

Atrocities On Dalits Who Will Break The Status Quo

By RAJDEEP SARDESAI

THIS is the extended Ambedkar Centenary Year, with numerous celebrations being held in honour of the great leader. It is also a year in which atrocities on Dalits continue without let, be it in Andhra, Bihar or Maharashtra. We are also approaching the first anniversary of the attempted self-immolation by a youth in protest against the V.P. Singh government's decision to reserve jobs for the backward classes as recommended by the Mandal Commission.

A recent report shows that in more than 70 per cent of the villages surveyed in Marathwada, the Dalits are confined to menial jobs. This is also a year during which Vishwa Hindu Parishad activists are burning copies of the proposed Places of Worship Bill which, it is argued, interferes with the individual's right to worship. And it is also a month when a Dalit policeman was stoned to death by upper caste residents of a village in Parbhani district, Maharashtra, for entering a temple.

Political Mileage

The contrariness of the situation hardly seems to bother us. It is almost as if we have resigned ourselves to being part of a casteist, communal and sectarian nation. The abysmally few responses have been characteristically hypocritical. Politicians have sought only political mileage from the gruesome episodes of caste-related atrocities. The massacre of Harijans at Chundur in Andhra last month led to demands for the resignation of the chief minister, Mr Janardhan Reddy, by rival Congressmen and the Telugu Desam leader, Mr N. T. Rama Rao. Mirroring this, some Maharashtra opposition leaders called for the ouster of Mr Ramadas Athavale, social welfare minister and a prominent Dalit leader, following the Parbhani incident.

In both Chundur and Parbhani, judicial inquiries have been ordered. But then, over the years, inquiries have also been ordered in Jehanabad, Madurai, Nathdwara, Arwal and hundreds of other instances of caste-related atrocities. These have changed nothing. We see the same farcical scenes of a plethora of VIPs descending on the grieving families instead of launching a no-holds-barred attack against the culprits. If Indira Gandhi could begin her return to power on elephant-back from Belchhi in 1978, then the Maharashtra chief minister, Mr Sudhakarrao Naik, is hoping to consolidate his position by taking a helicopter to Parbhani.

To say that these visits by politicians are little more than vote-catching gimmicks is to state the obvious. At 15 per cent of the national electorate, Dalits are an important vote bank. Alas, they are not a group large enough to encourage the people's representatives to play a more positive role in solving their problems. In the Parbhani incident,

the Congress MLA from the area was not overly enthusiastic in attending to the matter as he felt that it would create the impression among the upper castes that he was pro-Dalit. Nor was the local Shiv Sena MLA keen to get involved as the Dalits were not his voters.

In Parbhani, the relevant files were closed until the matter was raised in Parliament, following a report in this newspaper. It is not as if the custodians of the law do not have the necessary authority to ensure that discrimination on grounds of caste is penalised. On paper, the country has a powerful law protecting the democratic rights of the Dalits. Article 17 of the Constitution clearly makes untouchability a crime. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act 1989, is a statute under which certain caste related offences can attract the death penalty.

Yet the law remains on paper. No special courts for dealing with caste offences have been appointed. Already overworked sessions courts have been empowered to function as special courts. According to the report of the national commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, published in April last year, 4,022 SC/STs were murdered and 115,055 crimes against Dalits were reported between 1981 and 1986. Given that many such crimes go unreported, the number of offences may well be much higher. Among the reasons cited by the commission for this violence are: land disputes, alienation of tribal land, bonded labour, indebtedness, wage disputes, non-responsiveness of the administrative machinery, unreasonable forest policy and casteism.

Caste Hierarchy

At one level, then, the notion of ritual pollution and caste hierarchy embedded in the Chaturvarna system is still being used by the upper castes to enforce their social hegemony in village life. The recent report by Vidhayak Sansad, an organisation working for rural uplift, shows that, out of 95 villages surveyed in Marathwada, more than half did not have common drinking water facilities, 85 per cent did not allow Dalits entry into houses, 80 per cent prohibited them from entering temples and, in a majority of the villages, the Dalits were forced to work as scavengers.

It is social discrimination that forms the basis of an economic power struggle, with the upper castes dominating the structure of agrarian relations. The 1981 census reported that there were 65 lakh agricultural labourers in Maharashtra, of which 36.84 per cent belonged to SC/STs (as against a proportion of 22.5 per cent of the population). In Bihar, the land ceiling act came into force in 1962 but it was only in 1970 that notices began to be served on people owning land in excess of the ceiling. Much of the surplus land, which government claims to have redistributed, changed

hands only on paper, with some of it being non-cultivable wasteland that leaves the beneficiary no better off. A forest department report in Maharashtra says that of ten trees felled, only one goes towards meeting the basic needs of the tribals, while the other nine benefit the forest contractor.

The economic aspects underlying caste rivalries and violence have often been ignored while discussing the failure to eradicate casteism from Indian society. The Naxalites are the only ones to have accepted the underlying reality, which might explain their popularity amongst the tribals and Dalits in parts of Andhra and Maharashtra. Mr V.P. Singh too may claim to have had economic restructuring in mind when he tabled the Mandal report. But his transparent attempt at political populism failed because he did not see the basic contradictions in putting the Dalits and the other backward castes on the same platform. After all, many of the atrocities on the Dalits have been committed by the dominant peasant OBCs.

Hard Facts

Mahatma Gandhi too erred in emphasising the moral regeneration of Hindu society when he spoke of removing untouchability. In effect, he sought to keep Dalits within the Hindu fold, in the hope that untouchability was merely a temporary, if grotesque, distortion of Hinduism. His romanticised version of Hinduism ignored the hard facts of an essentially hierarchical social structure. It is this structure that sustains untouchability and mocks the votaries of *Hindutva* who take pride in an allegedly composite and homogenous Hindu identity.

The tragedy is that Dr Ambedkar's legacy which sought to operate outside Hindu religion has also not succeeded in breaking the *status quo*. Dr Ambedkar felt that organisation, education and agitation would enable the Dalits to reverse caste prejudices. As it has turned out, Dalit political groups are totally disorganised. Education has only led to the emergence of a Dalit elite class which has slowly distanced itself from agitational Dalit politics. Instead of constructive agitation, Dalit movements have either been absorbed within mainstream parties or else have degenerated into negative militancy. The deification of Dr Ambedkar by building statues in every village appears to have taken precedence over any fight for equal rights.

Dalit activists 20 years ago may have been expected to launch agitations to create public awareness had incidents like Parbhani occurred. Today, caught up in factional politics, and bereft of any ideological thrust, these very leaders appear unwilling to disturb the existing caste equations. These self-seeking status quoists have only aided in pushing the outcasts of our society out of the mainstream.