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# Caste and Nationalism: An Overlook on Tamil Nationalist Movements and the Caste in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract:

Caste has become a Major crisis in Lanka. The people from various social institutions and various movements have approached this issue in many different ways. The caste affects and plays a vital role in the livelihood of Tamil Eezham people who live in Sri Lanka as well as in Tamil Nadu. The Tigers and the Sri Lankan government decided to reopen the Jaffna Library, Later it was banned by the same LTTE movement. They give various reasons for the ban but the major reason is considered to be the caste. So, did the Tigers ban the reopening of the Jaffna Library because of the caste? How did the Tigers dealt with the caste issues in the society? The answers for the questions will be discussed in detail in this paper. The reasons behind the ban of the Library reopening and the caste crisis involved in this ban will be dealt with in detail. The authenticity of Tigers in the caste based issues and this ban will be dealt with in this research paper.

**Key Words:** The ban, Jaffna Library, caste crisis, Tamil Eezham, struggle.

## Introduction:

*Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from comingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier<sup>1</sup>.*

Caste system has become a major crunch in Sri Lanka Now – a – days. The people from various intellectual groups have approached this caste crisis in diverse ways in different periods. Many problems had aroused based on the caste issues at various places, at different scenarios and here, focus has been on the views of Tamil National Armed Movement over these caste issues; since This Tamil Nationalism Armed Movement came into existence due to the ethnic conflict. Though various movements have handled these caste issues in various ways, the way LTTE (which is a more important movement than other movements) dealt and reacted on these caste related issues is highly observed in this article.

This article spotlights and inspects the problems prevailing behind the ban on reopening the Jaffna Library; this placed an important criticism on LTTE. Major discussions and criticisms raised based on the reasons behind the ban. This article also discusses the LTTE's stance on the caste.

## Jaffna Library:

In 1983, Jaffna Library, Asia's largest Library, was burnt down to ashes by *Sinhalese Nationalists*<sup>2</sup>. Later in the year 2003, during the period of peace between LTTE and Sri Lankan Government, attempts were made to

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<sup>1</sup> Annihilation of caste, Other Books, Kozhikode, 2021, page no. 51

<sup>2</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-burning-of-jaffna-public-library-sri-lankas-first-step-toward-civil-war/>

reconstruct and reopen the Jaffna Library. The LTTE halted the reopening ceremony after the reconstruction of the Library; the reopening was cancelled because it.

It is said that the reopening of the library got cancelled because of the tiff between Mr. Aanandha sangari, the Leader of the Tamizhar Liberation Alliance and the LTTE; It is said that Mr. Aanantha Sangari had been to open the library. But, the real reason is different. The reopening was about to happen under the leadership of Mayor Sellan Kandaiah, who was the mayor of the Jaffna City Council at that time; he has been said to be from the lower caste. It is said that in accordance with the ideology of the Jaffna – Vellalar community the event was ceased. Since Mayor Sellan Kandaiah is from the lower community, The Jaffna – Vellalar community didn't want the name of the Mayor Sellan Kandaiah's name to be imprinted on this historical event.

**Mayor Sellan Kandaiah also acknowledged this, when he gave interview to the journal Daily mirror of Dhina Murasu as follows:**

Mayor Sellan Kandaiah said that '*the library reopening event got cancelled because of the caste crisis*'<sup>3</sup>. Now Documentary Director Somithran and Writer Sayanthan claim that the event had not been cancelled due to caste issues. They even managed to release a three – minute interview of Mayor Sellan Kandaiah in which he had proclaimed that he was not threatened by LTTE on this basis. (the objective of the released video and the circumstances under which this video was created all raises various questions regarding this).

In this particular debate, they corner the people who claim that caste is the reason for the library reopening and question their comments purposefully. They find faults in those people's comments and target them individually. So in this Journal the researcher tries to portray his view based on the events, revolving around the cancellation of the Jaffna Library reopening via various questions.

**What is the use of establishing that caste didn't play a vital role in halting the reopening of Jaffna Library?**

This is the basic question that was raised first in the mind. So it is a wonder why there is an establishment that there are no caste biases in the library opening. It finally leads to the state that the LTTE does not have any caste bias or they don't encourage caste within them. In that case we have to see how Tigers dealt with the caste crisis in and around them. We can analyze from that, whether there had been any caste crisis prevailing in the Library reopening ban or not.

**Did Tigers surpass the caste or not? Did they face and deal with the caste issue?**

There had been various questions raised based on the Tigers view or the positioning over the caste issue. Writer Sayanthan has produced evidence based on this issue; an article released by the Tigers about the caste positioning inside the LTTE; it has been released in their official magazine '*Liberation Tigers*'<sup>4</sup>.

In that Article it is stated that, taking the people to the edge of death in the name of caste discrimination even on the basic essentials of life is an unforgivable one, this stand cannot be permitted in the long run.

They also say that other caste related conflicts can be rectified; these caste conflicts can be neutralized through various approaches depending on the nature of the conflict.

The Liberation struggle of the Tigers and their radical actions out of their revolutions had begun to terminate the caste system. But without the necessary changes brought in the society and the economic system the caste system cannot be entirely eradicated. Every big change starts from the mind. To completely eradicate the caste system; we need revolutionary change in the society and the mind of the people.

It also states that the main objective of the LTTE was to bring social revolution on the basis of economic equality. This major objective can be clearly implemented only after we attain power after getting liberated from the clutches of Lanka. However it is even possible to gradually bring down the caste crisis by slowly implementing new revolutionary economic and cooperative schemes in the restricted areas even before they are getting liberation.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.geotamil.com/index.php/2021-02-10-13-39-07/6022-2020-06-28-20-25-11>

<sup>4</sup>[http://sayanthan.com/?p=1437&fbclid=IwAR1P4\\_x14lsgXtb97zdIlpJ8jVoqurqcCg5SgV6U0uFwmUs1NtDrn7jwfk](http://sayanthan.com/?p=1437&fbclid=IwAR1P4_x14lsgXtb97zdIlpJ8jVoqurqcCg5SgV6U0uFwmUs1NtDrn7jwfk)

But the later actions of the LTTE had been the real testimony of their actions. Regarding this issue it is better to hear *Dharma Prasad's opinion*<sup>5</sup>. He says that,

‘The LTTE’s were an aggressively disciplined and strict Military organization. Inside the military arena order, values and the hierarchy cannot function on caste basis, it can only work through the narratives related to Valour, masculinity, sacrifice and fertility etc. this is how it’s passed through generations. There cannot be a systematic influence enthralled upon Military discipline based on anyone’s birth or caste. With all these assumptions about the Military we cannot come to a conclusion that the LTTE did work without any caste discretions during their journey to the progression. The caste ban had not been the product of the progressive vision of LTTE over the caste issue; on the contrary it had been on the basis of military discipline; this was not an healthy vision. If the caste abolition had been on the basis of their progressive reformation it should have reflected during the caste conflicts in the society; but, it did not happen so.

The biggest allegation against the LTTE was that they stood by the dominant caste when the real caste crisis arose in the society; they were busy in fulfilling the wishes and aspirations of the dominant caste. There have been a lot of incidents to prove these allegations. Ban of the reopening of the Jaffna library is also one of such incidents. The next major accusation on the LTTE is that they dealt the caste mayhem as an individual crime and punished them for the same; they silenced the people who spoke against the caste at the gunpoint. ’

Another example of this issue is the importance given to caste in the Tamil Eelam Act (Criminal Procedure Act); there is no mention of caste in the table of contents. Caste crisis and related cruelties had been mentioned in the section on *criminal categories*<sup>6</sup>. Apart from that, in the Tamil Eezham Criminal Responsibilities and Punishments section, the LTTE has used caste as 2 years imprisonment<sup>7</sup> for caste cruelty.

**What is the social form of the caste? Whatever may be the reason, No one can deny that there is caste interference in the ban of the Jaffna library reopening.**

The people who discuss that there is no caste in the reopening of the Jaffna Library, keeps caste as an abstract element; they had been conferring caste as a separate entity from people and society, which it is not. They discuss as if caste is a commodity i.e. the people who need caste can take and those who do not want it, need not bother about it, but it does not work like that in the reality.

Every person in the society is brought up by their people with their caste norms and mentality. The only way to deal with it is to fight it from the root i.e. we should fight to uproot the traits it has created in the society and the people. The Tigers didn’t ever want to deal with the caste system; they either surpassed that caste practice or turned blind towards it. It is not new for the Eezham society because they had always been in the standpoint of ‘Castelessness or Caste blindness’<sup>8</sup>; Even the Tiger was in the same mentality. The Tigers did not directly support the caste system, but they did not even take any necessary measures to confront or eradicate the caste system. This had been clearly seen during the ban of Jaffna Library reopening.

The Tigers did not care about the caste based criticism placed against them during the Library reopening ban; they had not even bothered to reply for the accusations placed against them during this ban incident. The Tigers did not deny or object any of the accusations placed over them. The responsibility of the social movements is that if there is any criticism or accusations placed on them it is their duty to object and give explanation for that. The tigers did not do that.

Tiger were in the Monopoly position from early days, so they were not even interested to answer any of the accusations and criticisms placed on them, that is why they are still in this position today. If that is the major reason for the Tigers’ non – reactive attitude towards the criticisms then it’s a notable issue, because it is an

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/dharmupirasath/posts/3348841855128455>

<sup>6</sup> Tamil Eezham criminal code, LTTE Publication division, 1994, page. 35

<sup>7</sup> Tamil Eezham criminal code, LTTE Publication division, 1994, Page.36

<sup>8</sup> Casteless or Caste-blind? Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka, Kumaran Book House, Colombo – Chennai, 2009, Page. 97

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absolute expression of monotony. How can we pretend there is no caste inside the Tigers if this sort of monotony grows inside them in this caste based society?

The LTTE is not opposing the caste crisis or considering it as a threat in the society. Caste is not an invisible entity which cannot be seen. If the Tigers are not opposing the social evil like caste system in the society, then how can we assume that they are against that caste system?

The '*Dhina Kural*'<sup>9</sup> Magazine had portrayed a picture of Mayor Sellan Kandaiah wearing mayoral suit over his shoulder with sleeveless banyan, the panty tied up so that the inside trousers were visible and the picture was so repugnant that there were two knives in the place where the panty was tied. What was the stance of LTTE on the caricature of Mayor Sellan Kandaiah by the Magazine? It is difficult to identify whether the LTTE's silence is because of their Monopoly nature or is it their uncaring nature over the caste culture in the society.

The Tigers claim that the Jaffna library reopening had been a happening reality because of their one and only sole political monopoly. If they claim responsibility for the reopening, what did they do when the dominant caste were fulfilling their will in the society by various means. What did they do when the reopening of the library was stopped for an untold reason, why they could not reverse the situation at that time?

The LTTE stopped the reopening of the Jaffna library, if the LTTE is that powerful enough why they did not condemn the funny caricature of the mayor by the dominant caste people. The Tigers could not make those dominant caste people to apologize for that funny caste based caricature even though they claim their political monopoly status. If the LTTE can't even react against the caste based caricature how they can claim themselves as political monopoly in the society. If they are silent against this entire crisis, how can we declare that there is no caste interference in halting the reopening of the Jaffna Library?

Mayor Sellan Kandaiah was supposed to open the library during the reopening. if caste is not the major reason for the ban of the reopening, why Ananthasangari planned to steal the opportunity of this magnificent opportunity of reopening the Jaffna Library from the Mayor Sellan Kandaiah. Because the upper caste people didn't want the person from the lower caste reopening the library, Annanthasangari cleverly made Sellan Kandaiah to preside over the event by making him the head of the event so that he could take the opportunity of reopening the library. The upper caste people were very sure that Mayor Sellan Kandaiah's name should not be imprinted on this historical event.

If the Tigers were really unbiased and strong enough, they should have made Sellan Kandaiah to reopen the Jaffna Library in front of Anandhasangari. This action of Tigers would have been a great blow to the dominant Vellalar caste people as well as Ananthasangari; but on the contrary the Tigers had cancelled the whole reopening event. This action of the Tigers makes people question their biased decision in this library issue.

The Tigers declared that they stopped the Jaffna Library reopening because they did not want the Sinhalese Government to claim the fame of this Historical event. If this is the reason behind the ban of the library reopening, why didn't the Tigers ban the events on the first day of the renovation? Why did they stop the event at the time of the reopening?

Even Though the Tigers had the discussion against the caste system in the society, they never took stand against the Vellalar Caste system and their actions in Lanka. If the Tigers did not stand with the downtrodden people during the caste crisis, it clearly states that they stand in favor of the upper caste people. In this issue if they are not taking actual sides, it means that they stand by the dominant caste. In this issue there cannot be an intermediate or middle position, if so it will not be authentic.

### **Criticisms on caste system:**

As a matter of fact, we visit the past to reanalyze them so that it will be helping us with the concept to lead our present. There will be no benefit in joining hands with the international networks in criticizing the LTTEs who do not exist today. Instead of pushing the suffering Eezham community into the empty hope and empathy, they should be drawn into the light of criticism. They did not taste their liberation till date. Instead of pushing them into the darkness of false, empty support, bringing them into the light of fact through analytical criticism will be the right thing to do for their betterment in life.

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<sup>9</sup> Thinak Kural, Jaffana edition, 24.02.2003, Page. 4

Was there caste interference in the re-opening of the Jaffna library? This is still a debate till date. Mr. Kalanithi selladurai Sudharshan has taken a documentary on the title 'A Mayor's Political Journey'<sup>10</sup>, this documentary proves to be a very important contribution to the debate. It was a very detailed and very important conversation about the Library reopening issue. In considering the on-going conversation about the Jaffna library issue this documentary considers to be having three important points related to the issue.

**Three important points to be noted during the Jaffna reopening:**

'Caste does not play any role in the Jaffna Library Reopening' is the first important point discussed during the library ban. Later it moved on to the second important discussion that 'The Tigers had an unbiased nature towards the caste crisis and they did not support the caste system, because they do not have caste'. The third point taken for discussion and still discussed till date is that 'The LTTE faced caste through socialism (economic equality)'. There is still the discussion that prevails that there was caste interference in the Jaffna library reopening chaos and the discussion extended till the caste and its influence on the LTTEs. So considering this the third point i.e. 'The LTTE faced caste through socialism (economic equality)' will be taken into consideration for the major discussion here.

The idea 'Caste can be eradicated through economic equality' is still a major point of discussion even today, but it's a myth, the reality is different. Economic equality also cannot eradicate the caste from the society is today's reality.

Now the point that 'LTTEs dealt the caste with socialism' will be focused for further discussion. Before going into that discussion, we should analyze whether; the LTTEs were socialists – To what extent did the LTTE implement socialism? If we find the answer for these questions it will be helpful to find to what extent this socialist perspective of LTTEs helped them to eradicate caste from the society. All these discussions lead us to one ultimate question i.e. are the LTTEs real socialists (egalitarians).

**Are the LTTEs Socialists?**

The LTTEs manifestation starts with daily affirmation that 'the supreme goal of our revolutionary movement is that of equal rights and ownership, autonomy and Liberation'. LTTE also released publications like '*Towards a socialist Tamil Eezham*'<sup>11</sup> and '*Socialist Philosophy and Guerrilla war*'<sup>12</sup>,

*Not only that, they think that, because of the strong nationalism prevailed against the Eezham war 'during the early days we jumped into the armed struggle due to patriotism and the love for our nation; in the due course of time we realized the importance of the revolutionary ideas, so we rationalized the policy plan and action plan accordingly, we made a framework for our liberation movement in order to regulate our revolutionary policy (...) we accepted the Marxist – Leninist philosophy as an essential thing to carry forward the socialist revolution along with the national liberation'*<sup>13</sup>

In the four edition of the Political committee report of the LTTE which was published in June 1991, it was said that

*'Our leader Prabhakaran (...) abhors falsehood and hypocrisy (...) Being a socialist, he has as his highest ideal the national liberation of the Tamil people of Eezham and an egalitarian social system'*<sup>14</sup>.

From the above statements can we come to a conclusion that the Tigers are socialist or can they be called as Marxist or Leninist? (there are certain talks and text messages shared saying that LTTEs were Marxists). To clarify the doubts regarding this we should turn to the arguments and works of Political science researcher Mr. M .Thirunavukarasu into consideration.

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdHyALiJA2w&t=1684s&ab\\_channel=SellaSutha](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdHyALiJA2w&t=1684s&ab_channel=SellaSutha)

<sup>11</sup> *Towards a Socialist Tamil Eezham*, Adele Bala Singam, LTTE publication division, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> *Socialist Philosophy and Guerrilla Warfare*, LTTE publication division, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> *LTTE Political Wing Report*, LTTE Publication division, 1985, fourth edition, Page. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *LTTE Political Wing Report*, LTTE Publication division, 1985, fourth edition. Page. 14.

**M. Thirunavukarasu's view about the movements:**

*'Today all the youths who fought for the Eezham claim themselves to be a part of Marxist Leftist movement. even though they claim themselves to be active socialists; their socialism is alive only in papers in their official buildings.'*<sup>15</sup>

'For instance let's take seven youth movements like LTTE, PLOTE, TELo, TELA, EROS, EPRLF, NLFT out of twenty others,

*in this except NLFT other movements emerged from the right – winged camps but they proclaims the left – wing ideologies as theirs (...) over time these movements proclaims that they are not happy with policies of the moderate right – winged people in the camps, they accepted and embraced the extreme radical ideologies of the left – wing people as theirs and started following them'*<sup>16</sup>.

The above are the significant lines to be noted. The lines quote that the LTTEs rooted from the right – winged camps and later declared themselves to be the people who follow the left – wing's ideologies. In the real scenario the truth is, the Tigers neither followed the path of socialism nor behaved as a socialist.

**Related Data:**

The LTTEs head Prabhakaran met the international journalists in May' 2002, during the interview when the journalists asked about the economic policy of the LTTEs, he replied that interview Prabhakaran their economic policy will be an 'open market'. Prabhakaran said that if they form a separate Tamil Eezham government their economic policy will be 'Open Economic Policy'. *It was telecasted in YouTube and he had mentioned it at 1.47 minutes and 2.55 minutes in that video'*<sup>17</sup>

Not only in that video, even in the *Martyr day's speech'*<sup>18</sup>

In today's scenario the world and its order is changing. The relationship within the countries around the world also has changed. The human race is forced to face unforeseen challenges in their day to day life. We cannot neglect the veracity of today's world from its realistic objectives. We should deeply understand the current scenario; the way the society emerges and reacts according to the changes happening in the society in the due course of time; all these changes should be taken into consideration while the path for the liberation is laid. We should progress with our liberation process without contradicting world history, i.e. we should move forward with our liberation struggle with the flow of the contemporary world trends. That is the vital expectation of today's history too"

This stand is against the egalitarian (socialist) economic society i.e. these lines portray that they directly support the liberal, open economy. Within the two days of taking their oath the Tigers' declared a liberal, open economy as their policy. The LTTEs considers this speech and oath of their leader as their official political stand or political positioning. It cannot be considered that everything was an overnight decision. It will be convenient for us to understand this scenario from the opinion of Mr. Thirunavukkarasu, i.e. we should recall his opinion about the early budding days of Tigers.

Another example regarding this scenario of LTTE is Captain Malaravan's work '*Storm Bird*'<sup>19</sup> It was published in the LTTE publishing division in 1993. In that he talked about many things like revolution, progression, socialism, social change in the society, abolition of caste and women's liberation. At the same time a short note was bought from *Mr. Tamilselvan*<sup>20</sup> for the fiction; in that note we cannot find the words mentioned by Captain Malaravan in that fiction like revolution, progression, socialism, social change in the society, abolition of caste and women's

<sup>15</sup> *Sri Lanka Ethnic Clashes a Basic Understanding*, M.Thirunavukkarasu, Thayakam publication,1983. Page. 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Sri Lanka Ethnic Clashes a Basic Understanding*, M.Thirunavukkarasu, Thayakam publication,1983. Pag.36.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.eelamview.com/2011/11/17/hon-v-prabhakaran-press-conference-at-killinochi-2002/>

<sup>18</sup> *Heroic Day Speeches*, V. Prabhakaran, Malaiyam Publications, 2017,Page. 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Storm Bird*, Captain Malaravan, Malarannai publication, 2002, page. 65

<sup>20</sup> *Storm Bird*, Captain malaravan, Malarannai publication, 2002, page. 192

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liberation was not really dealt with by the movement in reality. Instead Mr. Tamilselvan's note was filled with heroism, sacrifice, war, loss, struggle etc..

Marxist and leftist movements started to boom and flourish worldwide between 1970 – 80s. So Marxism, socialism and the leftist ideologies and concepts followed by the LTTEs were based on the time it got started. Since the LTTE movement started during the booming period of Marxism and leftist movement, they adapted these movements' ideologies as theirs.

Another reason is that the armed struggle started by them needs complete dedication and support from the public. They were facing lots of challenges, they were suffering to get basic things like food, shelter, money and an army of people (People who are even ready to die) so they were in the position to depend on the public for their basic supplies. The LTTE thought that everything will happen only when they represent themselves different from other political parties who give false promises to the people; so, they should make the people believe that they will liberate them completely. So on contrary to other political parties the LTTEs faced National Ethnic problems and social problems in the front line and portrayed themselves to be the most progressive, promising and straightforward leftist movement. The LTTEs propagated and made the people to believe that they were their saviors.

Another reason for the rise of the armed struggle movements is when the other Tamil political parties including the leftist movements propagated for freedom and a piece of land within the integrated Lanka for the peaceful and liberated life of the Tamil people. The tigers came in with other propaganda; they declared their struggle as a struggle for a separate nation for Tamil people. They faced many questions like will it be the land for all the people? Will it be the liberated land without discrimination? Etc.. Till the armed struggles the demand and slogans from the other political parties were for power, self – determination, justice and a fair practice, but the LTTEs entry into the struggle changed everything. The LTTEs demanded revolution, equality, progression in their livelihood, caste abolition, and class equality in the society. They propagated for the new society.

Almost all the movements like Marxism and all the leftist movements were strongly protesting, voicing for the national level liberation, and voicing against the caste and class discrimination so the LTTEs also started following their path and protested for their liberation and worked against the class and caste discriminations.

Later when LTTEs attention shifted from people's welfare to foreign countries, they decided to leave beside the ideology they adapted from Marxism and the leftist movements.

Regarding this Mr. Govindhan has mentioned about this in work '*Towards the New World*<sup>21</sup>'. He has written fiction based on certain incidents that happened in the Telo Movement. In that there was a question asked to him via a letter i.e. is the association (Telo) supporting socialism? Is that the reason that stops the capitalists from funding the association?. Mr. Govindhan said that, when the letter was answered, they used to start it with the salutation 'Dear Comrade', later it would be stroked and replaced with 'Dear Friend, long live Tamil Eezham' and so on. When this change was questioned he answered that, 'they can write with the old salutation (Dear Comrade), but their purpose and needs will not be served with that; He says that their basic principle will go wrong. He also mentioned that, since their livelihood seems to be the biggest problem, following the exact principles in the rule book will not provide them with the required monetary and other basic needs. So to get those basic needs they were forced to follow certain strategies and do certain adjustments according to the scenario, even if they like it or not'.

It is best to think about the tactics and strategies followed by LTTEs in today's scenario should be taken into consideration. The LTTEs were following the policies and positioning which was broken and altered according to the situation. Because of these reasons we cannot accept them as the people who follow equality.

Mr. Guna Kaviyazhagan portrays the philosophical stand of the Tigers in his work 'Karbha Nilam' as follows 'we cannot access the Tigers based on the Worldly philosophical stands, because they follow any of the worldly philosophies as their own'. The Tiger was uncertain and did not understand the philosophies they followed. This lack of understanding is the major reason which prevents them from understanding the caste, class and the religion related problems of the people.

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<sup>21</sup> *Towards the New world*, Govindan, Thippori Publication, 1985, page.156

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