THE WORLD OF VJ/NT: IDENTITY AND CULTURE

W. B. Singam

Wamanrao Singam is a DNT activist, himself from the Beldar Community and of a rather philosophical orientation. He is based in Chandrapur, Maharashtra. The following article was presented as an essay in an All India Seminar held at New Delhi in April 2005.

Individual and Society

Society cannot exist without active cooperation from every individual and an individual cannot exist without vital support from the society in which he lives.

Racial, ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination are ultimately rooted in the evolutionary need of identification. During the past ten thousand years of agricultural dominance on the planet the individuals identified themselves most strongly with family, clan, village, religion or other groupings which, for all practical purposes, captured the individual right at birth. One is born into a family or a racial group. So the most basic of individual and group allegiances are determined at birth. The individual has little or no choice in the matter, and the group identity usually remains permanent through one’s life in the form of caste in India.

The Industrial Revolution

During the industrial revolution, the need for belonging remained but the nature of individual and group affiliations changed. Class consciousness provided another group of identification of belonging. The division of labor produced entirely new groupings. The family ties were weakened. The responsibility towards the elderly was transferred from their children to the State. In India, however, there was division not only of labor but also of laborer belonging to particular caste. The caste system has resulted in a number of ethnic groups. The tribal people have their separate identity. The tribal girl has independent identity and the tribal culture is more liberal about individual’s identity whereas in Hindu culture the domination of men over women has resulted in mixed typical culture of various caste groups.

Vedanta and VJNT

The Vedas, we are told, propagate that the creation of every individual comprises of ‘Aaapa, Teja, Vayu, Prakash, and Jala’ and the Universe is also constituted of these five vital ingredients. ‘Aatmaa (the soul) is immortal having no end.’ ‘Life is an accident, but death is certain.’ ‘Death is of the physiological body of every individual and not of the aatmaa (soul).’
All gentlemen are necessarily men but all men cannot claim to be gentlemen; so is the case with ladies. All ladies are necessarily women but not all women can claim to be ladies. Therefore the identity of every individual differs from man to man and from woman to woman.

We are told that the Vedanta says ‘All aatmas are equal and can unite with the param aatma’. But in practice, the Adivasis, the untouchables, and the VJNTs were discriminated and not allowed to share the resources of the community. Even in these trying conditions, the VJNT people maintained their high moral character and culture inherited from their ‘shramanic’ yogi ancestors.

**Man as a Social Animal**

Man is a social animal. Unless he proves his social instinct, he cannot claim to be a real human being. The social obligations are pertaining to parents, the society, the religion and culture and ultimately towards the Nation and the Universe at large.

**Nuclear and Computer Era**

We are now passing through the third wave of the ‘Nuclear and Computer Era’, the first being that of Agriculture and the second that of Industrialization. The advanced state of Science and Technology has changed the lifestyle of every individual. His identity is interdependent. Culture has a very little role to play in upper caste society but the tribals and the nomadic tribes have retained their heritage. They follow their own culture and customs in spite of the current educational change of Science and Technology. High moral character is the principal identity of the Tribals and Nomads whereas in the so called upper caste society the best suited dress counts for ability and identity of the individual. The greatest famine in the world is the famine of understanding. No two people seem to understand each other. Today people talk of emotional integrity as a myth invented by elites to be able to argue in favor of divorce. There is no emotional integration. There are only misunderstandings and mistakes, which can be corrected if there is a will to do so.

**Divisions of the Hindu Society**

The society of the privileged castes has, for its vested interests, created the caste based system of Hindu culture. It has divided the Hindu society into Savarnas and Avarnas. Savarnas are Dwija castes, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The other class – the Avarnas – are castes forming the Shudras. Out of the Avarnas, a third class of the Adivasis and Criminal Tribes and Nomadic Tribes is formed, and the fourth class is the Untouchables.

**Classification of the Nomadic Tribes**

The nomadic tribes can be classified as detailed below:
1. **The art of recreation**: The monkeyman, Garudi, Dombari, Nandibail Darveshi, the bearman, Kolhati, Aaradhi, Bahurupi, Chitrakathi, etc. With their born and inherent qualities they used to move from one place to another for their livelihood and at the same time they used to entertain the masses of the settled communities of the village.

2. **Nomads**: Vasdev, Godhal, Bhute, Gosavi, Bairagi, Pangul, Bhope, etc. They used to entertain the settled society by preaching them stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and of other various gods and goddesses.

3. The nomads of the third category used to earn their livelihood through their artistic heritage. Vaidu, Pathavat, Beldar, Ghisadi, Kaikadi, Kudmude Joshi, Pardhi, etc.

**Present condition**

Even after the lapse of 57 precious years of Independence, the Adivasis, the Untouchables and the Vimukta Nomadic Tribes are leading a miserable life without any fault of theirs. The Constitution of India has given reservation to Scheduled Tribes, but there is no reservation for Nomadic Tribes and Vimukta Jatis.

**The Law and the VJNT**

The Criminal Procedure Code of the British Government though was instrumental in bringing all Indians under one Criminal Law, and extra privileges of the so-called upper castes were curtailed, other British laws labeled the several tribes as criminals by birth, notifying them as Criminal Tribes. All these tribes get inhuman treatment from the police as well as from privileged castes of the society. One tenth of the total population, that is, ten crores of people come under this category of Nomads and Vimukta Jatis. I can understand that the rulers are reluctant to provide amenities and resources to upgrade this downtrodden society but they can at least control their officers and the privileged ones to refrain from anger arising out of caste hatred. Their anger is more destructive than fire, more disastrous than an earthquake. In their anger thousands young, precious, promising lives of Nomadic Tribes are lost.

**The period of Crisis**

The world is today passing through a period of crisis. Unrest in countries around the world is deepening and nations are moving in a jungle of darkness. Passion for power, lust for fame, greed for gold are growing rapidly with their volcanic speed. Unless we all try to learn from each other and understand each other, we are bound to perish. Today we find a craze for bigness, for greatness. We are anxious to become builders of big institutions, founders of big organizations, writers of big volumes. Let us wish and try to save every individual from this disastrous state of affairs and further wish to get men of faith, wisdom and love, of simplicity and sympathy and service with us. Also let us get men having childlike, innocent heart. This type of new generation is required to build a new society throughout the nation, so that they can lead the country from darkness to light.
Slavery in India

For the weak, the ignorant and the deprived kind of man in the social system, it is absolutely necessary to understand himself, his own society, his own traditions, and his life in remote and recent past. He is filled with the desire to understand himself by exploring these avenues. This inquiry then takes the shape of history and culture. This leads to the discovery of a number of truths – truths about his exploitation and slavery. One of the truths emerging from these inquiries is Our Slavery. This slavery existed in many forms in the world, however, in India, this slavery had, and still has got very different and unique features of its own.

This slavery in India is not just for an individual but is thrust upon a whole group of people. And the slavery has made traditions take the form of signs of that particular caste group, as they developed through the customs, manners and usages of that particular caste group. The people in the group started believing that being born in slavery, this slavery was the beginning, the middle and the end of their life.

Both the forms are connected with the caste system in India. The masters of the high castes have always considered themselves as the owners of these VJNT people. They have always looked down upon these classes and treated them as slaves.

Therefore, the world of the have-nots is the world of the Adivasis, the nomadic nations and the untouchables, and all those Dalits who are living outside the village boundaries. Their life has no meaning, their world has no meaning; they are living without freedom within the boundaries, their life restricted within barbed wires. They are living in a world where there are no schools, no books, no notebooks and no education, no health facilities, no sanitation, and nothing that the modern society demands the human beings to have.

The World of VJNT, their Identity and Culture

For the last thousands of years, there have been tremendous changes in the mode of living of all human beings.

But, at the moment, on the verge of 21st century, in the form of the VJNT people we find human beings still helpless, uncultured, fearful, ignorant. Their life has not improved from the primitive, pastoral times. To this date, we see them wandering from place to place and moving with their cattle and carrying on hunting and food gathering.

They have stayed like that, and will lead life the same way for thousands of years. Their camps were seen then, and are seen even now. Their prayers to their gods and goddesses and the most diabolical type of their religious rituals, offerings and motives are entirely different from the normal average human beings. Their lifestyle reminds us of the primitive man living 10,000 years ago in some unknown country.
Caste System

Indian human beings have been leading life with the caste system since time immemorial. However, there was no system of castes before the arrival of Aryans in India or during the Indus civilization. Caste system started during the times of the Rig Veda and got strengthened during the times of Manu. A member of the caste is the primary element of the caste system. He takes protection from his caste and he follows the restrictions imposed upon him by the caste as a solemn duty. The social restrictions imposed by the caste are of moral type. These restrictions are based upon the traditional rituals, customs and manners.

Punishments for caste breakers

But inside societies some people would behave against these traditions of the caste and would try to break the rules. Such people are punished by the society as offenders. They are excommunicated and they were not allowed in the caste. Many times such elements, considered ‘antisocial’, are thus punished, and that individual has to suffer and undergo the punishment because he has to lead his life under his caste umbrella.

How to bring Change in Society

Four eminent things are required to bring about total change in humanity.

1. Turn over your life in a child-like trust for the cause of society.

2. Rejoice in everything that the will of all our ideals as well as idols and great men of our societies since olden days brings to you.

3. Spend some time every day in silence, in meditation, in silent study of spiritual truths to achieve Samadhi and nirvana. 4. Continue helping needy ones, and see the service to society as the Supreme Service.

This way we will all attain the goal of our journey to perfection. We are not only facing environmental pollution; drugs and alcohol are destroying our youth. Let us all strive for establishing a new society of love and peace.

Identity and Culture of VJNT people

While studying any movement it is essential that we study their basic thought and their origin and culture. There are two different worlds in the Indian social system. One is the world of the class of ‘have-nots’ and the other is the class of ‘haves’.

Within the class of the ‘have-nots’ the nomadic and the ex-criminal tribes have their own world. Their internal structures, their merits and shortcomings, their mere existence and the directionless form of their life and identity must be recognized to understand their life.
My Vision of the 21st Century

My vision about the 21st century is to see the world without want. Every human being, irrespective of his country, color, creed, gets the necessities of life and is able to hold his head high. It is a world in which peace prevails among nations, and harmony amongst the people of the Earth. Everyone must be granted the right to live without fear or favor, and in every country all irregularities are abolished amongst its citizens.

'जियो तो मर उठाके जियो,
कोई अफसोस नहीं कि एक रात कम जियो।
पर जब तक जियें
हर रात मशाल बनकर जियें।'
आमीन!