

Unequal spaces

The latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on atrocities against Dalits punctures the long-held view that caste matters less in urban areas. The data for 2016, which for the first time gives figures for violence against Dalits in 19 metropolitan cities in India, reveals that crimes against Dalits in urban centres reflect the pattern in the rural hinterland. For instance, Lucknow and Patna top the list of cities that have reported the highest percentage of atrocities against Dalits, and match the figures for UP and Bihar, which have reported the maximum number of violent incidents against Dalits among states.

It is often argued that urban India, being a melting pot of communities and identities, is less oppressive towards Dalits. The nature of productive forces and relations and the wealth of employment opportunities in the cities foreground class identities over caste and, in turn, help to eradicate prejudice and caste-centric violence. Babasaheb Ambedkar was convinced that urbanisation could end Dalit oppression. However, the NCRB data reveals that urban centres tend to reflect the social mores and power relations of rural hinterlands instead of evolving an autonomous social or political dynamic that is accommodative of Dalit concerns and aspirations. Cities, indeed, offer more economic opportunities. But these opportunities need not necessarily subdue or end social discrimination. The trigger of caste oppression may be different in urban and rural areas, but urban India, clearly, is no less an unequal space than rural India for Dalits.

The continuing violence against Dalits — the number of incidents is rising every year — 70 years after Independence points to a failure of politics. A progressive Constitution and numerous laws have empowered the Dalits, but these have not ended caste discrimination. In fact, the politicisation and empowerment of the Dalit community has resulted in a backlash with counter-mobilisations by communities that are reluctant to give up their social, economic and political privileges. The political mainstream seems to be incapable of addressing this impasse, which has led to the emergence of new social movements and groups. The ongoing election campaign in Gujarat reflects this churn. Both the BJP and the Congress, which have so far dominated state politics, have been forced to acknowledge the emergence of young leaders like Jignesh Mevani, who represent mobilisations outside the field of electoral politics — Mevani has now entered the electoral fray. In UP, a crucible of Dalit politics, the Bhim Army has emerged as a grassroots movement independent of the BSP to challenge the hegemony of the privileged castes. These assertions of rights, dignity and self-respect are being met with violence. That atrocities against Dalits are getting reported more and more and new forms of resistance are emerging points to the stirrings of change both in urban and rural India.

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