

SOCIAL REFORM OR SOCIAL REVOLUTION ?

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Social Revolution

Social reform is a project in which I had much hope but have now lost it. The problem facing the nationalists, self-respectors, and socialists is, to my mind, not social reform, but really what may be called destructive work undertaken with our age and resolution. I may submit that I have come to this conclusion only after deep self-introspection and practical experience.

Let me illustrate my point. Let us suppose that there is a big pond considered holy, with an old and popular purana attached to it which says that even a drop of water from the pond taken into the mouth or smeared over the body would not only save the worst sinner from perdition, but would also take him to heaven. But if the condition of the water in the tank today is such as to cause indigestion if taken by the mouth or to cause itches and sores if smeared over the body, what should we do? First we should try to kill the poisonous bacteria in the

pond by spreading insecticide on the surface of the water, and if the position does not improve we should next try to empty the tank and clean it. And if the water is still found to be poisonous, we should decide that the very springs are polluted. In the circumstances would you still have faith in the purana and the holiness attached to the pond and continue to use the water, only to invite disease and death, or choose to close the tank once and for all by filling it with mud and debris?

In the above illustration, social reform is like cleaning the water with insecticide or baling out the water to clean the tank. To close the pond is to destroy it. I am a destructionist only in this sense. I say this only because social reform has had its day in our land. I do not refer to the modern types of reform, which are really not worth the name, as they are indulged in by some educated people and some plutocrats merely to hoodwink the innocent common man. They are not calculated to improve his lot. But yet the common man has been deceived by propaganda, with the result that his position is actually going from bad to worse.

The principal reason for this state of affairs is that the people who are really responsible for the degradation of the masses have come out as reformers for purely political reasons. But the reformers I have in mind are the great Siddhas, Buddha, Thiruvalluvar, Ramanujar and the like, who were reputed to have attempted social reform, but yet failed miserably.

Social reform varies from country to country. In the west, proposals for social reform apply to the whole community in equal measure. But in our country, the measures seem to apply separately to each group or community, involving inequality both in application and in result. The most important item of social reform in our country refers to the inequality based on birth, which is not to be seen anywhere else in the world. The next in importance are the beliefs and practices based on superstition, which are mostly allied to ideas about god, heaven and hell. Reform of these have been sought after (by) great minds as said above like Buddha, Thiruvallurvar, Ramanujar, Siddhas, etc. yet it cannot be said that anything effective has been achieved at any time. What a little has been done by

way of changing our people's habits and thoughts, is the result or reformations in the west, foisted on this country either for the Self-interest of our western rulers or in the genuine desire for reform. It is impossible to say that any reform has been done by our reformers has been done by our reformers genuinely for the benefit or the masses. The obstruction posed by belief in god, religion, Vedas, Sastras, is the main reason for lack of any initiative or effort on the part of our reformers. However, the divisions in Indian society have benefited and still benefit certain castes, who have all along turned a deaf ear to all talk of reform.

The obstacles to reform have all been met by learned arguments and logic by great seers like Buddha, Kapilar, Thiruvallurvar, and Ramanujar, and it is difficult to say that greater things can either be said or done by any in future. The obstructionists who still happen to benefit by the divisions and superstitions in our society, are still active and flourishing. Yet it must be admitted that conditions in modern days are vastly different from those that obtained in ancient days. But the absence of any change in religious or superstitious

beliefs even under modern conditions, is the principal block to all ideas of social reform.

It must be understood that god and religion are erected on the foundation of the superstitious beliefs of the people. Our daily life is regulated by superstition. As such it cannot be said that it is outside the pale of social reform to preach against blind faith and superstitious beliefs. On the other hand these are the targets for destructive attack in social reform. But as destructive tactics are ordinarily considered to be inconsistent with reform, it may be necessary to call the attempt reconstruction, meaning thereby that we destroy first and then reconstruct anew.

To engage in such reconstructive work, one must exhibit courage founded on conviction, as otherwise it will amount to suicide. It would be necessary for the iconoclast to work against serious and severe orthodox resistance which are the fruits of long tradition and selfish vested interests. Whatever are the causes of resistance they must be rooted out of existence. I am firmly of opinion that if anything of old, based on blind faith and

superstition is sought to be retained or tolerated, the result will be the total failure of reform. I am not one of those who feel that social reforms must necessarily be restrained by moderation and patience. I know that this would be distasteful to many. But it must be recognized that none can excel the moderation, patience, and tolerance of great seers like the Buddha, in whom I believe, these virtues were their weaknesses. People who are cautious about themselves and afraid of public opinion and heightened resistance, can never be effective reformers, and their panaceas can never bear fruit. Reformers ought strictly not to be bound down by any traditional rules. Instead they should be ready to sweep away everything before them.

Have not our old reformers tried long enough to change the people by peaceful persuasion, kind sermons and co-operative approaches? What has happened to their great efforts? How long are we to repeat the same processes? It is possible that sermons from the lips of savants like Vivekananda and Gandhi would be quoted against me. I am certainly opposed to their views. We all know that people worship portraits of these savants and glibly

quote from their sermons: but what is the condition of our society still, I ask! Value is ascribed to a thing not by what it looks like but by what is obtained by it for posterity.

There are those who beseech that we should not in the name of reform destroy and end symbols and arts. But the fact is that what they regard as glorious in the ancient symbols, arts, and fineries, are to my mind the very things that contributed to the downfall of our people and the humiliation of our land. For instance, Ramanujar, firmly convinced of the validity or utility of the ancient symbols of Namam and Poonool, attempted to corner every pariah, palla and chakkili (cobbler) and invest him with these ancient symbols; and by that queer process he is supposed to have established quality among men. The result was the preservation of the symbols without an iota of change in the inequality of man. Inequality even amongst the wearers of these symbols not only persists, but their dislike of those not addicted to these symbols became more pronounced.

Our temples are the most sacred of our symbols. Almighty god is said to reside in them. They are essentially the places created to worship god. Yet what is the condition of these temples? What is the benefit derived from them by the people? Could any one gainsay the fact that the very evils to eradicate for which the temples were created, are being freely perpetrated right in the presence of the mighty god. Have not brothels and drinking dens been compared to the temples? The position is similar in regard to the other arts of old.

One may ask what good have the Vedas, Sastras, Itihasas and Puranas, containing the doings of god on earth - and all ostensibly produced or revealed for the benefit of mankind - achieved so far? What have the Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Sivapurana, Vishnupurana, Periapurana, etc.,, so much praised and propitiated by our pandits and seers, done to the people? Do not these stores of gods contain incidents and characteristics worse than what we see in the lowest strata of our society? Can anyone deny that these puranas have been more a hindrance than an aid to human progress? Yet do we not see the reformers still being resisted by the

traditionalists, by these so -called divine symbols and arts and literature? It is not uncommon to find our pandits trot out obscure passages from these puranas in support of certain reformatory ideas. I believe these insertions are only to hoodwink the credulous people, as exceptions are said only to prove the rule. The miraculous incidents with which the puranas are replete, are as you all know, beyond human comprehension and utterly devoid of reality and practicality, and therefore outside the range of repetition in the modern age.

Instances are related in puranas of a few pariahs being admitted into the temples, where the all-kind god is stated to have given them grace and outright salvation. If it is asked why such things never happen these days, the reply is that those pariahs were different from those we see now. If that is really so, where is the need to preserve these old arts and letters? Untouchability may be pardonable in view of human ignorance, yet we have stories to say that even god recognizes untouchability.

What are the Things that Require Reform

Of the things that cry out for reform, the principal ones are, to my mind, god and religion, for the very simple reason that these are the two things that are invariably put in opposition to all reforms.

The less I say of god the better it would be. Talk on god may be likened to a dripping pot, which is full when it leaves the water surface but arrives empty at the top of the well. It is a matter for empty discussion and not for substantial results. However the best of prophets have said that god is something that cannot be seen or touched and is beyond human knowledge; and finally that it is something that exists only when believed in. There is really not much to argue about in such a definition of god.

Religion is another thing that does not give much help to understanding. As far as I can see, no religion appears to have given man peace or prosperity. Yet in the name of religion, war and propaganda have filled man's history to the brim. Every particular religionist is convinced that salvation is possible only through his

own creed, that his prophet is the only son of god, and that whatever that prophet has said is god's own work.. There is also no denying the fact that there are numerous subdivisions or sects in each major religion. It is impossible to find out who is representing the truth, and whose threat of hell is to be feared most. Where is the need for so much competition to gain god's affection, I ask! Do these religious heads really feel so much as to strive to take men to god? If these questions are calmly given thought, the absurdity and uselessness of religion will be apparent.

Even as one adventurer seizes power to become king ostensibly for the benefit and good of his people and leads them on to war to conquer other people's lands, so do these religious heads begin to lead people apparently for their benefit and later as power increases, try to engulf all others in their particular creed as being the only one calculated to give all men salvation, whatever that may mean. Truth is therefore inconsistent with many religions and creeds and numerous agents of god on a earth. Hence it is that it is difficult to identify religion with god, though each religion is supposed to be connected with god. If it were said that religion is meant to give a code of

conduct to people in each region or country, and variable according to time and age, there might be some excuse for it. Instead of that it is said that the religious prescriptions are divine expressions not susceptible of any change whatsoever. Then it is nothing other than meaningless bigotry, fit only to be destroyed by all reformers. Social reform must go in step with man's change and experience.

Status of Men and Women

Women in general have been treated as sub-humans in society. Woman has been taken for granted as man's slave, even as it is said that cattle have been made to serve as food for the tiger or that rats have been made for the benefit of cats. If this was really god's law, our first duty would be to rid the world of that god.

Chastity: The status granted to women all the world over is bad; more so in India. The rules of chastity imposed on them make one shudder. Chastity is held up as the sole criterion of their merit. Our puranas glory in a particular type of chastity, which covers implicit and slavish obedience to the husband

or lord. If the husband says that cold rice is hot, the wife must simply throw it away. If the lord calls her while she is drawing water from the well, she must leave the pot in midair and the pot must also remain suspended in space till her lord sends her back. This means that if the pot drops back into the well, she is not chaste at all! What more is needed to emphasise woman's slavery and nothingness, I cannot say. Have our gods in the puranas treated their wives this way? We see them instead carrying them on their heads or tongues or thighs or shoulders. If women are slaves, their children can only be slave-bred herds. Woman's freedom and equality with man is therefore a desideratum for civilization, and this is what a reformer should strive for.

In order to ensure freedom for women, all extreme ideas of chastity require to get abrogated. Chastity enforced under compulsion is really no chastity. Love and companionship should alone condition chastity. One standard for men and another for women is totally reprehensible and cannot survive under the principle of equality. It would be moon-shine to expect men to voluntarily grant equality. It is the duty of women to strive for the goal. Government has also

a responsibility in this regard. They can no longer take shelter under the plea of tradition and religion, any more than social reformers. Turkey, Afghanistan and China have already given the necessary lead in this matter. It must be remembered that the eyes of Turkish women and the feet of Chinese women have been freed from fetters.

***Widowhood:* A few words in regard to widowhood in India may not be out of place here. It must be plain to you that what is against natural instincts has been for long imposed on the unfortunate widows. This imposition not only betrays man's cruelty to women, but his total lack of proportion as well. It is really strange that a land in which goddesses are worshipped, the rivers are named after women, and the male gods are depicted as giving honoured seats to their wives on their heads or things, women in actual daily life should be treated as worse than dolls.**

There does not appear to be any sense whatever in compulsory widowhood. One does not know who is actually benefited by this enforcement, unless it be

that some sadhus and sannyasins felt the need for the existence of such a group of women. It can not also be that the ancient State feared a disproportionate growth of women and the consequent difficulty of matrimony among girls. At any rate this is a state that should not be tolerated any longer. Widows should henceforward strive for their freedom, find husbands for themselves, and take lessons from many of the lower castes, in which widows do marry. Social reformers have a special responsibility in this matter.

***Caste difference:* Caste did not arise by itself in human society. It is an institution that has been deliberately enforced under penal provisions. The basis for caste is that the stronger grind down the weaker. Caste is a proof of a fact that our people are not really a civilized people. Where is the need for caste divisions based on birth? There is nothing to prove that any man in any caste is incapable of any human avocation or character or culture or intelligence. All men are born equal, and inequality taught and enforced in after life is contrary to nature itself.**

All good people have wanted the caste system to end. Efforts in this way have not been wanting down the ages. But yet we do not see any change. I do not hope to witness any change through pious persuasion, searching of hearts, or national need. The institution can be attacked only at government level through representation in all things in proportion to strength in population of each caste. Equality in the enjoyment of material goods will ultimately lead to equality in status and the automatic withering away of all ideas of high and low, on which foundation alone caste has been constructed.

Equality of representation in all things ensures absence of exploitation of the weak by the strong. This demand cannot be outside the range of social reformers. Some nationalists raise the objection that claims based on caste would only perpetuate caste. They patriotically plead for equality of treatment, knowing full well that it is the high-caste man who will benefit by equal treatment amongst unequally developed castes. There are, besides, religious and psychological inhibitions to restrain and pull back the lower castes and push forward and encourage the higher castes. It is for these reasons that

representation on the population basis is the panacea, as a first step to ultimately eradicate caste.

***Untouchability:* A system which says that one man should not touch another man for fear of polluting himself, is horrid to contemplate. One wishes that a country in which such a system obtains should be destroyed by fire or earthquake or floods. How on earth it is possible to credit the mighty god with the attributes of mercy, grace and benevolence, when untouchability as an institution has persisted for ages, passes one's understanding. Would it not be desirable for the untouchables to free themselves by force or violence and perish in the attempt? Can a country that harbours this system, really crave for political freedom, swaraj and a civilized life ? There are people, I know, who have said that these injustices will go once political freedom is achieved. They forget that the horrid institution of untouchability was created and preserved when India was free and was ruled by godlike kings like Rama and Harishchandra. The cause of untouchability is not political slavery. It is the Hindu religion, pure and simple. Social reformers have perforce to kill the demon of**

untouchability if necessary by killing the Hindu religion.

***Education:* Social reform necessarily covers the subject of education. According to me education should conform to nature and general human character. The rest can only be magic. Let me quote from *Tirukkural*:**

**Who knows what's human life's befitting
grace,
He lives; the rest' mongst dead man have
their place. (214)**

**Who know not with the world in harmony to
dwell,
May many things have learned, but nothing
well. (140)**

What is practicable and natural to the world of men, should be found a place in education. What is taught today is contrary to these fundamentals. What would serve the rulers, be they kings or priests, by ensuring the unalloyed subservience of the people to the

powers that be, is what is served to our children. The present education, further, is calculated to subserve the interests of the exploiting classes that live on others' labour. To be brief, I would say that worship of god , practice of religion, propitiation of the rulers, which are all calculated to keep in mental slavery, should never enter the portals of education. Further education should more particularly be diverted to women, the untouchables and other backward classes; and denied altogether to those who credit themselves with divinity or intelligence through their birth itself. At least for some fifteen years, high caste pupils should be denied admission in all colleges and technical schools. An honest government, I feel, should do this unhesitatingly if it is intent on social equality and destruction of caste; and social reformers should oblige government to act in this way.

***Superstition:* That blind beliefs and superstitious practices should fall within the targets of social reformers, need hardly be restated, as it is already the general talk everywhere. Except for those who live by exploiting these beliefs and practices, there is no one else to gain by them. But for want of courage and resolution, the others are unable to change the**

position. God, religion, piety, Vedas are not the only things that encourage superstition. Beliefs about good days and bad days, vows, fasts, theerthas, sacred spots, and tributes to saints, etc., all help to spread superstition, which in addition make men waste their energy, wisdom, wealth and time. Although endowed with natural resources, India is enslaved, poor and primitive only because of our people's blind faith in superstitious practices. Some of the countries of the world that were very backward have within a few decades progressed in all arts and sciences, only because they struck at the root of the superstition that long enslaved their people's mind.

Our people dread to change even a small item of their senseless practices. God, religion, puranas and smiritis stand opposed to them. The objection of "our ancestral ways" is the worst of all. Crores are wasted in these practices. There are temples in India whose annual incomes run into crores, and they are wasted on useless rituals and for the especial benefit and aggrandisement of a few exploiters. To betray the credulous people into these senseless practices and beliefs, we have any numbers of puranas, agama sastras, legends of achariars, auspicious days and

sacred places, ceremonies,etc. Even governments and foreigners are not free from the desire to exploit the people's credulity.

Take the railways in India as an instance. None can say that their authorities have any faith in our sacred places, rituals, pilgrimages, etc. Yet it is interesting to see what the railways do. "Do go for Thula Bath", - "Vaikunta Ekadasi invites you"- "Come to Dhanushkodi for Adi Amavasai"- "Witness Karthikai Deepam at Thiruvannamalai", "Don't you go. to Kumbh Mela at Haridwar?"- "Come for Mahamagham at Kumbakonam" are some of the posters that one finds at railway stations and in the newspapers. Pictures of beautiful woman are also sometimes put in the posters to attract and deceive our people. They do not do all this to conduct people to heaven. You all know it is solely to make money. I believe that the amount wasted by the people on these pilgrimages, by way of taxes. People who blame the government for not doing this and that for the good of the people, do not seem to bother at all about the money that people otherwise squander. In fact it is easier for economists, politicians, and journalists to attack the government of their omissions and commissions, than to turn their

eyes and ears to the superstitious practices on which fortunes are spent. Experts to flare up at government of the least interference with superstition are also not wanting in this country.

If the money and energy spent on superstitious beliefs had been diverted to popular education, should we have the lowest percentage literacy in this holy land of ours? The ultimate source of our illiteracy, poverty, and disease, is superstition.

Social reformers who preach on the platform, but do not follow their own teaching in practice are many. They seem to be stunned and deterred on facing facts. To keep up superstitious beliefs, the activities of the exploiters never cease. Almost every religious sect, like the Saivas, Vaishnavas, Siddhantis, etc., conduct conference; Kalakshepams on Ramayana, Mahabharata, Thevaram etc., are never wanting. Social reformers must steel their minds and reinforce their activities to face these tremendous hostile forces if ever they are to succeed. To minimize the power and strength of the forces of superstition embedded in religion and god, is to court failure; and to grant omnipotence and permanence to superstition is to

betray intellectual bankruptcy. The fact that a practice or belief has lasted for ages and that it has a literature behind it, is no criterion of its truth. The world is full of able efforts of great men and great people who have succeeded in breaking down old and hollowed practices and changing the ways of men.

Since I have lost hope in social reform through constitutional persuasive methods, I feel that a totalitarian government pledged to rationalism and socialism will alone be able to do something. A government pledged to eradicate caste, must be in a position to proscribe all books and literature that glorify caste, division, however ancient and sacred they may be. A public bonfire must be made of all those books that harbour superstition and caste. All those Sankaracharyas and Matathipadhis that will practice caste must be jailed or exiled. The wealth hoarded in the temples by way of jewels and utensils must be confiscated and spent for the education of the illiterate and for finding jobs for the unemployed. It is necessary to prepare the country for a government that can boldly attempt these reforms. It may perhaps be necessary for many reformers to sacrifice their lives in the process. More than all, it is very necessary

for reformers not to be afraid of being labeled atheists. The term atheism or the idea contained in it has no sense in it. The real fact is that all those who lose faith in the Brahmin priests, the Vedas, Sastras, Itihasas and Puranas, are called atheists. If the superstition and exploitation of the priests cannot be destroyed without one becoming an atheist, well, there is nothing wrong in becoming an atheist. It is only then that the scare about atheism will dwindle and vanish. It must never be forgotten that priests and plutocrats will ever be enemies of socialism and therefore democracy and therefore of all reformers. It must also be remembered that the people who oppose one religion for another, put faith in one prophet as against another, and in consequence invite people to join their narrow fold, are all equally opposed to reform and enlightenment. It is necessary to warn people against such propaganda so that in their innocent credulity they may not be taken in by the false and misguided call for a change of faith. All religionists sail in the same sinister boat. A change of religion is no solution to man's ills. No religion is the solution.

A warning is essential in regard to those Brahmins and other orthodox people who easily seem to establish themselves as great reformers, merely because they have lately taken to meat eating, drinking, or eating in anybody's house. There are others who feel they contribute to social reform merely because they have made no distinction about caste in their marriages or in their concubines. It is wrong to regard these specimens as social reformers. At the same time let it not be made out that Brahmins alone are guilty of caste behaviour. It is found in all other castes, though perhaps not to that pronounced extent. I am aware of the criticism that while the Non-Brahmins are bitter about the superiority complex of the Brahmins, they themselves do not grant equality to those below them in the infamous caste hierarchy. There is much truth in this criticism. My only reply is that the Brahmins have to take the greatest blame, because their forebears have been the authors of caste and it is they who have meticulously striven to preserve the system; and that if there were a change of heart in the Brahmins, the top of the ladder, reformation in all other rungs would be easier and smoother. I must repeat that representation in services and schools in proportion to

population must be accorded to all castes irrespective of their old status in the hierarchy.

In conclusion, I may say that the ultimate object of social reform should be to teach good habits, extend knowledge, observe the principle of equality in all things, realize self-respect, and practice socialism and secularism in their true senses.