

# CASTE AS THE CORE TERRAIN OF INDIAN POLITICO-ECONOMIC INTERPLAY: PROBING INTO CONTEMPORARY INCIDENCES OF VIOLENCE

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## *Abstract*

Though Indian Constitution has bestowed basic tenets of Human Rights on the people of India and caste based impunity is enjoyed by the upper caste of the society. Though caste remains one of the major aspects of socio-cultural predicament, it sidelined in most of the social movements in India. Although, changing economy changes alignments of politico-socio-cultural power centers but accordingly, lower caste people have been marginalized and kept away from the benefits. The discourse which was developed pertaining to the caste violence and atrocities hardly takes into account the gender and economic dimensions and their 'habitus' into account. The caste violence during age of globalization hardly finds place in mainstream media and in the conduit of dissemination of wide information spread.

Against the above background this paper is an attempt to explore and analyze the multidimensional predicament of caste violence in India with the help of some representative incidences happened recently. It, also, examines the nature and politics of human rights and social security vis-à-vis caste politics in India. Paper is chiefly based on newspapers, biographies, government records and magazine reports.

## KEYWORDS

Caste violence, Caste and Gender, Habitus, Human Rights, Social Security, Modernism, Dignity and Respect.

## INTRODUCTION

Our mindset is still feudalistic. Irony is – in contemporary, so called modern era, on one hand we are still engrossed with the medieval and feudalistic psyche and worldview and on the other hand following democratic – welfare processes of state-craft. The basic modern principles of civil society - equality, justice and fraternity – have not only misunderstood with relegating them only in speeches with bookish theory & not in practice but also these principles are being manipulated for power gain and to keep intact the graded social stratification. Dr. Ambedkar pronounces that the balance between liberty and equality, fraternity should be developed in the society so that selfish objectives and concentration of power could be avoided. According to him, during pre-modern period 'utility' was the criteria to evaluate religion and ethical imperatives; in modern times to achieve just and egalitarian society we should have 'justice' as a criteria. Justice means the value system of liberty, equality and fraternity for individual as well as society's behaviour and interaction pattern.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, according to him, ethic imperatives and do's and don'ts of the society will be based on the values of liberty-equality-fraternity. In India religion, social status and wealth are the sources of power. Muddling with modernistic principles and inflicting cast-class-gender discrimination has been largely manifested in every walk of Indian society. None the less, the role of state appears to be, indirectly, supportive to these discriminations.

In India, caste has been the most important decisive factor in discrimination and unequal distribution of justice and resources. In the name of religion - traditions – customs and practices, not only the caste hierarchy has been maintained but also the power relations at each hierarchical level also kept intact throughout the history. In the era of politics of representation and just and dignified life, a number of incidences have occurred as assertion for rights and justice against oppression. In 1950, when Dr. Ambedkar was handing over the Constitution of India, he said that, ‘we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality....we must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which is Assembly has to laboriously built up.’<sup>2</sup>

Current scenario is pessimistic and counter – productive as far as the process of achieving egalitarian society and social democracy is concerned. The nation is on the verge of another freedom movement or civil war against the aggravation of regressive politics of hypocrisy, lies and caste-gender bias.

## PROXIMITY BETWEEN CASTE & VIOLENCE

As the fundamental and defining feature of Indian society is its caste system and history of India is nothing but caste-struggle; belief in caste system is proved to be a mental disease and virtually became unalterable. A peculiar cluster population of caste-class has continued to govern various political – economic institutions and also catering to the casteist & communal politics. Most of the time violence occurred to curb the challenge to the established caste-order, its production and reproduction as well as its preservation. The caste violence has direct support from different entangled coercive institutional psyche like patriarchy and larger feudalism.

Any physical or mental violence is a symbol of power execution and oppression; sometimes it materialises in the reciprocative form of emotional and spontaneous reaction to the acute exploitation and coercion. The collective violence and most of the time individual violence in India has the root cause in the institution of caste. Caste violence has been structured and collective in nature. As controlling woman’s sexuality has been integral part for the preservation of caste system; invariably patriarchy along with caste became important component in the manifestation of violence. Policing endogamous marriages has become one of the important duties of all patriarchal traditional institutions like *khaps* in Haryana.<sup>3</sup> Violence is an integral part of the production and reproduction the caste culture. Therefore, when the issue of exogamous marriage (inter-caste marriage) emerges in the form collective – community based violent ‘punishment’.

Public utterance of various caste based sexist phrases, idioms and abusive words are expressions of mental violence. None the less, these comments do keep alive the image and relationship with the condemned identity for members of upper caste (kids, men and women). It contributes to the negative opinion making and nurturing false past-memory which directly or sometimes indirectly supports open collective physical violence.

## NATURE OF CASTE-VIOLENCE

We find numerous parallels in the caste violence if we closely study some of the it - for instance the recently occurred caste-violence like in Karnataka, Muthanga incident of Kerala, Khairlanji massacre of Maharashtra, Dalit protests in Maharashtra, caste violence in Rajasthan, dalits killings in Mirchpur of Haryana, Dharmapuri violence, Marakkanam violence of Tamilnadu, Javkheda *hatyakand*, Maharashtra; Jat-Dalit violence in Dangawas, Rajasthan; Rohith Vemula Suicide in Central University of Hyderabad and latest Saharanpur violence of Uttar Pradesh. Economical dependency<sup>4</sup> is one of the important factors to retain dominance on lower caste people. Along with it, whatever available avenues for development in independent India – like education, wearing good – clean clothes, eating hygienic & healthy food, earning in city and change in lifestyle, change in standard of life and similar others. After independence, one of the early major caste violence of Kilvenmani massacre (or Keezhvenmani massacre),<sup>5</sup> where against the background of ‘the green revolution’ the dalit labourers demanded hike in wages in 1968. Local landlord arranged some other labourers from outside, but local shopkeeper was supporter of labourers. He was beaten up and kidnapped, then issue was flared up. Labourers caught kidnappers and freed the shopkeeper. In that attempt landlords’ agent was killed. All landlords assembled and set the whole dalit locality on fire. This massacre resulted the death of 44 people. After that a number of incidence happened in Tamilnadu of the same nature; in 2016, when dalit upsurge in Una taluk of Git Somanath district attracted national media, two Paswans were thrashed by the mob and member of the mob urinated in the mouth of one of the Paswans. The reason for this community based violence was the theft

of a motorbikes, which belonged to a Bhumihar. In Bihar, unlike the other states, the caste clash has been between Paswan versus Bhumihar.<sup>6</sup> Paswans also happens to be dominant in all other dalit castes and political class exploit this schism like Chamar–Chuhra divide in Punjab<sup>7</sup>; in 2012 Vanniyar mob ransacked and torched 268 dalit homes in three villages of Dharmapuri district, Tamilnadu. Vanniyars wanted to ‘punish’ upward moving dalits.<sup>8</sup> It was the issue of dalit Parayar boy married to a Vanniyar girl; in 2006, at Khairlanji of Maharashtra members of a dalit family were publicly humiliated, raped and lynched to death by upper caste mob. The issue was a new land deal by that family and a bright girl who was enrolled for higher education. Such a train of innumerable recorded and unrecorded incidences reveal one and same overarching understanding of using traditional caste based asymmetrical relations, the upper caste members remained in advantageous and powerful position in all sphere of life.

Even the so-called peaceful time-span between two consecutive cast violence has been use to reproduce and consolidate the caste system which would adopting modified socio-cultural and economical ambiance. On – line caste based marriage bureaus is one of the examples. Interestingly, those castes are of the aim of annihilation of it, are also having their marriage bureaus. It gives not only general acceptance but also normality and support to the invisible violence in caste system.

## CASTE PARTIARCHY/BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY

Lower caste women have been the most oppressed social category in the predicament of caste and violence. Violence plays very important role in nurturing and strengthening the caste system. All possible tools of acute sexist public humiliation have been inflicted in this regard. Sexuality of lower caste woman has been vandalized time and again. To give the violence a stable and institutional dimensions, economical and most importantly political supports, also, been provided.

As it has been dominant patriarchal-chauvinistic psyche that lower caste woman’s sexuality is easily available to upper caste men. And this psyche is shared by the upper caste women as well. In number of above mentioned incidences upper caste women were happily played role of bystanders and playing role of custodians of caste violence by supporting the male counterparts. As woman’s consciousness is dictated by her caste status, she hardly could transgress the caste line and established sisterhood with other caste women. Dalit woman’s social status, her dependability and her contribution in mode of social production makes her more venerable. It is also due to graded- divided images of Indian women and degree of exploitation varies from image to image (what Uma Chakravarti calles as Brahmanical Patriarchy).<sup>9</sup>

## WHAT HAS GONE WRONG!?

It is now accepted secret that, though it is unconstitutional, untouchability is practiced at most of the places in India.<sup>10</sup> So after independence the pillars of the democracy have been very effectively manipulated by casteist forces to keep intact the pre-independence asymmetrical alignment of power relations.

Right from India’s independence the intensive program of education never been taken. So Indians followed most of the pre-independence time’s practices, institutions and power-relations. The nature of development plans were, by and large, against the poor and dalits. The poor and dalits are always asked to make sacrifices in the name of the development of nation, whether it is the issue of construction of big dams or surrendering their lands, etc. Moreover, ‘as they open their economies to the neoconservative global order, the market penetration of these societies accentuates the political inequalities and injustice, further escalating contradictions, exacerbating socio-economic disparities and ethno-religious differences.<sup>11</sup> It is, also, observed that there is grave discrepancy in the distribution of welfare programs and common facilities including that of health care. Invariably, the so-called ‘mixed caste’ villages were kept aside in the execution of such programs.<sup>12</sup>

The most important pillars for establishing democratic principles – judiciary, police and media – are, by and large casteist and gender biased. All above mentioned cases of caste-violence were occurred either in the presence of police or with their consent. In most of such cases police are reluctant to book the case under caste atrocity act and in spite of investigating the crime; they purposely keep some loopholes so that in court of law the criminal/s would get advantage of it. These crimes hardly get registered under Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989. Even judiciary, especially of the local courts, doesn’t act to award justice, instead protects regressive chauvinistic casteist forces. So the rate conviction rate is negligible. In most of the caste violence judiciary out rightly rejected the casteist character of violence, Rape and the whole caste-community’s involvement in the

violence. Ultimately, the wide spread stigmatised feeling of insecurity and fear psychosis could be observed in dalits. In most of the cases (around 90%) women are reluctant to register cases due to apprehension of social boycott.

## NEO-LIBERAL INDIA AND SPREAD OF 'FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS'

India neo-liberalism, created rift amongst not only all lower castes but it parted them on the basis of class, rural-urban divide as well as their world view – perspective of life. Such alienated – sanskritised dalits, always, made to play agential role to uphold mainstream ideology of oppressors. To keep the institution of caste intact and powerful, modern media and opinion making devices have been used on big scale. All over the India, it is next to impossible to arrive at lower caste people's unity because the caste dynamic changes from place to place and moreover, in most of the cases comparatively upward mobilized lower caste gets appropriated by upper caste power centers and made them to play role of agency in nurturing larger caste dynamics. One can have an idea by comparing number of lower caste national leaders of various political parties and their so far contributions.

Media decides what opinion to be put in the circulation. Most of the news of caste atrocities and humiliations as well as achievements and contribution to nation building have been curtailed and presented in truncated manner. Rather, rumors made wide spread like - lower caste people have been unreliable, their women are easily available, originally dirty and dubious people – such number of general opinions are finally justifies violence on them. It justifies the so-called punishment to the lower cast people. Media creates, inculcates and circulates 'false consciousness' in the mainstream psyche. The singular comprehensions of pseudo-self image of upper caste members nurture hatred towards lower caste members. This process of 'othering' has been strengthened by electronic-print media, social media and rumours. Communities are fragmented into a world of individuals staying in their homes and watching TVs so resistance is implausible to find a room to develop and further discouraged by the conformist media. So in the imposed habitus, identity is given by the society and not by an individual. Repeated telecasts of the conformist events like youth festivals of a particular caste or some caste based festival or religious functions, cater the same.

## DISCUSSION

'Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen' – as said by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.<sup>13</sup> In his last speech in Constituent Assembly, he cautioned about three things – Grammar of Anarchy, Hero worship is sure road to degradation & eventual dictatorship and journey of political democracy strictly towards achieving social democracy.<sup>14</sup> Caste system has become the biggest stumbling block in the progress of democracy and the nation. Currently, it has become more difficult in the presence of fractured - confused consciousness and ultra individualistic attitudes. It is fact that most of the Indians are still far from the respectable and dignified life. Their struggle is with 'equals for equality'. Whenever they assert for the same, collectively institutionally their attempt has been brutally curbed. Though, all human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, caste based violence remains at the core of the terrain of Indian politico-economic interplay. State, always, treat such violence as an issue of larger human rights and not specific to dalit rights, caste based violence – violence with dalit women. One of the solutions is - instead of relying on state machinery for reform and achieving social democracy; wide spread joint struggle of local organisations could be raised all over India against caste system, dominant peasant castes, administrative machinery along with fighting against caste violence patiently.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Writing and Speeches of B.R. Ambedkar, Published by Govt. of Maharashtra (hereafter BAWs), 2016, IInd Edition, Vol.18, Part 3, pp.160-176.

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- <sup>2</sup> Retrieved from [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/38799/15/15\\_appendix.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/38799/15/15_appendix.pdf), pg. 337 of the text, accessed on 20 May 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> *Khaps, Castes and Violence*, *Economic & Political Weekly* (hereafter EPW), Vol. XLV No.18, May 1 2010, pg.7
- <sup>4</sup> Dilip Chavan, *Jatiya Atyachar: Ladhyachi Samyak Deesha Konti?* (Marathi), unpublished paper, pg. 3-4.
- <sup>5</sup> The Hindu (newspaper), 25 July 2013 and 10 March 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Mohammad Sajjad, (December 17, 2016), *Atrocities against Dalits in Bihar, Understanding Caste Dynamics*, *EPW*, Vol LI No. 51, pg. 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Ronki Ram, (January 21, 2017) *Intercaste Cleavages among Dalits in Punjab*, *EPW*, Vol. LII No.3, pg. 54-57.
- <sup>8</sup> S. Senthilir, *Caste Fire in Dharmapuri, Tamilnadu*, *EPW*, December 29, 2012, Vol. XLVII No.52, pg. 12-13.
- <sup>9</sup> Uma Chakravarti (April 3, 1993), *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, *EPW*, Vol. 28 No. 4, pp. 579-585.
- <sup>10</sup> Navjivan Trust with Rober E. Kennedy Centre for Justice & Human Rights conducted a survey between 2007 & 10 entitled, 'Understanding Untouchability: A Comprehensive Study of Practice and Condition in 589 Villages', where it is construed that untouchability, with its all traditional web of power relations, is practiced in 565 villages of 11 states.
- <sup>11</sup> Rudolf C. Heredia, *Democracy and Violence in India*, *EPW*, April 23, 2016, Vol. LI No.17, pg. 33-34.
- <sup>12</sup> Gobinda C. Pal, *Cast and Access to Public Services 'Intensified' Disadvantages*, *EPW*, July 30 2016, Vol. LI No.31, pg. 102-107.
- <sup>13</sup> BAWs, Vol 1, p 57
- <sup>14</sup> *Excerpts from the speech to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949* Retrieved on 30 May 2017 from <https://scroll.in/article/802495/why-br-ambedkars-three-warnings-in-his-last-speech-to-the-constituent-assembly-resonate-even-today>.

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