — in education, employment, other opportunities, social status and human condition in general? What is the position of their property right in the context of changing personal laws?

The replies to most of these and allied questions seem largely predicable, on the Indian side, where the spokesman of what is known as the traditional view is concerned.

They flow along two broadly familiar lines — one can be described as that of the Golden Age of the Past; the other that of the Platinum age of the Present.

Let us begin with the Golden Age syndrome. Why are most of the Indian women, even more than the men, left illiterate? No, there were great women scholars in the Vedic Age and the Epic Age — like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Brahmavadini and many others. Why are they largely confined to the kitchen? No, they were not, in the distant past, when there were many rulers and warriors among them. Similarly, on the issue of freedom of choice in marriage, the tendency is to hark back to the ‘Swayamvara’ practice of old and let one's fancy float along the fields of medieval chivalry and mythological romance — Nala and Damayanti, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, Arjuna and Subhadra and so on and so forth. The names could be easily multiplied.

The question arises — when we are face to face with the prosaic sociological facts of today, why should we always have to take recourse to the mythological poetic fancies of yesterday? Could it be that we are not quite comfortable with the facts as we see them?

As for the Platinum Age pattern, the tall poppies at once swim into our kea, and impel us to ask: Don't we have a woman Prime Minister? Didn’t we have more than one woman Chief Minister? Are there not half-a-dozen High Court Judges and at least a couple of Vice-Chancellors? And three or four District Collectors in a few States, if not all of them?

It may be pertinent here to ask: Does one swallow make a summer? Or even a couple of them, for that matter?

For all the name-dropping we might indulge in, with a difference though, we still live in a man’s world; a man-made, or is it Manu-made society; governed by an essentially masculine scale of values. Don’t we?

Rousseau said long ago that man is born free, but everywhere he is found in chains. If we replace man by woman, he would be even more right, especially in traditional societies, India not excluded. One need not be a staunch feminist, let alone a woman’s libber, to realize this.

Take education, for instance. By and large, girls are educated for marriage, while boys are educated for a career. For many, if not most or all the girls, marriage is, in fact, a career. Not always because of their choice in this regard, but because the men would have it that way.

It is not my case that they should Hot marry, or even that they should not be married to satisfy their mother’s or grand-mother’s desire. Don’t they have a personality to develop, an identity to establish? Not necessarily in opposition to the males but apart and in harmony.

As for employment, two main impressions seem to persist among respectable middle-class families:— One is that it is infra dig for their daughters to go out for work; the other is that only certain jobs are approved (by the menfolk) as good for women — like nursing and medicine, teaching and telephone exchange. All the others are taboo — or so, it used to be.

These impressions are,' of course, slowing getting erased.

Women's rights had been won the hard way in many countries of the West — the Pankhursts paying a high price for women's suffrage in England, I wonder if they have the vote even now — in countries like Switzerland. (At least they didn't have it, until recently.) Indian women seem to have got it without so much as a fight — on a platter, as it were. We needn't grudge them that, anyway.

Social legislation abroad had obviously always been a slow process. It was Justice Holmes who said: " The legislation of today is meant to meet the social needs of yesterday." Traditional law seems to lag behind social practice the world over. In India, it is the other way about. Our public opinion and social practice (even today) are yet to catch up with the legislation of yesterday — be it on the restraint of child marriage, encouragement of inter-caste marriage, prohibition of dowry, enforcement of monogamy or the facilitation of divorce, of course, only in unavoidable cases.

It is in this region that social reform has to play a vital role — in educating public opinion, just as social reformers in the past had played a crucial role, as catalysts in influencing the thought of decision-makers.

One has to look back a little and focus attention on the latter half of the nineteenth century in India, which can be described as the Age of Enlightenment for us, as the latter half of the 18th was to France in particular and Europe in general. Here too the roots go farther back to that Pioneer among reformers — Raja Ram Mohan Roy, rightly hailed as " the Father of Modern India.

While his mission was spiritual in its basic objective, it had also a powerful social aspect to it. In a resourceful synthesis of ideas from the East and the West, he tried to reconcile the end of individual perfection with the ideal of social good. In the precise words of his perceptive admirer, Dr. Brajendranath Seal :

" The East had placed the group above the individual in social organization, and the individual above all social bonds in the quest of *summum bonum*. The West had stressed the claims of the individual polity, and of the social good in the Kingdom of God. The Raja held that individual progress is the touchstone as well as the measuring rod of social progress; but the individual's progress could be secured only by organizing and establishing the conditions of social progress."

The most popular expression of this philosophy is associated in the public mind of today with the Raja's initiative in the abolition of the Suttee (or the practice of burning widows km the funeral pyre of their husbands). This was by no means easy for him, as the strength of numbers was not on his side but that of Raja Radhakanta Deb, the leaded of the conservatives. He could certainly not have achieved his aim without the aid of a responsive Governor-General like Lord William Bentinck and the blessings of a liberal administration in England.

The Raja's social aim was larger and more comprehensive than the attack on a glaring social evil —it was in fact to spread the benefits of to education far and wide, ignorance and superstition, bigotry and fanaticism, to raise the of and to purify more &l theory from the impurities of outmoded dogma and the accretions of age-old custom.

The next landmark on the road of progress in social reform was the campaign led by Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar for widow-remarriage, against poiygamy and for women's education. It was on 7 December 1856 that Vidyasagar became instrumental to the first widow remarriage in Bengal —in which the bridegroom was a junior colleague of his at the

Sanskrit College. This was followed sometime later by the marriage of his only son — Narayan — to a widow in the teeth of opposition by near relatives. “Introduction of Widow remarriage has been the greatest good work I haw done in my life ”, wrote Vidyasagar later in a letter to his brother.

The Act (XV) of 1856, which made the re-marriage of Hindu widows valid was in some ways the biggest piece of achievement in the history of social Reform Movement in the 19th Century. In his campaign to make this a reality, Vidyasagar was running a greater risk than even Ram Mohun Roy. For the simple reason that the vested interests of social orthodoxy were even more strongly entrenched here against the Pandit than against the Raja.

Vidyasagar fought no less hard against polygamy, with particular reference to the Kulin a practice in Bengal, though it did not receive legal sanction. In his passion for combating social backwardness, he relied on two factors — education and legislation. He sacrificed a lot for women’s education — in his service to the Bethune School and other girls’ schools, in, the countryside of Bengal. He was overjoyed to see the first woman M.A of Bengal, Chandramukhi Bose, who reached her goal, with his encouragement and support.

His last act, almost on his deathbed, was to give his opinion in writing on’ the Age of Consent Bill in 1890.

Trained in traditional oriental learning as & Sanskrit Pandit, Vidyasagar combined his zeal for social reform with a modern, integrated view of education in the Sanskrit College. He advocated “ the acquirement of the largest store of sound Sanskrit ,and English Earning combined, under the impression that such a training is likely to produce men who will be useful in the work of imbuing our vernacular dialect with ‘the science and civilization of the modern world.”

At this stage, it may be useful to recall the origin and growth spiritual movement founded by Raja Ram Mohun Roy, known as the Brahmo Samaj. Its Basic teachings included the unity of godhead, the efficacy of congregational prayer, the giving up of idol worship by its adherents and the promotion of an enlightened social outlook among the people, with no destination of caste. Its three great leaders, the founder himself, Ram Mohun Roy, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (father of the Poet) and Keshub Chandra Sen were the most important. They represented the confluence of three streams of spiritual knowledge.

Roy was deeply influenced by the monotheism of Islam which he blended with the Brahma knowledge of the Hindu scriptures. Tagore the Maharshi (or secular saint) was inspired by the wisdom of the Upanishads, embodied in me line from Isavasya: “ Ishevasyam Idam Sarvam” (All that exists is pervaded by God). Sen, who chose to describe Brahmoism as “Human Catholicism”, summed up the essence of the creed in the two Christian concepts of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Thus the new Movement was enriched by drawing upon the spiritual resources of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

It was largely thanks to the efforts of this movement, that the Government was encouraged to pass a few salutary measures of social reform like the abolition of early marriage of girls, the sanctioning of widow remarriages and the indirect facilitation of inter-caste marriages, in the shape of the Civil Marriage Act (of 1872).

The emotional fervour and the inspiring eloquence of Keshub Chandra Sen had helped to put a new life into the Brahmo Samaj Movement in the 1870’s until an event in his family life sparked a traumatic experience among his followers. This was the marriage of his 14-year old daughter to the 17-year old Maharaja of Cooch-Behar in 1878, which led to a schism in the Brahmo Church from which it never recovered. It gradually dwindled and lost its vogue,

remaining now only in name.

But not before spreading its influence to the different quarters of India, especially the West and the South. In the West, its impact was felt in the foundation of the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra around 1867. In its growth and development, the part played by Mahadev Goyind Ranade was considerable. He was one of the founders of the Widow Remarriage Association tm 1861), the Deccan Education Society and indirectly of the Indian National Congress as well.

Here again, there was an event in Ranade's personal life, which discredited him in this eyes of the reformist section, of which he had been an active leader. When his first wife died, it was expected by his friends and colleagues that he would many a widow. To their utter disappointment, he was forced by the manoeuvrings of an intransigent father to marry a minor girl. This was a serious blow to the movement for social reform to which he was deeply committed. Not all his reputation for personal integrity and saintly character were enough to rescue his image from the slough of despond.

In South India in general and Andhra in particular the movement expressed itself in a series of challenges under the evangelical fury of Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu (1848-1919).

Despite his meagre resources, financial and physical, Veeresalingam threw him elf, heart and soul into the movement in all its implications, spiritual and social as well as personal. He was a school master by profession and a journalist as well in his spare time. He was a man of rare courage and rarer determination (i.e., rarer among the Andhras, reputed for their fleeting enthusiasms). It was his righteous indignation and faith in the justice of his cause that gave him all the strength.

Added to these was the inspiration provided by the example of Vidyasagar and the precept of Ranade. These, with the support of the students and youth of the day were enough to enable Veeresalingam to fight against all odds. The first widow-remarriage in Rajahmundry, which was also the first in Madras Presidency, then covering almost the whole of South India, took place under his initiative on 11 December 1881.

Like all reformers, down the ages, Veeresalingam adopted a pragmatic approach to the problem on hand {viz., Widow Remarriage). Uncompromising on basic principles, he was not fussy about minor details. Believing in the gradualness of inevitability, he chose to concentrate on one thing at a time. He did not believe in the caste system, but he started this experiment of Widow Remarriage with the higher castes, the twice-born first, for good reasons of his own, before going on to the others. In 1897, he was happy to play the master of ceremonies at the wedding of the young poet Sarojini Chattopadhyaya (Bengal Brahmin) with Dr. M. Govindarajulu Naidu (Andhra Non-Brahmin) in Madras. Later still he renounced caste altogether, when he became an ' anushtanic Brahmo' (in 1906).

Like Vidyasagar, Veeresalingam was an educator. He started educating society through the education of women. He opened a girls' school at Dhavaleswaram, near Rajahmundry, his native town, in 1874 when he was about 26. This was probably the first Girls' school to be started on the initiative of a private individual in the Andhra Region. It will be amusing to recall that some learned Pandits, including those well versed in he Vedas, were stoutly opposed to the idea of female education. It was nothing less than shocking and scandalous to them.

Parodying their wrong-headed arguments, he wrote in his humorous periodical, Hasya Sanjivani' :

"Our ancestors were never guilty of the crime of education. ….Education would lead to forgery and falsification of records. Were our ancestors ever known to have been handicapped for want of education? Never. They were, on the other hand, happy and long lived. The present generation is becoming short lived by its failure to follow their example. Is it not our duty to be true to our ancestors and resist the Government's attempt to start schools and thereby corrupt the youth ? "

Veeresalingam's concept of social reform was surprisingly holistic. He made bold to tackle corruption in public life, with particular reference to graft among officials, and different aspects of immorality in social life. Focusing attention on the hydra-headed problem, he wrote in his periodical, *Vivekavardhani*:

"If bribery is exposed, the local satraps would be offended; if concubinage is denounced, the gay lotharios would be outraged; if outmoded (unsocial) customs are denounced, the illiterate masses would be unhappy; and if ostentatious rituals are derided, the priests and preceptors would be enraged. If the journal were to prove true to its self chosen mission, it must needs offend such a wide variety of vested interests."

The problem is as veal today as it was a hundred years ago; and the hurdles are no less serious, because the operators are a lot more sophisticated and influential.

Quite an untypical Telugu Pandit for his day, and even for ours, Veeresalingam questioned many of the social practices of the day, including the marriage of very young girls to doddering old men. He did this largely under the focus of the new light of knowledge coming from the West, through the medium of English education. It was under the impact of this knowledge that he harked back to the first principles of human liberty, justice and the primacy of ethics in personal conduct. He did not, of course, question the authority of the *Srutis* and the *Smritis*, quoted by his opponents, but sought to interpret them in their original context, freed from the distortions of custom and the perversions of latter-day personal expediency.

In his adoption of a realistic attitude and search for a practical solution, Veeresalingam's method was closely similar to that of Ranade. Both of them advocated a multi-pronged approach to the reform of Hindu society — welcoming Governmental measures for progressive social legislation, as well as individual and collective agitation. To the charges made by the conservatives of the import of foreign ideals, Ranade replied that the change was sought not as an innovation but as a restoration of the original state of perfection. "We must return to the old order of things ", he said, " All that the Government is called upon to do is to revert from the times of corruption to the times when Hindu society was more healthy and vigorous".

Perhaps, the same would hold good for other societies as well.

It is now-a-days becoming a fashion with academic radicals and armchair revolutionaries to dismiss all reform as an enemy of revolution. Cautioning those extremists impatient for change at one stroke, Ranade said: " The true reformer has not to write upon a clean slate. His work is more often to complete the half-written sentence. He has to produce the ideal out of the actual with the help of the actual. We cannot break with the past altogether; with our past we should not break altogether, for it is a rich inheritance, and we have no reason to be ashamed of it."

Festina lente (hasten slowly) is perhaps a motto no longer in fashion now-a-days — But it is, on second thoughts, worth more than a second look.

Closely related to this, in a different historical context, was the issue whether social reform or political freedom should take precedence in the attention of Indians working for the nation's welfare. This was quite a live issue at the time of the birth of the India National Congress in Bombay in1785. Weighty arguments were advanced on either side, and finally the protagonists of ‘political freedom first’ won the day; and this was .accepted as the main plank of the Congress. Political and social thinkers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, later came to have serious reservations on the ultimate wisdom of this decision.

Though the two groups remained distinct, a compromise was struck and ft was decided (that the .advocates of social reform should meet in a separate session called the Indian Social Conference al the same premises, after the Congress delegates had dispersed. Ranade, Bhandarkar, Chiplunkar and others belong to this group, strengthened later by the addition of Gokhale. The other had, among its champions, Tilak, Agarkar and company.

In due course, the two groups went further apart, one under the banner of the Moderates and the other under that of the Extremists. Political moderation and social radialism went hand in hand among the moderates — later come to be known as liberals. They supported all such measures as those relating to the age of consent, civil marriage, women’s right to property and the gains of learning in the Hindu undivided family. The attitude of the other school, viz., Extremists, later come to be known as Nationalists, could be summed up as combination of political Extremism and social conservatism. Tilak was once its eloquent spokesman. His mantle fell on Mahatma Gandhi, who once it’s eloquent Gokhale as his political Guru. His real guru, though at one remove, was Tilak. Their idiom and technique ware similar —so were their reflexes.

At this distance of time, it would be idle to speculate on the ‘ifs’ and ‘might-have-beens’ of history. Because the whirligig of time cannot be put in the reverse gear. But one thing is clear— our political set-up and administrative machinery are more modern than our social structure. It is high time we did some thing to modernize our social thinking and bring it in harmony with the polity envisaged by the founding fathers of our Republic.