

Unpacking the Dalit angst

On April 4, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted: “[No government has, perhaps, given respect to Babasaheb](#) the way our government has.” Stung by the criticism over his government’s alleged inaction in defending the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, before the Supreme Court, Mr. Modi cited his reverence for Ambedkar as proof of his government’s commitment to the welfare of SCs and STs.

Mr. Modi deserves the credit he claimed for fast-tracking the construction of the Ambedkar International Centre in New Delhi. The Congress was in power for two-thirds of those 25-odd years that the project took for completion, but it behaved as if it never wanted to finish it.

However, Mr. Modi’s ‘credit’ amounts to nothing compared to the criticism that his government is facing as being anti-Dalit. Some Dalit leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too have openly expressed dissatisfaction with the government, depriving it of the opportunity to dismiss the matter as anti-BJP propaganda.

A summer of gathering discontent

In essence, the controversy over the Atrocities Act forces one to take a position on the special provisions for the protection and welfare of SCs/STs. Can the interests of these groups be ensured without resorting to special provisions? Second, one must consider the issue within the larger context of the unprecedented attacks on the Constitution mounted by some BJP leaders. Mr. Modi’s position appears ambiguous on special provisions and he is silent on the Constitution.

The apex court’s verdict has its origins in a 2014 report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice headed by Ramesh Bais, a BJP MP. It recommended ‘an inbuilt provision’ to protect those falsely implicated under the Atrocities Act. Through its verdict, the court has just done that.

It is not as if those Dalits protesting against the verdict are bent on falsely implicating non-Dalits in criminal cases, but they are concerned that the verdict will embolden obscurantist sections to unleash violence on the community. It matters little that the guidelines confine to atrocity cases involving government officials, but the Karni Sena has heard the message it wanted to hear.

Where the committee and the court erred is in their failure to revisit why Parliament thought it necessary to make a draconian law that bypasses due process and whether the conditions have changed so much to warrant dilution of the Act. Their single-minded pursuit to provide justice to victims of false cases at the cost of the Act’s subject matter resembles more of a butcher’s nonchalance rather than the diligence and empathy of a surgeon.

In the absence of populism

Ambedkar thundered thus in his Annihilation of Caste, “...turn in any direction you like, Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster.” Sadly, the received wisdom appears to be: to ignore the monster is to have killed it. For example, Mr. Modi’s genuine aversion to caste as a divisive force in society has been translated into myriad incongruities. One, the government still refuses to release caste data from the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), reducing the SECC to merely the Socio-Economic Census. Two, departing from tradition, the President’s annual address to Parliament this year had no references to the government’s commitment to special care that SC/STs and other weaker sections deserve.

Three, traditionally the annual Economic Survey used to carry trends in social sector spending, especially on SC/STs, minorities, etc. The Budget would follow a similar pattern. In 2015, the government dropped this feature in these important policy documents. Justifying the erasure of caste, the Finance Minister said, "Our commitment to the 'Daridra Narayan' is steadfast, as is commitment to the Constitutional principles of Equality and Justice for All, without concern for caste, creed or religion." The Budget reverted to the old pattern from the very next year (2016-17) but the change of heart was never explained. However, the Economic Survey still caters to a casteless India.

Ambedkar's Dhamma, Gandhi's Swaraj

The aversion to caste in governance needs to be contrasted with caste calculus in elections. The advocates of caste-blind approach are entitled to hope that it would lead to a casteless society. But it can also throw us into Social Darwinism.

Dalits and other weaker sections revere the Constitution as the ultimate guarantor of their rights in view of the way it recognises them. Most Indians also respect the Constitution for its obvious merits. Two notable exceptions to this are the far left and the religious right, which is represented by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and while the former remains in margins, the latter has come to dominate the mainstream.

As historian Ramachandra Guha highlighted, the RSS rejected the Constitution as it's not in tune with the Manusmriti whose laws, the RSS claimed in 1949, "excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity [among Hindus in India]." The rub is the "spontaneous obedience and conformity" to the caste system which Ambedkar found so obnoxious that he burnt the book to express his outrage.

The only change in seven decades is that the RSS no longer invokes the Manusmriti, and its chief, Mohan Bhagwat, takes a nuanced position by merely saying that the Constitution does not reflect "Bharatiya ethos". Union Minister Anantkumar Hegde ended the ambiguity, saying: "We are here to change the Constitution." A BJP MLA from Uttar Pradesh went a step ahead and declared that India would be a Hindu Rashtra by 2024. No senior leader of the government or the party contradicted any of these utterances. For Mr. Modi, silence doesn't seem to be an option any longer.

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