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Conversion and the Curse of Caste

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IN his article "Conversion Debate: A Clash of World Views" (March 27), Professor T K Oommen makes several misrepresentations regarding Hindu society, Hinduism and the results of conversion.

He states that "during the colonial time (sic) substantial number of Dalits and Adivasis did embrace Christianity, and they did this in order to escape ritual degradation and oppression". As a result of an Act of the British Parliament passed in 1813, missionaries were permitted to enter India. The missionaries saw in India a vast and populous field for converting millions of souls to the "true" faith. The religion of the Hindus came in for severe criticism and ridicule: caste, untouchability, polytheism, idolatry, immoral gods and goddesses, animal sacrifice, hook swinging, child marriage, dowry, sati, polygyny, polyandry, etc.

Dual Identity

The missionaries had links with the British rulers, links of religion, race and culture. A large number of natives saw them as just another arm of the colonial government, a perception that endowed them with power and prestige. Thanks to the support of British officials, missionaries were able to start a number of schools, hospitals, craft centres, homes for orphans and destitutes, and so on. These institutions won the respect and admiration of the people, of even those who did not directly benefit from them. More importantly, as far as Hindus were concerned, missionary activity stimulated thoughtful individuals to look at their own religion and society critically and embark on the long and arduous task of reform. However, on the negative side, the welfare activities of the missionaries were linked to the long-term goal of conversion. The very poor and low status people including ex-untouchables and tribals were converted to Christianity which, they were assured, was egalitarian, free from caste and untouchability.

But were Dalits able to shed untouchability and enjoy the same status as converts from higher castes? The answer is "no". The stark fact is that they continue to experience discrimination both within and without the church. They are not allowed to occupy the pews meant for the higher castes, and they continue to marry within their caste. Dalit Christians who live in arid rural areas continue to experience dire poverty, illiteracy, exploitation and discrimination. In this context, I cannot do better than quote from *The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study*, by Godwin Shiri: "Because of the miserable, nay beggarly, situation into which they are being pushed, they are forced to adopt a dual identity — a Hindu identity for the sake of getting some state help which is vital for their very survival, and a Christian identity because of their faint hope of acquiring a social status ... In fact, they are people 'caught' in a triangle of sorts, a socially oppressive society, a communally discriminating state and a church which, though least concerned about their plight, is often moralistic in the demands it makes on them."

It is no wonder that Dalit Christians are demanding that they be given the same facilities and concessions which the Scheduled Castes are getting. Christian leaders are backing this demand with political agitation. However, there is another side to this problem, namely, the failure of the church to deliver on the equality promised to the converts. Not only that, the church's failure is made out to be the state's. However, thoughtful and sensitive Christians are distressed over the continuing caste inequalities in the church. I may add here that during the 1980s, I was invited to participate in a seminar of South Indian bishops on the persistence of caste in Christianity.

Frail Man

Before I conclude, there is one last point. Professor Oommen ends his article with the statement that the conflict over conversion is really a conflict between "dynamic, converting religions" and "static, non-converting religions". Leaving aside the issue of how conversions are carried out — the Supreme Court, for example, has emphasised that 'allurements' and 'inducements' are illegal — this use of the words 'dynamic' and static is peculiar. One of the makers of the 20th century was a physically frail member of a "static religion" who fought for the rights of the oppressed and exploited coloured peoples of South Africa, and then devoted the rest of his life to fighting for the freedom of his country from British rule. Fifteen years after his death, Afro-Americans in the US were inspired by his example to fight successfully for their rights by launching a civil disobedience movement. Prof Oommen may have heard of him.

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be based on some universal model.

One of the questions that came up at the symposium was: "What is science?" Terms such as "parallel knowledge systems" and "indigenous knowledge systems" were frequently used by social scientists. Indeed, an entire session was devoted to the topic "Other Knowledge Systems: Beyond Science". However, from a scientist's point of view, there is no pre-ordained definition of science. Science is a knowledge system built on universal principles. Nothing in this approach prevents other forms of knowledge – indigenous, traditional, civilisational so on. – from being subsumed in what we call science. This would involve a process of validation – observation, verification, repeatability and a codification based on a minimum set of universal principles – that forms the basis of the methodology of science.

What are, however, not universal are the modes of science-society linkages that involve complex interactions among science, technology, economics, culture and politics. In this sense, therefore, science, including the process of science and technologies, has both an exogenous and endogenous character. The post-colonial legacy of a West-driven S&T system has had an important consequence for countries such as India. It has suppressed not just the endogenous aspects of application of science, but also the endogenous aspects of the process of science – indigenous and traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda or traditional farming or water harvesting methods. The latter has been largely, if not entirely, displaced by modern, or "Western", science as many choose to call it.

There is, however, an increasing realisation today that there is an urgent need to give these "other knowledge systems" or "indigenous knowledge systems" their due place and value in society. More so at a time when the process of globalisation is threatening to appropriate elements of this collective knowledge of societies into proprietary knowledge for the profit of a few. However, a validation of the civilisational and traditional systems of knowledge using the methodology of science is essential for their integration with modern science and a "knowledge exchange" internationally. The symposium called for such an approach to form an important component of the new science-society contract.

While some people would hold the view that such a validation process itself is "Western science-centric" and, therefore, not an entirely correct procedure, there is inherent in this argument a Catch-22 situation which does not contribute to advancing the cause of other forms of knowledge. For example, without such a validation, "knowledge systems" such as astrology, Reiki and Vastu Shastra, which are patently unscientific, would begin to demand space in a science-society discourse.

What is, however, more important is to ensure protection of IPRs for validated traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda. There was a general consensus at the symposium with regard to placing on record in Budapest the fact that the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the WTO makes no distinction between these knowledge systems, which have been evolved by societies over centuries, and the ones involving inventions of modern science. Participants of the symposium felt that the new social contract must demand an amendment of the TRIPS Articles to give due protection to such knowledge bases.

EVEN though the details and specifics of responses to changing science-society linkages in the West may not be of immediate relevance to developing societies, their broad contours do offer lessons. Prof. Michael Fischer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) outlined the evolving new contract in the U.S. and its experiences. He said that the question of involving social sciences and humanities in the field of natural sciences has assumed new relevance in view of the developments and transformations in science itself. There was, he observed, an overall shift in the relative positions of different sciences today.

Prof. Fischer said that while the role of universities remained central, their orientations needed to change. The laying of a certain social basis in the pursuit of science, he said, was happening by means of widening the curriculum base in institutions such as the MIT to give rise to what he termed "the post-modern engineer of the contemporary era". At another level, he pointed to the practice of science shifting from academic institutions to commercial enterprises, from government centres to transnational corporations, from the hitherto separated-from-the-market research to market and patent protected research, from individual credit to dispersed and commercialised knowledge, and from government regulation to social movements (environmental sciences entering the public sphere).

This tendency towards the instrumentalisation of science towards the market was emphasised by Dr. Kazancigil, who said that the new contract has to recognise this as an undesirable development because it has led to, on the one hand, "global competitiveness" and the consequent shrinking of state intervention and reduced public funding, and on the other, restricted access to information, data and results arising from commercial interests. This has also imposed a certain "short-termism". Good science, however, requires a long-term or medium-term vision that comes with open science. Dr. Kazancigil said: "Science as public good is increasingly at threat."

One of the aims of the Bangalore symposium was to generate inputs to the Budapest Conference with a developing countries' perspective. Towards that, the symposium came up with a set of recommendations for consideration in Budapest. Called the Bangalore Communique, it sets out the strategy to meet the expectations of a developing society from science in the 21st Century. It recommends a plan of action that will reinforce, as well as reorient, the science-society relationship for equitable development and for protecting the environment.

Besides, the symposium suggested amendments to the draft declaration on *Science and the Use of Scientific* Knowledge to be adopted in Budapest. The UNESCO headquarters in Paris had sent a draft of the declaration for consideration in Bangalore. There was widespread disagreement at the symposium over the formulation of the UNESCO draft. It was felt that the draft failed to reflect adequately the developing countries' perspective and that, in a sense, it reinforced some of the elements of the existing science-society relationship. The document was discussed and amended to include in it the concerns of developing countries which account for nearly two-thirds of the world population.

These two documents together encapsulate what needs to be articulated in a world forum like the WCS in order that the concerns of developing countries will be heard and be given due place in the future practice of science and modes of development. However, only the Budapest meeting will show whether all this would lead to tangible moves that could benefit the developing world, and whether the scientific community of the South has any voice in world forums at all. ■