Caste, Untouchability, Anti-caste Politics and Strategies

The caste system in India originated about 2,500 hundred years ago. It is prevalent not only among Hindus but also among Sikhs, Christians and Muslims. While it has many aspects, here we are concerned with the aspect of hierarchy, of high and low, of touchable and untouchable, which has provided legitimation for the unequal access to resources, and to the exploitation and oppression of lower castes, besides the discrimination against lower castes by higher castes.

The most obnoxious part of the caste system was that it designated certain groups as untouchables and outcastes, and then used this to deny them ownership of land, entry into temples, access to common resources such as water from the village tank or well. Non-untouchable castes, including the lowest among them, were not to have any physical contact with untouchables. They could not accept water or food from their hands.

In the villages, the untouchable castes performed all the menial jobs such as those of scavengers, water-carriers, skinners of hides of dead animals, leather-workers, as well as, of course, agricultural labour. Under the jajmani system, they received a fixed share of the produce from the landowning families as payment for their services.

From the middle and late nineteenth century onwards, breaches began to appear in the system described above. Economic changes, especially the commercialization of agricultural production and agrarian relations, emergence of contractual relations, new employment opportunities outside the village in factories, mandis, government service, the army (aided by education), all contributed to a shift in the position of the untouchables. Social reform movements, such as those of Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra and Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala, also began to question the caste system and caste inequality. From 1920 onwards, Gandhiji integrated the issue of abolition of untouchability into the national movement and major campaigns and struggles, such as the Vaikom (1924–25) and Guruvayur satyagrahas (1931–32) were organized.[1] Gandhiji's effort was to make the upper castes realize the enormity of the injustice done via the practice of untouchability and to persuade them to atone for this wrong. He opposed the British attempt to treat the Depressed Classes, as untouchables were then called in official parlance, as separate from Hindus, and grant them reserved seats in legislatures, based on separate electorates in the Communal Award of 1932, because once they were separated from the Hindus, there would be no ground for making Hindu society change its attitude towards them.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar, a brilliant lawyer, educated in the United States with the help of a scholarship given by the Maharaja of Baroda, emerged as a major leader of the Depressed Classes by the late 1920s. He was a Mahar, a major untouchable caste of Maharashtra. In 1932, after Gandhiji went on a fast against the Communal Award, he agreed to the Poona Pact by which the Depressed Classes (later Scheduled Castes or SC) were given reserved seats from within the general Hindu category. But by 1936, he argued that conversion to another religion was necessary and even chose Sikhism. But the conversion was deferred since the British government would not promise that the benefits of reservation would be continued in the case of conversion.

In 1936, he formed the Independent Labour Party which sought to combine with peasants and workers and contested and won a few seats in the 1937 elections to the Bombay Legislative Assembly. By the early 1940s, Ambedkar realized that his effort to build an alliance against the Congress was not making much headway, and he decided to focus on the SCs alone and formed the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942. He also cooperated, politically, with the colonial government on the understanding that he could get more benefits for the SCs. His loyalty won him a seat on the Viceroy's Executive Council (the equivalent of the cabinet) in the 1940s.

Other strands also emerged in different regions; in Punjab the Ad-Dharm, in Uttar Pradesh the Adi-Hindu and in Bengal the Namashudras. Interestingly, in both Punjab and Bengal, they allied with the pro-British Unionist Party and Krishak Praja Party respectively. In Bihar, Jagjivan Ram, who emerged as the most important Harijan Congress leader, formed the Khetmajoor Sabha and the Depressed Classes League. The main demands of Harijan organizations before independence were freedom from the begar or caste-specific imposed labour, grant of forest or wastelands for cultivation, and removal of legal disabilities from owning land, such as those imposed by the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900, which did not include SCs among agriculturist castes. Many individual Gandhians and Gandhian organizations were very active in this respect.

With independence, major initiatives in the area of removing caste injustice and inequality were to be attempted. The constitution extended political rights to all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, sex, language, race and this included the SCs. But it also specifically in Article 17 declared that: "'untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "untouchability" shall be an offence punishable with law'. In 1955, parliament passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act which further specified that any offences were punishable with a fine, and/or cancellation of licences and public grants. In 1976, the Protection of Civil Rights (Amendment) Act was passed which provided for enhanced and stringent punishment, appointment of officers and special courts to deal with offenders, legal aid for victims, etc. The constitution also made provisions for reservation of seats in legislatures and educational institutions and of government jobs for SCs. The reservations were initially made for a period of ten years but have been extended continuously since then.

Dr Ambedkar was a party to the constitutional and legal initiatives as, despite their differences in the pre-independence days, he was chosen by the Congress as the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution and was the law minister in Nehru's cabinet. However, differences emerged, and he left the government to form the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, which contested elections but its candidates mostly lost to Congress candidates in reserved seats. In 1956, he reverted to his position of conversion being necessary and, with himself at the head, led half a million people (some say 6 million), mainly Mahars, his own community, to become Buddhists. He could probably do this because reservations were not denied to Buddhist converts as they were to SCs who converted to Christianity and Islam. Some other untouchable groups, such as the Jatavs of Agra, also followed him, but many others did not.

Ambedkar died soon after, in 1956, leaving no second line of leadership. However, on the basis of a letter written by him, published posthumously, the Republican Party was founded in 1957 and it fought the elections to the Bombay Legislative Assembly in the same year and won a few

seats. Personality clashes and other issues soon led to splits and in a few years most factions joined or allied with the Congress, which under Y.B. Chavan made special efforts to accommodate them.[2]

In the early 1970s, a new trend identified as the Dalit Panthers (Dalit, meaning downtrodden, being the name by which the SCs now prefer to call themselves in various parts), emerged in Maharashtra as part of the countrywide wave of radical politics. It was first reflected in creative literature and then in politics. Established as a political organization in 1972, the Dalit Panthers leaned ideologically on Ambedkar's thought, and had their base mainly among youth and students in urban centres. They talked about revolution, but there is little evidence of any concrete strategy being evolved. The agitation for renaming Marathwada University as Ambedkar University resulted in the anti-Dalit riots in 1978 in the rural areas of Maharashtra in which the main aggressors were the middle-caste Maratha Kunbi non-Brahmin peasants.

By the 1980s, the Dalit Panthers had developed serious differences over issues such as whether or not to include non-Dalit poor and non-Buddhist Dalits, primacy of cultural versus economic struggle, as well as over personalities, for example, Raja Dhale versus Namdeo Dhasal. Splits began to occur and most factions, as in the case of the Republican Party twenty years earlier, joined or allied with Congress over time. Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of B.R. Ambedkar, in 1990 made an effort to unite all Dalit organizations for contesting the Maharashtra State Assembly elections and a huge morcha of 500,000 people was organized in Bombay but later differences cropped up again.

In North India, a new party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) emerged in the 1980s under the leadership of Kanshi Ram (and later Mayawati, who became chief minister of Uttar Pradesh) which declared electoral power as its basic aim and strategy. Though initially there was talk of Dalit and Backward Castes and minorities coming together as a bahujan samaj, in practice the BSP has become a Dalit-based party willing to ally with any political force, BJP, Congress, Janata, Samajwadi Party, as long as it advances its vote share and gets political power. Such a deal with the BJP got Mayawati her chief ministership in Uttar Pradesh in 1995 and, much to the annoyance of those who regarded V.P. Singh as the messiah of social justice, the BSP happily dropped him to support Devi Lal and Chandra Shekhar in 1990. The BSP has succeeded in securing a sufficient base among the SCs in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Madhya Pradesh for it to become a significant factor in electoral calculations of other parties and the lack of dominance of any one party has given it an importance it might not have had otherwise. A marked feature of its ideology has been a strident and often abusive stance towards upper castes in general, though proximity to power appears to be already exercising its mellowing effect.

In May 2007, Mayawati led the BSP to a clear majority in the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. This was a major achievement, because even though she had been chief minister of Uttar Pradesh earlier on three occasions, June to October 1995, March to September 1997, and May to August 2003, this was the first time a Dalit party had come to power on its own, without support from other parties. The BSP won 206 out of 403 seats. The most significant feature of the BSP victory is that Mayawati managed to attract support from across India's complex caste spectrum. Brahmins, Thakurs, Muslims and OBCs voted for the first time for a Dalit party,

because BSP had offered seats to people from these communities. As usual, this was accompanied by a colourful slogan: *Haathi nahi, Ganesh hain, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hain*: The elephant (BSP logo) is really the wise Ganesh, the trinity of gods rolled into one. After being sworn in as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh for the fourth time, on 13 May 2007, she announced that her agenda is focussed on social justice through laws and other means for weaker sections, providing employment instead of distributing money to unemployed and her slogan is to make Uttar Pradesh into an Uttam (excellent) Pradesh. In keeping with the policy of attracting the votes of upper castes, she also talked about a policy for poverty-based reservations rather than caste-based reservations.

Non-Dalit parties and groups taking up issues of concern to Dalits have also played a significant role in their empowerment. The agricultural labour unions set up by different parties and NGOs that have taken up agricultural labour issues such as wage demands, demands for employment guarantee schemes, right to work, house sites, abolition of child labour, right to education, etc., have all contributed to a new Dalit self-confidence. Exclusively Dalit organizations have also mushroomed. Dalit youth in rural areas have organized Ambedkar Sanghams. In urban areas, students, teachers, youth and office workers have been organized into associations, but these are more concerned with advancing the interests of their members and have little link with rural areas or the urban poor.

It must, however, be recognized that despite all the efforts of Dalit parties and other political groups, the majority of Dalits still vote for the Congress. It is this simple but overwhelming ground reality that has propelled Dalit leaders over the years towards the Congress and not simplistic explanations based on theories of cooption or betrayal. If their aim is to change this, Dalit ideologues will have to understand the underlying causes.

Sociologists have found that despite the claims of the leaders of the Dalits, Buddhist converts in the villages have not given up their old Hindu gods and goddesses, but have only added photographs of Ambedkar and the Buddha, in that order, to the pantheon. Buddhist converts in villages show their newfound confidence by celebrating Hindu festivals, especially ones earlier barred to them, such as Gauri puja and Ganapathi puja, with great gusto and public display, by cooking prohibited religious foods, etc. The upper castes are angered not by their having become Buddhists—they are able to accommodate that quite easily— but precisely by their defiance of traditional Hindu norms and emulation of Hindu religious practices. Thus, despite conversion, we find that Dalits feel equality with caste Hindus only when they are able to practice the same religious rites and customs which the upper castes had denied to them. Gandhiji's understanding and strategy of struggle against the Dalit problem, which emphasized gaining religious equality via temple entry, stands validated. The fate of converts to Christianity, who continue to have separate Dalit churches, or separate places within churches, who face discrimination, including denial of promotions within Church hierarchy, denial of right to perform ceremonies, refusal by priests to accept water from their hands, etc., also proves that conversion has only transferred the problem of caste-based discrimination from Hinduism to Christianity. The same is true of Muslims, with low-caste Muslim converts being treated by high-caste Ashrafs in a similar manner.

Similarly, reservation of jobs and seats in educational institutions at a higher level could only make a marginal difference. Given that, in the total population, only about 3 per cent get higher education and can have access to government jobs, the percentage of SCs who could possibly benefit is much smaller, as they are mostly poorer, more rural, etc. Reservation of seats for SCs in legislatures has had some effect, with electoral imperatives forcing representatives to take up issues of concern to their constituents, but the tendency for co-option and personal aggrandizement among representatives of SC origin has not been any lower than that among those belonging to higher-caste groups. A more recent problem is the competition between different SC castes, such as Mahais and Mangs in Maharashtra, Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, Chamars and Chuhras in North India. As the benefits of reservation are inevitably availed of by the better-off castes among the SCs, the disadvantaged ones begin to demand quotas within quotas, and intra-SC hostility is becoming increasingly politically visible. This is the logic of reservation—once reservation is secured, the only way of further improving one's prospects is by trying to secure a larger slice of the apportioned cake for one's group.

The overall position of SCs has improved considerably, nevertheless. But the causes are not to be found mainly in either conversion or reservation, the two highly visible strategies. The more invisible processes of social and economic change, of industrialization, of agricultural growth leading to growth of rural employment, of urbanization, have all helped. The extension of primary education and health facilities, the anti-poverty programme, the rural employment guarantee schemes, rural income-generating schemes such as subsidies and loans for dairying and goat rearing, the literacy campaign, the campaign for abolition of child labour, have all been crucial. The provision of house sites in villages, begun by Indira Gandhi, has been particularly important since it has removed a major instrument of coercion from the hands of the upper castes who could earlier threaten to throw out the recalcitrant members from the village land. Adult franchise, which makes the vote of even the poorest and the lowest caste valuable, has had its own consequences. Distribution of land, where it has occurred, has also helped in improving status by removing the stigma of landlessness and raising living standards. An innovative new scheme started in Andhra Pradesh enables SCs to purchase land on the market with the help of grants and loans provided by the government. The breakdown of the jajmani system, and the increasing delinking of caste from traditional occupation, has also been critical.

As a result of all these and many other similar processes, untouchability in urban areas has virtually disappeared and in rural areas has declined drastically. In the more prosperous rural areas, where employment opportunities for low castes have expanded untouchability has decreased. When employers have to seek out labour, they can ill-afford to flaunt their higher-caste status. In factories and offices, caste-based discrimination is rare, though old casteist prejudices may linger. Atrocities against SCs continue to occur, but they are usually a reaction to open defiance of upper-caste norms, such as a lower-caste boy eloping with an upper-caste girl, or lower castes allying with extremist political groups, as in Bihar, to challenge upper-caste authority. As such, the atrocities, though worthy of condemnation in the strongest terms, are to be understood as proof of increasing assertion by lower castes.

However, great inequalities still remain in access to education, to employment, to other

economic and social opportunities. The link between caste and literacy is strong, with studies showing that in villages where upper castes have had near-universal adult literacy for several decades, lower castes could have literacy rates close to zero, particularly for women.[3] In 1991, in India as a whole, while literacy rates for men were 64 per cent and for women 39 per cent, for SC men they were 46 and for SC women only 19. In Uttar Pradesh, the comparable figures were 56 and 25 and 39 and 8. In Kerala, however, the gap is much narrower, with the general figures being 94 and 86 and SC figures being 85 and 73.[4] The regional contrast shows how it is possible to reduce inequality through positive social measures such as provision of elementary education. Even the benefits of the policy of reservation cannot be utilized without education as is shown by the general inability to fill quotas reserved for SCs at every level.

In the future, too, the emphasis on anti-poverty strategies such as rapid economic development and employment, and income expansion via employment guarantee schemes and other similar measures needs to continue. Education has been found to be a major vehicle for social mobility and therefore emphasis on providing universal primary and even secondary education is an imperative. This must include a special emphasis on female education, given the direct impact observed on fertility rates. This also shows the need for greater emphasis on equal opportunities for quality education from the primary level itself as education has been found to be a critical vehicle for social mobility.

The issue of the Backward Classes or Castes, which came to a head with the Mandal report in the anti-Mandal agitation in 1990, is quite different from that of the SCs, though efforts are made at the political level to equate or collapse the two.[5] The so-called Backward Castes are really the intermediate castes whose position in the ritual hierarchy was below that of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and above that of the untouchables. They did suffer from certain ritual disabilities as compared to the upper castes, but they were in no way comparable to the SCs since they often had access to land and other economic resources. Nor did they suffer from untouchability. Besides, the category includes great disparities, with some castes or sections of castes being very powerful economically and socially and others being quite disadvantaged with a ritual position just above that of the SCs.

Sociologists have shown that Backward Castes such as the Ahirs, Yadavas, Kurmis, Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Lodhas have gained considerable economic advantage via post-independence land reform which gave land rights to ex-tenants of zamindars. This new found strength increased their political clout and representation and they are now seeking to use this clout to secure greater advantages for themselves in jobs, education, etc. In rural areas, they are the biggest exploiters of the SCs who are agricultural labourers and there is little in common between them. The Mandal report has been shown by scholars to be based on faulty methodology and a weak database. The Mandal judgments have also been subjected to severe criticism by sociologists who have argued that caste has undergone such drastic changes since independence but the judiciary is still working on the basis of outdated and ill-informed Western notions of caste. In fact, the politics of reservations for Backward Castes has more to do with sharing the loaves and fishes of office and power than with a struggle for social justice.