“India of My Dreams”

M.K. Gandhi

(Exerpt pg 222-223)

I have frequently said that I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress. Nor, do I believe in inequalities between human being. We are all absolutely equal. But equality is of souls and not bodies. Hence, it is a mental state. We need to think of, and to assert, equality because we see great inequalities in the physical world. We have to realize equality in the midst of this apparent external inequality. Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, in so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil. I do, however, believe in Varna which is based on hereditary occupations. Varnas are four to mark four universal occupations, imparting knowledge, defending the defenceless, carrying on agriculture and commerce, and performing service through physical labour. These occupations are common to all mankind, but Hinduism, having recognized them as the law of our being, has made use of it in regulating social relations and conduct. Gravitation affects us all, whether one knows its existence or not. But scientists who knew the law have made it yield results that have startled the world. Even so, has Hinduism startled the world by its discovery and application of the law of Varna. When Hindus were seized with inertia, abuse of Varna resulted in innumerable castes, with unnecessary and harmful restrictions as to intermarriage and inter-dining. The law of Varna has nothing to do with these restrictions. People of different Varnas may inter-marry and inter dine. These restrictions may be necessary in the interest of chastity and hygiene. But a Brahmana who marries a Shudra girl, or vice versa, commits no offence against the law of Varna.

It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the out caste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or of a crop because of the weeds. The outcasteness, in the sense we understand it, has therefore to be destroyed altogether. It is an excess to be removed, if the whole system is not to perish. Untouchability the product, therefore, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is thus an attack upon this ‘high-and-low’-ness. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true Varnadharma, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each as necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other.

From the economic point of view, its value was once very great. It ensured hereditary skill; it limited competition. It was the best remedy against pauperism. And it had all the advantages of trade guilds. Although it did not foster adventure or invention there, it is not known to have come in the way either. Historically speaking, caste may be regarded as man’s experiment or social adjustment in the laboratory of Indian society. If we can prove it to be a success, it can be offered to the world as a leaven and as the best remedy against heartless competition and social disintegration born of avarice and greed.