

## Maharastra Andh Shradda Nirmulan Samiti Conference

### Necessity of Inter-caste and Inter-religious Marriages

*To strengthen the Secular fabric of the Nation*

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I am immensely happy that the Maharastra Andh Shraddah Nirmulan Samiti is organizing the conference on “the Necessity of Intercaste and Inter-religion Marriages” This is an important aspect of national life, which will strengthen the foundations of national integration.

The Intercaste and inter-religious marriages have a great role in further strengthening the secular fabric of the nation. Hence, I heartily congratulate the organizers and in particular, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, President of the Maharastra Asndh Shradhha Nirmulan Samiti, for the untiring efforts in this direction. Dr . Narendra Dabholkar and the ANS are well known not only in Maharastra, but also in the country for the persistent work for the eradication of superstitions and blind beliefs. I am immense happy that ANS work now encompasses another important aspect of national and social life, i.e. promotion of Inter-caste and inter religious-marriages. It has great significance for the future of our country. On behalf of Atheist Centre, I congratulate, all the couple that are assembled here and also the supporters to the noble cause. It is the sea of sympathy that would bring a sea change in the outlook of the people. It is the sympathy and empathy that encourage the young to embark on such social reform measures with full confidence and determination.

Marriage is intensely personal, but with profound social significance. The couple is the smallest social group which not only has the potential to perpetuate progeny, but also, in the process they add a new dimension to social relations in a traditional society.

In this centuries-old tradition-bound society, which has petrified social relations, requires a new direction and dynamism. In each generation it is the youth who are harbingers of change. They are a ray of hope to give a new impetus to social change by their vision and action.

#### **When the Caste Barriers Fall**

Untouchability and caste system are the bane of India's progress. For thousands of years the Indian society, in particular the Hindu Society has been vertically and horizontally divided and subdivided in the name of caste, sub-caste and untouchability. The centuries old customs and traditions even vitiated the Christians and Muslims to some extent and they too follow the caste system in practice. Herold Issac's *India's Ex-untouchables* reveals how deep-rooted the caste system is.

### **Efforts of Social Reformers**

History bears testimony to the fact that efforts were made by social reformers and enlightened individuals to oppose the caste system and the practice of untouchability. They considered it as a heinous crime against humanity. But the tentacles were too deep to be removed so easily, Kabir, debunked the evil system. Revolutions in Hindu religion tried to lessen the rigours of the caste system, but they were co-opted into the system in the long run. In South India, Basaveswara fought against caste and social evils. He advocated intercaste marriages eight hundred years ago. It was revolutionary step in Karnataka. In Palnad area of Andhra, Brahma Naidu organized *Chapa Kudu*, (inter-dining) for breaking the caste barriers. Vemana and some other poets ridiculed the system. But the stranglehold of tradition and religion did not give scope for change.

### **Early Lead of Maharashtra and Bengal in Social Reforms**

Maharashtra is the citadel of social reforms in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was Maharashtra and Bengal which had shown the way to the rest of the United India to follow. The social revolutionaries, like Mahatma Phule and Raja Rammohun Roy, Eswara Chandra Vidya Sagar, Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Kesab Chandra Sen, Bharat Ratna Maharshi Karve, Kandukuri Veeresalingam in Andhra who was known as “Eswara chandra Vidya Sagar of South India” and many other social reformers brought a new Renaissance in India with their vision and perseverance. They heralded a new society with dynamism, progressive outlook and fought against obscurantism and social superstitions. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, these social reformers fought against suttee, infanticide, child marriages and advocated widow remarriages, girls education and liberation of women from age old customs so that they become equal partners in the onward march of the society. They had a vision and mission in life, and bore the brunt of opposition with determination and zeal. Thanks to the pioneering role and their forward-looking outlook, the youth of that age were inspired and responded positively. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Nationalist movement further widened the vision and mission and made it a part of Gandhian Constructive programme to rebuild the nation.

### **Mahatma Gandhi’s Contribution**

It was the 20th century that witnessed tremendous change in breaking the caste-barriers and the movement for eradication of untouchability gained momentum. Mahatma Gandhi took up cudgels against the practice of untouchability and made it a part of his programme for the attainment of political independence. He named his Journal *Harijan* and started Harijan Sevak Sangh. He appealed to all, to strive for the eradication of untouchability. Gandhi moved step by step towards the abolition of caste at the fag end of his life. He harped on education, rural reconstruction, and fought against dowry, and myriad other social evils. Being a leader of the masses and a strategist, Mahatma Gandhi proceeded step by step towards social reform. At the fag end of his life he championed intercaste marriages and he regarded that it was essential to do away with the untouchability. Eradication of untouchability and Communal harmony leading to Hindu-Muslim Unity was his cardinal principle in his Constructive programme

### **Dr Ambedkar’s Call**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar strove incessantly for the eradication of untouchability and the caste systems. He clearly recognized that untouchability was part of the caste system and the latter was intertwined with Hindu religion. He made it clear through his writings and speeches that untouchability is social and not racial. He advocated modernization and change of vocations to restore human dignity. Dr. Ambedkar created courage and confidence among the poorest of the poor—the dalits. He was out and out for the annihilation of caste and untouchability. He clearly visualized that to destroy untouchability caste must go and that for annihilation of caste, religion is the hindrance. He was well aware of the interconnectivity between untouchability, caste and religion. In the evening of his life, Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism for the same reason.

### **Secular Constitution**

The secular nature of our Constitution and the liberal atmosphere in society should lead us towards intercaste and inter-religion marriages. Education, employment opportunities, mobility and exposure to other cultures through, TV, Radio and the newspapers and the migration of the people from one country to the other, or within the

country in creating a new situation. It is leading to modernization. People are ready to accept science, but still they are not ready to accept scientific outlook which is the very basis of science. When we think rationally and develop scientific temper we soon realize that caste and religion are bane of progress.

Religion and caste and other parochial considerations are deeply entrenched in the Indian society for centuries and the evils cannot be rooted out in a few years time. It requires persistent and consistent effort with vision, determination and broad-mindedness. Many a time we have to follow a lone furrow with grim determination, as many people would like to follow the beaten track. Many are progressive in talk and regressive in action. Ready to comment and lament on the current state of affairs, but not ready to take the path of reconstruction of society on secular lines.

### **The rise of religious fundamentalism:**

We need a new outlook and approach to tackle the present day problems. Caste system is one of the root causes of injustice and oppression. In the modern world the tentacles of caste spread into all institutions—social, political and educational, and economic. **The word 'caste' originated from the Portuguese 'casta', which denotes division.** Now caste is not only a division of social structure; but caste is divisive and oppressive. The influence of caste is not only confined to Hindu religion, but the other religions like the Christianity and Islam are contaminated and tainted by the evil practice.

The caste bonds are loosened in the modern India. But casteism is increasing. Casteism is eating the vitals of the nation. Caste consciousness is growing. With good intentions, the caste based reservations for the backward castes were introduced in the Indian Constitution. But half a century of experience had shown that caste based reservations led to the development of vested interests to promote casteism and also thwarting the march towards reducing the caste consciousness.

Caste based reservations also increased the sub-caste consciousness. Instead of looking and marching forward, there is a clamour to be included in the category of the backward. Compared to the days of Independence, now the caste consciousness is growing day by day. Social justice demands and necessitates help to the weaker sections. No doubt, by all means the weaker sections must be helped. But by making caste as the criterion for financial and educational help; the society is now facing new problems of self-centred approach. The time has come to change the criterion of help from 'caste' to 'economic' backwardness. No doubt, all the poor who are getting benefit in the reservations will be eligible for economic criteria also. But the criteria of economic backwardness will have a healthy effect in social relations and those who have improved their economic status will stand on their own feet with dignity and self-respect.

Otherwise, in the field of politics, the caste based approach has devastating effect on the efforts for social and economic development. Politics of manipulation is increasing. It is easy for rulers to throw some crumbs and show benefits and control the rest as their vote banks. The intercaste and intracaste and religious rivalries distract the attention from the real issues of development. Hence, castelessness and going beyond religion is the only answer. Intercaste marriages, casteless marriages and religionless marriages pave the way for national integration. Separation of Politics from Religion is no longer a mere cherished idea, but of a great practical necessity. The fusion of politics and religion is detrimental to human progress.

### **Castelessness**

Hence, castelessness is the only answer. Intercaste marriages, casteless marriages and religionless marriages pave the way for national integration. In fact, the children of intercaste married couple are casteless. They are free from caste and religion. The children should not be categorized either in the father's caste or mother's caste or religion. Separation of politics from religion is no longer a mere cherished idea, but a great practical necessity. The fusion of politics and religion is detrimental to human progress.

### **Gora's Contribution**

Gora (November 15, 1902-July 26, 1975) was an atheist and social revolutionary hailing from Andhra Pradesh who fought against caste and untouchability. Gora and his wife Saraswathi Gora (Sept. 28, 1912 – Aug. 19,

2006) were founders of Atheist Centre, a social change institution in 1940 at Mudunur village in Andhra Pradesh and then it was shifted to Vijayawada in 1947 to further expand its activities.

Gora's social reform measures started 1930s with his advocacy for the Devadasi and widow remarriages. He opposed child marriages. For his programmes he faced the wrath of the orthodoxy. He was dismissed from the Kakinada and Machilipatnam Colleges twice. Without succumbing to the pressures, he resigned his lecturership and devoted his entire life for the cause of atheism and social revolution.

Even before starting the Atheist Centre, right from 1930s Gora was very much involved in social reform activities, enthusing the youth to follow the unconventional path. In the then tradition bound society he took up the bold step of organizing inter-dining programmes, breaking the barriers of caste and religion. The caste system is so deep-rooted in the soil and the social atmosphere was so vitiated, people were not eating together, because of their observance of their caste norms. They was not only observing untouchability but also inter-untouchability and they were not even eating together. Gora organised interdining with all of them together and faced severe opposition on many occasions.

Since the inception of the Atheist Centre in 1940 Gora made it a point to insist on arranging his stay in untouchable localities, wherever he went to address meetings or to attend functions. It was a revolutionary step. Sometimes the presence of Gora in the village had electrifying effect and heated discussions took place for or against Gora's stay in the untouchable locality of the village. Gora welcomed the participation of local organizers of the meeting to join him in the interdining programme.

As the caste taboos were strong, some of the organizers of the programmes were subjected to social boycott. In some families men were not allowed to enter into their houses again as they had participated in inter-dining programme.

Gora always made it a principle to organize the inter-dining and other programmes for social equality in the glaring sun of openness. He was firm on his principles and was uncompromising in his opposition to the practice of untouchability and caste system. But he was polite all the time. He set the example before others and never blamed them for not following him or emulating his example. He followed a socio-psychological approach of persuasion and understanding. Hundreds of inter-caste, the casteless and inter-religious marriages have been celebrated in Andhra Pradesh under the influence of Atheist Centre.

Caste and untouchability are divisive. Hence, different sections of so-called untouchables also do not marry. They do not dine together. They do not even take drinking water from the same well.

Hence the Atheist Centre made special efforts to educate them about the necessity of castelessness. It encouraged mixed housing without reference to caste and religion. It is very difficult to promote marriage between two sects among the so-called untouchables. However Atheist Centre could perform even such marriages.

### **Atheist Centre Champions castelessness and secularism:**

Atheist Centre is in the forefront of promoting intercaste, Inter-religion and casteless marriages. More than fifteen hundred such marriages took place at the Centre and other parts of the State. Members of Atheist Centre placed an example before others by marrying casteless and breaking the barriers of untouchability. It is the example that inspires others in the efforts for social equality. It organises gatherings of the casteless couple and honours them. It encourages marriages under the Special Marriage Act, which is a secular method without reference to caste and religion. Inter-religion marriages between Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Christian, Hindu-Sikh were held at the Centre. It performs marriages openly and no secrecy is involved. Many a time the Centre faces severe opposition for the marriage from both the parents and relations. But it is the openness of methods that enabled change in the attitudes of others and the process of reconciliation in the families becomes easier in the long run. It adds the necessary moral fiber to the reform.

Eradication of untouchability is intricately interconnected with the issue of human rights, human dignity, economic betterment and social justice. Caste system is one of the root causes of injustice and oppression. In the modern

world the tentacles of caste spread into all institutions—social and political and even education and economic. Caste system is a symbol of injustice.

### **Gandhi and Gora**

Mahatma Gandhi finally arrived at the conclusion that the abolition of untouchability is possible only when intermarriages take place between the so-called untouchables and the upper castes. He even publicly proclaimed that in his Sevagram Ashram he would celebrate only those marriages where one of the spouses came from the so-called untouchable community.

It was the work for the abolition of untouchability and caste system that was instrumental in bringing Gandhi and Gora closer. Gora's *An Atheist with Gandhi*, (published by the official publishers of Gandhian literature, Navajivan, Ahmedabad) gives an account of the conversation between Gandhi and Gora on atheism and the efforts for eradication of untouchability; and caste system. Gora's eldest daughter Manorama was scheduled to marry Arjuna Rao at Gandhi's Ashram, Sevagram to break the barriers of caste and untouchability. But Gandhi was assassinated. When the marriage took place at Sevagram Ashram In March 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister, greeted and congratulated the couple for their courage of conviction.

A decade later Lavanam's marriage with Hemalata was also celebrated at Sevagram Ashram upholding the same principle of social equality Thus Gora bridged the gulf between precept and practice in his efforts for the eradication of untouchability and caste system. All the children and grand children of Gora married casteless. Thus Gora placed the ideal of castelessness before others through example.

Gora's efforts for the eradication of untouchability attracted wide attention. Prof. S. Chandra Sekhar in his foreword to *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, stated that "Gora is one of the undeservedly unrecognized saints of India." (Ed: J. Michael Mahar, The University of Arizona Press, Tuscon, Arizona, USA.)

During Gora's Birth Centenary Government of India released a commemorative postage stamp in 2002 and recognized his contribution to the nation. Gora's unflinching support for social reform through his personal example and incessant and uncompromising efforts for the eradication of untouchability and caste system was helpful in further strengthening the ramparts we guard.

### **Need for strong voluntary effort:**

Since the advent of independence of India in 1947 the law and the Constitution is in favour of the abolition of untouchability. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution declares that untouchability has been abolished. And its practice in any form is prohibited. But law alone cannot bring social change. It should be backed by the public opinion. The Untouchability Offences Act was passed in 1956 and later in 1976 it was renamed as Civil Rights Act. But the caste system and untouchability are deep-rooted, and it is possible to eradicate them only if we build best defenses against caste and untouchability in the minds of the people. In this regard the voluntary effort plays a major role. The media also contributes its mite in creating public opinion in favour of social change. The chronic problem requires multidimensional and multifaceted approach coupled with the example to accelerate the pace of social equality.

After Independence lot of change is visible. Education, mobility, interaction with others, forced change helped in loosening the caste bonds. The revolution in communications and the role of radio and T. V. also helped to broaden the mental horizons of the people. Urbanization and industrialization resulted more in forced change, which necessitated living together in proximity of one another. But this forced change did not result in a mental revolution, which would transform it into social change. Hence in India we find more a verbal commitment to the eradication of untouchability and caste system, rather than a determined effort on the part of majority of the people. Hence, it becomes all the more necessary to strive hard to fight the evils of caste system and to do away with the stranglehold of untouchability.

Atheist Centre makes it clear that eradicate untouchability is intricately interconnected with caste. Hence, caste must go. Similarly, Caste and religion are inseparable. The tentacles of caste spread into all religions in India and

vitiating the whole atmosphere. Hence it is incumbent that one must grow beyond caste and religion and think in terms of one humanity.

It is heartening to note that State and the Union Governments to give encouragement and incentives to the inter-caste married people in the form of monetary help or preference in government jobs. Some police officers that are encouraging and giving protection to the couples who want to marry inter-caste. Some of the police stations became venues for 'inter-caste marriages.

The politicisation of the caste system and utilization of the differences of caste and untouchability for narrow partisan ends and selection of candidates in election by various political parties on the caste criteria have given a new lease of life to the dying caste system. The political parties should develop national outlook and should not fan communalism and casteism for their sectarian and immediate gains.

In spite of the adverse trends and the difficulties faced by the protagonists of change, they are not disheartened. On the whole the efforts for the eradication of untouchability and caste system are having positive gains. The Newspapers, Radio, T. V. and the textbooks speak for the necessity of social equality and for the eradication of untouchability. Even the Road Transport buses exhibit the signs that "untouchability is a crime against humanity". This trend shows the wider acceptance of the desirability of change.

#### **"One person, one value"**

In democracy, political representation should not be confined to "one person one vote." What we aim at is "one person one value." Taking inspiration from the work of the earlier social reformers and the institutions of social change, relentless efforts are needed to fight the scourge of untouchability. Caste barriers must fall.

Secular values and institutions must prevail. There should a radical change in the outlook of the people. Liberal outlook is the first step. But it is the practice of promotion of castelessness and programmes for eradication of untouchability that would bring desired change in society. The growth of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism need to be opposed. It is possible only when new secular values are inculcated among common people.

In this context the Conference on Inter-caste and Inter-religion married couple which is organized by ANS is a step further in creating public opinion in the right direction. We need new programmes, new dynamism and innovative approaches to strengthen the secular ramparts we guard. It is our task in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to give new impetus to social revolution to march towards a post-religious society.