Caste and the City

Contributed by Shivam Vij
Thursday, 22 July 2010
Last Updated Friday, 23 July 2010

Some gentlemen, who happened to belong to what the Constitution of India calls “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes”, got together and built a building called Gaurav Apartments in the east Delhi locality of Patparganj.
About two-third flats in Gaurav Apartments are occupied by Dalits and ‘tribals’. The remaining flats remain vacant as upper caste (UC) individuals are forewarned about this by (UC) property dealers.

This is the true nature of caste discrimination: it operates via exclusivism. We won’t live with you, we won’t eat with you, and we won’t socialize with you. So it should not be surprising that such marginalisation extends to the job market.

A businessman who refuses to rent a flat in Gaurav Apartments, would he ever give a job to a Dalit at his office? Unlikely. He will say that “they” lack “talent”, are not educated enough, and so on.

The reason why we hardly see Dalits around us, or in public life, is that we have kept ‘them’ away from ‘us’, and continue to do so. Reservations in government jobs and institutions of higher education, however, created a small Dalit middle class and did what had never happened before: made some Dalits and UC’s participants of the same social universe.

I saw this personally in two cases, cases that gave me this perspective and helped me reject the anti-reservations anger of the people around me. In my school in Lucknow I had a classmate, Abhijeet Yadav, whose father was a bureaucrat who had obviously benefited from post-Mandal reservations.

Although Yadavs are a middle caste (OBC’s), the classroom had a prejudice against him, expressed in the all-encompassing term ‘chamaar’. Abhijeet was not a ‘chamaar’, but that was exactly what he was called whenever he would enter into a brawl with someone in class.

Our ignorance about the difference between a ‘chamaar’ and a ‘Yadav’ was matched by our ignorance about our own castes, Many of us found ourselves asking our ‘progressive’ parents as to what castes we belonged to. I, for one, turned out to be a Khatree. I never understood what it meant.

By the time we gave our board exams, we had matured enough to realize that we just can’t do this to Abhijeet, for reasons of political correctness or the fear of a backlash from a bureaucrat, if nothing else.

But by then Abhijeet had been harassed enough (in typical public school method) to not only turn into a bully but also dropped his surname in the high school examination. He must have thought to himself: if my classmates in an elite missionary school can do this to me, my surname on the mark sheet would always beget discrimination and prejudice.

Such a clash was happening because it was the first time we were coming in contact with someone who was suffering, in the twentieth century, from the sanction given by Manu to the caste system. Abhijeet’s turning into a bully was a way of saying, ‘I refuse to become a victim figure’. This was a failure, too, of the education system: our textbooks never told us much about caste.

And then, a neigbour of ours sold his house. The entire colony was saddened that the new occupants belonged to the caste of ‘mochees’ or cobblers. Both husband and wife were in government jobs, obviously reserved for them, but the gossip in the street was that one of their kin was still a mochee.

Someone went to the previous occupants and regretted: “Kin ganday logon ko apnay makaan de diya hai. Why have you given the house to such despicable people?”

The family in turn could smell this. They decided to throw a party. This was their way of finding out who was casteist and who was not: there were some who made polite excuses and did not attend. But as the family’s acceptability in the locality grew, everyone made amends by visiting them and calling them over.

In both cases, the entry of ‘low’ caste individuals and their families into the (UC) “mainstream” took place because of reservations in government jobs.

Before this could adequately happen across India, the Indian state decided that jobs and resources were to be transferred to the private sector. Jobs in the private industry, even in the highest levels of the organized sector, often depend upon who knows whom. When you move in your own society, you think you never discriminate against anyone else.

So how do you solve the problem of Dalits? Indian industry, despite its pretensions of corporate social responsibility, is unlikely to take initiative. Unlike American corporations that believe in “diversity”, hire and train individuals from minority communities (including immigrants from India), Indian industry is unlikely to volunteer. The government must step in, as it intends to do very soon.

The Congress party has obviously learnt from its past mistakes in promising reservations in the private sector. The Congress once dominated over Indian politics. We had a virtually one-party regime.

The Congress would ideally embrace all political aspirations within itself, thus becoming a microcosm of Indian society. That explains the presence of Nehru and Patel in the same party, in the same government. But the Congress failed to do this with Dalits and ST’s in northern India.

Christopher Jaffrelot (India’s Silent Revolution, Permanent Black, 2003), meticulously shows how the Congress in north India failed to raise a Dalit leadership, and remained dominated by UC’s.
This led to the rise of caste-based parties such as those that we identify with Mayawati, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Gandhi called them ‘Harijans’ or the Children of God.

They found it condescending, and coined the term ‘Dalit’, meaning oppressed. Instead of UC’s stooping down and offering tea and sympathy, caste was pre-destined to be challenged from bottom-to-top. In the end Gandhi lost and Ambedkar won.

The urban elites of north India detests ‘low’ caste leaders, call them names, and accuse them of being casteist. If the same elites refuse to live in an apartment full of Dalits, then that’s not casteism. This is why Mayawati keeps calling everyone ‘Manuwaadi’, because everyone is Manuwaadi. The statues of Ambedkar that she keeps installing all over UP, earn scorn from the elites. They say it amounts to squandering public money.

But for Dalits these statues symbolise power and social security. These statues across UP are vandalized every time Mayawati goes out of power. When Dalits from all over India are brought for a BSP rally to Lucknow, they are immensely proud to see the gigantic Ambedkar statue at the Ambedkar Udayan, grandly seated exactly like Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial.

In her rallies, Mayawati declares, “Main chamarin hoon. Main chamaar ki beti hoon. I am a chamaar. I am the daughter of a chamaar.” She chooses to use the derogatory term ‘chamaar’ as a matter of political assertion. To hear this is a moment of great pride for her Dalit “votebank”.

She is appealing to them to use the ballot to elect a chamaar like them into power. Although realpolitik has forced her to become less radical, there was a time when Mayawati’s pet slogan was “Tilak, tarazu aur talwaar/ Maro inko jootay chaar!” My translation: ‘Curse be upon the Brahmin, Baniya and Kshatriya castes.’ Identity politics at its best. (My personal admiration for Mayawati also has to do with her self-appointment as ‘Behen’, or sister, when it would have been so easy to construct her as a ‘mother goddess’ in a mother-fixated nation. But the elites simply dismiss her as BMW, Behen Mayawati.)

Mayawati, Mulayam and Laloo symbolise political empowerment of ‘low’ castes, without which you would have had, by now, a million Naxalite mutinies in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But economic empowerment continues to elude large masses of Dalits. The story has just begun.

(Source: Ambedkar.org, religious section http://www.ambedkar.org)