Chapter 28
CASTE AND CONVERSION[1]

The instinct of self-preservation is responsible for the present upheaval in the Hindu Community. There was a time when the elite of the society had no fear about its preservation. Their argument was that the Hindu community was one of the oldest communities that has withstood the onslaught of many adverse forces and therefore there must be some native strength and stamina in its culture and civilization as to make it survive. They were therefore firm in their belief that their community was destined ever to survive. Recent events seem to have shaken this belief. In the Hindu-Muslim riots that have taken place all over the country in recent times it has been found that a small band of Muslims can beat the Hindus and beat them badly. The elite of the Hindus are therefore reflecting afresh upon the question whether such a kind of survival in the struggle for existence is of any value. The proud Hindu who always harped upon the fact of survival as a proof of his fitness to survive never stopped to think that survival was of many types and not all are of equal value. One can survive by marching against the enemy and conquering him. Or one can survive by beating a retreat and hiding oneself in a position of safety. In either case there would be survival. But certainly the value of the two survivals is measures apart. What is important is not the fact of survival but the plane of survival ? Survive the Hindus may, but whether as free men or slaves is the issue. But the matter seems so hopeless that granting that they manage to survive as slaves it does not seem to be altogether certain that they can survive as *Hindus*. For they are not only beaten by the Muslims in the *physical struggle* but they seem also to be beaten in the *cultural struggle*. There is in recent days a regular campaign conducted vigorously by the Muslims for the spread of Islamic culture, and by their conversion movement, it is alleged, they have made vast additions to their numerical strength by winning over members of the Hindu faith. Fortunately for the Muslims there is a large mass of non-descript population numbering about seven crores which is classed as Hindus but which has no particular affinity to the

[1] Originally published in the 'Telugu Samachar Special Number', Nov. 1926.

Hindu faith and whose position is made so intolerable by that faith that they can be easily induced to embrace Islam. Some of these are going over to Islam and yet more may go.

This is sufficient to cause alarm among the elite of the Hindus. If with a superiority of numbers the Hindus are unable to face the Muslims what would be their fate if their following was depleted by conversions to Islam ? The Hindus feel that they must save their people from being lost to them and their culture. Herein lies the origin of the *Shudhi Movement* or the movement to reclaim people to the Hindu faith.

Some people of the orthodox type are opposed to this movement on the ground that Hindu religion was never a proselytising religion and that Hindu must be so by birth. There is something to be said in favour of this view. From the commencement of time to which memory or tradition can reach back, proselytism has never been the practising creed of the Hindu faith. Prof. Max Muller, the great German Savant and Oriental Scholar in an address delivered by him in the name of the Westminster Abbey on the 3rd of December 1873 Day of Intercession for Missions, emphatically declared that the Hindu Religion was a non-missionary religion. The orthodoxy which refuses to believe in expediency may therefore feel well grounded in its opposition to Shudhi, as a practice directly opposed to the most fundamental tenets of the Hindu faith. But there are other authorities of equally good repute to support the promoters of the Shudhi movement, for it is their opinion that the Hindu Religion has been and can be a missionary religion. Prof. Jolly in an article '*DIE AUSBREITUNG DER INDISCHEN FULTUR',* gives a graphic description of the means and methods adopted by the ancient Hindu Rulers and Priests to spread the Hindu Religion among the aborigines of the country. The late Sir Alfred Lyall who wrote in reply to Prof. Max Muller also sought to prove that the Hindu religion was a missionary religion. The probability of the case seems to be definitely in favour of Jolly and Lyall. For unless we suppose that the Hindu Religion did in some degree do the work of proselytization, it is not possible to account for its spread over a vast continent and inhabited by diverse races which were in possession of a distinct culture of their own. Besides, the prevalence of certain *YAJNAS* and *YAGAS* cannot be explained except on the hypothesis that there were ceremonies for the Shudhi of the Vratya. We may therefore safely conclude that in ancient times the Hindu religion was a missionary religion. But that owing to some reason it ceased to be so long back in its historical course.

The question that I wish to consider is why did the Hindu religion cease to be a missionary religion. There may be various explanations for this, and I propose to offer my own explanation for what it is worth. Aristotle has said that man is a social being. Whatever be the cogency of the, reasons of Aristotle in support of his statement this much is true that it is impossible for any one to begin life as an individualist in the sense of radically separating himself from his social fellows. The social bond is established and rooted in the very growth of self-consciousness. Each individual's apprehension of his own personal self and its interest involves the recognition of others and their interests; and his pursuit of one type of purposes, generous or selfish, is in so far the pursuit of the other also. The social relation is in all cases intrinsic to the life, interests, and purposes of the individual; he feels and apprehends, the vitality of social relations in all the situations of his life. In short, life without society is no more possible for him than it is for a fish out of water.

Given this fact it follows that before a society can make converts, it must see to it that its constitution provides for aliens being made its members and allowed to participate in its social life. It must be used to make no difference between individuals born in it and individuals brought into it. It must be open to receive him in the one case as in the other and allow him to enter into its life and thus make it possible for him to live and thrive as a member of that society. If there is no such provision on conversion of an alien the question would at once arise where to place the convert. If there is no place for the convert there can be no invitation for conversion nor can there be an acceptance of it.

Is there any place in the Hindu society for a convert to the Hindu faith ? Now the organisation of the Hindu society is characterized by the existence bf castes. Each caste is endogamous and lives by antogony. In other words it only allows individuals born in it to its membership and does not allow any one from outside being brought into it. The Hindu Society being a federation of castes and each caste being self-enclosed there is no place for the convert for no caste will admit him : The answer to the question why the Hindu Religion ceased to be a missionary religion is to be found in the fact that it developed the caste system. Caste is incompatible with conversion. So long as mass conversion was possible, the Hindu Society could convert for the converts were large enough to form a new caste which could provide the elements of a social life from among themselves. But when mass conversion's were no more and only individual converts could be had, the Hindu Religion had necessarily to cease to be missionary for its social organisation could make no room for the incoming convert.

I have not propounded this question as to why the Hindu Religion ceased to be missionary simply to find an opportunity for obtaining credit for originality of thought by offering a novel explanation. I have propounded the question and given an answer to it because I feel that both have a very important bearing upon the Shudhi movement. Much as I sympathise with the promoters of that movement, I must say that they have not analysed the difficulties in the way of the success of their movement. The motive behind the Shudhi movement is to increase the strength of the Hindu Society by increasing its numbers. Now a society is strong not because its numbers are great but because it is solid in its mass. Instances are not wanting where a solid organised band of fanatics have routed a large army of disorganised crusaders; Even in the Hindu-Muslim riots it has been proved that the Hindus are beaten not only where they are weak in numbers, but they are beaten by the Muslims even where the Hindus preponderate. The case of Moplahs is in point. This alone ought to show that the Hindus suffer not from want of numbers but from want of solidarity. To increase solidarity of the Hindu Society one must tackle the forces which have brought about its disintegration. My fear is that mere Shudhi, instead of integrating the Hindu Society, will cause greater disintegration and will annoy the Muslim Community without any gain to the Hindus. In a society composed of castes, Shudhi brings in a person who can find no home and who is therefore bound to lead an isolated and separate existence with no attachment or loyalty to any one in particular. Even if Shudhi were to bring into the Hindu fold a mass like the Malkana catch of Shradhanand, it will only add one more caste to the existing number. Now the greater the castes the greater the isolation and the greater the weakness of the Hindu society. If the Hindu society desires to survive it must think not of adding to its numbers but increasing its solidarity and that means the abolition of caste. The abolition of castes is the real Sanghatan of the Hindus and when Sanghatan is achieved by the abolishing of castes, Shudhi will be unnecessary and if practised, will be gainful of real strength. With the castes in existence, it is impossible and if practised would be harmful to the real Sanghatan and solidarity of the Hindus. But somehow the most revolutionary and ardent reformer of the Hindu society shies at the idea of abolition of the caste and advocates such puerile measures as the reconversion of the converted Hindu, the changing of the diet and the starting of Akhadas. Some day it will dawn upon the Hindus that they cannot save their society and also preserve their caste. It is to be hoped that that day is not far off.

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