

The Quiet Grip of Caste*

Some time ago I visited a Dalit hamlet in Rewa district. It was hemmed in on all sides by the fields of upper-caste farmers who refused to allow any sort of approach road to reach the hamlet. There were short roads inside the hamlet, but they stopped abruptly at the edge of it. The hamlet had the feel of an island surrounded by hostile territory. I wondered whether any other country in the world still cultivated such absurd and monstrous practices as the caste system.

The next day I read an interesting article on this subject by André Béteille (“India’s Destiny not Caste in Stone”, *The Hindu*, 21 February 2012). The article began by pointing out, plausibly enough, that the hold of caste in social life is subsiding in many ways. For instance, the association between caste and occupation is not as rigid as it used to be (as Chandra Bhan Prasad puts it more succinctly, “pizza delivery is caste neutral”). Similarly, the rules of purity and pollution tend to be a little more relaxed today than a hundred years ago, at least in public spaces. Following on this, Béteille blames electoral politics, and the coverage of it in the media, for the perpetuation of caste consciousness: “If, in spite of all this, caste is maintaining or even strengthening its hold over the public consciousness, there has to be a reason for it. That reason is to be found in the domain of organised politics.” I submit, however, that there are simpler reasons for the survival of caste consciousness.

The real issue, actually, is not so much caste consciousness as the role of caste as an instrument of power. But the two are linked. To

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convey the point, some of us collected information on the share of the upper castes in positions of power and influence (POPIs) in Allahabad – the press club, the university faculty, the bar association, the top police posts, and the commanding positions in trade unions, NGOs, media houses, among other public institutions. The sample covers more than a thousand POPIs of Allahabad, spread over twenty-five public institutions. The share of the upper castes in this sample turns out to be over 75 per cent, compared with a share of around 20 per cent in the population of Uttar Pradesh as a whole. Brahmins and Kayasthas alone have cornered about half of the POPIs – more than four times their share in the population of Uttar Pradesh (they could be said to constitute a sea of POPIs). These are approximate figures, partly based on guessing castes from surnames, but the pattern is clear enough: the upper castes continue their overwhelming control over public institutions. It is not that other castes (or communities) are completely unrepresented, but, with such a large majority, it stands to reason that the upper castes call the shots.

An attempt was also made to identify Dalits in the sample. This required further enquiries, since Dalits (unlike many upper castes) often do not have recognisable surnames. In fact, many of them do not have a surname at all, or, at any rate, are listed in official documents (such as employee registers) under names – or nicknames – such as “Chote” or “Sunita”. That itself is quite telling. More importantly, there was no evidence of any significant presence of Dalits in the sample institutions, except a few – such as the university faculty – where mandatory quotas apply.

It is worth noting that the dominance of the upper castes seems to be, if anything, even stronger in institutions of “civil society” than in state institutions. For instance, in Allahabad the share of the upper castes is around 80 per cent among NGO leaders and trade union leaders, close to 90 per cent in the executive committee of the Bar Association, and a full 100 per cent among office bearers of the Press Club (which is, in fact, made up almost entirely of Brahmins and Kayasthas). Even trade unions of workers who belong mainly

to disadvantaged castes are often under the control of upper-caste leaders. There is some food for thought here about the grip of the caste hierarchy on social institutions, including some that are otherwise anti-establishment.

There is a little (not much) more balance in state institutions such as the municipality staff or the faculty of Allahabad University. Even there, however, the share of Dalits is minuscule, especially in the more prestigious categories such as “head of department”. The reservation norms are evidently being circumvented with abandon.

Perhaps Allahabad is particularly conservative in caste matters. It is, of course, just one city, though it is worth mentioning that Allahabad is a bit of a centre of power in its own right. For instance, at least seven of India’s fourteen prime ministers were born, brought up, educated, or elected in Allahabad. And the alumni of Allahabad University are found in large numbers in the civil services and other public institutions across India. Still, there is no intention here of singling out Allahabad, where the numbers happen to come from, for special attention. The point is to illustrate a general pattern that also applies to varying extents in many other parts of India. Indeed, a number of recent studies have brought out, in similar ways, the continued dominance of the upper castes in media houses, corporate boards, judicial institutions, and even cricket teams.

Coming back to the issues raised earlier, it is far from clear why “caste consciousness” has any reason to die down in such circumstances. There is really no need to invoke electoral politics (important as that factor may be) to understand why caste consciousness persists. The dying of caste consciousness, in this situation, would sound like a good deal for the upper castes, since the system of domination would continue, but little notice would be taken of it – and this is indeed happening to some extent. Dalits, however, have absolutely no reason to be “unconscious” of the dominance of the upper castes. A Brahmin who enters the Press Club and finds himself in the company of other Brahmins and upper castes may be unconscious of the situation, and even feel somewhat proud of this lack of caste consciousness. But a

Dalit who enters the same room and finds himself surrounded by upper-caste colleagues, some of them possibly active custodians of the caste hierarchy, is unlikely to feel at home. Similarly, the Dalits who are marooned in isolated hamlets of Rewa district can be forgiven for feeling a little caste conscious.

No-one can be blamed for being born in an upper caste, since it is not a matter of choice. But perhaps this privilege entails a special responsibility to fight the caste system, instead of leaving that to the Dalits – or worse, obstructing their struggle for equality (like the landlords of Rewa). Surely, for instance, there is a role for greater attention to “diversity” in public institutions, of the sort that has significantly reduced ethnic or gender imbalances in other countries. What prevents the bar association, NGOs, or trade unions in Allahabad from ensuring that they do not become upper-caste clubs? Perhaps there is a constructive role here for caste consciousness of a different kind.