

THE FUTURE OF CASTE

“Turning in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path.” BR Ambedkar

I write about the future of caste with the determination and the desperation of a suicide bomber who has been handpicked to assassinate that monster. If you look closely at my fragile frame, you will see the belt-bomb strapped to me, you can count the hand-grenades I caress. On my mission, I turn bullet-spitting historian, I turn acid-throwing stalker. My anger is the most potent undetonated device that I carry. I write with frenzy, with blinding rage, with hatred, seeing nothing ahead of me but the obituary of the oppressor I set out to kill. I am buying for blood. Its death dances out in front of my eyes.

Like the rest of my tribe that is indoctrinated to destroy itself in order to annihilate a cruelty whose presence makes the world a worse place, I dream of the appointed day, I rehearse scenarios. There is a smile on my lips because I am in the company of women and men like me, who would die, if that is what it takes, to put an end to this dehumanizing system. This is an obsession, a shame that spills over.

We have chosen our target, and like a secret society of terrorists, we work out the logistics in the belief that we will live forever, that we have the license to kill. In this macabre jihad of sorts, we are convinced that caste is a savage system that deserves to be crushed and consigned to the pages of history.

Caste has survived because of its atrocities, literally over the dead bodies of lynched lovers, over charred Dalit settlements, through the use of organized violence to enforce and maintain superordination and subordination. Caste is the colourful poison in syringes injected into women who elope. Caste razes a hut to ashes in Kilvenmani. Caste kills those who are defenceless and unarmed in Khairlanji. Caste is the dried excrement that finds its way into the mouths of rebellious Dalits at Thinniyam. Caste is the massacre of Dalit village headmen at Melavalavu. Caste is extra-judicial detention, torture and murder, caste is custodial gang-rape. Caste operates in consensus. Its atrocious face comes about because of collusion, and the absence of any substantial group of privileged people who are willing to turn caste-traitors.

On the other hand, the caste-Hindu backlash refuses to accept who we are when they know what we are – it is the result of a supremacist mindset that has the single aim of delegating Dalits to the bottom of the social hierarchy. This everyday dismissal has several facets. In my immediate, personal case, it denies me my Dalit selfhood, doubts my origins because of my way with words, my choice of clothes. This explicit project engages with me in every sphere of life. It is a dual struggle where one has to escape pigeonholing and also affirm one's identity when on the edge of assimilation.

Fighting against caste, and resisting casteism involves combating the malady of easy assumptions and crude prejudices. It means dealing with a discriminatory

mindset that eagerly awaits to translate its deep-set hatred into action. This is the mindset which advises me to go to the slums and ensure that all Dalits get food, shelter and clothing when I begin a discussion on how caste operates within the classroom. It sets my priorities and defines and drafts my agenda. It dictates the sticky notes on my desk, drafts the to-do list on my mobile phone. And if I were to listen to them and submit myself, I will be bestowed with a honorary inclusion to offset the centuries of systematic exclusion. In exchange for my commodification and celebration of the outcast experience, I would become a token/trophy to be flaunted. After the ceremonial co-optation, I will be asked to don the mantle of a gate-keeper, with an instruction to let in only those who pose no threat to the status quo.

In all other cases, the system operates through distrust: and a preconceived notion that we are not only low, but also evil. Demonizing us, and dehumanizing us allows the caste-Hindus the luxury of having an argument to defend their case, and to gloss over all the social injustice that the system has permeated. This is one of the reasons why, when asked to critically reflect about the future of this structure, I find most dominant/upper castes not holding any discussion on how the structure should be dismantled, but instead, they adopt a dialogue of condescension where their approach seems to revolve around humanizing/civilizing/ educating the Dalits. Another favorite position taken by a majority of the 'upper' castes on how to eradicate the caste system is the bizzare request to scrap away the reservation policy at the earliest.

Arguments of purity/impurity of the castes are presently not as emphasized as arguments about innate intelligence/ refinement because of the social shift from importance accorded to religion and piety vis-a-vis importance accorded to talent, sophistication and social mobility. In his book on Hindu manners and customs, Abbe Dubois records an instance of how a Tamil Brahmin women fled the place when her Sudra friend publicly disclosed that she had tasted chicken broth. In the present day, neither beef-eating or beer-drinking would make anybody any less a Brahmin; just as all claims to vegetarianism by a Dalit is not going to reduce her social stigmatization.

What would the death of the Indian village – that bastion of caste supremacy – mean? Suppose we simply entrusted every village to our governments, and suppose they decided overnight to achieving a total corporate sellout? I can still see the stratification, and almost anticipate reading research volumes on the forms and functions of Coca-Cola casteism. On the other hand, neither do I believe that merely the reaffirmation of local/ territorial/ linguistic identities and ethnicities, even as one witnesses genocide and ethnic cleansing in several pockets of the subcontinent, help diminish the relevance of caste.

It is wishful thinking that caste, also being a geodemographic system, could perhaps fade out and not carry any relevance if only the people were displaced. At the village level it may no longer be a system of production, but it remains a set of coded practices. The emergence of caste-neutral occupations has not led to the death of any single caste identity. Such predictions about urbanization's effect on

caste have proved futile. Cruising across the seas, it has been carried to every landscape. Even expat Indians are in no mood to give it up so easily.

My techie 'Silicon Valley' friend, a fellow-Tamil Dalit shared an anecdote of driving through the inner city in Denver along with a colleague. Seeing the poor blacks, the rundown neighbourhood and poverty, the other man, a caste-Hindu, said, "Namba ooru cheri maadiriya irukku illa?" (It is exactly like the Dalit settlements in our village, isn't it?) That is the problem with the caste-Hindu mind it is trained to recognize caste everywhere, to replicate its order. Which is why, it is seen as perfectly alright when an Indian NRI justifies being ultra-strict and oppressive at home unlike other American parents, "How do I face my relatives and family back in the village if my daughter marries a Kallu (Black)?" His fear is as heartfelt as that of a 15th century Brahmin facing excommunication for transgressing caste boundaries. Obama might be astonished that his Black brothers and sisters are not only seen through a coloured perspective, but also in a casteist manner. This is not like the parallels that Dalits love to make in order to build networks of solidarity and shared experience with the Blacks, this is just a little example of the stigmatization that the caste-supremacist Indian loves to indulge in. Until there is a change in this mindset, wishing away caste is going to be a pointless pastime.

Even Dr. Ambedkar's idea of discarding Hinduism as a means of escaping caste is no longer feasible. The promise of egalitarianism in other religions may be enticement enough, but converts would have realized firsthand that such a change is merely cosmetic. As a truly secular religious identity caste has literally gone places, permeating every aspect of any faith-based order. Dalit Muslims and Nadar Christians are identities as well-entrenched as that of Iyengar Hindus, thus making caste an Indian, rather than a Hindu identity.

Naomi Zack called race a biological fiction, caste is another that-which-cannot-be-named fiction that merely derives its reality from the manner in which it affects people's lives, occupies their consciousness and establishes itself as a nightmare for any theoretician of history. Instead of laying trust in multiplicities and mind-boggling hybridities, even those who are anti-caste believing in splicing the world into uniform binaries: Dalit/non-Dalit, or, Brahmin/non-Brahmin.

Although each of its individual parameters has undergone change, caste by itself has survived by reincarnating itself in the face of any kind of social and economical upheaval.

MN Srinivas observed that one of the commonest and cynical features of the present movement towards equality was that "each caste regarded itself as the equal of castes superior to it while simultaneously denying similar claims from those inferior to it. (The Dominant Caste and Other Essays) Caste, however, calls for a continuous revision of theory. The above conjecture is no longer true, because what we have observed since the 1990s has been the race for claiming backwardness (or in some states like Tamil Nadu, "most backwardness") in order to gain from the quota system. This struggle to be labelled inferior and backward and unrepresented is part of an elaborate masquerade. When the Gujjars wanted

to claim the Scheduled Tribe status, they paralyzed the nation by bringing its railway services to a grinding halt. The demand of the Vanniyars in a truly novel casteist manner, by setting fire to Dalit settlements to to achieve the separate category of Most Backward classes was successful too. In both these instances, the Indian nation (especially its trigger-hungry police force) was portrayed as a villainous identity, not merely denying these people what were phrased as 'legitimate' rights but also silencing the people by killing those who dared to protest. Corpses of those killed in the police-firing became the currency that let these castes strike a deal with the state.

But caste, does not end with being merely a blackmail tool that tries to obtain positions of privilege for itself. It is as vehement and its movement is as orchestrated when it seeks to deny the same power/authority/opportunity to others. Caste is enshrined in the 100-odd gory self-immolation bids that took place all over north-India against VP Singh's government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations to introduce reservation for the backward classes. Caste is a system that lacks any semblance of an excuse for its existence and yet it has the power to hold a country to ransom.

The only weakness of the caste system, like its strength, lies in the fact that caste is never based on choice. The supremacist and patriarchal nature of its control ensures that at every stage people are stripped of choices. A decision to step across those restrictive castelines, to refuse to accept the enforcement of caste practices or to collude with a projects of violence and discrimination, to resist its patriarchal controls and the patterns of thought that it imposes/ingrains/instigates in our midst will lead to multiplicity and unpredictability and disintegration. It is for this reason that I often imagine the annihilation of caste as a feminist exercise

where women totally reject the control of their sexuality in the name of caste/custom, they refuse to internalize patriarchy and speak out against the other forms of discrimination deeply embedded in our society.

The readiness to destroy caste requires us to destroy a part of ourselves, but finally it will culminate in the end of imagined/assumed inferiorities and superiorities. That is why, irrespective of wherever we find ourselves in that hierarchy, we can militate against caste only if each of us make it a personal rebellion, a conscious choice to defy that oppressive, self-defeating system. As an Ambedkarite, I can look at the future of caste only from an obsessive perspective of annihilating it I believe that the real looking-ahead can exist only when there is no reason for looking back.