

Lala Lajpat Rai vision of Dalit Reformation

[28th Jan is birth-date of Lala Lajpat Rai]

Lala Lajpat Rai, Sher-i-Punjab was, indeed a lion both in thought and deed, in what he professed and practiced, in his political, social and even economic ideas and ideals, in his sense of service, patriotism and nationalism, in his dealings with the 'old' and the 'new', the high and the mighty, and the low and the depressed. Issues and problems affecting the lot and destiny of the dalits had a special place in his ideas and vision of nation building. He witnessed the Indian society was characterized by status summation i.e. low status in the caste hierarchy itself implied a correspondingly low status in social, religious and economic position. Dalits formed the most indigent, ostracized, apolitical and illiterate section of the Indian society. During his student age Lala ji was attracted towards Aryasamaj because of its nationalistic outlook, its program of social reform, its education mission and the spirit of self-sacrifice, self-reliance and self-help that it instilled in the young minds. His views were nurtured by the company of brilliant scholar Pundit Guru Dutt Vidyarthi and Lala Hansraj with whom he later established DAV institutions.

Lala ji considered the rigidity of Hindu Caste system as bane of Hindu society and a barrier in social and national progress of the Hindus. He considered it as a disgrace to humanity, sense of justice and feeling of social affinity. He considered allowing of valuable human resource to rot in a state of utter depression and helplessness as unsound by all aspects. He was against categorization of Indian population in census on basis of religion, caste, tribe etc. as an attempt by Britishers to implement divide and rule policy. He openly condemned Christian missionaries proselytizing activities and considered it as regular toll and loss to Hindu society. He said that the missionaries who were posing as social levelers and egalitarians had failed to eradicate caste distinctions and were only building castles in the air. Christianity has failed to emancipate caste system while the bureaucracy wanted to give caste a new orientation to make it subservient to imperial needs. He considered caste and inter caste jealousies as blockage for national progress. He was critical of maltreatment meted out to dalits in different parts of country. In one of speeches as president of depressed classes at Gurukul Kangdi he chided the Rajputs of Hoshiarpur for cruelty to Kabirpanthis, the Brahmans of Jammu for placing a hot plate iron on the body of a Vashisht caste Hindu and people of Ludhiana for not allowing a Ramdasi Hindu to drink water from municipal tap. He was critical of Hindu attitude towards untouchables before and after conversion. He said as a Hindu you won't touch him [Dalit], you would not let him sit on the same carpet with you, you would not offer him water in your cups, you would not accept water or food touched by him, you would not let him enter your temple, in fact you would not treat him like a human being. The moment he becomes a Mohammadan or a Christian, without even giving up his ancestral occupation, you are all smiles to him, you welcome him to your home; and have no objection at times to offer him drink and food in your utensils etc. What an irony? What a paradox? Why and where did the so much boasted of tolerance of the Hindus disappear, the moment that tolerance was demanded by the classes lower in the social scale? Was that Hinduism? No, he believed that it was nothing but disgrace to the good name of Hinduism.

Lala ji pressed on leveling down of all equalities and wanted that the reformation must begin from below. He supported Varna system and rejected caste system. He pointed out that the Hindus had established their caste system (Varna system) on basis of work, merit and disposition. The division was founded on justice and the needs and principles of the community. But afterwards the classification became purely a matter of birth and the institution of caste was clothed with a divine sanction to the glory of the Brahman and the desecration of the Shudra.

Lala ji supported the Aryasamaj concept of Shuddhi of dalits who were made non Hindu by force or incentive in past. Aryasamaj motive was not only to water down the apartheid character of the caste

super-structure of the Hindu society by asserting that individual's caste status was always achieved and not ascribed, and by reclamation, re-conversion and Shuddhi, the Aryasamaj put the dalits at a slightly higher social substratum, but it also made systematic and sustained efforts to make the untouchables coalesce in the society as an agreeable section. Aryasamaj was instrumental in providing age old deprived facilities like water, education, technical training and thus economic uplift. The main idea behind this exercise was eradication of evils of caste system and creation of Hindu Sangthan. The social work done by Aryasamaj in different famines and opening of orphanages for orphans was another achievement to his works. The inter caste marriages and widow remarriage was like social revolution in caste ridden society. Opening of school, college and Gurukul both for boys as well as girls where education was provided irrespective of caste differentiation was turning point in field of education.

In nutshell, Lala ji had a very soft corner for the dalits and his remedial measures had the stamp of his own making. The social and national efficiency of a nation can never be achieved until hard steps are not taken to eradicate the evils of caste system. The dream of Lala ji is still unfilled even after 68 years of independence because of lack of political will. Today caste is withering but casteism is flourishing. The evil of casteism must be destroyed from our minds to unite Humanity.

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