

Caste Iron: Will Narendra Modi Dare to Make India Equal?

The Needle's Eye



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Education and urbanisation sharply narrow the economic gap between the lower and upper castes. In bigger cities and towns, if you have a good education and a good job, your caste is not a badge of shame or pride. You might even be considered an equal

Every few weeks, India heaves with episodic rage. Communal unrest, ghar wapsi, Hindutva, freedom of speech, beef, intolerance, and now the place of Dalits in our society, and our caste and class biases: it's a pity the friendly astronauts in the International Space Station who tweet us snapshots of our lovely pelucid coastlines can't capture our clumps of flailing arms, our gusts of shouted anger, our bonfires of verity. Please understand, I am not being dismissive or contemptuous like Arun Jaitley who spoke witheringly about 'manufactured revolt'. We get genuinely upset, and then we simmer down and return to our daily struggles—until we are hit by the next shocker, like the suicide by Dalit student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University on January 17.

The question is simple: what will it take for a modern, competitive India to rise from a feudal society stuck in a swamp of inequality, prejudice, and the absence of equal opportunity generation after generation?

Surely not a revolution. We are a democracy. Just two days ago we celebrated 66 years of one of the world's most comprehensive constitutions. During the 114 days it took to debate the Draft Constitution, our Constituent Assembly wrestled frequently with the moral imperative of giving their downtrodden brethren from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes a better future.

Has that happened? At the time of independence India's population was about 345 million, which is roughly what the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes number today. We have added about a billion people

since the constitution was drafted, and we are still an unequal society.

So if not a revolution, what then? Between China's Communist takeover in 1949 and the launch of Deng Xiaoping's reforms three decades later, it took two huge upheavals, Mao's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and the deaths of nearly 60 million Chinese before that country began to lift off towards economic superiority.

CASTE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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that reservations of public-sector jobs and college seats, which are supposed to total not more than 50 per cent, will right the wrongs of centuries of discrimination, bias and class prejudice and hostility.

The nomenclature of prejudice has changed, of course. What started as shudra or the lowest caste in Vedic times became Untouchable during British rule, and then Harijan in Mahatma Gandhi's lexicon, and finally Dalit in 'modern' India (wasn't every era modern while it lasted?) We have invented sub-categories like the Mahadalits. As if enshrined affirmative action were not enough, for the past quarter-century we have also had reservations for Other Backward Classes;

within OBCs, we also now have Extremely Backward Classes.

Despite our constitution-makers' lofty idealism, caste has been a political football. Which is why Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu, who doesn't have to worry about an election until 2019, chose not to speak at all about Vemula's death, instead tweeting his excitement about flying to Zurich and then Davos. Which is why Narendra Modi could not smash through the caste wall in Bihar, and a disgraced and casteist politician like Lalu Prasad won the most seats in the state election two months ago. Which is why Modi spoke emotionally at the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University in Lucknow five days after Rohith Vemula hanged himself, saying "Politics has its place, but a mother lost her son." Uttar Pradesh, our most populous state, will elect a new government next year, and if Modi does not play his cards right, Dalit supremo Mayawati will sweep back into power.

Which is also why the symbolism is important. Vemula was a leader of the Ambedkar Students Association at Hyderabad University, and the ASA is a relatively new youth-politics organisation. Student political groups have been nurseries for many of today's leaders. Jaitley, Lalu, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, Sharad Yadav, Prakash Karat, Sitaram Yechury, Anand Sharma, Ambika Soni and K.C. Tyagi have risen from groups like the National Students Union of India, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi

Parishad, Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, Samajwadi Yuvajana Sabha, Yuva Janata, Lohia Vichar Manch, Students' Federation of India and the All India Students Federation. Campus politics is serious business.

Caste reservations are also serious business. Article 334 of the Constitution said special reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, and state assemblies would cease after ten years. Those reservations have been extended, by a decade each time, by the 23rd, 45th, 62nd, 79th and 95th Amendments, and currently stand at "seventy years" until 2020. Do you want to bet that they will never go away?

But more serious are the facts. The 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census said 35.73 per cent or 316.6

million people in rural India, and 37.9 per cent of Andhra Pradesh's rural population of 36 million, are illiterate. Only 3.54 per cent of the 2011 rural population of 886 million Indians were college graduates. 18.57 per cent of Andhra's rural population are Scheduled Castes. Only 3.11 per cent of the population of 3.22 million in Guntur district have college or post-graduate degrees.

Rohith Vemula came from Guntur district, was from a Scheduled Caste (although there has been a grotesque attempt to prove that he was not a Dalit but an OBC, meaning he was low down but not that low down the ladder), came from a broken home, was supported by a single mother, and had got into the university on merit and not through a Scheduled Caste quota. Yet he faced all the bias and prejudice directed at his 'quota'

brethren. All of them, and the ASA was just one part of it, aspired to a better life.

Ambedkar, who is worshipped by the Dalits, had only wanted to champion the cause of the Scheduled Castes. Much to his surprise, he said, he was persuaded to head the Constitution Drafting Committee. But that did not give his view of caste prejudice a roseate hue.

Warning that India would get political, but not social and economic equality, Ambedkar said in his valedictory speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949: "In India there are castes. The castes

are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality."

Does the kind of better education that Vemula sought help? Statistical expert Rajesh Shukla, who co-authored an analysis of discrimination, 'Caste In A Different Mould' and now heads People Research on India's Consumer Economy, conducted an intensive survey across 72 districts in 21 major states in late 2014. His sample covered 101,534 households; his team quizzed 20,195 respondents.

Shukla extrapolated his findings to 270 million households nationwide. If the mean annual household income for families headed by graduates was ₹335,174, those headed by "general category" or mainly upper-caste graduates came in at ₹369,654, while Scheduled Caste households headed by a graduate came in at ₹288,841—more than four times than if the household was headed by an illiterate Dalit. Also interestingly, a Dalit household headed by a graduate in a big city on average earned ₹281,603, whereas 'metro' households with upper-caste graduate heads averaged ₹350,216.

In other words, education and urbanisation sharply narrow the economic gap between the lower and upper castes. In our bigger cities and towns, if you have a good education and a good job, your caste is not a badge of shame or pride. You might even be considered an equal.

WHEN CAN WE WALK TOGETHER?



ANIRTA SHER-GIL: TWO ELEPHANTS