

Checking crimes against Dalits

Recently, the Supreme Court banned the immediate arrest of a person accused of insulting or injuring someone belonging to a Scheduled Caste or a Schedule Tribe. Critics and activists have argued that this amounts to a dilution of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (POA Act), 1989. What has been the impact of the POA Act, especially on violent crimes against Dalits?

A 2017 paper by Peter Mayer, "The better angels of their natures?", published in *Studies in Indian Politics*, argues that "contrary to popular understanding, murder, rape and arson against Dalits have declined significantly since a peak in the early 1990s." The highest rates of Dalit homicide are seen in the northern States (Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan) and in Gujarat in the west. Even here, the rates have been declining. In the southern States, the homicide rates are very low (as is the case with Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal). These trends are true for other major crimes against Dalits too.

Mayer tests out various hypotheses. Is this due to increasing Dalit literacy? He does not find a statistically significant correlation between literacy and reducing crime rates. Higher political mobilisation? A look at parliamentary ascendancy of Dalit Chief Ministers in States suggests that this does not entirely explain the decline either. Cleavages in the party system and party competition also do not explain this. The hypothesis that greater party competition allows for Dalits to have a say in government and would deter high homicide rates does not hold as those rates do not vary across two-party or multi-party systems significantly.

Mayer, however, finds a significant correlation between crime rates against Dalits and overall murder rates across States. The decline in overall rates of interpersonal violence has impacted crimes against Dalits as well, he argues. The decrease in overall crime rates is due to a better economy which has fostered "gentle commerce", and a more responsive state that acts upon the agency of the Dalits, which is seen in higher reporting of crimes against them.

Mayer concludes that even if Dalits haven't achieved equality in a caste-stratified India, they have achieved significant steps towards empowerment which has minimised their routine humiliation through various crimes committed against them.

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