

SOCIAL PREJUDICE

Caste Abuse

IT WAS a grim warning for all users of intemperate language, and particularly for citizens of India who continue to believe that caste bestows special rights on an individual. Untouchability has long ago been 'abolished', but caste prejudice is one of the most insidious cankers eating into the country's vitals. At 4 p.m. on August 16, Metropolitan Magistrate Thakur Dass Kashav delivered a judgement in one of Delhi's Patiala House court rooms that could exert considerable influence on such bigotry.

Kashav concluded that Captain Kuldip Chand Mehra, 57, who is deputy director (operations) and belongs to an Indian Airlines elite Grade 18, was guilty of having abused Om Pal Jatav, 36, a transport assistant of the corporation posted at Palam Airport, by addressing him as a *chuda* (sweeper)—a reflection on Jatav's cobbler caste. "The convict is not a previous convict and is holding a very responsible post," said Kashav. "So keeping in view all these facts I am of the opinion that the punishment of imprisonment of one month rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs 250 shall meet the ends of justice." Though he is out on bail, if he is imprisoned even for an hour, under the airline's rules, he could lose his job.

Printed Roster: The incident that sparked off the *State versus Kuldip Chand Mehra* case occurred on April 11, 1977. That afternoon, Jatav was shift in-charge and responsible for arranging to pick up and drop crew members of airline flights. Every day, the transport department receives a printed roster listing the names of all crew members passing through the airport on that day. Jatav's roster carried the name of Captain H. Bhattacharjee as the commander of Flight 424 from Srinagar. At the last moment, as it later transpired, Bhattacharjee was replaced by Mehra.

When Flight 424 landed, Mehra and his co-pilot V.K. Sharma walked to the transport department, and Mehra brusquely asked Jatav for a car to take him home. "I told him respectfully that his name did not figure in the roster," recalls Jatav, "and asked him which flight he had flown in on." Jatav points out that many crew members travel by routine flights as non-flying members, called Staff On Duty (SOD). Mehra was apparently infuriated because Jatav asked him whether he was SOD that day.

"Nevertheless," says Jatav, "I told Captain Mehra that I would immediately arrange a car to take him home." Still furious, however, Mehra allegedly launched

into some round abuse. "*Kis b.....d ne tum chudon ko naukri di hai? Main tumhari naukri khatam kar doonga.*" Mehra yelled. (Which s..... gave you sweepers employment? I can get you sacked in no time).

Thereafter, Mehra, according to the case records, went upstairs to the Operations Movement Control and telephoned both the chief engineering manager and the regional director, but they were unavailable. Jatav says that Mehra eventually commandeered an airlines car, pushed its driver aside, and drove off. Jatav then made a detailed entry in his log book.

Formal Letter: At that time Mehra was also the administrative officer at Palam, and the following day he wrote a formal letter to the Chief Engineering Manager, Dharam Vir, complaining about Jatav's "misbehaviour". Jatav was summoned and hauled over the coals by Vir. At that point, he says, he became alarmed. "Captain Mehra could ruin my career for nothing," he says. "So I



Jatav: fighting for his rights

went to the lounge, borrowed paper and carbons, and wrote out a complaint."

The complaint was lodged with the inspector-in-charge of the Palam police chowki, Sahdev Sharma. Jatav alleges that Sharma deliberately prolonged his investigation, and so the official police First Information Report (FIR) was lodged only on August 20 that year, more than four months later.

On January 9, 1981, Jatav filed a complaint against Sharma himself, alleging that the inspector was thwarting the case's progress. The case against Mehra, meanwhile

had begun some time in early 1978, under Section 7(1) of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, and the hearings kept dragging on. Kashav was the third magistrate to hear the case. Public Prosecutor Gulab Singh Mehra had been specially assigned to Jatav's case because he, too, belonged to a Scheduled caste and government orders specify such "sympathetic" help. In April last year, however, prosecutor Mehra was arrested by the Anti-Corruption Branch of the Delhi Police because he was caught "red-handed" accepting a bribe of Rs 200.

Backtracking: Undaunted, Jatav is currently pursuing his complaint against the inspector and trying to get him listed as another accused in the case. The complaint states that after filing the FIR, Sharma backtracked by claiming on the witness stand that there were no eye-witnesses to the Mehra-Jatav fracas, although Jatav had produced four prosecution witnesses to back his case.

Jatav joined Indian Airlines in 1972 and has not been promoted even once. He says that the promotion rules were changed in 1977 to state that transport officers would need to hold diplomas or degrees in automobile engineering, a qualification Jatav lacks although he is a graduate. The be-whiskered Jatav, who lives in very lower-middle class area in Delhi's Karol Bagh, says that he has spent almost Rs 30,000 on the case, often taking leave without pay to appear in court. In May 1979, after hearing that Captain Mehra had been granted legal aid of Rs 4,400 by the airlines, Jatav wrote to his superiors requesting similar monetary help but was turned down.

When contacted by INDIA TODAY, Captain Mehra, who is now an Airbus commander and was promoted to his present post only in May this year, refused to discuss the case at length. But the pilot seems quite confident that his revision application against Kashav's verdict, pending now in the Sessions Court, will "vindicate" his stand.

Mehra refused to be photographed, saying: "Jatav belongs to the lowly Grade 3/6, miles below mine. How can you think of printing my photograph alongside that *chamar's* on the same page of your magazine?" Claiming that all the witnesses had testified in his favour—actually only Inspector Sharma has turned hostile—Mehra said: "Kashav is also from a scheduled caste."

Mehra's militancy does not end there. He happens to be president of the Airlines Unreserved Staff Welfare Association (AUSWA) which seeks to "protect" the right of the upper castes against "the pernicious influences of reservations and favouritism for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes".

—CHAITANYA KALBAG