

The need for atheist outlook

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The need for atheist outlook

I congratulate the Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, for conducting the 5th World Atheist Conference. You are doing a very laudable work following the footsteps of the doyen of atheist movement late Thiru Gora.

When the world is threatened by terrorism, fundamentalism and religious fanaticism, we are trying to promote harmony through mutual understanding and tolerance by spreading the ideas and ideals of atheism, rationalism, free thought and humanism. This conference will make a significant contribution in this respect.

Tragedy

I come to know that Dr Vijayam and his colleagues at the Atheist Centre had gone to coastal regions to undertake relief and rehabilitation work amidst the people affected by the sudden and violent tidal waves which we call tsunami. I appreciate them for having undertaken the timely humanitarian work. Tsunami is caused by an earthquake below the sea. An earthquake took place on 26th January near Sumatra in Indonesia causing tsunami. It had put to death about, 1,70,000 people in South East Asia. In our country, besides Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Karaikkal and Kanyakumari are the worst affected coastal regions. Thousands have perished. It is a great tragedy.

Our Contribution

Periyar Trusts and those working in our institutions have contributed more than Rs. 10 lakhs to the relief and rehabilitation. We sent Rs. 2 lakhs to the Central Government and Rs. 5,27,731 to the State government. In addition, those in our movement, Dravidar Kazhagam, as well as the members of the staff in our institutions and students have gone to the affected regions and distributed essential materials to them - food, clothing and medicine worth about 3 lakhs, I met and consoled the patients in the hospitals at Thanjavur and Tiruvarur.

Hope is an inherent quality.

I mention these things first to indicate that we are one among the many who have done the needful to mitigate the sorrows and sufferings of our brothers and sisters. We have written to authorities that our Nagammaiyar Children's Home will adopt those orphaned by tsumani. In spite of the unexpected calamity that had resulted in the great loss of life and property, you in the Atheist Centre and we in the Dravidian movement as various other-welfare organisations, institutions and kind-hearted individuals have not lost hope in the future well-being of our people.

Why is this so? Hope is an inherent quality of the people. There may be a few exceptions. Some people take away their own lives when they face a tragic situation. But that is not the normal course or the general trend among the people. They want to live, accept the challenge, work and rebuild their future.

Optimism

It is a fact that men and women do not generally lose hope even amidst destruction and devastation. It is after the terrible holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese have made their country a prosperous nation. That is hope. That is indomitable human spirit.

Human nature is always to aspire high, to achieve things and to seek happiness. We are always optimistic that people will be more comfortable and happy in future than they are now. It is not true that there was a Golden Age in a remote past when all the needs of the people were fulfilled. The fact is we have yet to achieve that goal; we are moving towards it. We are very hopeful that scientific discoveries and their applications will enable the human race to achieve what it aspires.

Human achievement

It is not a vain hope. The Modern Age has been proving for the past three hundred years that human suffering can be reduced, needs fulfilled in a better way and comforts enhanced.

Suffering from physical pain due to diseases has come down to a remarkable extent. People do not die in young age due to diseases. Wonderful discoveries in medicine and surgery have enabled us to live longer. Fifty years ago the average life span was about thirty. Now it is nearing seventy.

Now we have better sanitation facilities, better health conditions. Achievements in transport and communication have made the world smaller. Wonderful discoveries in Information Technology have remarkably widened and quickened the knowledge base. Discoveries in bio-sciences and achievements in bio-technology are going to revolutionise the condition of human life. Achievements in outer space are no less. Man has landed in the moon and is dreaming to go beyond. I want to remind you at this juncture that there are Kalpana Chawlas who are proving that women are equal to men in great adventures and achievements.

Theism or atheism

But we are not complacent. We still live amidst dangers. It is true that science and technology have changed our outlook and our life. But they are neutral; they can be utilised for good or for evil purposes. Man has to choose. He has to make a wise choice. Making a choice depends upon human knowledge, temperament and outlook.

It is in this context we have to take into account a person's faith and religious beliefs. It is time to tell the world that the traditional theological approach is not only an obstacle to progress, but also harmful.

Let me explain. Hinduism tells that everyone is endowed with a separate entity known as "soul". It is indestructible. It is eternal. It takes rebirth. The nature of rebirth depends upon a person's deeds (Karma) in this life. If he does good deeds he is in a better position in the next birth; if he follows an evil course, he will suffer in the next birth. It was on the basis of this theology, the "Maha Swamy", the late Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi of

Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, told that an untouchable could not become a touchable in this life even if he washed himself clean with a soap of superior kind. He has also asserted that untouchability promotes welfare (Kshemakaramaanathu). These ideas of late Sankarachariya of Kanchi are compiled and published as "Theivathin Kural" - the voice of the divine (A collection of his speeches).

Now the question is : Should we allow such theological nonsense to be propagated? Should we not educate our people about the harmful effects of the ideas spread in the name of Sanathana Dharma - everlasting way of life? It justifies social inequality on the basis of a person's birth in a particular caste or Varna. The French Revolution of 1789 abolished social inequalities in France. It led to the same process in the other European countries in the 19th century. But graded social inequalities based on caste still continue in our country because of Hindu scriptural sanction and the doctrine of Karma. Does this not harm social harmony and unity? It does harm our social set-up leading to mutual hatred, suspicion, misunderstanding and frequent conflicts. In this way theological outlook militates against human welfare.

The present Sankaracharya of Kanchi Mutt, Jayendra Saraswathy says that he has been lodged in Vellor jail because of his Karma (activity) in the previous birth. But the police say that he has been sent to prison, because of his Karma in this life. He is accused number one in the murder of Sankararaman, the temple manager. What is the truth? Is it due to his Karma in the previous birth or in this birth that he is put behind the bars? The court will find out the truth.

If the accused Sankarachariya sincerely believes in the doctrine of karma, he would not have appealed to the Supreme Court to get bail.

What we have to keep in mind in this context is this: the court will not decide on the principle of 'Karma', but on the basis of facts proved by evidence. The judge may be a believer.

He may even believe the doctrine of Karma. But when he honestly decides the case, he suspends faith in the traditional theology involving soul and rebirth, and seeks truth on the basis of provable facts. At this juncture he assumes the approach of an atheist!

Yes, an atheist is an honest seeker of truth. He does not defend himself on the basis of falsehood based on speculative theology that cannot be proved. He believes that only truth will prevail in the end. He is a seeker of truth because he knows that being truthful lends real strength. Being honest, the atheist does not spread a conjectural theory or speculative theology as profound truth. A judge, if he is a believer, behaves like an atheist only when he decides the case honestly, whereas a non-believer is consistently atheistic in his attitude. The difference between a believer and a non-believer is this: The believer does not worry about facts, and acts upon blind faith. But the non-believer follows a course of action only when it corresponds with facts, is testified by experience, and appeals to reasons. Moreover, he ensures that the activity promotes common good.

GORA AND PERIYAR

A theist thinks that everything happens in accordance with a course determined by all powerful God. Men and women cannot do anything against God's will; their life is pre-determined.

In the same manner, one who believes in the speculative theory of soul, rebirth and the principle of Karma thinks that his course of action in this birth is determined by his activities in the previous birth.

It is this kind of determinism that Perriyar and Gora revolted against. They believed that men and women can choose their course of activity. They can improve their condition by their hard, consistent and wise endeavour. A rationalist, as we have seen, believes a thing on the basis of his experience, rational analysis and facts that are verified or verifiable. His belief does

not depend upon blind faith that cannot be proved. Periyar and Gora pointed out that the philosophy of predestination or predetermined course of life does not motivate people to improve the material and cultural condition of human life.

If predestination is true, why should those in the Atheist Centre or any other persons rush to help the victims of a calamity? If everything happens according to God's will or Karma in the previous birth, what is the use of human endeavour? Where is the scope for us to make any choice? It is in this context, Gora told that a theist is not mentally free whereas an atheist is free and hopeful.

Human destiny is not in the hands of any supernatural being or some blind force. Man can decide about his own course of action and strive to increase his welfare. As he makes the choice, he is responsible for what he does. In this manner atheism compels people to pay attention to moral behaviour or ethical aspect of life.

Theism does not make people morally responsible. They think they do not make the choice, but act according to the direction given by a Supreme power. So they shift the responsibility for their actions to some other agent!

Moreover the theological belief in hell and heaven has now become a farce. No one is afraid of divine wrath and punishment. Once Periyar visited an open-air prison in Thanjavur in early 1970s. Most of them in the jail were life convicts. He asked them if they were believers or non-believers. All of them told that they were believers and regularly worshipped some deity or other. So Bakthi or devotion to a deity has not restrained them to stay away from crime. On the other-hand rational humanism demands that every one should take the responsibility for their own behaviour. This approach will enhance the moral behaviour of humans. Periyar used to say: "Bakthi is a personal asset, whereas discipline is a public asset. In the absence of Bakthi nothing is lost, but if there is no

discipline everything is lost". So atheist outlook promotes disciplined life.

Humanism Vs Religious Fundamentalism

The world faces grave issues. Religious fundamentalism and fanatic communalism endanger the safety and security of the people in various regions. Blind faith in god and religion divides people. Humanism unites them and helps them to live in harmony.

Fundamentalism is not a phenomenon confined to the extremists among the Muslims. It is gaining ground in other non-Islamic countries also, including the U.S.A. and the European Union. It is reported that the election of George W. Bush in November 2004 as the U.S. President has strengthened the influence of Christian fundamentalists dedicated to restoring the Bible, "god's word", to a central role in public life and foreign policy. Many of his supporters spread the wrong notion that the warring Iraq is an "arena of a cosmic struggle between good and evil". What we normally consider as crimes and massacres, the fundamentalists permit as necessary happenings!

We also come to know that the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair is a strong religious believer, and members of his government are undermining secular traditions. They promote faith schools run by various religious communities, including two financed by a fundamentalist. We are also concerned about the report that vatican activism is spreading in the European Union.

In recent times the world has become aware of the havoc wrought by the majoritarian Hindu fundamentalism in Gujarat State. Under the direction of Sang Parivar fanatics, more than 2000 Muslims, a minority community, had been killed in March 2002. Strangely the Bharatiya Janata Party that was in power at the time of this inhuman brutality won the general elections for the State Legislative Assembly later in the same year. This

encouraged the majoritarian fundamentalists to try to spread their tentacles in other parts of the country. But the general elections held in May 2004 to Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament of India, did not turn out to be favourable to them. The BJP led coalition government at the centre was voted out of power. In thwarting the Hindutva forces again coming to power, the Tamil Nadu State stood in the vanguard. Our movement, Dravidar Kazhagam, played a very vital role in this process. Though it is a non-political social movement, it did intensive propaganda through the length and breadth of the State against the fundamentalists coming to power.

In our view there should be geographical division of labour among the Atheists, Rationalists, Humanists, Free thinkers, sceptics and secularists in driving away the menace of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, and in promoting scientific outlook, tolerant sentiments, liberal values and egalitarian order in all spheres of public life. Conditions differ from region to region. Organisations and movements have to chart out a plan, prioritising their activities according to the peculiar problems prevailing in a country or region. While elsewhere Christian, Islamic and even Buddhist fundamentalists pose a danger, in India the majoritarian Hindu fundamentalists are a threat to liberal and secular principles. It is for this reason we call upon people in our country to be vigilant in warding off Hindutva menace.

I share the views of Mr. Roy Brown, the President of IHEU, recently reprinted by the news agency, *Reuters*: "In the face of the religious onslaught on humanist values, we have to speak out and get our message over." Again as Babu Gogineni, IHEU executive director, says: "We must work hard to combat the encroachment of religion on public policy and on the rights of non-believers."

Periyar used to say that we should be prepared to pay the due price to achieve a lofty goal. Let us keep this dictum in mind as we endeavour to fulfil our task.