faith and peace
Interfaith Cooperation Forum Newsletter

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The Ramadan market in Poso where people can buy halal foods for the evening breaking of the fast.

(Photo by Gunawan "Wawan" Primastaya)

Reflections on Ramadan

School of Peace Alumni

The month of Ramadan begins for Muslims around the world on or about June 6 this year. In this collection of reflections, several School of Peace (SOP) alumni in Indonesia

and the Philippines share what this month of fasting, praying and charitable giving means to them. **[Read more]**

Burma's Ominous Political Debate over Ethnicity

Sister Mai Nghiem

The discrimination that the predominantly Muslim Rohingyas in Burma face has been well documented in recent years. The author shares her personal experiences that reflect this discrimination that extends beyond the Rohingya community, affecting other Muslim communities in the country as well. Through the examples she provides, the bureaucratic contortions that government officials perform in the categorization of people's identities reveals their prejudice. [Read more]

A Nuclear State Remains Unable to Protect the Fate of Women

Asian Human Rights Commission

Earlier this year the provincial assembly in Punjab enacted legislation to protect women from violence. An Islamic institution in Pakistan reacted, however, by recommending changes to the law that,

among other restrictions on women, would allow husbands to “lightly beat” their wives if they deserve punishment. **[Read more]**

Casteless Society and the India of Our Dreams

Swami Agnivesh and the Rev. Valson Thampu

The dreams of India’s founders, explain the Hindu and Christian authors, was a republic rooted in a liberal, secular and egalitarian society where caste divisions, domination and discrimination would have no place. In nearly seven decades since its independence, this dream though has not become a reality. The authors explain why and outline the difficult work that is required to dismantle this unjust socio-economic system that, the authors note, is not based on religion. **[Read more]**

Reflections on Ramadan

School of Peace Alumni

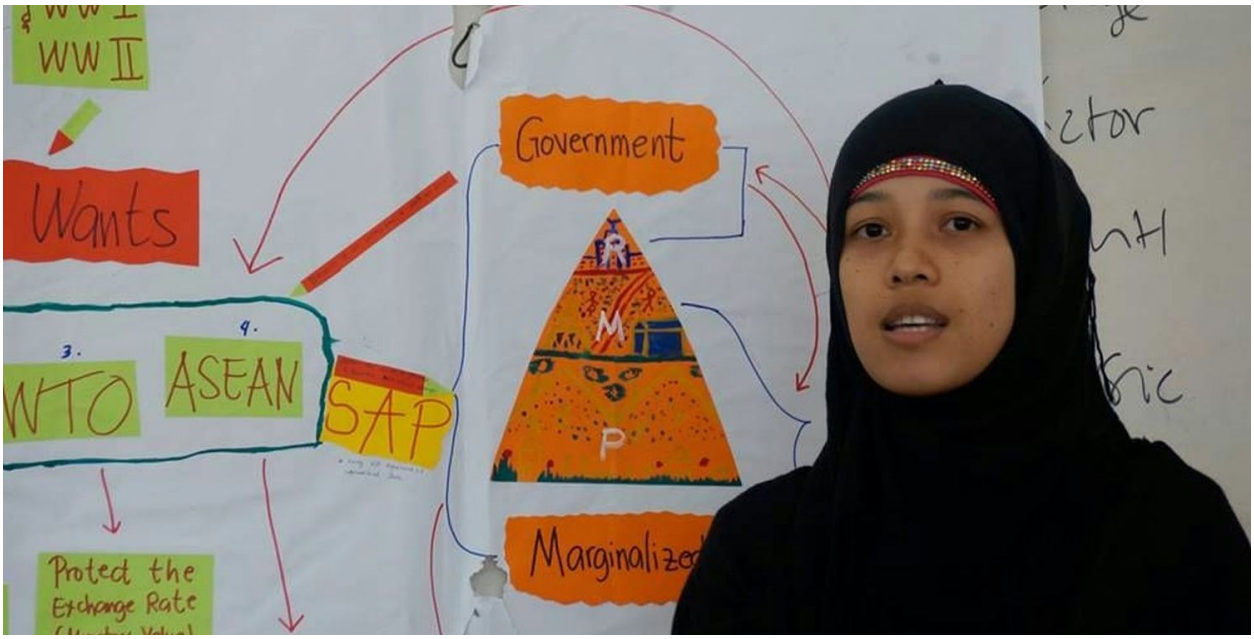
Gunawan "Wawan" Primastaya (SOP 2010): The month of Ramadan is a big annual celebration for people in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Everyone gets excited to go to the Ramadan market to buy cookies, food and drinks. Everyone goes to the market, even Muslim and non-Muslim people. Therefore, for me, Ramadan is not only a kind of worship for the Muslim community, but it's a time to celebrate diversity and peace with all the different communities.

The month of Ramadan for me is also a time for reflecting on our lives. Fasting during Ramadan is not only to stop drinking and eating during the day but also a time to control the emotions within ourselves.

Ramadan also emphasizes the value of reconciliation: first, you have to be reconciled with your own self and then other human beings. It can be done by being forgiving, being

grateful, and through positive thinking and building good interactions, or what we call "*silahturahmi*."

Laela Tambawang (SOP 2012): When you learn about fasting, maybe you think it's about food, and maybe you will say it's easy. But, in truth, it's not about how long you can last without food; the truth is how you have to fight with yourself, with your ego, emotions and with everything inside yourself. Fasting—it's about how you learn to be kind, to be true to yourself and your environment. Fasting is about sharing kindness, love, etc. Fasting is how you learn to control negativity around you and reflect on your life during fasting. And after one month of fasting, the outcome that I wish for myself after fasting is how I can become a better person. The truth is fasting is not just about food, but it's how you transform yourself after a month of reflection.



A-esha "Ashang" Afdal Ampatuan (SOP 2015): Ramadan for me is a month of disciplining oneself and strengthening his or her relationship to Allah and other creations—disciplining because you need to avoid things you usually do that can give you pleasure and focus on doing what Allah wants you to do as his creation.

It is also a month of testing yourself as a Muslim physically, mentally and spiritually. You need to evaluate yourself: Can my body still bear no food and water for a day? Can my mind still focus and forget about the earthly things? Lastly, what have I done as a creation of Allah this past year? Did I do what he wanted or what I wanted?

If your answer is following Allah, congratulate yourself because you played your role as his creation. If not, then you need to improve yourself by rendering most of your time to worshipping him and asking for his forgiveness because life is so short to waste. You need to invest good deeds for the day after life by doing what he wants, not what you want.

Indeed, Ramadan is the most important month of all because it gives me a total picture of what a real Muslim is.

Fira Tiyasning (SOP 2015): Two of the most important parts of Ramadan are charitable giving and fasting.

On Friday June 24, 2016, Generation of Peace (a young community group in Poso) and me gathered with some young people in Poso to reflect on making a strong stance for peace as young people in Poso. Our point of discussion was sharing experiences with Budiman Maliki, who received the Ma'arif Award from the Ma'arif Institution. Budiman Maliki is a peace-builder in Poso who has been active in dedicating himself to work during the conflict, and Gunawan Primastaya (SOP 2010 alumnus), who is a Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) fellow in Chicago in the United States, encouraged the participants to use social media as tools for a peace campaign. The participants came from different backgrounds all around Poso.

This meeting gave us a better understanding about current issues in Poso. As a network, we would like to collaborate through action to balance the image of Poso in the mainstream media by using social media and our local newspapers. I'm grateful to be given a chance to explore these issues with such a wonderful group of young people in Poso. As young people, we face the same issues, but we don't know how to address them. It was an emotional experience where I realized the power of a united group, the value of working hand in hand and the meaning of togetherness to make something better in the future.

One of the other things we do during Ramadan is fasting. It goes smoothly because of intension. Wise people said it comes from deep in your heart in which you believe it can be real and your mind forces your body to do it step by step. Thus, for me, fasting is a sign—a sign for all human beings to realize that we have to cooperate together.

We can't refuse to believe that we need each other. Fasting is the sign to think outside of yourself. I hope through this activity with Generation of Peace we can upgrade our sense to look around. We don't learn from experiences, but we learn from reflecting on experiences. Fasting without acting is nothing.

These reflections were collected by Rachel Bergen, an intern from Canada working for Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Her one-year internship is supported by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Discrimination is learned at an early age as schoolchildren in Burma often refuse to befriend their classmates with a *kalar*, or South Asian, identity with their "merging eyebrows." *(Photo from www.citylab.com)*

Burma's Ominous Political Debate over Ethnicity

Sister Mai Nghiem

Last year I accompanied an ethnic Shan-Danu Muslim teenager to an immigration office in Burma's Shan State to inquire about the citizenship application she had submitted through her high school. Although her friends had received their cards, the girl was told to come to the immigration office.

When she inquired about the reason for her visit, she was asked, "Are you of mixed blood?"

The girl didn't understand the question.

The official asked again, "Are you Chinese?"

The girl looks somewhat Chinese. Her father is ethnic Danu, and her mother is an ethnic Shan. They both are citizens, as are their parents.

She replied, "I am Muslim."

The officer responded in an impatient tone: "Yes, that's mixed blood," adding that was why she needed to come to the office.

"Mixed blood" doesn't refer to her or her parents' ethnicities but to her religion. It appears to be the default category for Muslims, an automatic synonym for both South Asians and Chinese. All of her hyphenated "native" ethnic identities, however socially conceived and defined, matter less than her religion.

Designating her a "mixed blood" cost her money, of course. A junior officer charged her 7,000 kyat (about US$8) to file her application. His sole act was to put her documents into a cheap, old paper folder.

The girl's case is emblematic of the growing political debate over the status of Burma's Muslim communities. It is enormously tangled and is used to further increasingly ominous jingoism against anyone presumed to be non-Burmese—and there are legions of the disenfranchised.

Although Muslims, mostly Sunnis, make up only about 4 percent of the population according to the latest government census, and as much as 6 percent to 10 percent according to the country's Islamic scholars, they have in recent months been demonized by leaders of the 89 percent majority who describe themselves as Theravada Buddhists. The majority population, reportedly egged on by a military that wants to keep its hand in

running the government from behind the scenes, repeats that Bengalis are terrorists and troublemakers who foment violence and that therefore they and their religion must be suppressed. The majority do not seem to accept that the violence must stop immediately and that political dialogue is needed to clear misunderstandings and problems.

The racist discourse that has been fueling extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric every day on social media web sites and printed in hate publications is also found on signboards at immigration offices at all levels in the country. The signboards state: “A race does not disappear by being swallowed by landmass, but by being swallowed by another human race.”

The political effect of self-victimization is that it lends support to an anti-Muslim campaign that is already manifested in large-scale violence.

The country’s 1982 Citizenship Act is being used against those not recognized as official “national races” to prove that their forefathers lived in the Burmese territory prior to 1823—one year before the First Anglo-Burmese War 190 years ago.

That is odd as at that time there was no Burma as we know it today. Moreover, today’s “official” categorization of 135 ethnic groups is at odds with the history of categorization itself. For example, a 1960 publication by the Ministry of Culture estimated ethnic groups to be about 50, but the manual from the Dept. of Immigration and Manpower published in 1971 listed 144 so-called national races.

In this manual, Muslims and South Asian groups were listed in an alphabet soup of designations, such as Rakhine-Chittagong, Burmese Muslims, Rakhine-Kaman and Other Burmese-Indians. The updated list of the 1990s, which the government never released officially, included only 135 groups. All Muslims and South Asian-related groups were removed. U Ko Ni, a Supreme Court lawyer, writes in the *Pyithu Khit* (*People’s Era*) *Journal*

that contradictions in the Citizenship Act and Burma's three constitutions create a mélange of citizens of ethnic parents, naturalized citizens, guest citizens, people whose status is doubtful, those who have the right to be naturalized citizens, citizens with the right to run in elections and citizens without the right to run in elections.

Apart from legislative flaws, legal implications and political or electoral discrimination, the experience of Muslims in Burma sheds light on the way they are made citizens and foreigners simultaneously.

First, the name of the card that identifies one's citizenship status is called a "Citizen Scrutiny Card." The use of the term "scrutiny" is a reflection of the surveillance state. It is not only to scrutinize citizens as individuals but also to limit the rights of certain people in the name of protecting race and religion.

At immigration offices, as with the girl I accompanied, the phrase "mixed blood" is frequently used. It is not something to be ashamed of in this 21st century socio-political order. Immigration Minister Khin Yi recently said citizenship in Burma is determined by bloodline.

What is equally striking, however, is the way Muslims are identified on their cards. Race/religion for a university student whose father is ethnic Danu and mother ethnic Innthar, for example, is identified as "India Burman Danu Innthar Islam"—without punctuation. This happens because every Muslim is required to identify on his or her card either as being from India, Pakistan or being Bengali.

There are only "India" or "Pakistan" as countries but not race, if there is anything called race at all. Although there is no clarification over whether the use of these words is to refer to either nationality or citizenship, or ethnicity, using them for the category of race/religion appears imprudent.

The case of the student's mother is also intriguing. The mother, who is ethnic Innthar, was identified as "Bengali" although she is not even ethnically related to a Bengali. When immigration authorities began issuing the current Citizen Scrutiny Card in 1989, the mother's father in a small village in the Inle Lake region was told he must register as a Bengali on his card. Not knowing the implications, the old man said, "It doesn't matter. If you want to write, just write it." The ethnic Innthar man thus became a Bengali.

As a result, his daughter was also issued the card on which she was classified as Bengali. Having realized that being identified as a "Bengali" on the card was troublesome, the woman took an oath at the township court that she was not Bengali but Innthar. Although the township immigration officer didn't change her ethnic status after the oath, the woman's argument won at last. Her Bengali status was successfully stripped off. She un-became Bengali.

In another family in Taunggyi, the multicultural capital of Shan State, a child is identified as "India + Burmese + Islam" and another as "Pakistan + Shan + Burmese + Islam" despite the fact that they are in the same natural family unit. This detail doesn't seem to matter to the government.

Such is the creation of "aliens" who have lived in Taunggyi for four generations. They are not migrants, and yet legal categorization has made them foreigners from South Asia—known as *kalar*. The striking matter in the first two cases is that the grandchildren of once relatively well-known figureheads of the town have been designated foreigners or outsiders by ethnic Burmans who only recently came to Shan State on government duty to scrutinize who are and are not proper members of the town and the country—strangers coming to town only to tell the native families that they are outsiders.

In addition to turning in-country born Muslims into foreigners, official ethnocide is occurring. A good example is that of ethnic Pathi, a Muslim majority people in central Burma whose recorded history and recognized status go back to the Burmese dynasty era. Although referred to in general terms as “Burmese Muslims” since the mid-1900s, Pathi as an ethnic category has faded away. Members of the community only continue to use Pathi as a prefix to their names.

In 2012, a political party was barred from registering a party with the name “Pathi.” Similarly, members of the community no longer register as Pathi on citizenship cards.

In another case, a Mandalay woman of my acquaintance has been newly registered as “India Burmese + India Burmese/Islam.” Her old card, which was issued when she was 10, identified her by “national race” as Pathi and Islam for the religion category. But when she was required to update the card as she turned 18, the Immigration Dept. denied issuing her the card with Pathi as a national race. She did not renew her card for more than 12 years, at which point she found herself holding a card that identifies her as “India Burmese” although it was not her decision to accept her new legal identity.

She was cheated by the authority, that is, she refused to renew the card for more than 12 years until she was ensured by the authorities of a card with Pathi as her ethnicity. But when she signed documents and picked up the card, it was written “India Burmese + India Burmese/Islam.” Now an ethnic Pathi for 30 years is a new “India Burmese.”

Religion is a major determinant of this system of alienation. For instance, a man in Mandalay has India on his card, but his brother, who chooses to follow his mother’s Buddhist religion, does not.

Dislike of Muslims and discrimination is not new in Burma, however. It is decades old, but the latest round of anti-Muslim hate campaigns, animated by the 969 Movement, has had a serious impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations.

Striking discrimination in my recent research in Shan State is that of primary school teachers against children. This prejudice seems new. Some Muslim parents are saddened that teachers called their children *kalar* (Indian/ Muslim boys) or *kalar ma* (Indian/Muslim girls). At one school in Taunggyi, a third-grade Muslim girl was not allowed to participate in a staged activity due to her "*kalar*" look, discouraging her from going to school at all.

Teachers do not seem to be teaching respect and tolerance either. A grade one student, for example, was not befriended by other kids due to her *kalar* look, especially the "merging of the eyebrows." The list goes on.

With the anti-Muslim 969 Movement, Muslims are increasingly facing discrimination in the employment sector as well. In the past, Muslims were not recruited by the military or civil service. Now employers, in both family businesses and companies, are less willing to hire Muslims. A recent university graduate applied for a job at a bank in Taunggyi but was told clearly that the bank did not hire her kind.

Not all Burmese or Buddhists hate Muslims, however. There are monks, educators, activists and ordinary citizens who are frustrated with the spread of hate campaigns across the country. But their benign attitude and voices are far less powerful and felt than that of a nation that has designed alienation politically and structurally as well as that of majority Burmese and/or Buddhists who have internalized and unleashed anti-Muslim sentiment and actions.

While the restrictive Citizenship Act makes Muslims second-class citizens, the discrimination they face results not only from the matter of law, i.e., the lack of

citizenship, but also from alienation, particularly the practice of outright denial, which has much do with racism and ignorance. Discrimination against Muslims is based on their sociocultural or ethno-religious membership as much as on legal status.

Therefore, while addressing the 1982 Citizenship Act is vital, it is important not to lose sight of the social and political dynamics of alienation, ethnocide and discrimination. Promoting mutual respect, recognition and tolerance, and most importantly, the undoing of anti-Muslim state propaganda and the majority's internalized racist attitudes and actions, are issues that must be addressed.

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This article originally appeared in the May-August 2016 issue of Seeds of Peace *published by the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) in Bangkok.*

Efforts to end domestic violence in Pakistan through the enactment of legislation is being challenged by the country's Council of Islamic Ideology, or CII. *(Photo from http://bolobhi.org)*

A Nuclear State Remains Unable to Protect the Fate of Women

Asian Human Rights Commission

In retaliation for the Women's Protection Act passed in February 2016 by the Punjab provincial government, the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) in Pakistan has made recommendations to amend the act, including allowing a husband to lightly beat his wife for defying him, banning coeducation after the primary level and banning women from receiving male visitors.

The CII is a powerful constitutional body that advises the Pakistani legislature on whether laws are in line with Islamic teachings. The body consistently attempts to stop the development of women's rights. After the Punjab assembly unanimously passed the

Women's Protection Act of 2016, orthodox clerics denounced it as being in conflict with the Qur'an and the Constitution of Pakistan and vowed to use all measures to oppose it.

The act criminalizes all forms of violence against women, provides women with special centers and aims to remove the usual bureaucratic hurdles that complicate a woman's quest for justice. Under the law, a family court would fix a hearing within seven days after receiving a complaint. The defendant will have to show cause in court in the same week. All complaints would be decided within 90 days from the day of the receipt of the complaint. The law provides that victims of domestic violence cannot be evicted from their homes without their consent. If they are evicted, the court can intervene.

The court can also order a GPS tracker to be installed to monitor movements of the defendant, provided that an act of grave violence has been committed or is deemed likely to be committed. It also redefines violence as any offence committed against a woman, including domestic, sexual, psychological, economic abuse and cybercrimes.

On March 14, Maulan Fazlur Rehman, chief of the political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, after meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, said that the prime minister had heard the party's reservations against the Protection of Women against Violence Act and promised to amend the law so that it doesn't contravene the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and also asked for suggested changes to the law. In response, the CII devised a proposal, the main features of which are the following:

- A light beating is acceptable should the need arise to punish a woman. The proposal bans forceful beating, saying only a small stick is necessary to instill fear.
- Beating is allowed if a woman does not wear a hijab, if she interacts with strangers, speaks too loudly, gives others cash without her husband's permission, refuses intercourse with her husband without any religious reason or refuses to take a bath after intercourse or her menstruation.
- It also suggests a ban on various activities, including women fighting in wars, but it allows women to participate in politics and become judges and proposes that the need for a guardian for women of age is not required.
- Women should not be permitted to receive male non-relatives or foreign officials, and they should not use birth control pills without asking their husbands.

- There should be a ban on coeducation after primary education.
- Female nurses should not be allowed to take care of male patients.
- Women should be banned from working in advertisements.
- Women can enter into a *nikah*, a marriage contract, without parental permission.
- Anyone who tries to force women into marriage or facilitates such a marriage should be sentenced to 10-year imprisonment.
- If any non-Muslim woman is forced to convert, then the oppressor will be given three years of imprisonment while the woman will not be murdered if she reverts to her previous faith.

The CII consists of 20 members. During the deliberation on this proposal, three members—Justice (retired) Manzoor Hussain Gilani, Dr. Noor Ahmed Shahtaz and Muhammad Abdullah—raised objections on many clauses of the proposed bill and urged the chairman to moderate it. Moreover, it comes as little surprise that the proposed changes were discussed by a panel of only men as the sole female member, Dr. Sameeha Raheel Qazi, was not present.

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, a woman's status as a human being has still not been settled despite the significant number of women leaders in the independence movement as well as women leading the rights movement after the creation of Pakistan. Fatima Jinnah, sister of the founder of Pakistan, also had tremendous public support while she was contesting the presidential election in 1965 against military dictator Gen. Ayub Khan.

In fact, prior to the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, it would have been hard to find the kind of discrimination between men and women that exists today. During the so-called Islamic era of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq between 1978 and 1988, however, women were given half the status of men in all walks of life. This discrimination continues today with women having to prove that they were raped, for instance, and provide four male eyewitnesses to the rape.

Being an Islamic country as declared by the Constitution, and a nuclear state, Pakistan has still to decide whether women are human beings, or mere instruments in the hands of Muslim fundamentalists who will decide what they must or must not do. The government is always trying to appease Muslim fundamentalists with regard to half of

the country's population. This lack of respect must end, and women's freedom and liberty must be given back to women themselves rather than to the mullahs.

The proposed changes to the Women's Protection Act not only go against the fundamental rights available to women in the Constitution of Pakistan and several international laws and treaties Pakistan has signed and is bound by, but they also add no value to the rights of women. The proposal must be dismissed, and instead, the government should work towards effectively implementing the Women's Protection Act, which is landmark legislation that can contribute greatly to improving women's rights in the country. The government should also take steps to reform the CII by having women constitute half of its members and by increasing the professional qualifications of its members.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) works towards the radical rethinking and fundamental redesigning of justice institutions in order to protect and promote human rights in Asia. Established in 1984, the Hong Kong-based organization is a Laureate of the Right Livelihood Award in 2014.

The most dirty and degrading jobs in India, such as removing human excrement from private and public non-flushing toilets, is reserved for Dalits, or Untouchables. *(Photo from www.iccokia.org)*

Casteless Society and the India of Our Dreams

Swami Agnivesh and the Rev. Valson Thampu

The architects of the Indian republic fondled the hope that, as secular ethos took roots, democratic institutions spread and a secular-scientific outlook consolidated itself, Indian society would outgrow the evils of the caste system. Those who harbored this hope were not insincere. They simply underestimated the die-hard durability of a pseudo-religious institution primed by a pro-status quo worldview. Because of this miscalculation, they did not launch an all-out war against caste. They assumed it would wither away in the course of time and die a natural death.

This degeneration of the caste system, however, did not happen. What has happened is that the “India of our dreams” began to undergo a radical redefinition. Our republican

dreams are being revised. A political engineering to perpetuate caste domination has gained gradual ascendancy over the liberal-secular ideal of an egalitarian society. This phenomenon has happened by default. While republican and egalitarian ideals were preached, precious little was done by way of practical action to break the stranglehold of caste over Indian society. The gulf between theory and practice continued to widen, eroding the credibility of the theory. Today there is widespread cynicism on whether or not the war against caste is winnable.

No institution can be effectively combated unless its roots are identified. The roots of the caste system are not religious, as many tend to assume. This presumption is the case that is made, especially by those who are keen to secure a contrived legitimacy for caste so as to prolong its social tenure. In fact, caste is not, and cannot be, a religious institution. It is a socio-economic system that arrogates to itself the rags of religion simply because it is aware of its utter nakedness. The caste system, as B. R. Ambedkar identified and all social scientists agree, has two main roots: the ban on interdining and intermarrying.

Social intermingling through meals and marriage are experiences of the purest proximity and kinship. Dining, especially of a ceremonial kind, is not a matter merely of eating. It is a projection and affirmation of belonging together, an implicit recognition of the equal worth of all who share the meal. It involves an overcoming or denial of interpersonal and intercommunal distance. Ceremonial dining, for instance, is the most universal expression of the birth of a new relationship, as in the case of a wedding or a new deal in business. It has played a key role in all cultures in the formation of communities and has helped to break the barriers that keep individuals and groups segregated from each other.

The ban on interdining is therefore a powerful means for keeping social segments and religious sects apart from each other. A case in point is the appalling divide between Catholics and Protestants in Christianity perpetuated through the ban on sharing the Lord's Supper, which is a ceremonial and symbolic meal meant to unite the household of faith. The taboo against interdining is a clever conspiracy of fragmentation, a psychological and ritual mechanism of division. It seeks to foster a mindset of prejudice and rejection. Those we assume, by taboo, to be ineligible to dine with us seem to lack human identity and dignity for this reason alone. How powerful a social reality this act is can be measured by the immense gratitude and encouragement that Dalits even today experience when someone from an upper caste background eats with them. It is felt as socially liberating and affirmative, even when it is done as a private act with no social reverberations. Interdining is thus a measure of potent psychological significance. It is a concrete metaphor of mutual acceptance and a leveling instrument, socially and psychologically.

Even more powerful than interdining as a tool of reformative and affirmative social engineering is the instrument of intermarriage. Marriage is the foremost institution of intimate acceptance. It has the potential to dismantle all walls of division and alienation. In the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism, for example, the devotee believes herself to be married to her *ishtadevata*: a state of intimate integration or perfect oneness. Such intimacy is the necessary medium for knowing the other. The alternative to intimacy is alienation or social, cultural and mental distance. Distance is a medium of distortion. It is only in a state of distance that the truth and worth of a person or group can be denied or distorted. Multifaceted distance is of the essence of caste. In contrast, the spiritual goal in all religions is to overcome distance: first, distance from God and, secondly, distance from our fellow human beings. Caste is contrary to the logic of spirituality.

Both Swami Dayanand and Bhimrao Ambedkar were convinced that so long as interdining and intermarrying are not practiced our society couldn't be exorcised of the anathema of its caste mentality. The institution of caste survives, flying in the face of history and progress primarily because the various segments remain confined to their separate social ghettos, policed by a host of deep-rooted taboos and interdictions. Given the fact that we are social animals, separation is an aberration—an unnatural state. It is only an unnatural system that has to be enforced, coerced and reinforced with severe social and religious sanctions. Except in the cities, the punishment for intercaste marriage, even today, is death. And these tragedies occur in spite of the fact that even our religious literature acknowledges love to be beyond all social and economic labels and stigmas.

The problem with caste is not only that it forbids interdining and intermarrying but that, in doing so and in order to do so effectively, caste fosters a mindset that turns a society against itself. The social injustice immanent in caste generates a cultural and economic compulsion to create a correlation between caste superiority and economic progress. It is easy to see how this perception occurs.

Marriage, for instance, has to be between equals. The best way to hence forestall intercaste marriages is to aggravate inequality between castes. This socio-economic separation creates a commitment to deepening the economic and cultural divide between the upper castes and lower castes.

It is a by-product of this mentality that today "merit" is defined almost wholly along caste lines. Merit is involuntarily equated with caste superiority. Hence, the tendency to idolize "merit" as it is understood today.

The prospect for intercaste marriages, in such a social climate, is manifestly bleak. The commitment to caste thus becomes a keenness to perpetuate the developmental disabilities of the lower castes: a fact writ large over our policies and priorities in education and the incremental exclusion of Dalits and the backward classes from the opportunities of development.

Experiences spread over nearly seven decades of nation-building leave us in no doubt that the evil of the caste system will not wither away unless the war against it is joined in a tactical and practical way. The parroting of pious sentiments will not do. Concrete measures have to be adopted and implemented, foremost among them being interdining and intermarrying. It is in the Dalit and backward constituency that the soul of India remains shackled. It is this social location of injustice where the war of liberation has to be joined in all earnestness. Going by its track record, religious conversion seems an evasion of responsibility in respect of this epic battle. The basic goal is to heal Indian society of its social leprosy, and not merely to offer an escape route of questionable merit to some of its victims.

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