

► Caste Is Within You

Bijaya Dashami celebration this year shattered my expectations and shook my belief about caste system. The tika experiences virtually weakened my reasoning to assess the unreality of caste system which, in Dor Bahadur Bista's critique discoursed in Fatalism and Development, has served brilliantly as the major deterrent of economic, political and social development of Nepal. Perhaps, the experiences I am sharing may sound too personal. But they threatened my notion that caste discrimination is erasable and abolishable.

This Dashain was the first occasion for me in which I was to receive tika from my in-laws who are Chhetris and thus conventionally below my caste. I, along with my spouse, visited few of the Chhetri families as a new jwain (son-in-law) – a new Brahmin jwain. But the hospitalities and the courtesies with which I was welcomed by my in-laws and other relatives made me long for my own Brahmin culture with which I have lived for three decades of my life and which has thus dictated my life and doings. The first thing that I missed during the tika reception was mantras. Brahmins have this tradition of reciting mantras when it comes to offering tika to their siblings and kin. The most frequently recited one being ayu drona sute shriyam dashrathe... (May you have as long a life as that of Drona and may you have as great a fame as King Dasharatha's of Ayodhya).

My in-laws knew no mantras and gave me tikas without any recital. As for the other relatives, most of them were very uncomfortable to offer tika to someone from a higher caste. They kept reminding me that I was a Brahmin boy who had married a Chhetri woman. "You are Brahmin. We are Chhetris. You are high caste. We are low caste. You chose to marry a low-caste woman. May you and our cheli (daughter) be happy forever," one said. "How time has tumbled! A purohit (priest) comes to receive tika from Chhetris. You are Brahmin and for us every Brahmin is our purohit," another elderly gentleman said. It was as if they wanted me to realize that I had committed a social sacrilege, a blasphemy, a sin by choosing a Chhetri woman as my life partner. It was as if they were looking down upon me as a Brahmin that had fallen from grace. It was as if I had lost my caste. It was so overpowering that I had to struggle hard to enable myself to appreciate their responses as mere human weakness. Throughout my stay at my in-laws, I felt uncomfortable and restless. I began to miss the pleasantries, formalities, rituals, and hospitality that are typical of a Brahmin family. For a moment, I had a realization that caste is no more an imported ideology but a reality. I reckoned that it is a major condition of our social life.

Historically, caste system has been an imported idea in Nepal. With Aryan invasion (2000-1500 BC) in India, caste system is supposed to have taken root there. In Nepal, it got introduced with the influx of Brahmins from the south in different phases of history; during the rule of Lichchavis and Guptas and during the Muslim Conquest in Northern India at the end of the twelfth century. King Jayasthiti Malla, early Mallas and Jung Bahadur Rana are key actors who strengthened the caste system.

But this historical reality sometimes falls short to awaken the senses of the people during the critical hours. Some people will not believe in it even if they are told of this secret. Take for example the shock the relatives of my in-laws exhibited at having to receive me as their kin. They should have taken my marriage for normal. To see from their own spectacles, I am a high-caste man that had married a low-caste Chhetri woman. I had made a family connection with a low-caste family. This should have cheered them up. But they were visibly in consternation. They were dismayed that I had flouted the caste hierarchy.

Therefore, for them, not only had I fallen from grace by taking up their cheli, I had also attempted to cause disturbance to the natural order ordained by God in which Brahmins remain as arbiters between gods and other mortals. So, in their eyes, I had disregarded my caste dharma and thus was guilty of sacrilege. On my part, I should not have felt my conviction under threat simply because a group of people still stick to the same age-old belief system. In fact, their outlook about caste issues should have encouraged me to evaluate that discourse as a clash between two convictions. I should not have felt itchy being among them. But I had been. Just as they were unhappy to see a Brahmin, an upholder of caste system, disregarding caste values, I too was losing my spirit to refute their trust as mere nothing.

I did not explain to them that caste system was unnatural. Neither did I tell them why caste discriminatory was unlawful. Those elderly relatives would not have been convinced even if I had attempted to do so. I simply heeded to their words of sorrows psychoanalyzing them all the while. I was making a lasting introspection in my mind about the ramifications of the system. Caste system is rooted in peoples' psyche like phantoms, like ghosts.

Hence, the mind should first outlaw caste discrimination. Change will follow then.

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