

## FROM THE EDITOR

### **PAMPERING THE NATION'S WEAKNESS**

Laws which govern our life and even our lifestyle are not very simple. We may, in principle, decide to change a certain aspect of our lifestyle. But if, in some obscure part of our being we continue to derive some pleasure out of the old habit, our pious resolutions to give it up shall fail.

The pleasure in question may be perverse and it requires some courage and honesty to admit that it is perverse. But we must muster such courage and honesty when it concerns as vital a question as the present and future of the nation.

Let us not delve into the origin and growth of the caste system in ancient India. It had its own role to play and it had played it. The fact is, like several other institutions, the caste system became anachronistic. The makers of Indian constitution decided to do their best to put an end to it. Over the centuries the people of certain castes had been synonymous with economic and educational backwardness. Provisions for reservations in educational, vocational and political spheres were made in order to bring the backward forward, not to make backwardness a privilege.

But we seem to have clean forgotten the very ideal behind the provision. Leaders of different political parties, instead of working for leading the people beyond their caste-consciousness, are vying with one another to pamper the consciousness. It may be a necessity to extend the provision of reservations, but the manner in which the leaders are assuring the 'backward' people that if their party is voted to power the reservations will continue, amounts to glorifying a provision which originated from a deplorable necessity. We should not feel proud in granting a longer lease of life to reservations, we should feel sad that we have to do so. The attitude counts for much.

Caste-consciousness may be a deep-rooted malady. If so, our efforts to eradicate the malady must go deeper than extending the reservation which is the easiest thing to do and which is counterproductive. It serves the immediate interest of the political parties, but is harmful to all in the long run.

The Indian feudal system was as old as, if not older than, the caste system. Nowhere in the world was the Raja as sanctified an institution as in India. Yet the Indians could afford to do away with their numerous Rajas, along with all the hoary traditions that used to go with them. The Indians can also do away with the caste-consciousness once the vested-interest takes its hands off it. It will be a wise Step for all the major political parties to sit down together and decide on certain basic ideals for the sake of the country's future. They can resolve not to exploit such traditions which, in the course of time, had become India's weaknesses.

## ON THE TIDES OF TIME

### **On "DOUBLE DOUBLE TOIL AND TROUBLE"**

A traveller from the West who claims to have passed through a number of Indian villages says that belief in the witch is abundant among the masses and he is quite critical about it. It is difficult to say which the villages he visited are and how he came to the conclusion. News of a woman suspected of witchcraft being punished by the people of her community comes from certain tribal areas from time to time. Belief in witchcraft may still be there among many, but, a little awkward though it may sound, in India such beliefs had never been as wide as it was in the West. (The Indians had higher occult preoccupations than indulging in witchcraft.)

No other injunction of the Old Testament was perhaps more zealously observed in the West in the Middle Ages than "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!"

"Every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr'd brow, a hairy lip, a gobbler tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue, having a rugged coat on her back, a skull-cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, and a dog or cat by her side, is not only suspected but pronounced for a witch," said John Gaule in *Select Cases of Conscience* (1646). This was the state of affairs in England.

It was worse in Scotland. "Did a foul-mouthed old dame give a neighbour a handful of words more forcible than courteous, and did terror, or revenge, induce or simulate, a nervous seizure in consequence, the old dame was at once carried off to the lock-up, and but few chances of escape lay between her and the stake beyond." (*Witch Stories* by E. Lynn Lynton, 1861)

History also tells us of Benedict Carpzow of Leipzig, Germany, who during his tenure as chief judge from 1620 to 1666, passed thirty thousand death sentences out of which twenty thousand were against women accused of sorcery. He supervised every hanging personally and made sure that a dead dog and a rat were buried with the convict. He was a regular church-goer and proudly declared that he had read the Bible fifty times!

Witchcraft, however, was seen in a different light in India. It was neither glorified nor condemned outright. Like poison that could be put to beneficent as well as harmful use, witchcraft could be employed for pragmatic as well as destructive purposes. Indian occultism took cognisance of various planes of existence. There were weird beings, ranging from ordinary ghosts to spirits with marked characteristics such as Pishachas, Vetalas etcl, and beings of a higher supernatural order such as the Gandharvas and the Yakshas.

While the services of the beings of the first category could be obtained through appeasing them or even coercing them (like Prospero handling Ariel), the beings of the second category had to be propitiated through certain offerings and observance of some discipline.

The famous story of King Vikram and the Vetala (a powerful spirit that possessed a corpse) points to the belief that the spirits were not just neutral forces to be mechanically mastered, but they had their own preferences. The occultist, who employed the king to secure the Vetala, intended to kill him as the concluding part of his ritual. But the Vetala, pleasantly surprised at the king proposing right solutions to all the riddles he puts forth to him, discloses to him the occultist's motive. The ritual ended in the king killing the occultist and realising the Siddhi that was due to the later.