

Inclusion and the right to dignity

On the morning of April 3, the front pages of newspapers told us of violent protests by Dalits in northern India the day before. They had opposed the dilution by the Supreme Court, in its order of March 20, 2018, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Blazing headlines and accounts that followed told us how many people had been killed and injured, about innumerable acts of arson, of the blocking of trains, closure of shops and the calling in of Central forces in some States. Sadly, the tone of most reports was dispassionate, soulless and bare. They might have been recounting a tale of a privileged group inflicting violence on geographical and human landscapes for the noble purpose of lowering taxes.

But we need to go beyond headlines and ask why a vulnerable community took to the streets. Think of its desperation, how it has lost confidence in the ability of Indian democracy and now the judiciary to give it justice, how the promises of the Constitution have been blatantly and vulgarly betrayed, and how it has been subjected to repeated indignities, reiterated insults and bodily harm by citizens of this great Republic. Worse, its own leaders have let it down.

If the leadership had faithfully discharged its mandate of representing the needs of Dalits, the represented would not be living lives that are best described as subhuman. In January 2016 the death of Rohith Vemula, in July 2016 the public attacks on Dalits in Una, and earlier this year attacks on celebrations of the historic Bhima-Koregaon battle in Maharashtra showed up in great detail the flaws of our body politic. How many more indignities does the community have to suffer? How long will non-Dalits be indifferent to this suffering? It is time to reflect. What has gone wrong with the project of justice that independent India initiated with a flourish? What has gone wrong with our own sensibilities? It is time to agonise and to feel shame.

Affirmative action policies centring on the politics of presence have certainly contributed to the repair of historical wrongs. The advantages of these policies are, however, unevenly spread out. The constituency of affirmative action has benefited in bits and pieces. For instance, we see the making of an educated and professionally qualified Dalit middle class. A Dalit movement has succeeded in prising open worlds that for long had been closed to the community. Activists have seized the right to voice through collective action, and now influence and even shape, public debates.

Today, Dalits write their own histories and biographies. A vibrant literary movement denounces the ostracism of an entire community from mainstream society, and chronicles the nerve-racking experience of being treated as an outcaste. Challenging prevailing literary conventions, rewriting the script of literary and poetic production, inserting the community into critical narratives of the Indian nation, and intent on representing their own community, writers have profoundly dented the way we think of others and of ourselves.

This genre of literature has gained considerable acclaim. English translations of Dalit literary works, for example Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables* (2005), and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009), have expanded the canon of post-colonial literature and aesthetics in Indian and western universities. And, above all, electoral politics, affirmative action and the space afforded by civil society for mobilisation have enabled a suppressed community to recover agency and speak back to codified power. Yet caste-based discrimination persists in significant areas of social interaction. In short, the one vital good that the justice project tries to secure — respect/self-respect — continues to elude attempts at repair of historical injustice.

The impact of disrespect upon the Dalit community cannot be underestimated. Disrespect

reinforces other injustices confronted by the community in everyday life. And it disrupts social relationships based on the reciprocal obligation to see each other as equal and as worthy of dignity. Disrespect demoralises and diminishes human beings and erodes their confidence to participate in the multiple transactions of society with a degree of assurance. Despite historical struggles against rank discrimination in words, verse, and collective action, despite acceptance of historical wrongs by the leaders of the freedom struggle, despite the mobilisation of the Dalit community, and despite affirmative action, caste-based discrimination continues to relentlessly stalk the political biography of independent India. Till today what caste we belong to continues to profile social relations, codify inequalities, govern access to opportunities and propel multiple atrocities. The project of justice remains unrealised.

Indians have failed to secure justice for their own fellow citizens. It is time to express solidarity. Constitutional and legislative provisions and Supreme Court judgments are important, but they are simply not enough. If the right to justice is violated, citizens should be exercised and agitated about this violation. For this to occur, for society to feel deeply about violations of basic rights, the right to justice has to be underpinned by a political consensus. A consensus on what constitutes, or should constitute, the basic rules of society is central to our collective lives. A social movement geared to attack caste-based discrimination can remind us that denial of respect is a problem for non-Dalits as well.

To put the issue starkly, if respect is compromised, the project of redistributive justice has borne inadequate results. One of the most essential goods human beings are entitled to, the right to dignity, has not been realised. For this right to be recognised, social movements that speak the language of equality for their own particular constituencies have to come together and support the idea of building a political consensus on what is due to all human beings, what should be done for them and what should not be done to them.

We read of such movements in pre-Independence India. In independent India, the onus of battling discrimination has fallen onto the shoulders of Dalits. The rest of society wends its way without regard for the infirmities of its fellow citizens. We have to shrug off indifference and shoulder responsibility. It is only when we concentrate on the construction of a political consensus in society, that the uncomfortable distinction between 'us' and 'them' that bedevils much of the case for remedial justice will dissolve. We have to do this because disadvantaged communities are not only likely to be economically deprived but also socially marginalised, politically insignificant in terms of the politics of participation as distinct from the 'vote', humiliated, dismissed and subjected to intense disrespect through practices of everyday life. Anyone who suffers from these multiple disadvantages will find it impossible to participate in social, economic and cultural transactions as an equal.

Certainly, efforts have been made to repair historical injustice. But the ideology of discrimination continues to dominate despite a multitude of constitutional provisions, laws, affirmative action policies and political mobilisation. We can no longer assume that some redistribution of resources will lead to respect and self-respect. The politics of voice can achieve a great deal in the public sphere, but if the ideology of discrimination continues to shape social relations, much of the gains are lost. One of the most essential goods human beings are entitled to, the right to respect, has not been realised.

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