Castes: Old and New

I fear that foreign observers of Indian life would feel frustrated if the caste system should completely disappear in our country. They will have nothing left to talk about. The caste system has always offered a convenient handle for foreign observers. In my opinion, next to Russia, India is the most visited and the most-commented-upon country in the world. I am afraid that the abolition of caste will affect the tourist traffic, on which so much anxious thought and discussion is being bestowed at present. If a notice should be put up at Santa Cruz aerodrome or on the Gateway of India announcing, "There is no caste system in this country," I believe, many a tourist would turn back home with the feeling that he has been cheated of legitimate entertainment for which he has paid a heavy fee in the shape of air or steamer fare.

Once a visitor from a far-off country called on me. When I asked her what I could do for her, she replied, "I should love to take Indian coffee in Indian style." This was an understandable request in this part of the country. After coffee she said, "Now I want to see the caste system. May I see it in your house?" I blinked for a while and then told her that the caste system was not a curio in a glass-case to be displayed on request. "Then what is it?" she asked, cross-examining. I explained, throwing into my sentences a proper sprinkling of such words as varnashrama dharma, etc. She was properly impressed. "What caste are you?" she asked. I told her. She would not believe it. "You can't tell me that! If you were really a Brahmin you would not have drunk coffee with me, don't I know so much?" I felt that there was some justice in her observation, and explained to her how the caste system was disappearing in our country and how our national aim was to create a casteless society. She was aghast. "What, no more caste system!" She looked as if I had told her that the Himalayas were to be shifted to another location. Presently, she asked, "What will you give us in its place, for people like us who come thousands of miles to see your country?"

"Perhaps fertilizer factories, river valley projects, hydroelectric..." She would not allow me to finish my sentence. "I have seen all kinds of factories and projects in all parts of the world. I don't have to come to India to see them. I would not have taken all this trouble to come here if I had known there would be no caste system. I wish I had known it earlier." Then, out of sheer pity, I took her to a Sanskrit college: there she saw people wearing tufts and caste-marks, wrapped in colourful shawls, sitting on the ground and reciting their lessons. She took several photographs of the classes at work, and then told me, "Now show me where the other castes are. I want to photograph the entire caste system." "Why?" I asked her.

"I have signed an agreement with a lecturing organization to tour America and lecture on the caste system in India." She went away greatly pleased, and I am sure she has gone through a heavy lecturing programme. I do not know whether she abused or complimented this country on this subject, but anyway it brought her here.

We hear that several thousand tourists are likely to visit India in the coming year. In the interests of this traffic would it not be advisable to start a model caste-system village, kept in full swing, if need be with a subsidy from the tourist department?

The old caste system is wearing away, no doubt, but who is to check the development of new castes. Breaths there a man, except a saint, with soul so dead that he does not attempt to show off his learning, possessions, contacts, and so forth? The reason why a certain person adopts the nursery-picture-bushcoat seems to be, not that he could not secure any other cloth, but that he attempts to remove himself from a group wearing bush-coats made of non-spectacular material. I recently learnt that among bush-coat wearers there are twenty-five sub-sects. Among motor-owners there are said to be forty different sects, depending upon the length of the whip-like aerial on the mudguard, the variety of little plastic birds stuck on the glass inside, and so on. New lamps for old seems to be the law of life. Old or new, lamps serve the same purpose. It almost seems as if all change is illusory. We seem to be repeating the same set of old things, but under a new guise and a new denomination. It would be an interesting pastime for anyone to observe and classify the new castes that are springing up all around.