

*Evangelical Consultation in India Discusses Caste*  
By Asia Theological News

*In February 1984 the Theological Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India and the Asia Theological Association jointly sponsored a Consultation on Caste and the Church. Thirty-three evangelical Christian leaders, most of them Indian, gathered in Bangalore to discuss papers written for the consultation and to produce a statement of conclusions. Two of these papers and the concluding ten-point declaration are reprinted here, by permission, from the April-June 1984 issue of Asia **Theological** News.*

**“WE STAND TOGETHER” Declaration on Caste and Church**

As representatives of the body of Christ from all over India, we thirty-three participants met together in Bangalore from February 9-12, 1984, under the co-sponsorship of the Evangelical Fellowship of India-Theological Commission and the Asia Theological Association. Grappling together with the issue of caste and the church in India, we have come up with the following ten-point statement, jointly expressing our concern for the eradication of the evil caste system.

1. We affirm the biblical revelation of God as creator, which is the basis for all men to enjoy the privilege and right of dignity and equality before God. Acts 17:26; Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 1:16,17.
2. We affirm the biblical teaching that all people are made in the image of God and hence possess equality of status. Moreover, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, no one people can claim superiority over another. Gen. 1:27; Acts 17:26; Ps. 87; Amos 9:7.
3. We affirm the biblical teaching that all those redeemed in Jesus Christ are one; and hence the church, the body of Christ, while being an organismal unity of several parts, considers exclusivism, prejudice and discrimination to be abhorrent and intolerable and must be rejected. 1 Cor. 12:12, 13; Gal. 3:26-28; Eph. 2:13-16; Jn. 17:21; Eph. 4:15,16.
4. We affirm that the church as a worshipping community needs to demonstrate in its life and practice, as God's Kingdom community, the biblical teachings of purity and sanctity, equality and dignity, liberty and fraternity, and love and justice. Rom. 12:1,2; Phil. 2:15; Eph. 4; Gal. 5:1; Prov. 21:8; Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8; 1 Pet. 3:8.
5. We affirm that the church as a witnessing community is the light and salt of the world—a prophetic people practicing and proclaiming all that we believe as a worshipping community and transforming our nation under the Lordship of Christ in obedience to the Word of God. Mt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:9.
6. We affirm that the church as a caring community must be involved in the life and well-being of its individual members. The biblical distinctives of love and community need to be expressed in the solidarity of God's people concerned for one another, particularly for new believers in their need of love, respect, security and identity. Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 12:26; 1 Pet. 9:10; Jas. 2:14-17; 1 Jn. 4:7-21.
7. We affirm the biblical absolutes concerning God and man as revealed in Christ and the Word

of God; but we recognise that the actualisation of these truths in and through the church is a process that demands a determined effort, teaching, costly obedience and discipline under the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit

8. We consider the caste system to be man-made and totally unjust, a system which has directly or indirectly permeated the total fabric of our nation. It denies human dignity and constitutional privileges of equality to the majority, while enabling an exclusive minority to enjoy self-arrogated privileges. The caste system has inhibited innovation and progress while paralysing social, political, economic and religious structures.

9. We confess and repent that on occasions and in places we have permitted the evils of caste to influence the church and to mar the beauty and unity of the body of Christ.

10. We resolve and recommend that immediate measures be taken by the local churches, theological institutions, organisations, families and individuals to eradicate caste. Some practical steps we suggest are:

a. That we preach more openly against the caste system and seek to include this teaching in our constitutions, articles of faith, and doctrinal statements of all our churches and related bodies.

b. That systematic teaching be prepared to educate all ages of men, women, and children.

c. That the importance of teaching these issues at home be emphasised and definite attempts be made to encourage families to discuss these issues, seeking to implement and inculcate these teachings in all areas of life, particularly in marriage.

d. That local churches, theological institutions, organisations, leaders, families and individuals presently and periodically evaluate the influence of casteism in their lives and take corrective measures to eradicate this evil.

e. That wherever the evil of the caste system has permeated the church's worship and witness, we seek corrective measures in the light of biblical teaching through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Where guilty we must seek to humbly confess our sins and to accept and take disciplinary action.

f. That individual Christians wherever called upon be a voice for the lower castes, the exploited and oppressed. Legal advice and personal counsel may be given without compromising our Christian commitment. Where appropriate, joint action may be pursued with other agencies to take a united stand against casteism.

We stand together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, pledge ourselves to commitment and action.

## THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF CASTE

By Ebenezer Sundar Raj

*Ebenezer Sunder Raj, the author of "The Origin and Growth of Caste," which appears here in summarized form, is Director of the Friends Missionary Prayer Band and Honorary Associate General Secretary of the India Missions Society.*

*Association. Graham Houghton, the author of "Caste in the Protestant Church," is principal of the South Asia Advanced Christian Studies in Bangalore and president of the Association for Evangelical Education in India.*

The origin of caste in India has four roots: racial, occupational/ economical, migrational, and religious. We shall discuss these roots.

Prehistoric India was inhabited first by the Negritos **Race** and later by the Proto Austroloids, the Dravidians, and finally by the Vedic Aryans "who are racially considered [to be] Nordics." The Kadars, Pulayans, Irulas, and the Deccan and Andaman hills are representative of the now extinct Negritos. The Proto Austroloids came from the Mundas, Santhals, Kols and Bhils of the Central India hills are representative of them. The Mongoloid form represented by the northeastern hill tribes. The most populous race to occupy the entire prehistoric India, barring the Dravidians in their extent from Sind to Cheranadu. Historians point to the advanced Dravidian civilization and culture in Northern India.

Authorities on the Indus civilisation collectively point to the fact that the black Dravidians were exterminated and the coloured Aryans. Their civilisation was destroyed, and those who were not killed were made slaves. The destruction of the conquered race marks the first step in the development of the Indian caste system. Thus, the foundation of caste gradation in India was the division of the conquered slave (Dasa Varna or Dravidian) race from the master (Aryan). The master had absolute sexual rights over his domestic slave women, and the mixing of blood for a millennium resulted in a considerable population of mixed race known as the Shudras. As recognition of the partial Aryan descent, the Aryans admitted, in a restricted sense, to the Aryan (noble) community as the fourth and last class, although Upanayana (the sacred thread") as a mark of full Aryan status was denied them. The possibility of further metisation leading to the eventual loss of Aryan identity and its cherished culture and religion, however, eventually warranted the most stringent regulation for segregation.

During the Brahminical and the epical era, much liberal social intercourse was existent between the four caste groups (white Aryan castes and the coloured Aryans in Aryavarta), while social intercourse with the Anaryan was prohibited. This resulted in a mushrooming of numerous intermediate subcastes and clans, a type of caste ladder, with colour or race being the deciding factor. An elaborate and ingenious gradation resulted. For instance, "anuloma" is the descent of a child of a high caste male and a lower caste female; and "pratiloma" is the descending or the descent of a low caste male and a higher caste female.

This second factor is evident in all ancient » civilisations. In mono-ethnic civilisations occupational division was the result of socio-economic struggle. In multi-ethnic civilizations like India and South Africa, however, occupation was a religious struggle with the conquering or dominant ethnic group forcing the low occupations on the weaker or conquered. Pollution is a concept that is found in some form and degree in all civilisations. Anthropologists speak of occupational pollutions and taboos and point out certain concepts of cleanliness that were considered by the dominant ethnic group as legitimate reasons for segregation and degrading the castes, clans or tribes of such occupations. The Churas (the tanners of Punjab), the Chamars (the tanners of Central India), and the Chanars (toddy tappers of Pandya) are examples of groups that suffer from occupational pollution and consequent segregation.

The third root of caste gradation in India is the migrational aspect. The powerful socio-political and religious movements of the last three millennia have resulted in numerous migrations of ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. One Indian historian, H. H. Embastha, Vaidehaka, and Magadha as examples of territorial names which became caste or clan names after migration. The Sourashtras in Tamil Nadu, the Mathuras in Andhra, and the Elavas and Syrians in Kerala are typical migrational groups that eventually became castes in the Aryan caste ladder. Thousands of such groups can be traced across India.

Contrary to popular notion, India is a more multi-religious country than any nation in the world. The census of enumerates fifty-nine religions in India. The interaction among these religions (creedal and ethno), however, has numerous ethno-religions which eventually have been absorbed or classified under Hinduism as castes. The K Nanak Panthis, Raidas Panthis, Lingayatas, Narayana Guru Sect and Satnamis are some examples.

These four roots, in their various combinations and interactions, have produced in three thousand years the castes of Northern India that we find today. It must be discreetly noted that while interaction was possible in varying degrees among the above-mentioned castes, no interaction or social intercourse was permitted between the Arya and the pure Dravidian. Beginning in the Vedic era and developing in the Brahminic era, the segregation was made total and eternal. The concept of untouchability in Aryavarta. Because of this asprashya dharma, the house slaves had to be isolated from savarna (no caste) isolation. This was the birth of dasa cheri (harijian colony) in Aryavarta. From then on the dasa system gave way to the practice of a corporate (village) slave (or "jamani") system. This must be clearly noted in our understanding of bonded labour, man mortgage, Padial, Kothadimai, Adiar, and other systems of slavery that existed in India. The most stringent legislation was made against untouchables. In Aryan literature they are equated with the dogs and "not only his touch, but his shadow and sight pollute." Class division and slavery were evident in the early Egypt, China, Rome, Japan, Iran, Britain, Ireland, Germany and other countries. But only in India did class division develop into the rigid caste system and untouchability under "divine" injunction by unscrupulous vested interests.

### Caste in the Protestant Church

By Graham Houghton

The *Christian Patriot*, a weekly newspaper of "social and religious progress" which was founded in Madras in 1890, over the years has had a considerable amount to say about caste. Conducted entirely by Indian Christians, it described caste as a curse whose nature it was to corrupt human beings.

In a study of some of the early issues, some provoking facts emerge; for instance, the question of whether caste was a religious or social institution was dealt with. The *Christian Patriot* argued that the earliest sources on "caste speak of it as a religious institution." Interestingly, the paper attempted to bolster its argument further a few years later by quoting from a missionary, the Rev. Wheeler Bogges, who was convinced that caste was a religious rather than a social institution because:

(a) it has its roots in the sacred literature of the Hindus; (b) its defenders claim for it a divine origin; (c) religious duties are linked with caste in that it formed a necessary qualification for the performance of those various duties; (d) Hindu religion gives the bounds of the various castes so that no one can change his caste from a lower to a higher, (e) religious rites are necessary to restore caste when it is broken; (f) rules for maintaining caste by purification ceremonies are religious.

The crux of the matter for Rev. J.A. Sharrock, a tireless campaigner against caste, was the fact that caste was social as well as religious, "or rather social because it is religious." The Hindu, he said, "is nothing if he is not, at any rate in ceremony, religious. Religion dominates everything; hence caste, which is the essence of Hinduism, pervades every action of a man's life." In any event, Sharrock took umbrage with those who contended that whatever caste was for Hindus, it was merely a social organisation to Christians.

No matter in what form caste manifested itself in the church, it was in the final analysis for the *Christian Patriot* "contrary to the Spirit of Christ," for the system was established upon the fundamental idea "of the superiority of certain classes of human beings over others, a superiority which has a divine sanction." In an article entitled "The Relation of Missions to Caste," J.D. Maynard of the Mission of the Society of Friends saw something else. For him caste was an "effective political force" conceived by "Brahmanical genius that sanctified and petrified the distinctions of race, rank and occupation." At first sight, the deep-rooted fault of the caste system and its incompatibility with Christianity appeared to be over a detail of practice. Christianity wants to convert, whereas caste forbids its adherents to change. However, the much deeper and more significant incompatibility between the two, according to Maynard, lies in the fact that: Caste is rigid; Christianity is responsive and adaptable. Caste is a system; Christianity is life.

Caste is of the law; Christianity is of faith.... Caste is of the dead past; Christianity is of the eternal future. Caste rests on a conception of the ultimate reality of the distinctions between men, accepts and fixes these, and gives no hope of a change. Christianity rests on a conception of the equal value of all men before God and the temporary character of all earthly distinctions.

At the same time, the *Christian Patriot* was in no doubt as to the practical outworking of the system, considering that "the worst evils—social, moral and spiritual—that India [was] suffering from [could] be traced more or less to the pernicious influence of caste."

Interestingly, and perhaps obviously, opposition to caste extended beyond the concern of the Christian community. There were many Hindus who acknowledged the evils of caste and who spoke out against it. The Maharaja of Gaekwar, speaking at the Indian National Social Conference in 1904, affirmed the evil of caste on the grounds that it socially, economically and professionally hampered the life of an individual. But he observed:

Its most serious offence is its effect on national life and national unity. It intensifies local dissensions and diverse interests, and obscures great national ideals and interests which should be those of every caste and people, and renders the country disunited and incapable of improving its defects.... It robs us of our humanity by insisting on the degradation of some of our fellow men who are separated from us by no more than the accident of birth.

The editor of the *United Church Herald* included in the journal's January 1913 edition a tenfold statement of objection to caste agreed upon at an "Anti-Caste Conference" which was held in Bombay shortly before. The significance of the declaration, noted the editor, was the fact that it was not a statement "of missionaries or of others outside of the caste system" but that it revealed "the increasing evils of that system as they bear upon those who have to endure them from within Hinduism itself." Caste was objected to because it was "directly and indirectly responsible for the huge mass of ignorance and illiteracy;...[because it] created a wholly artificial order of social precedence;... [and because it] brought about the huge problem of the Depressed Classes." The statement, published in leaflet form "to be scattered broadly over the land," concluded with an appeal to everyone who had the good of India at heart to rally against caste and "seek to change the foundations of a system which has cultivated any usefulness it might have had [and to] build

up a new generation of broader vision, of more catholic sympathies, of a loftier altruism, and of a purer and intenser patriotism."

These were among the reasons that from its inception the *Christian Patriot* took issue with what it referred to as "this baneful system whose unfortunate existence in the native Christian community has not only been marring its usefulness as a body but also has been the source of many a positive mischief." It was this same concern for the influence of caste upon the life of the church that very likely led the Madras Native Church Council at its inauguration in 1868 to accept a Caste Declaration form. Although it was drawn up by the Church Missionary Committee, this form was signed by all participants before taking their seats as members of the Council. The Declaration stated:

Believing the system of Hindu Caste to be contrary to the spirit and requirements of the Gospel of Christ, injurious to the souls of those who adhere to it, and an impediment to the exercise of brotherly love among the members of Christ and to the spread of the gospel in this country;—because it inculcates the false idea of pollution on account of birth— because it confines a man and his family forever to the grade in which he was born and prevents his rising into a higher class of society, whatever may be his character and merits—and because it recognises a combination of individuals assuming authority and power to hinder those who follow out the dictates of conscience, and who wish to enjoy liberty in matters of marriage, food and social intercourse;— I do on those grounds condemn and renounce the system of Caste, and admit it to be the duty of every Christian man heartily to renounce it; and I will uphold and assist all those who exercise their Christian liberty in opposition to the system of Caste.

This Declaration was faithfully signed by all incoming members of the Council at least up to 1917. Not all such rhetoric, however, was consistent with actual practice. One correspondent to the *Christian Patriot*, for example, noted that it was only those who were Christians for the sake of convenience and whose Christianity was "but skin deep" that looked down upon fellow Christians with that "cursed caste distinction." The writer concluded, "I say it is high time that Christians ... should wake up to show caste Christians the awful disunion they cause by clinging to the cursed heathenish caste." After expressing himself so forthrightly, he rather surprisingly signed himself "John R. Sivasubrahmania Iyer."

In drawing to a close a discussion that extended over several weeks, an article entitled "Duties and Responsibilities of Indian Christians", which appeared in the June 1896 issue of the *Christian Patriot*, recognised that:

Christianity is on trial in India. Many are watching to see how we are affected by it as a community. Let us resolve to bury at the foot of the cross of Him who, though he was God, took upon himself the form of a servant and made Himself of no reputation all our egotism, our self-conceit and social bigotry and make an earnest effort to realise in the heart as well as in the outward life our openness in Christ. To us, resurrectionized Christians and Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, there is no Pariah, nor Brahman, no Rajah nor Semirdar but one new man.

*Reprinted by permission from Asia Theological News, published quarterly by the Asia Theological Association, P.O. Box 1477, Taichung, Taiwan, R.O.C.*