

This Anti-Mandal Mania

k Balagopal

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THERE is perhaps no issue on which we are such hypocrites as caste; Nor any other which brings out all that is worst in us with such shameful ease. The moment V P Singh announces the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation of reservations for the backward castes, an avalanche of obscenity hits the country. It carries before it the Press, the universities, and opinion-makers of all kinds.

Arun Shourie, a one-time civil liberties leader, starts writing sickeningly casteist articles and editorials. He shelves temporarily his habit of delivering self-righteous sermons to the reading public and tactical advice to the National Front on its internal and external problems, and starts writing the kind of insulting stuff against the dalits that would have got him lynched if he had dared to so much as hint against the forward castes. An acknowledged constitutional expert like H M Seervai forgets for the moment the ideal of social egalitarianism that is one of the redeeming features of the Indian Constitution, and laments instead the death and destruction of merit and talent that egalitarianism has always been accused of leading to. Girilal Jain, whose explicit advocacy of Rajiv Gandhi's cause was tempered with a seemingly gentlemanly style of writing now comes out in rabid prose to demand the ouster of V P Singh's government on the ground that it has lost the sympathy of a handful of forward caste students in the north Indian capitals. Letter writers to the English language press whose staid views and laboured prose are a byword, suddenly turn poetic and start comparing the pranks of the anti-reservationists to the French student revolt of 1968 and the Chinese student uprising of 1989.

India Today, a newsmagazine that normally affects an 'objective' and unemotional style of reporting sheds all pretence of neutrality and openly comes out in full blast to bulldoze the views of its substantial readership in English, Hindi, Tamil Malayalam and Telugu. It denounces the "wretched display of cynicism" of the National Front constituents and supporters, and attacks the "cynical waffling"

of Rajiv Gandhi, *not* because all of them are covertly supporting the anti-reservation movement while defending reservations in public, but for precisely the opposite reason that they are not denouncing Mandal Commission's recommendations openly. It publishes one of the more offensive cartoons against reservations: the picture shows V P Singh and a bunch of SC, ST and BC men and women happily lolling in a sea-borne ship with three flags indicating the three categories hoisted on the deck, grinning cruelly at the forward caste students who are sinking all round with their degree certificates held high. It is difficult to imagine a more atrocious caricature of reality, which is almost exactly the opposite, not with standing all the laments you hear about reservation quotas.

The entire forward caste Hindu community has suddenly become a solid rock. Fundamentalist and secular, Marxist and Gandhian, urban and rural, have all been united as nothing else would ever have united them. They are led by the academics, the whole lot of whom—left, right and centre—have suddenly discovered that the only legitimate division of society is between the talented and the inefficient, and between the rich and the poor. People who would have normally called you a naxalite if you so much as spoke of class differences have made the sudden discovery that "the only dichotomy in Indian society is that between the haves and the have-nots", as an unlikely statement of a Haryana BJP leader puts it. Caste will undoubtedly be the last of the iniquitous institutions to die out in this country. It will outlast everything else.

Everybody has suddenly made the unbelievable discovery that there is some thing called 'merit' which has been in the possession of the Indian elite all these days, and which is now sought to be destroyed by V P Singh to please the wretched talentless backward castes and get their votes. A new term, and a new falsehood, have entered the ideological ballast of the Indian ruling classes. For four full decades it is the forward caste Hindus who have dominated every aspect

of life in the country. They have held all the land, all the capital in trade, finance and industry, they have held all the top positions in administration, education, science, technology and medicine, and what a pass they have brought the country to! The economy is running a fever of nearly double-digit inflation, coupled with sluggish growth and paucity of resources; its politics is ridden with crises of all kinds and is perverted by the ills of corruption; its agriculture is stagnant even in green revolution show-piece areas; its administration is inefficient, unimaginative, and of course corrupt. And it is these people who today claim that if others are allowed to get in, that will spell the death of development for India!

It is not very important whether the Mandal Commission's listing of backward castes is very rational and scientific. That listing is undoubtedly the weakest part of an otherwise well-argued report. A rational debate concerning the identification of backward castes can be held, and objective criteria evolved, if that is all the issue involved. After all, the south Indian states have been implementing reservations for backward castes for more than two decades, on the basis of quite a reasonable classification of backward castes. But that is not the issue at all is proved by the agitational forms and slogans chosen by the forward castes. Just as a rational debate can and must be joined rationally, a casteist onslaught can only be fought in caste terms, and in the streets if necessary. The forward caste youth are not only going around insulting and humiliating the backward castes and scheduled castes, they further have the cheek to say that the government's decision has provoked caste war in the country. The youth are spoiling for a fight and their fathers are sitting at home writing articles, editorials and speeches, egging them on to fight to the finish.

It is difficult to forget Arun Shourie's initial editorials urging the forward caste youth to not allow the agitation to die out; and he is one editor who has consistently opposed all agitations, whether in his office or out in the streets. The pamphleteers against reservations who are glorified by the names of editors of newspapers and professors in our universities have the cheek not only to claim that it is reservations that provoke casteism, but also to add the patronising bit of advice that since employees who get into offices and institutions on reservations are humiliated and insulted at the place of work, it is in the interest of their own self-respect to give up reservations, which is rather like a thief

saying that he has the habit of pocketing either people's valuables when he is in the mood, and so they had better not possess any. The association of Class I officers of the government of India urges the government not only to withdraw the decision to implement Mandal Commission's recommendations but also to withdraw the existing reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, on the ground that such political expediency will have a deleterious effect on efficiency of administration; as of now 94.32 per cent of the Class I officers of the government of India are forward caste Hindus (plus a few elite Muslims and Christians), and what exactly is their record of efficiency that justifies this casteist comment on 85 per cent of the population? In any other context such blatant deceit and hypocrisy would not have been tolerated, but then caste is quite a unique context for us Indians.

The extraordinary unanimity exhibited by the press is truly astonishing. Has it occurred to any honest press person—for reason drives us to presume that some among them must be honest people—to ponder whether this unanimity is caused exclusively by a superior concern for the future of this nation that the press possesses and Bindeswari Prasad Mandai did not—and Ram Vilas Paswan and Mulayam Singh Yadav do not—or by the more mundane fact that the entire press corps is staffed by forward caste Hindus, and that too principally Brahmins? After all, they disagree about everything under the sun; about capitalism and socialism, private sector and public sector, Rajiv Gandhi and V P Singh, Devi Lal and Arun Nehru, about every conceivable matter concerning the public life of this country. Why then does this remarkable unanimity prevail, all the way from the unlikely pair of Arun Shourie and Girilal Jain, through the English language columnists—who have probably never seen the poor village Brahmin and his destitute children about whom they are filling copious columns now, and many of whom probably have precious little of our cultural ethos left in them but still cannot forget caste prejudices—right down to the scribes of the vernacular press that normally echoes Devi Lal's diatribes against the Arun Shouries and the Goenkas of the newspaper world?

Everybody knows that if employment is all that is involved, reservation is a small issue. The role of the public sector in employment generation, which has never been commensurate with its share in investment, is now gradually being decreased. The initiative in investment is passing into the hands of the private sector, and there is very free talk of handing over

basic industries to the private sector. Even essential services like education and health are getting privatised rapidly. Within the public sector, many state governments are already implementing reservations for backward castes, and anyway V P Singh has promised he will not impose? the decision to implement Mandal Commission recommendations on any state government, a promise that was promptly followed by announcements from the chief ministers of Orissa and Himachal Pradesh that their states would not implement the decision; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would have followed suit if only both the states had not had Yadav chief ministers. And within what is left, V P Singh has excluded defence establishments, scientific and technological research institutions, and central government educational institutions from reservations for backward castes. What this leaves out, for all practical purposes, is a few jobs like postal runners and railway booking clerks, which is clearly nothing much to get excited over either way. The highly emotional opposition to reservations, therefore, must be seen not in the context of employment and unemployment, but in the context of the caste system, and the continuing role it is playing in determining the distribution of resources and political power. It is precisely because reservations attack the caste system, an attack that the Indian polity can ill-afford, that there is so much fuss against them.

To get a comprehensive look one has to see the totality of resources available in the country, and the institutional means by which they are apportioned among the people. Capital, land and the rest of nature are the three major sources whose ownership confers status and power; those who do not possess them labour on them to obtain a livelihood. The possession is for the major part with the forward castes or with the state which is again principally accessible to them. This is not just an incidental correlation of caste and class, not just a historic relic, but a real relation and a living reality. Sudipto Kaviraj, an academic whose name figures in progressive circles, has managed to convince himself of the unreality of caste (according to his opinion as quoted by *India Today*) to the extent of remarking that asking forward castes to give up jobs in favour of the dalits merely because their forefathers committed injustice ages ago is like saying that the Hindus can destroy the mosque at Ayodhya and build a temple there because some Muslim rulers in the past destroyed some temples and built mosques. It appears that when it comes to the caste question we take leave not only of our intelligence and our sensitivity

to the feelings of other people (how else does one explain the obnoxious stuff that Arun Shourie is filling the *Indian Express* with, day in and day out), but even our capacity to see things which stare us in the face. Whatever Babur did or did not do to the temple which did or did not exist at the spot where Rama did or did not take birth is a historic relic, a happening or non-happening of the past. Caste is very much a living reality. Caste was one of the principal determinants of the distribution of resources and power in medieval India, and the principal theoretical justification of exploitation; today it continues to play both the roles, in spite of a certain amount of capital penetration and political democratisation, the principal difference being that it is today juridically displaced from the high place it had in the age of the *dharmastras*. Caste is juridically dead, but very much alive politically and ideologically. If it is in general a theoretical fallacy to confuse the juridical form with the real content, one must be particularly careful in wishing away things which do not exist juridically, in a country like India whose ruling classes do not possess the requisite measure of progressive potential to be able to afford even an ideologically camouflaged reflection of all real political and economic relations in juridical forms. The inability to see this point is one of the main reasons why Marxist analysis of caste in contemporary India has generally been very unsatisfactory.

Tickets to the assembly or parliament at election time, public works and excise contracts, co-operative loans, industrial licences, supply contracts, managerial jobs in the private sector, a vice-chancellor's post, or even a favoured relation with the administration or a profitable position within the faculty of the universities where academics unburden themselves of weighty lectures on caste and class (among other things), not one of these is obtained without the use of caste. Caste plays a significant role in shaping the composition of India's elite; the propertied classes use their caste to maintain and reproduce their status, and to acquire commensurate political power. Those among the forward castes who are not blessed with much property at birth use their caste to climb up the political ladder and subsequently acquire property. Caste also plays an important role in cementing the blocks within the elite for intra-ruling class conflicts, and for mobilising the middle classes for assaults against the poor. The poor among the forward castes—who are undoubtedly numerous—have one advantage which the dalits do not have, viz, the use of caste links with the rich to obtain a small job or a petty loan; not all of them always suc-

ceed, but the possibility is undeniably present.

The forward castes use their caste identity for all these purposes, but when the backward castes attempt to use their caste identity to gain a foothold in the corridors of power—or even to get an ill-paid clerk's job—there is so much fuss about destruction of merit and death of efficiency. The casteism of the forward castes is never seen as casteism, for it is an advantage always possessed by privileged groups that their existence is taken to be part of the natural order of things. It is the challenge to that casteism that is seen as casteism. The unwritten reservation that the forward castes enjoy in the form of 'Connections' is incomparably more potent than all the recommendations Mandal has made for the benefit of the backward castes, but that is not seen as reservation.

But connections are not all; the list of reservations available in society is quite long, except that nobody thinks of them as reservations unless they take statutory form, and are meant for the benefit of the oppressed castes. Good public school education is reserved for children of the rich, and that reservation goes on for generation after generation. I am sure most people will find it terribly illogical if one says that just as everybody now argues that reservations in education to the dalits must stop after one generation, and from the second onwards they should fend for themselves, it should be equally made a rule that if parents have had public school education, their children and the subsequent generations must be denied access to such schools and must be made to study in government schools. A cultural atmosphere at home that is conducive to book learning is reserved for the Brahmins and the Brahminised upper castes. It will no doubt be regarded as a monstrous suggestion if one says that since these people have enjoyed this reservation for so many generations, hereafter Brahmin children will be removed from their homes at birth and brought up in a hostel where they will have to share a common cultural atmosphere with other castes. The 'right connections' is another reservation widely prevalent in society, and that again is available only to the rich and the privileged communities. This reservation too, far from ceasing after one generation or two, goes on for generation after generation, and indeed becomes stronger as time goes on.

But of course the biggest reservation of them all is property. Property is reserved for the progeny of the propertied, for generation after generation, irrespective of talent or merit. It will no doubt be treated as sacrilegious if one suggests that hereafter property shall not be inherited

by the children of the propertied, but by the persons who possess the greatest merit in handling it. After all, if it is a national disaster for jobs to be given to meritless persons on grounds of caste, it is equally a national disaster for property to pass into the hands of persons not competent to put it to use for no reason other than a genetic accident. And let nobody answer that if they are inefficient in managing property then they will lose it sooner or later, and let nobody prove a marginalist theorem to support this. We know very well that no such thing happens in real life.

The lawyers of the Supreme Court, in an astonishing step, boycotted work for a day in protest against the Mandal Commission even while the writ petitions filed against the Mandal Commission's recommendations were pending before the Supreme Court, and the Court had announced the dates of hearing; if the matter was something that affected the life and livelihood of the poor, these very same lawyers would have refused to so much as sign a protest note, on the ground that the matter is sub-judice; and yet when it comes to the Mandal Commission, not just one or two of them, but a majority of the Supreme Court Bar Association finds it possible to boycott the court without any compunction whatsoever. Now, all these lawyers have five figure monthly incomes, and quite a few of them six-figure incomes. Not one of them requires a government job for his or her children, they have all the required connections to push them into the affluent private sector—starting with their own practice, which will be inherited by their children whether they possess any forensic talent or not. This fact itself proves that what is involved in this whole anti-Mandal mania is not employment but casteism, but that is not the point I want to make right now. The point is: will these legal luminaries agree to the passage of a law saying that hereafter the practice of a lawyer shall not be inherited by the son or daughter but by the most talented law graduate in the neighbourhood, for any such reservation on genetic grounds is destructive of merit, and harmful to the country?

This whole humbug about merit is the most trying piece of double-speak the Indian elite has invented in the last four decades. It is difficult to believe that a man of the world like Arun Shourie, who certainly does not have the excuse of innocence that is the only plea the anti-Mandal adolescents can possibly take, really believes that he occupies the august editorial chair at the *Indian Express* for reasons of sheer merit. Arun Shourie's egoism is evident if his style of preaching, but it is difficult to believe that even

egoism can blind a man to such an extent. If Arun Shourie had not suited Goenka's politics he would not be editing *Indian Express*; and if he did not suit some proprietor's politics he would not have been editing any paper at all, notwithstanding all the talent he may possess. He is certainly aware of this, and yet he finds it possible to fill that paper, the largest circulated English daily to this country's misfortune, with casteist filth day in and day out about the merit the forward castes possess and the imbecility of the dalits.

What is most offensive is the definition being adopted for knowledge, competence, etc. We have inherited from Brahminical Hinduism a most undemocratic definition of knowledge, that dismisses as not worth knowing all that the working people know by the very nature of the work they do. They possess knowledge about cultivation, about weaving, about masonry and smithy, and even about the proper cremation of a dead body. This knowledge has been the basis of the reproduction of society's material life, and yet Brahminism would not recognise it as knowledge. That non-recognition goes with the appropriation of the material wealth produced by them. You cannot allow the working masses to claim the title of knowledge for their skills and yet deprive them of the fruits of what they produce. And so only knowledge about the *Srutis* and *Smritis* was recognised as knowledge, and proficiency in this alone signified intelligence. If a democratic revolution had properly taken place in India, and if modern science and technology had grown out of the knowledge the working people possess, perhaps we would have broken philosophically with this Brahminical epistemology, but instead of that we have completely destroyed even the basis for the traditional knowledge the working people of this country possess and grafted on to our economy the science and technology borrowed from abroad in the form of textbooks, which again has been monopolised by the very same Brahmins who have established a monopoly of book knowledge. Thus the Brahminical theory of knowledge continues to shape the curriculum of our schools and colleges, and it is proficiency in this knowledge defined as book learning that is being called 'merit'. One only has to imagine scrapping this curriculum and replacing it with knowledge about cropping, weaving and carpentry, and imagine then how handicapped the Brahminised upper castes would find themselves in such schools, to recognise the ridiculous snobbery of this whole debate about 'merit'. Either we get rid of this undemocratic educational culture, or else—since there are no signs

of such a change—accept the necessity of providing with reservations those people who are at a disadvantage in this educational culture, not because they are incapable of book learning but because they have been deliberately kept out of it for ages. And since it is on the basis of caste that they have been kept out, it is only on the basis of caste that we can identify the needy in this matter. It requires a special blindness to ignore the fact that our cultural life is still caste-determined.

As for the rest, so long as caste remains one of the determinants of property and power, so long as it is used by the rich and the powerful as a means of maintaining and strengthening their domination, it remains the moral right and indeed the political duty of the poor and the deprived to use their caste identity in the struggle for their liberation. Class struggle and caste struggle are not two opposite or contradictory things, but are closely interwoven and coterminous struggles.

To end, it is necessary to emphasise that it is pointless to see the matter in terms of employment opportunities, their dearth or paucity. The whole issue is best seen within the context of the growing authoritarianism of the Indian polity. The Indian ruling class has passed the stage where it feels it can accommodate the needs of the masses at least up to a point. Nor is it any longer really interested in long-term development on the basis of a planned use of the nation's resources. Instead its various sections are busy grabbing all that they can lay their hands on, and this is a no-holds-barred activity. Not a single one of the measures meant for the welfare of the masses, especially the rural poor who mostly belong to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and the Backward Castes, has been implemented, nor are they likely to be implemented in the future. Land ceilings, minimum wages, dry land development, rural industries, not one of these has been blessed with implementation. On the other hand the rural propertied classes are appropriating to themselves the control of not only land but all the natural resources that used to be available to the poor and provide them with some livelihood. Forests, fisheries, firewood—all of nature has passed from the hands of the labouring people into the control of the rich.

In this situation, any assertion of the poor for better opportunities is met with a policy of no appeasement and ruthless suppression. Movements of the rural poor are met with police brutality or the assaults of landlords' goons. And the aspiration of the upper fringe of the oppressed for a decent job or a share in political power is met with the kind of obscene attack that we are witnessing

today. Just as the caste identity is used to mobilise the middle classes under the *senas*, caste is again being used to incite the middle classes among the forward

castes against the poor. Such a caste mobilisation can only be fought in caste terms, and there should be no inhibitions on this score.

Communal Riots in Recent Months

Asgar Ali Engineer

The Ramjanmabhoomi issue has played a major role in sharpening communal tensions where they already existed and creating a communal divide where there was none.

COMMUNALISM does not seem to be receding in India. Not only that; the communal situation is worsening day by day.

Though the Ramjanmabhoomi controversy as a whole has led to more than 180 clashes, causing several deaths, the recent eruption of violence during the Ganpati festival in five Gujarat towns left 16 dead and nearly two dozen persons severely injured thus shattering communal harmony of past few months. It should be remembered that south Gujarat has become a communal cauldron which keeps on boiling. It spills over at the slightest pretext. In Gujarat the uneasy coalition between the Janata Dal and the BJP is also contributing to worsening of the situation. During the rathayatra through Gujarat almost all the BJP ministers took part and mobilised people and even government resources for their political game. Chimanbhai Patel just could not prevent this. Even worse there is not a single Muslim MLA from any party in the Gujarat assembly today to take up the issue on behalf of the Muslims.

The BJP is determined to increase its political clout with the Hindus by exploiting every possible religious issue. It is now established reasonably well that the BJP health minister of Gujarat, Nalin Bhatt, was instrumental in provoking riots in Baroda on September. This riot erupted when the Ganpati procession was passing through communally sensitive Mandvi locality causing eight deaths and injuries to about 24 people. Nalin Bhatt was present and 'receiving' the procession. Eyewitness account shows that Bhatt was restraining the police commissioner C P Singh from using force to curb the violence and though the curfew was imposed on the city from 8 pm rampaging mobs went round looting shops and setting them on fire till about 1 am. The Congress(1) leader Sanat Mehta who was also minister of finance in the erstwhile Congress ministry said that the BJP minister did not allow the police to lathi charge or explode tear gas shells.

J S Bandukwala, a teacher of physics in the M S University, Baroda and a

spokesperson of Muslims in the city, alleges that Nalin Bhatt, the BJP minister from Baroda is noted for his virulence against Muslims. His fanatical anti-Muslim behaviour has continued even after he became a minister. On September 4, he led a huge Ganesh procession through the heart of the city. Provocative slogans were shouted against Muslims, in Muslim localities. The Muslims reacted by throwing stones. Within minutes there was a rumour that the Muslims had killed Hindu women and children. Looting and burning of every Muslim shop on the route of the procession followed. To break open shutters gas-cutters were used. The Jama Masjid was also partially damaged. Also, Bandukwala maintains that "regrettably the government surrendered to the BJP threats and released a number of looters arrested under TDA".

It is said that as soon as the news of rioting reached Gandhi Nagar the first thing the chief minister Chimanbhai Patel did was to summon Bhatt to the state capital. Also, a senior Janata Dal leader close to the chief minister told reporters that the health minister had played a role in spreading the violence. But strangely enough on the third day Chimanbhai Patel absolved Bhatt of any complicity and he was summoned to Gandhi Nagar to attend a meeting of the health department. Obviously the BJP had protested vociferously against the Janata Dal leader's insinuation that Bhatt had a role in spreading communal violence in Baroda.

It is felt by some political observers that the chief minister first got Bhatt exposed in public and then defended his cabinet colleague and tried to absolve him of any complicity. The chief minister also tried to assuage the ruffled feelings of Muslims by ordering an inquiry into riots by a senior government official. One does not know what comes out of this inquiry. But the BJP not only forced the chief minister to release their activists arrested under TADA but also pressured him to get Bandukwala arrested. The Baroda police commissioner said that Banduk-