

India, the class act

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‘With this kind of rebellious example, how will fair play and righteousness prevail? Won't the lower castes get out of hand? In this decadent age, common men follow the right paths out of fear — if that were destroyed, where could we find the strength to uphold the world?"

That is a passage from *Samskara*, U.R. Anantha Murthy's slim and searing novel about the cruelty and illogicality of caste in a decaying and decadent *agrahara* and the ruction caused by one rebellious Brahmin who brings home a prostitute. It dates back to 1978, and things have regressed, if anything, in the three decades since. Anantha Murthy himself says he is baffled by what he sees.

Why, I asked him, when Gandhiji himself was such a strong supporter of the caste system. As the Mahatma wrote in *Young India* in 1920, remarks he made on caste had drawn a host of vituperative reactions, some of them "prolix and unintelligible". "I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration," Gandhiji wrote. "But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural, and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better. The silent destruction and reconstruction of sub-castes have ever gone on and are bound to continue. Social pressure and public opinion can be trusted to deal with the problem. But I am certainly against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions." Of course, Gandhiji condemned untouchability as a "heinous crime against humanity".

Anantha Murthy said Gandhiji was careful to make a distinction between *varna* (class or more accurately 'functional division') and *jati* or origin. "Ideologically we talk about *varna*, politically we talk about *jati*." In the past one thousand years, he said, only two kinds of Hindus ever got beyond the caste trap — "those who fell in love with God, and

those who fell in love with a woman". The higher your caste, the more difficult your everyday life was in an Indian village. You couldn't go hunting if you were a Brahmin. If you were a lower-caste widow you could remarry. If you were a Brahmin widow you were condemned to a life of ostracism and deprivation. Girish Karnad, who wrote the screenplay for *Samskara* and acted in it, noted in the *New York Review of Books* in 2000: "...the internal diversity resulting from the caste system may be our main defence against a Hindu fascist state controlled by the traditionally advantaged classes."

Even in ancient India, *varna* was

short while I have been back in my land, I have been bewildered at how hierarchical we are, how immutable our divisions are. We pat ourselves on the back for our economic growth and gaze through our rose-tinted glasses at the superpower horizon. But we are obsessed with where we stand (or sit) in the pecking order, and what class we move in. Having lived in Japan, which is also rigidly hierarchical and where *meishis*, or business cards are sacred, I was struck by how Indians are now the world's champion exchangers of business cards, and how we have taken to studying them closely to see whether the other person's title has

his proud father bought him a wrist-watch. What temerity! The headmaster beat the boy to within an inch of his life and left him deaf and half-blind. Last month a Dalit farmer was murdered in a Maharashtra village because he dared to dig a well on his own land.

You have to pinch yourself to remember that you are in a Shining India where dollar billionaires are becoming more numerous. You're also surrounded by one-sixth of humanity. That does not mean you are in the 21st century. Why, just over two weeks ago tens of thousands of men, women and children packed Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Race Course to convert to Buddhism. Did they bet on the winning *sutra*?

The trouble is, nobody wants to admit that the caste rollercoaster is carrying us, pinned against our seats and screaming in horror, down a 70° incline and straight off the rails. Everything is reserved, and colleges are falling over each other to set aside quotas, and the Gujjars — bless them — who range from shepherds in Kashmir to royalty in Rajasthan to nomads in lower latitudes — want to be pushed even further down on the ladder so they can 'earn' the benefits of the backward castes. So much for the creamy lafyer atop the cosmic lassi. So much for the parable of the Rajput princess and her Meena loyalists working with her Gujjar daughter-in-law to interrupt the orgy of "national shame". There is a small intake of national breath at the ease with which mobs can cut off the nation's capital. Really, there is not much you can do to explain to the widows of the two policemen who were lynched by rioters why the brains of crowds of men posing with their barricades and their battering rams shrink to the size of peas, and how that kind of frenzy can be switched on, and off.

Let us leave the last words to two learned judges of the Supreme Court, who last week roundly condemned the violence and added: "As the electronic media shows, the offenders feel that they have done some very heroic or laudable thing because they show their beaming faces when the TV camera is focused on them."

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not a permanent classification. If you followed certain rules, became a vegetarian, and observed certain rituals, you could go up the *varna* ladder. But politics is a great leveller. "Everyone will become a *kshatriya*," Anantha Murthy told me. "Even Mayawati will sooner or later become a *kshatriya*. Shivaji was born a *shudra*, but he became famous as a *kshatriya* after his coronation in 1674 and even had a *Purana* written in his honour." Not really surprising if you remember that all Hindus are born *shudras* and the Brahmins among them gain twice-born status only after they acquire the sacred thread.

But that is a digression from the reality of 'caste' in India. In the

an honorific or anything that places them in a corporate or government organisation chart. A senior Singaporean I met last week remarked on how, only in India, you get people putting their former jobs on their cards, as in 'Former Ambassador to Ruritania'. Pol Pot would have loved it; 'Former Leveller of the Masses' would have looked good.

Why is caste etched so deep in our hearts? Stop and ask a Bihari for directions and, after telling you your destination is only *ek kos* distant, he will ask you where you are from and then ask: "Kya jaat hai?" A quarter-century ago, in a Harijan *toli* in a Bihar village, I remember meeting a young boy who not only wanted to go to school, but was so bright that