

A summer of gathering discontent: on Dalit unrest

At the First Round Table Conference in 1930, B.R. Ambedkar reminded his audience: “The men who fought with Clive in the battle of Plassey were the Dusads, and the Dusads are Untouchables. The [men who fought in the battle of Koregaon](#) were the Mahars, and the Mahars are Untouchables. Thus in the first battle and the last battle (1757-1818) it was the Untouchables who fought on the side of the British and helped them conquer India.”

The battle of Koregaon was fought on January 1, 1818, between the upper caste army of the Peshwa empire of the Marathas on one side, and the East India Company’s army manned by Mahars and their British officers on the other. The result is viewed with mixed emotions in today’s India. It is easy to say that an Indian empire lost to the British company. But it is difficult to not acknowledge that probably the Indian empire lost because of its insistence on treating fellow Indians as untouchables.

In pre-independent India, as part of his movement on behalf of the depressed classes, Ambedkar used to commemorate the victory of the battle of Koregaon, and often visited the site of the battle itself. That tradition of celebrating the rare triumph of broken men, over the twice-born, has been followed without interruption even after Independence.

Two hundred years after that battle, no lessons appear to have been learnt. New year this time began with the bicentennial celebrations of the “victory” of the lower castes being attacked by mobs led by upper-caste leaders. The Devendra Fadnavis-led government in Maharashtra, which is often called the new Peshwai, seemed to have done enough on New Year’s Day to justify that label. The leaders of the anti-Dalit violence were allowed to roam free and Dalits are even today agitating for the [arrest of Sambhaji Bhide](#), who is said to be one of the principal instigators of the violence.

Dalit march demands Bhide’s arrest

Anti-Dalit violence is not limited to Maharashtra alone. On February 15, a retired revenue officer and Dalit activist, Bhanubhai Vankar immolated himself in the District Collectorate of Patan, north Gujarat, to protest against the State government’s failure to regularise ownership of land tilled by a Dalit. Also in Gujarat, on March 30 a 21-year-old Dalit youth called Pradip Rathod, of Timbi village in Bhavnagar district, was killed allegedly by upper caste men for owning and riding a horse. Around the same time, the Allahabad High Court dismissed a petition of a Dalit man, Sanjay Kumar Jatav, who had sought its protection to ride a horse at his baarat (wedding procession) around a village in western Uttar Pradesh’s Kasganj district. An administrative solution was sought to be brokered by the district administrator to allow Sanjay to arrive on horseback at his marriage. At least five Dalit MPs from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have publicly voiced misgivings about the Central and State governments’ handling of Dalit issues.

Into this bubbling caste cauldron, on March 20, came the Supreme Court judgment in *Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v. the State of Maharashtra*. The court in effect, defanged the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The judgment directed, “in respect of offences under the Atrocities Act, no arrest may be effected, if an accused person is a public servant, without written permission of the appointing authority and if such a person is not a public servant, without written permission of the Senior Superintendent of Police of the District... As and when a person arrested is produced before the Magistrate, the Magistrate must apply his mind to the reasons recorded and further detention should be allowed only if the reasons recorded are found to be valid. To avoid false implication, before FIR is registered, preliminary enquiry may be made whether the case falls in the parameters of the Atrocities Act and is not frivolous or

motivated.”

Notwithstanding the government’s feeble protestations of not being responsible and despite filing an immediate review petition, the judgment was perceived as the straw that broke the camel’s back. A [nationwide bandh in the first week of April](#) saw an outpouring of Dalit anger that resulted in at least 10 deaths, mostly protesters. Protests had to be put down with the heavy hand of the state. The genie of caste unrest has however escaped from the bottle of social control. There has been a counter-mobilisation to do away with caste-based reservations in favour of the Scheduled Castes. The nation stands teetering on the precipice of a hot summer of discontent. It appears, as Ambedkar put it in his last address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, that “those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.”

He had prophetically warned: “On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.”

It is an inescapable task of nation-building to seek to restore equal value to each individual who has been rendered less than a whole by socially assigned caste fractions. Ambedkar’s postulate for Dalit and Savarna alike was: “So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.” He warned: “It is not enough to be electors only. It is necessary to be law-makers; otherwise those who can be law-makers will be the masters of those who can only be electors.”

Politics reflects society. From the days of the Poona Pact of 1932, Dalits have been co-opted into the power structure on terms dictated by others. They have been given a share of the pie, but never the rights to distribute or allocate the pie. It took nearly 50 years after Independence before a subaltern party headed by Kanshi Ram, managed to install a Dalit Chief Minister in its own right. That “miracle of democracy”, to use P.V. Narasimha Rao’s felicitous phrase, grew into a full majority in 2007 with Mayawati serving a five-year term as Chief Minister till 2012.

In the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, despite a largely intact vote share, her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) failed to win a single seat in U.P. Dalit representation even in the reserved seats was provided by BJP members, many of whom had been with the BSP earlier. In terms of political power, Dalits today are no more independent wielders, but have been subordinated to their assigned roles within the Hindutva umbrella.

The wilting of the Dalit political clout has simultaneously seen an increase in the use of legal and illegal force against them, by those who think that they have at last regained their rightful roles of dominance. In response, attempts are now being made to harness the Dalit vote to the votes of others who feel equally alienated. Immediate results have followed, in the form of victories in by-elections for the Lok Sabha from Phulpur and Gorakhpur, which were constituencies earlier represented by the current Deputy Chief Minister and Chief Minister, respectively. Retribution came in the Rajya Sabha elections, when the defeat of a BSP candidate also called Bhimrao Ambedkar was loudly hailed as the revenge of Chanakyaniti.

Political power, however, cannot be an end in itself. The attempt must be to bring about a far more equitable distribution of political and social power than has hitherto happened. That power must be used to achieve social transformation and cultural change for an egalitarian India where Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are available to all. We must strive to achieve “a just society... in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of

a compassionate society”.

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