

Why Dalits dislike environmentalists

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There is an alienation between two of the most powerful social movements in India - the anti-caste movement and the environmental movement. The reasons for this have to be analysed seriously.

THAT Dalits (Adivasis and others) dislike environmentalism is a fairly well-known but little discussed fact. It was first brought home to me at a large NGO conference, when several Dalit activists stated defiantly, "we should go into their cities and pollute them". Similar sentiments have been heard from Adivasis: "if you like the forests so much, why don't you come and live here and give us your city flats?" There is in fact an alienation between two of the most powerful social movements in India - the anti-caste movement and the environmental movement - that has to be seriously analysed.

Last year in Orissa, where I have been employed by a Dalit/Adivasi-oriented and rather chaotically run NGO, NISWASS (it not only has village level developmental work, but also BSW and MSW social work courses), I saw more of this. Coming to Bhubaneswar, I had quite naturally wanted to see the nearby Lake Chilka, famous in movement circles for struggles against Tata-sponsored prawn cultivation. I did not quite anticipate the indifference, if not hostility to the cause in NISWASS circles, but nevertheless we got the use of an institution vehicle and organised a one-day visit to three fishing communities, with both our main guides being local Dalits.

The visit itself was quite interesting - the people described not simply their battle with the Tatas, now long gone, but even more their problems with ongoing government restrictions about where they could live, where they could fish; they complained about "outsiders" coming in to seize fishing rights, and expressed an urge for their earlier freedoms before not only companies and encroachers but before the top-down government cooperatives had come into their lives.

Fishing communities in Orissa, as in Bengal, are classified as "Scheduled Castes" and I had been told by Bengali friends that theirs was indeed a "Dalit struggle". In Chilka itself, at least one vocal spokesman identified himself as "Dalit". It was only later, in discussions with a NISWASS leader, that this identity became problematised: "They only got themselves included in the SC list recently. Don't worry about them, fishermen are very well organised and have a lot of people to speak for their cause". Not so difficult to understand! In fact, the Keutas, the main fishing community on the Orissa coast, are classified as Scheduled Castes but were never untouchable, never considered polluting. The ex-untouchables in the area are the Hadis, and as one Hadi graduate later explained, the Hadis are socially not really allowed to fish: there are no "legal" sanctions as previously but they are not given access to the skills, and are not really "good" at it. Hadis are village servants, doing "polluting" tasks, and their perspective on the whole issue is different.

According to the Keutas, "outsiders" were claiming the benefits of the increasingly prosperous business of fishing; according to the Hadis, they were excluded from the benefits currently being gained by castes like the Keutas. This kind of problem is never, to my knowledge, discussed by environmentalists talking about reliance on "traditional fishing techniques" as opposed to "modern" fishing. There is indeed much to learn from traditional knowledge here, as in all other cases of caste-based artisan techniques, but can this be done without dealing with the practices of caste exclusion that went along with these? That the "traditional" producers of any type should have an exclusive or primary right to that production is not an innocent demand either; Dalits in

Punjab were excluded from land ownership by a British law that forbade land transfer to “non-cultivating castes”.

Much today is written about traditional water harvesting systems. One example of these is the phad system in Maharashtra, and it seems to be what all environmentalists say it was: ecologically sustainable, and providing equal water access to all cultivators. What is usually not said is that only “cultivators” had the right to water - Other Backward Class artisans and untouchable service castes of the village, who were socially excluded from cultivation, were also excluded from water rights. Raising questions of equal water rights or land to the tiller entails challenging tradition as well as the current capitalist structures of domination, but the silence of most environmental descriptions here is disturbing.

Indeed, reading environmentalist descriptions and Dalit descriptions of pre-British Indian villages reveals entirely different worlds. One is a world of harmony with nature, of different caste specializations resulting in sustainable filling of “ecological niches” (as Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha have put it) and non-competitive (i.e. peaceful) relations with each other, almost the autonomous “little republics” described by the British. The world is a picture of domination and tyranny, with significant sections of the village excluded even from its human membership and almost all forced into narrow fragmented lives, closer in fact to Marx's comments about the imprisonment of human minds. Mahatma Gandhi had spoken of “Ramraj” and Ambedkar of “cesspools”; the contrast between these perspectives remains as stark today as they were 50 years ago.

Is it an accident that these issues are not discussed? Nearly all of those writing on environmental issues in Orissa are upper caste people. The ex-student leader of the Chilka campaign in fact comes from a Brahmin community in Orissa, the one that provides priests for the Jaganath temple (they forbade even Indira Gandhi from entering the temple on the grounds that she had married a Parsi). Coming from such a caste cannot of course disqualify any individual from taking part in a movement or becoming a leader. But from Phule to Ambedkar, anti-caste movement activists have laid down one condition for Brahmins joining them: renounce the shastras and puranas, the “sacred” scriptures which legitimise caste. But this is precisely what is not being done; on the contrary, in Orissa and elsewhere a large section of the environmentalist leadership is trying to base itself on these scriptures.

What of Maharashtra, where there has been historically a much stronger anti-caste movement and much discussion in leftist circles recently, of “Brahminism”? Here one might expect upper caste environmentalists to be much more savvy. Unfortunately not. Sanjay Sanghvi and other representatives of the Narmada Bachao Andolan recently attended two seminars at Pune University, one on “New Social Movements” and one on the “Post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement”. Their journal Andolan reported only on the second seminar, congratulating Dalits on their growing self-criticism, but giving a Brahminic misspelling of Jotiba Phule's name and never mentioning the explicit challenges to the NBA put in the social movement seminar by Adivasi leader Waharu Sonavane.

Waharu's question was: “Why are there no adivasis in the NBA leadership?” Sanghvi could have replied: Well, we recognise the problem, we want to deal with it, let's discuss it, etc. But he did not. Instead he made the insulting and dismissing response, “Our village level leaders are all Adivasis”. The question of leadership and the question of identity are two important issues being raised today by the anti-caste movement. Kancha Ilaiah, one of the leaders who has raised both these issues, has argued in “Why I Am Not A Hindu” that Dalit-Bahujan social, cultural and religious practices are entirely different. In fact, the popular devatas in Maharashtrian rural

culture are Vithoba, Khandoba, Bhiroba, Jotiba and the like. Phule takes his name from the black peasant devata Jotiba, not from “Jyoti”. The spelling of his name is a clear Brahmin-non-Brahmin marker in Marathi. Getting this wrong means not knowing people's names. Thinking it sufficient to say that village leaders (of Adivasi villages!) are Adivasis while ignoring the issue of the upper-level leadership means not even understanding what their complaint is. And thinking that only the Dalit movement needs “self-criticism” is not only patronising, but harmful to the development of a unified people's movement in the country. This is why Dalits dislike environmentalists.