When Will Atrocities on Harijans Stop?

A.B. Vajpayee’s Speech in Rajya Sabha on August 4, 1988
Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Made the Following Speech in Rajya Sabha on August 4, 1988 while Raising a Short Duration Discussion on Recent Incidents of Atrocities on Harijans and Tribals in Some Parts of the Country

Madam, Deputy Chairman, I rise to raise a discussion on recent incidents of atrocities on Harijans and Tribals in some parts of the country. The notice for this discussion has been given by 40 other members besides me. This means that hon’ble members are very much concerned about whatever is happening with the Harijans and Tribals in various parts of the country and they would like to know what measures government propose to take to stop recurrence of such incidents in future and would also like to pressurise the government so that it could move in right direction.

Discussion: A ritual

Sometimes it appears that such discussions have become a ritual. Whenever there is a discussion in the House on the plight of Harijans and Tribals who are known in official parlance as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, then it is pointed out that the atrocities on these people have increased rather than decreased. Even official figures confirm this hypothesis. I have got figures with me for 1985-86. I wanted to have the figures for 1987 too. We are in 1988 but the process of collection for figures also moves slowly like the process of stopping the atrocities by the administration.

The number of cases of excesses committed against the Scheduled Castes registered by the Police during the year 1985 was 15,373. For 1986 this number increased further. The figures for the period between September-October, 1986-87 indicate that there has been a still further increase in the
number. So far as the Scheduled Tribes are concerned the number of such cases registered in 1985 was 4,055. In 1986 there was a marginal decrease in it but the figures for 1987 are not available.

Increase in Atrocities

According to 1986 figures 524 Harijans were killed in one year, 661 cases of rape were reported and 950 cases of arson were registered. So far as Scheduled Tribes are concerned the number of murders was 136, that of rape 231 and in 221 cases the Tribals became victims of arson. These figures do not include cases of Police excesses. It is well known that these excesses are increasing. These figures also do not include such cases as are not reported. The number of such cases is very large.

It is strange that out of the registered cases of such incidents, chargesheets are not issued even in half the cases. Even out of the cases in which chargesheets are issued, prosecutions are launched in a very limited number of cases. The number of such pending cases is 36,865.

Sir, I have collected some more figures. The Protection of Civil Rights Act was passed in 1985. This was a good law. But it is not known why those defending these cases under the above Act do not perform their duty well? The number of acquittals in 1980 was 69.37 per cent, in 1981 it rose to 82.54 per cent and in 1982 it further increased to 89.40 per cent. The figures for later period are not available.

How Criminals are Acquitted

How so many people got acquitted? Is the law defective or the cases are not framed on a sound footing or the cases are filed as a routine and the Police and the administration do not take pains to establish the cases? It is just
possible that the witnesses may not be forthcoming due to social pressures, but if the witnesses are given protection they would come forward to make a statement. But I find that the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1985 has failed to achieve its objective.

I would urge upon the hon’ble Minister to give all the facts and figures while replying to the debate. When this law was enacted it was expected that a report would be laid on the Table of the House every year about its implementation and the House would get an opportunity to discuss that report, but I find that the latest report has not been laid on the Table of the House. There is a Commissioner for Scheduled Castes, there is also a Commissioner for Scheduled Tribes. I find that these Commissioners and the Commission appointed for these classes are being made more and more ineffective.

Massacre in Jahanabad

Sir, when one or two heart rending incidents occur the entire country is shocked and struck dumb-found as if the lightening has struck. Then we are awake to the reality. Recently on 16th June there was a massacre in Jahanabad. These are not isolated cases of excesses and atrocities. 19 Harijans were done to death in the village Nonahi—Nagawa. The murderers killed only menfolk. They did not spare even six month old boys. One little girl, a child who was wearing a boy’s dress was also killed.

Why women were spared? Elsewhere in Bihar where these massacres took place even women had become victims, but in Jahanabad women were spared. I asked them why this was done? I got a reply that the murderers wanted that only the menfolk should be killed and when their women-folk would cry by beating their breasts they will enjoy the scene.

How cruel is it? Is it not beastly? Does it behave a civilised society? Are we really civilised? These questions
arise again and again. And this is not the first time that a murderous spree has taken place. I vividly remember the massacres that took place at Dehuli and Sadhupur in Uttar Pradesh. These incidents occurred in 1980-81. Even after 8 years the people who were uprooted, the kith and kin of those who were murdered have not been fully rehabilitated so far, the assurances given to them have not been fulfilled. In Bihar there has been a series of unfortunate incidents of massacre. There was a great deal of hullabaloo about Belchi incident. Party Politics is played about these massacres. One party can show its mettle by blaming the other party for these incidents of mass murder. But this is not a partisan issue.

We are all Guilty

Even after 40 years of Independence fifteen crores of Harijans who have been exploited for centuries are still being subjected to inhuman treatment. Are we not guilty for all this? Does it not lower the head in shame of the entire country? We might claim to be the heirs to the most ancient civilisation and greatest culture, but these claims prove to be hollow when such incidents take place. I do not want to bring politics in this controversy. But such incidents should awaken us. I can produce more figures. Bihar's is not an isolated case. Atrocities are being committed on Harijans in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The number of such incidents in Tamil Nadu has suddenly increased. Kerala and Karnataka are considered to be progressive states, but sporadic incidents have also taken place there in which Harijan youths have been made to eat human excreta. In the rural areas of Gujarat the situation is bad. No region is free from such incidents.

Physical Injury: Injured Conscience

Harijans are faced with two kinds of problems. One is of social discrimination and the other of economic exploi-
tation. There are two facets of atrocities resulting from social discrimination. Harijans are subjected to physical as well as mental atrocities. It affects one's self-respect. Whatever has happened in the Shri Nathdwara temple of Rajasthan is a mental infliction. That caused a wound on one's soul. Why the doors of a temple should be closed for a Harijan? Why should one create an obstruction between God and his devotee? Untouchability has been prohibited by law. Earlier the Constitution had announced its abolition. Now it is a cognisable offence. Access to public temples and public wells is now open to all. Even then Harijans are barred from entering into the temples.

So far as Shri Nathdwara temple is concerned an excuse was made out that the temple belonged to a particular sect and so the "Maryada" of the temple should be maintained. I was going through the Protection of Civil Rights Act. In that Act all the Sects coming under the Hindu religion have been included in it. Some of these have even been enumerated in it. It has been stated that the doors of these temples should be opened for all the Hindus. I want to read out the explanation to Section 3 which is as follows:

"EXPLANATION: For the purpose of this Section and Section 4, persons professing Buddhist, Sikh or Jain religion or persons professing the Hindu religion in any of its forms of developments including Vira-shaivas, Lingayats, Adivasis, followers of Brahmo, Prarthana, Arya Samaj and the Swaminarayan Sampraday shall be deemed to be Hindus."

Nobody can be allowed to shut the doors of a temple on the plea that the temple belonged to a particular Sect. If there is any regulation for the sake of "Maryada" it should apply to all. If wearing of a Kanthi with a string is essential to have entry into the temple of Shri Nath ji, then it is a different thing. But I had gone to visit the above temple nobody looked for the Kanthi around my neck. I was allowed without a Kanthi.
Deputy Chairman—(Shri Jagesh Desai) : They allowed me too.

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee : They also might have seen your neck. These arguments are being advanced in order to check the Harijans from entering into the temple. This step hurts the soul. Had I been a Harijan I would never have compromised with such a situation. Nobody should do so.

We should rather be grateful to these people who suffered for centuries, but did not give up Hindu religion. If we close the doors of temples which are the abodes of God for them even in 1988 then it is scandalous.

Public Awakening, A Must

I want to know what Government has done in this direction in order to create public awakening, in order to enlighten the people and to educate them? Whether any contribution has been made by the Government media in this connection? Whether no steps could be taken in this direction through T.V. to change this mentality? I am glad that the observations made by the Shankaracharya of Puri in regard to Harijans have been opposed by many people. Several Dharmaacharyas have spoken against them. These have been opposed by the Sanatana Dharma Sabha, by the Arya Samaj. Vishwa Hindu Parishad has issued a statement to the effect that this viewpoint is wrong. Several other organisations have come into the open against it.

But the doors of the temple of Shri Nath Ji have not been thrown open to the Harijans so far. I do not want that there should be some kind of demonstration there. I do not want even this that there should be some pushing and jostling around there, but I do want that the doors must be opened. Before Independence a campaign had been launched as a part and parcel of the Independence Movement to remove untouchability and the discrimination made on the basis of
one's birth. Mahatma Gandhi staked his life to keep the Harijans, as an inseparable part of the Hindu Society. But if now they are separated then it would be due to our follies. It is most unfortunate that now there is no public awakening and every thing is evaluated with a view to get votes.

**Harijans Must Get Possession of Land**

Sir, as I said before Harijans are facing economic problem as well. Most of the murders that are being committed in Bihar are due to land disputes or non-payment of minimum wages. Only replacement of Chief Minister will not do. Land reforms have not been implemented in Bihar. Surplus land has either not been distributed which should have been done or if it has been allotted to Harijans they have not received its possession. It is the position throughout the country that the surplus land has either not been allotted to Harijans or if allotted, possession has not been given to them. The influential and the powerful people, the high caste and the upper class people, opposed it with their lathies. They do not allow the Harijans to have the possession of the land allotted to them. This is the position in regard to the public ponds also. Government is a silent spectator. Why the Minimum Wages Act was not being implemented properly? If the Government cannot get this Act implemented then what is the use of fixing a minimum wage? Moreover the minimum wage is increased from time to time for the sake of publicity. When the already fixed minimum wages are not being paid then how the enhanced wages would be paid? Please do not make a mockery of it.

I demand that the Prime Minister should convene a meeting of the Chief Ministers and should formulate a programme on their advice. A date should be fixed. 26th January could be fixed for it. A campaign could be launched throughout the country on that day on the administrative level, on the people’s level and those Harijans should be given proprietary rights who had been allotted land for tilling. If need be the entire might of the Government should be mobilised for this purpose. Is Government prepared to do so? The question of fixing minimum wages could also be discussed in that meeting of the Chief Ministers.
Change of Attitude

Sir, those districts should be earmarked which are prone to excesses on Harijans in certain States. Special administrative arrangements could be made for such districts. We should ascertain the social attitudes of the officers who are sent to such districts.

I would like that when the examinations are held for I.A.S. and I.P.S. posts and when viva voce is undertaken the candidates should be asked if they believed in the caste or Varna system. And in case somebody believes in the Varna system then he should be specifically asked if he believed in VARNA based on birth or on occupation. I do not think such a question is put to them at present. If an officer believes in caste or varna and a man being high or low by birth then he cannot do justice. Such an officer cannot even maintain law and order properly during caste strife. In Bihar officers too get involved in caste-wars—and support the people belonging to their own caste. I am not saying this about all the officers. There are good and bad people everywhere.

I have seen in Canada that at the time of recruitment the officers and the employees belonging to even lower categories are thoroughly questioned as to their racial prejudices. In spite of this there is discrimination on the basis of colour. In our country the caste prejudices have taken deep roots. Sometimes it looks as if they are ingrained in our blood.

One Human Race

In fact if this view of caste based on birth is accepted then logically the entire humanity belongs to one caste, that of Man. All men are born in a similar manner, they all belong to the same one species. But in our society, the caste system has assumed a vitiated form in which distinctions, even of high and low, are based on birth.

On Varna system too the country should have a clear thinking. I want that this question should be thoroughly debated. I want that all the political parties should discuss this question freely and frankly. I invite the Congress Party to take part in this discussion. Recently Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi was felicitated. A commemorative volume was
published on this occasion. Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi is one of our national leaders. But I was amazed to see one article in that commemorative volume in which Varna system based on birth was commended.

Caste is not Based on Birth but it is Based on One’s Vocation

There is no mention in scriptures about Varna being based on birth. Varna means which one chooses. Whatever vocation we choose, it denotes our Varna. It depends on one’s acceptance. Whatever vocation a man chooses depends upon his qualities, actions and nature which are not the same in all persons. There is mention in the Vedas about the creation of this universe. There is no mention of Varna system in it. There is a story in the Markandeya Purana that Brahmaji established Varna system after he made arrangements for man earning his livelihood. It is clear from this that in ancient times one’s Varna was determined on the basis of one’s vocation and not on the basis of one’s birth. From Vedic period till Mahabharata period the basis for Varna system was one’s qualities, one’s vocation and not one’s birth. In one family people belonging to different Varnas used to live together. But in course of time Varna based on one’s birth came to be fully entrenched and this created a distortion.

Sir, Ved Vyasa was the son of a fisherman’s daughter. Narad was the son of a maid servant. How did they rise so high and became so venerable? A man’s greatness is not determined by his birth. If a child is reared in a good atmosphere, he has good upbringing, he receives proper education and training, then he can rise to any height. If all human beings have got a divine spark in them and if every seed is a potential tree then why every man should not be given opportunity to rise to his full stature? All men are born as Shudras (low caste). One becomes a Brahmin by one’s Sanskaras, one’s upbringing. It is another thing that we denied a section of society proper upbringing and cursed them to live as Shudras for ever. This position is unbearable. Systems change, Smritis too undergo a change. Society changes with the times. Now we are entering into the 21st century. God alone knows in what condition we would reach there.
All are Born Shudras

Adult franchise, expansion of education, extension of communications and means of transportation, industrialisation, migration of the people from villages to the cities in search of livelihood, living together in the same localities where these restrictions are no more there, the Constitutional provisions, the various laws enacted should have gone to loosen the bonds of caste system and eliminated Varna based on birth.

It is said that when this universe was created there was only one Varna, namely the Hansa Varna. In Kaliyug also there is only one Varna, we all are Shudras. But today where is the need to say that we are Brahmans and we are Shudras? We are human beings, we are Indians. The people should have freedom to express their faith according to their mode of worship. There is no objection to it. We call our Hindu religion as Sanatana Dharma. In the Sanatana Dharma there is a duty towards the present era, we have a duty towards our nation. What is the need of the hour, what is required today? This is an age of egalitarianism, this is an age of equality. There is need for a social revolution to bring about equality. I do admit that this revolution cannot be brought about by the Government. In fact the Government cannot bring about any revolution. It can only create illusions (Interruption). But the Government can help in the process of change (Interruption). Let the ruling party adopt a clear attitude in this matter.

Prof. K.K. Tewari: R.S.S. is doing this work.

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee: Yes, although R. S. S. is doing this work yet you call it a communal organisation.

Prof. K.K. Tewari: You are encouraging communalism—(Interruption).

Deputy Chairman (Shri Jagesh Desai): But this is not reflected in the speech of Vajpayeeji.

Prof. K.K. Tewari: He is not expressing these sentiments from the bottom of his heart but only superficially—(Interruption).
Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee: I want that the benefits of such schemes as have been launched for the economic development of Harijans and Tribals should reach them. There is need to be vigilant about it. There are a lot of schemes, but during my tours I have found that the Harijans and Tribals even do not know about these fully. They do not get full benefit out of these. They are neck deep in debt. Traditional vocations are slowly disappearing and no alternative opportunities of employment are being provided to them.

There is provision for reservation in services for them. But the reservation is mostly on paper. Even that is being opposed now. The Supreme Court in one of its judgements had observed that the reservation has not been provided just to give employment to a few persons but this is to create a feeling of participation in the administration among large sections of society, the feeling that they have a stake in the present system, that they have a part to play in it.

You may see the figures, there is hardly any representation given to Harijans in Class I and Class II services. The position of Tribals is worse still. If officers responsible for the selection have a bias or prejudice against a particular caste then they cannot do justice. But these things have to be changed. The persons who are entrusted with the job of recruitment, appointment and promotion should be held responsible in case of default.

Right to have Forest Produce

I want to say one thing about the Tribals. Their main problem is economic. The primary source of livelihood for the Tribals was growing forests, cattle breeding, poultry farming, pisciculture and production of silk. The Tribals had an unrestricted right on forest produce. But the Government has acquired monopoly at certain places in regard to forest produce in the name of saving the Tribals from exploitation.

Now the Tribals are faced with double danger. It is essential to protect the forests. But this theory is erroneous that the Tribals are responsible for the destruction of forests. These Tribals are living in the forests for thousands of years.
They were born in these forests, they have been brought up there, they have grown up there, they know the importance of the forests. They might be cutting some wood for using it as fuel, but this cannot destroy the forests. Actually, corrupt contractors, corrupt politicians and corrupt officers are responsible for the destruction of forests.

Today a tribal has got no right over the forest produce. Tribals are being deprived of land in the forest villages. Their land is acquired for development purposes. It should be ordained that land should be allotted in lieu of land acquired. But this is not being done. Adequate compensation is not being paid for acquisition of their land. Where will the Tribals go? Their traditional vocations are disappearing. What are the new means of livelihood for them?

Increase in Excesses Due to Awakening

I think there are two main reasons for the increase in atrocities against Harijans and Tribals. One is that there is awakening among them. This is a good sign. Now they are not prepared to suffer in silence. Now they are ready to fight it out. This is good. How long would they bear these atrocities? That is why sometime the situation in places like Bihar is described a Caste-war. Tribals have also awakened. However, Naxalites are taking advantage of this situation. They are inciting the discontented and oppressed people to take resort to violence. We have to foil such attempts.

The second reason is that the influence of vested interests is decreasing economically as well as socially. They have become desperate, they take recourse to violence. They want to maintain their stranglehold at all cost.

What role the Government would play in this situation? What would be the role of Police? A day should come early when there is no need to discuss these excesses, there is no occasion to do so, and if there is a discussion at all we should be in a position to say that excesses are decreasing, the number of victims of excesses is coming down. One wonders when such a day would come. There is no hope that such a day would come so long as this Government continues...

Thank you.