

Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values

S.M. Michael, ed.
Vistaar Publications
New Delhi, 1999.

The fate of all edited collections is an uneven presentation of themes and perspectives and the volume under review suffers from the disparate and thematically fragmented collection of articles. In such a situation it is usually impossible to comment on each and every piece. I have therefore selected some themes on which I have reflected in the course of my own work on Dalit consciousness. One of the most interesting articles in the book is by Prof. Shayam Lal. He points out that sociologists and anthropologists have recognised the historical processes of Sanskritisation, Islamisation, Westernisation and Modernisation, but have ignored "the major cultural process of asprashyeekaran (Dalitisation)" He, therefore, focuses upon this neglected area. Referring to "the phenomenon of conversion from higher caste to the lower Untouchable caste" he cites two processes by which this transformation is effected: one, changes in the lifestyle and values of persons leading to abandoning the high-caste social and ritual position and accepting membership of lower castes; secondly, poor economic condition, landlessness and dependence on others for their livelihood. The latter could occur due to various reasons such as foreign invasions, local conquests, famines, epidemics, and other natural calamities. A separate section deals with the degradation of Rajputs, Zamindars, and peasants during the operation of the Muslim slave system in medieval India. An equal number of Hindus in his view were degraded to low untouchable status within the traditional system in which Rajputs who had taken water from the hands of Bhil women in Gujarat had been outcast and lost caste status. The touch of an untouchable and association with Muslims lowered caste status and led to an increase in the untouchable population all over India. As Prof. Shyam Lal concludes, "a caste has its

own image and identity on the basis of which it considers itself distinct from other castes. It tenaciously sticks to and justifies this identity which is the basis of the survival of the caste." However, during times of hardship, distress and economic crisis sheer physical survival outweighs the survival of identity and thus the process of merging into lower castes proceeds apace. This, according to the author has been a universal process of social change in Indian history and has occurred in every part of the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps it is this process which accounts for the fact that hierarchy appears to be acceptable to even the lowest caste who are struggling to reject their own low status. As the article titled "Ambedkar's Daughters" points out, Dalits such as Mahars, who consider themselves superior to other Harijan communities of the area, will not at all tolerate mixed marriages with castes whom they consider lower in ranking, viz. Mang, Dhor, and others. The author reports that she was told by her Mahar informants that, "You see, all people are not equal. . . . The castes have different cultures, languages and behaviour. The Mahar are higher, the Mang or Dhor are lower, and we cannot give our daughters to them or accept their girls." (p. 241) Apparently, even conversion to Christianity does not change this attitude. A Mang Christian will not marry a Mahar Christian, but within the Mahar community Hindus, Buddhists and Christians may marry freely. Likewise, as Fitzgerald mentions (chapter 5, p. 132), Dalit Buddhists apparently continue to practice untouchability against other Untouchable castes despite bitter rejection of it for themselves. Therefore, even if Dalits are not in deep conformity with the caste system, they have internalised concepts of hierarchy.

At least four articles are mainly concerned with what K.P. Singh terms as the "Dalit bourgeoisie" (p. 159) Even

when a different terminology is used the central focus of the authors such as Gailk Omvedt, B.L. Mungekar, S.P. Punalekar and Richard Pais is what Gopal Guru calls the elimination "of a homogeneous Dalit unity", pushing the Dalits away "from the centre of collective struggles to the periphery", viz. "participating in the struggle by paying only lip sympathy to the Dalit cause". (p. 141) Omvedt begins her piece by quoting Dr. Narendra Jadhav of the Reserve Bank of India, whom she describes as a most highly placed economist of Dalit background and a supporter of liberalisation. He said: "Ambedkar would have supported devaluation!" This is in contrast to the views of Teltumbde and Thorat who have vociferously argued against 'the new economic policy'. Omvedt's own position is that an examination of Ambedkar's ideas makes it clear that his moral economy was one of abundance and wealth accumulation. He rejected "the Christian glorification of poverty" and argued that "there is no Sermon on the Mount to be found in the Buddha's teachings. His teaching is to acquire wealth" (p. 281). Consequently, Ambedkar believed Buddhism was superior because lawful and moral accumulation of wealth is praised and he argues: "the trouble . . . is not with property but with the unequal distribution of it" (p. 283). Omvedt believes that Ambedkar had a positive appraisal of economic development and no inclination towards the ascetic 'limitation' of needs; he rejected what he called a 'pain economy'. She concludes: "At a time when many environmentalists . . . are preaching an anti-developmental ethic . . . (Because) of the problems of ecological destruction . . . he would have seen the solution to this in a form of sustainable development, not a rejection of development as such" (p. 184).

Mungekar also writes in a similar vein when he holds that liberalisation,

privatisation and globalisation may enable the country to secure economic growth at a relatively high rate but dispossessed groups such as the Dalits would not share the benefits because of the unequal opportunity structure. Contrary to the above, Punalekar maintains that the process of rural development has actually subordinated the Dalits. Basing his study on Maharashtra and Gujarat he argues that the benefits of development including education have created 'new' elites among the scheduled castes and tribes and given them a somewhat privileged position and a share in political power too. This internal stratification and differentiation leaves a large mass of Dalits in relative deprivation. Thus, though Punalekar sees the signs of growth and development as clear and visible, the paradox he draws attention to is the obstacles it puts in the way of social justice. Therefore, he titles his article, 'Development Against Empowerment of the Poor?' On the other hand, Richard Pais' assessment of the opportunities for social mobility in scheduled castes is one of "remarkable intergenerational mobility" and changed social status. He finds that the process of mobility in education and employment tended to promote not only individual but also group mobility. The majority of his respondents enjoyed amicable social relationships with colleagues at the place of work and neighbours in the place of residence.

Gopal Guru draws out the activist platform from such empirical studies. Observing the tensions and hostility between various Dalit castes such as the Mahars and Mangs in Maharashtra and between the Dalits of Telengana and those of coastal Andhra Pradesh he argues that the feelings of relative deprivation and the fact of social mobility of some Dalit sections stabilise the system and help it function. The Dalits who are relatively backward feel envy, contempt and hatred against their fellow Dalits who are better off in educational and material terms. Thus he sees the very advancement and development of some sections of the Dalits as a contribution to negative consciousness, diffusing the formation

of social consciousness and trapping the Dalits in the quest for social mobility—the "mobility syndrome of Dalits" (p.141). This is an extremely sectarian position and reminds one of the very old and interminable debates in the leftist parties on 'reform versus revolution'. In this context it is mandatory to decry and denounce every state policy of "transferring resources from the more privileged sections to the underprivileged sections as a part of its welfarist strategies. In doing so the state not only weakens the critical consciousness . . . but also discredits the movement by co-opting the most vocal and assertive elements" among the Dalits. From the days when Lenin denounced the "labour aristocracy" of the working class and the co-optation of the elite workers in the national consensus during World War II, this has remained a popular argument of the communists. It was this approach that led to the European communist parties raising the slogan of "Face to face with Fascism", preferring to risk their followers' lives rather than work for gradual change and reform. This tired and irrelevant argument is flogged by the theoretical stance of Guru's article. The most irresponsible statement he makes is to denounce the Indian state for shifting resources—"this includes various constitutional provisions and different welfare programmes for the Dalits—from the more privileged sections, thus reducing the absolute deprivation into relative deprivation." The author would prefer that Dalits exist in a state of absolute deprivation so that his imagined Dalits develop an equally imagined "collectively critical subversive consciousness". Relative improvements in the social, economic and educational conditions among Dalits are not only undesirable from Guru's point of view but actually the 'enemy' of their so-called "long-term interests." Arrogant intellectuals have often scoffed at the very human acceptance of compromises and argued for sacrificing small gains for their meta-theories of complete and total change.

In an earlier response to my review of her book, Omvedt had similarly

maintained that "Shashi Joshi's well-worked out theoretical interpretation of Indian history . . . describes the nature of the brahmanic-Hindu synthesis with an emphasis on its reformist and accommodating nature." She on the other hand focused on "the exploitative and oppressive aspect" and instead of my term, the "Indic pattern of synthesis" she substituted "the brahmanic synthesis" which took account of Dalit movements for change "to maintain its force." (*Economic and Political Weekly*, August 2, 1997)

None of the authors has any serious answer to the questions I raised four years ago: what made the caste system—jati vyavastha—an intrinsic part of the world-view and way of life of the 'exploited' as much as that of the 'exploiters'? Why was hierarchy accepted and internalised by all castes? Why did movements for reordering society and social relations such as the Buddhist and Jain ideological interventions not lead to large scale revolt? Why, instead, did they function like a slow molecular transformative societal force, often receiving royal and political patronage? Did not the egalitarian Bhakti movement modify the pre-existing matrix of power and compel the dominant cultural castes and discourses to accommodate them? Is this not the specific Indic civilisational model of moving towards an expanding societal order in which the nucleus of power does not jump out from the centre to the periphery but only metamorphoses in time and space?

Michael, Omvedt, Guru and Oommen all share the underlying assumption that the Bhakti movements were "reformist" and that the equality professed by them "remained a mirage" (Oommen p. 152). In their collective wisdom they can be said to hold that the Bhakti movements were "only a negative rebellion" as they "accepted a Hindu framework." The pertinent question I asked years ago is: why was a 'Hindu framework' acceptable and desirable to the Bhakti cults if the Hindu order was so universally to be indicted? (*Seminar*, June 1997). Let alone the Bhakti movements of the medieval past, even

Gandhi and Nehru are castigated for their Hinduism. Michael objects to Gandhi's opinion that Dalits could "maintain a Hindu identity without the stigma of being untouchables" as "untouchability was not an essential part of Hinduism" (p.106). The supposedly "secular" Nehru is also criticised for his *Discovery of India* which expounded "a view of history which saw Vedic culture as the core within which 'non-Aryan' and other elements were assimilated, and with the caste system functioning as a basically harmonising system for this absorption" (Omvedt, *EPW*). Thus, Hinduism is the commonly painted villain of the piece. However, as John Webster points out, persons do "not automatically cease to be Dalits upon conversion to Christianity . . . instead, the evidence points to the conclusion that, at least for Dalits, the stigma of untouchability . . . (is) an Indian, rather than exclusively, a Hindu phenomenon. A communal view of caste imposes a framework . . . which seriously distorts the empirical realities

of the Dalit situation and Dalit movement."

As Nadkarni, in a well argued article has said, the truth of the matter is that Hindu society is not amenable to easy generalisations: "The most celebrated among the Sanskrit writers—Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa—were not brahmins but came from the most deprived classes. Similarly, Satyakaam Jabaala, an eminent philosopher who wrote Aranyakas in Sanskrit, came from a low stratum of the society." And the most striking feature of the Bhakti movement was that it enveloped all the castes, including the untouchables. Ramanujan, Basaveshwara, Sant Jnaneshwar and Eknath, all inspired transcendence of caste and Hinduism ceased to be mere brahmanism, thanks to the Bhakti movement. Zelliott (1966) has listed several bhakti saint-poets from among the untouchables—Nandanar, Tiruppan Alvar, Ravidas, Chokhamela, Mahar Gopal Baba, and Santbai, a Chamar woman saint.

The fluidity of caste in modern times

has, in any case, been demonstrated by Narayan Guru Swamy's movement in the early 20th century which transformed the formerly untouchable caste of Ezhavas into an honoured part of Hindu society. The reorganisation of whole castes and their upward mobility has been encapsulated in the scholarly work of M.N. Srinivas through his concept of 'Sanskritisation'. One of the spectacular success stories of transformation of an almost untouchable caste into a powerful community is that of the Nadars in Tamilnadu (Nadkarni, *EPW*, August 16-23, 1997). Of course, the backward classes since independence have shown little interest in the plight of Dalits (who themselves are not averse to hierarchical divisions) and of late have shown great violence in their relations with the latter. The final battle for social justice cannot be fought with simplistic slogans but by understanding and using the logic of the Indian pattern.

Shashi Joshi is a Fellow at the
I.I.A.S., Shimla

Development and Decay of Parliament in India

Although the Constitution makers had established parliamentary system in India, it got converted into an executive centric or a primeministerial system of government as a corollary of the persistence of one party dominance namely Congress for more than four decades (from 1947 to 1989) with brief interludes from 1969 to 1971 and from 1977 to 1980. This explains the dearth of studies on the Indian Parliament. Another reason for this could be the impact of American behaviouralism on the Indian and foreign political scientists engaged in the study of politics in India. It directed their attention towards the study of political behaviour and made them neglect that of the institutions. The seminal studies of W.H. Morris-Jones, *Parliament in India*

(Longman, Green and Company, London, 1957) and Subhash C. Kashyap, *Parliament in the Indian Polity* (Manager, Government of India Press, New, 1980) are the only notable exceptions in this context.

But the regionalisation of Indian politics as a result of the cumulative impact of the processes of modernisation, politicisation and economic development or maldevelopment on the one hand and disappearance of the national leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Jai Parkash Narayan and Rajiv Gandhi on the other, has culminated in the conversion of one party dominant system into a multi-party system. This has led to the decline of the executive and enhanced the importance

of Parliament since 1989 despite the dissolution of the Lok Sabha and the consequent mid-term elections in 1991. As a result the importance of the study of the Indian Parliament has been recognised. The degeneration that has set in over the years in the behaviour of the parliamentarians has made the study of this institution all the more necessary.

The book under review is the concluding volume of a highly ambitious but much needed six-volume research project on the history of the Indian Parliament executed for the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi by Dr. Subhash C. Kashyap, former secretary General of Lok Sabha.

In the first volume, Dr. Kashyap gave an account of the evolution of the

History of Parliament in India, Vol. 6
by Subhash C. Kashyap
Shipra Publications, New Delhi,
2000, Rs. 850/- U.S. \$85. pp. 572,