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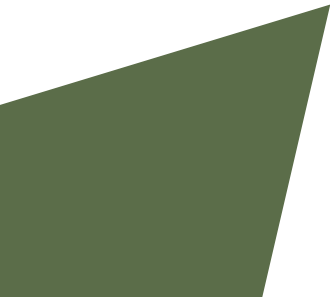
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Systemic Oppression of Dalits and their Cloaked Identity

Arnav Doshi

According to Article 46 of the Constitution of India, 1950, “The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation”¹. Today, 72 years after India’s independence, the muffled voices of Dalits struggle to break the shackles of oppression and discrimination. Silenced by the guns of violence and apprehension of political reprisal, the Dalits in India are manipulated, often pushed to the edge, with acts by the upper-caste to instigate them and invite a predictable provocative reaction as seen in the Ramabai shootings in Maharashtra in 1997. Retaliations by the Dalit community to events similar to the Ramabai shootings, form conjectures and create a backlash from both the Government and the society. These upper-caste protestors re-construct the memory and agenda of events relating to violence and history to delineate a picture that portrays the Dalit community on the wrong side of the tracks, a political opposition to the society. The upper-caste protestors also use gaslighting as a tactic to gain more power by making the Dalits question their reality and socio-political stance in Indian society.

The technique of manipulation and reconstruction of historical and present events by upper-caste protestors has two tenets. Firstly, by sensitizing and scrutinizing the information disseminated in society. In the article “Communicating Caste, Invisibilizing Violence: An Assessment of how NCERT Textbooks Teach Caste”, Sumit Chaturvedi elucidates that “the social science textbooks take shape as per the policy of the state which is in turn shaped by the realpolitik of the land. Thus, when the political sphere is not ready to confront upper-caste dominance and interrogate the very basis of the caste system, no textbooks can properly educate or sensitize students to the very violent and destructive nature of caste. While caste-based discrimination has been outlawed, many of its features such as untouchability, apartheid, social boycott, etc. are not yet obsolete and are very much a part of India’s social reality. Humiliating practices in everyday life and cases of physical violence, atrocities, riots, etc. against Dalits are some maladies perpetuated by this system”². The sensitizing of students through the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) textbook alter their primary socialization to depreciate the sacrifice and struggles that Dalits face on a daily basis. Through these textbooks, casteism is taught as ‘history’. This associates the struggles of Dalits with implied pastness, making students think that there is no continuity to these practices in the present. A struggle that is incessant in India is altered with a narrative that it

¹ Art.46, Constitution of India.

² S. Chaturvedi. *Communicating Caste, Invisibilizing Violence: An Assessment of how NCERT Textbooks Teach Caste*. The Polis Project. Retrieved from <https://thepolisproject.com/communicating-caste-invisibilizing-violence-an-assessment-of-how-ncert-textbooks-teach-caste/#.Xq53hKgzZyz>.

is historic and does not exist in the present social milieu. Hence, internalization to the subject on Dalits is manipulated for the students through NCERT textbooks.

The second segment to the manipulation and reconstruction of events is highlighted in the atrocities against Dalits in Marathwada. Congress government boldly affixed Babasaheb Ambedkar's name to the Marathwada University in 1978 which invited a backlash from the upper-caste Marathas. "The violent upper-caste mobs not only physically attacked the Dalits but seemed to have particularly looted and destroyed whatever little essential belongings like foodgrains pullovers, clothes, radio and TV sets, etc, that the Dalits had acquired"³. Through field research, the information gathered inferred that the atrocities committed against Dalits were committed to retaliate against Congress politician, Sharad Pawar, who was "responsible for emasculating the political base of Shiv Sena"⁴. The event of re-naming the university was a false pretext for upper-caste Marathas to unleash Anti-Pawar sentiments and manipulate the purpose of re-naming the Marathwada university. Another reason cited by the Marathas to justify their attacks was that "Marathas particularly the zamindars in the area are hostile to the Dalit not because of the Ambedkar issue but because of the fear that they may have to lose their land to the Dalits who have been making attempts to claim Maratha land under the Land Ceiling Act of the state government"⁵. The upper-caste protestors manipulate the purpose of events associated with Dalits to re-construct a pretext to justify their actions. Marathwada's atrocity is an instance of upper-caste Marathas attempting to manipulate an event and interpreting a negative narrative in which the upliftment of the Dalit community is the reason to depress the community.

"My birth is my fatal accident". Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hyderabad, wrote this in his suicide letter. He was a young scholar who committed suicide because the University stopped his fellowship stipend raised in the issue under the banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA). Rohith found it difficult to manage his expenses without the fellowship stipend, he found it difficult to be in a world where he was an oppressed Dalit. His searing letter was an indictment of the prejudice against Dalits in society. To propound the oppression Dalits face, Anand Patwardhan directed a film called Jai Bhim Comrade (2011). In 1997, a statue of Ambedkar was garlanded by upper-caste protestors with shoes. The Dalit community in Ramabai was outrage and protested this act of disrespect. The peaceful protests gained momentum but only to face bullets from a team of aggressive policemen who claimed to

³ G. Guru. *Understanding Violence against Dalits in Marathwada*, Vol.29 (No.29), Economic and Political 469, 470 (1994).

⁴ Ibid, at 471.

⁵ Ibid.

have retaliated in response to burning of a truck by Dalits. Although there was no concrete evidence supporting the claims of the policemen, the Dalits were caught in a crossfire, of silence and asserting their rights. To draw a link between Rohith Vemula's death and the massacre at Ramabai, Jai Bhim Comrade highlights a story of lower caste humiliation and liberal upper-caste hypocrisy and growing contradictions. Dalits are killed for leaving their traditional jobs and exploring new avenues. They are not considered equals, and any association of an educated Dalit with their community or ideology results in the relinquishment of their benefits in the society, which is executed by upper-caste protestors through gaslighting. The death of Rohith and several other Dalits in the Ramabai massacre delineates a picture of a society where equality is an ignominy, where functionalism of society thrives on the ascribed oppression of lower caste individuals, especially Dalits.

According to Dayanandan, "Theologians (and social scientists as well) must expose and reveal the nexus that exists between two major demonic forces that give power to oppression and discrimination, namely: prejudice and elitism. Power itself cannot be properly understood without comprehending the role of prejudices and elitism in providing religious and institutional sanctions for all forms of discrimination".⁶ The liberation theology of Dalits must focus on the elusive forces that propagate discrimination and oppression. "The nexus between prejudice and elitism in the Indian Caste situation can best be understood through the notions of purity and pollution"⁷. This impurity made the society believe the Dalits as untouchables. This cultivated a certain environment to which Dalits were confined to, forcefully bred in by the upper classes. L.M Shrikant stated in the report, "By the force of habit the Harijan has lost his (sic) self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself but as a privilege or presence which he must protect. He has not much courage to seek another job in the field or factory. He has become lazy in mind and body and callous to his condition; and he will not educate his children"⁸. This posits the power of the Indian caste system which transforms people into self-captivity with a bleak prospect for liberation or freedom. The callous and confined mentality adopted by Dalits ceases the process of liberation and makes policies by the government for their upliftment otiose. The incessant condemnation of Dalits by the society has pushed them into a state of stagnancy, where the current situation is considered an ideal situation with no scope of liberation. B. R Ambedkar's concern for the community was for

⁶ P. Dayanandan. *Who Needs a Liberation Theology?*, Vol. 10 (No. 1), Dalit International Newsletter 5-8 (2005).

⁷ P. Rajkumar. *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 60 (2010).

⁸ *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the Period ending 31st December 1951*, National Commission for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, 1, available at

<https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/handle/10973/15595>

the 'need to get rid of the slavish mentality' and his concern is highlighted by the catatonic state Dalits are coerced into. A state that leads to a vicious cycle of children from the Dalit community opting for the same jobs as their forefathers and not pursuing education to seek unorthodox jobs for their upliftment and thus being a slave to oppression.

One may congratulate the Congress leadership to have affixed Babasaheb Ambedkar's name to the Marathwada University and consider it a victory to the Dalit Liberation Movement. This bold decision should be considered a win for the Dalit community and a step further towards their upliftment, but, to the contrary. The emergence of Bahujan Mahasangha as a rival force had sent a message to the Congress by mobilizing several Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC) who were traditionally with the Congress. This was not a move for the upliftment of the community rather a retaliation to the Mahasangha. "In such a situation and the need to create a safe constituency, the Congress is trying to mobilize resources and OBCs for gathering Dalit and OBC support which is crucial for electoral victory. It is this political compulsion which should sufficiently explain Congress's enthusiasm over resolving the university issue in favor of Dalits in Maharashtra"⁹. What seemed to be a hope for social upliftment of the Dalits was a front for political compulsion. The incognito political compulsion by the Congress was to the benefit of the party which was crucial for gaining electoral victory and asserting dominance over the Bahujan Mahasangha. "The Dalit leadership is busy claiming victory over the government decision to include the name of Ambedkar in the name of Marathwada University"¹⁰. However, this university issue has led to the regression of the liberation of the community and Dalit politics because Dalit leaders cannot claim that their effort got Ambedkar's name attached to the university. It was a political facade and succumbing to political compulsion that won the community the name. Thus, this highlights the implicit oppression of the Dalits embedded in ostensible upliftment acts by the government.

The reality Dalits are subjugated to has become a hindrance to Dalit liberation because of Dalits internalizing their fates. They have been oppressed covertly for decades and that oppression has become their reality. "Dalit theology should offer space to derive predicates of the obligatory which constitute an ethical response to case-based discrimination"¹¹. Not only political facades but their birth itself has become their reason to accept a sub-world wherein they are bound to the oppressive forces of caste-based prejudice and elitism and have bleak to no prospects for the liberation of their interests and rights. The word 'equality' has been engraved in the preamble of

⁹ Supra 3, at 469.

¹⁰ Supra 3, at 472.

¹¹ Supra 6.

our constitution, but the reality is far from the equality our constitution-makers envisioned for this nation. Rohit Vemula was not just another dispensable Dalit in our society, his death was the seed sown for the growth of Dalit liberation against caste-based discrimination. The Dalit community must change their narrative from being the oppressed and minuscule minorities to unfold their true struggles in the society, no matter what images are constructed in textbooks. They must paint the picture they want the society to view and take their fate in their own hands than letting political milieu dictate it. Decades of oppression must be refashioned on the anvils of equality and egalitarianism for the Dalits to taste liberation.