

Caste prejudices are hard to erase in a rural milieu

The Social Attitude Research India survey conducted in Delhi, Mumbai, Rajasthan and UP recently does not throw up any significant surprises. It shows that close to two-thirds of the population in rural Rajasthan and rural Uttar Pradesh practise untouchability and half the same population is opposed to Dalit and non-Dalit Hindu marriages. In fact, the respondents favoured a law which would prevent such marriages. While caste prejudices are very hard to erase in a rural milieu, what should be equally worrying is that they are still very much prevalent in urban areas and institutions. We saw evidence of this in the Rohit Vemula case in Hyderabad University and in the Kanhaiya case in JNU. The easiest answer is the quota system for Dalits in institutions of higher education, government jobs, local governments and so on. This is contentious because critics will argue that this gives an unfair advantage to the better off among Dalits, reinforces caste and goes against the merit principle.

The better option would be to address the problem at the primary education level. The public education system should be re-oriented to ensure that Dalit children enrol and stay in schools. Education is a cost-effective tool to ensure that disadvantaged children get a more equal footing in later life. The other method would be to have more robust implementation of poverty alleviation schemes for Dalit families. Studies have shown that those who attend schools undergo a generational transformation in their aspirations and their confidence.

The main aim should be to enable Dalits to compete on their own steam. To expect social attitudes and casteist mindsets to vanish overnight is utopian. The very fact that Dalits are still described as disadvantaged is proof how little progress there has been. The state should create enabling conditions for them to move up the social mobility ladder on their own merit. The biggest obstacle in the understanding of the persistence of class and caste is the near total absence of empowering education among Dalits. For regressive concepts such as untouchability to vanish, it is politics that must change first, mindsets will follow.

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