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Meanings of Dalit Identity

Dalit Identity and Politics edited by Ghanshyam Shah; Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2001; pp 263, Rs 295 (paperback).

SURINDER S JODHKA

From social anthropological monographs on 'village communities' published during the 1950s and 1960 to the current preoccupation with understanding the nature and implications of the rise of dalit politics/identity, the social scientific literature on caste has seen many changes. This shift is not merely that of scholarly interests. It reflects the changes in popular discourses on the subject. In a sense, it also reflects the 'substantive' transformations that have taken place over the last century in the meanings of the word/category of caste.

For example, it would perhaps only be rarely that social scientists interested in caste today would look at it as an 'unchanging' reality that characterises the social structure of Indian society, as was the case earlier. Unlike in the past, the question of caste today is being raised not necessarily by anthropologists or by those who were the guardians of the traditional normative system, viz, the brahmins and other upper castes, but more often by those who have been at the receiving end of the oppressive structures of the hierarchical order. They are the ones who seem to be insisting on the continued relevance of caste as a social reality today.

Though Mandal was certainly an important turning point in the discursive history of caste, the cotemporary realities of its 'revival' can perhaps be understood better if we go back to the 1980s, when dalits began to dissociate themselves from structures of political patronage and started consolidating their autonomous political formations. This change has had far-reaching political implications for the working of Indian democracy. Understandably, this also offered interesting opportunities for social scientists to look at the dynamics

of social transformation taking place in the country through the prism of caste.

This edited book by Ghanshyam Shah gives us a fairly good idea of these new trends. This book is the second volume in the Sage series on *Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge* being edited by Simon Charsley and GK Karanth.

As is suggested by the title, the primary focus of most of the papers presented in the volume is on questions of dalit politics and identity. However, in order to give a background understanding, some of the initial papers provide a broad overview of the socio-economic status of the scheduled castes in contemporary India. Further, not all the papers deal with questions of electoral politics. Identities need not reflect in electoral mobilisations alone. Several papers focus on the new dalit literature and the cultural movements. Some attention, though perhaps not enough, has also been paid to the internal diversities of dalit politics today, a point I shall come back to later in the review.

Apart from introducing the theme and giving an overview of the subject and its significance, Shah in his introduction also offers some 'hard' facts about the changing socio-economic status of the scheduled castes in contemporary India. As per the 1991 Census, there were 138 million persons belonging to the scheduled castes and they constituted nearly 16 per cent of the Indian population. A large majority (84 per cent) of them lived in the rural areas but owned very little agricultural land. Due to their weak economic position, many of them end up working as bonded labourers.

However, Shah also recognises that the processes of capitalist development and competitive politics have opened up several new opportunities for the dalits. Caste-based discrimination no longer carries legitimacy in the democratic politics of India. Equality has come to be widely accepted as a desirable norm. Hierarchical structures of caste are no longer seen to be 'functional' for the economic system. As Kathleen Gough had observed, caste today is a limiting rather than determining

factor in the choice of occupation. Implementation of land reforms and other development programmes have also helped some dalits to acquire land. Though atrocities against them continue, or in some parts of the country have even gone up, the practice of untouchability has declined. Thanks to the policies of job reservations, a small but assertive and articulate middle class has also emerged among dalits. Competitive politics and reservation of seats in political institutions have made them acutely aware of their rights.

Though a lot has changed, internal differences within the scheduled castes have not yet disappeared. Or, in other words, though the overarching identity of being dalits has become much more popular, differences and hierarchies based on 'sub-caste' identities within them still persist. However, Shah rightly points out that unlike the upper castes, "dalits do not have material interests in maintaining" such hierarchies.

In the following essay, Thorat and Deshpande develop a critique of mainstream economics and point to the caste blindness of the discipline. 'Economists', they argue, "have paid scant attention to the issues related to caste-based economic inequality and its link with economic discrimination as compared to the other social science disciplines which did substantial research work on economic inequality and discrimination associated with caste, race, ethnicity, gender and other institutions" (p 45). This has been true not only of mainstream neoclassical economics but even of Marxists who looked at caste only in the framework of the feudal mode of production.

Ambedkar's writings, Thorat and Deshpande argue, offer us a useful starting point for building an alternative economic theory which can incorporate caste and factors like the Hindu religious philosophy into economic thinking. With the help of available statistics, they also provide us with a brief account of different kinds of "caste-based economic inequalities" prevailing in contemporary India.

Though contemporary dalit movements have not been much concerned with the question of explaining the structures of caste hierarchy, they cannot be completely blind to academic theories of caste.

Theoretical discourses do impact upon politics. In his paper based on a study of a south Indian village, Sudhakar Rao develops a critique of some of the prevailing assumptions about the nature of caste relations amongst the dalit castes. He disagrees with those theorists who emphasise the ideological/cultural consensus on the question of hierarchy among all the caste categories, including those at the bottom. According to this view, the nature of hierarchical relations and the accompanying framework of values were essentially the same within the dalit castes as they were amongst the 'twice-born'.

Rao's study of rural Andhra Pradesh did not support such a thesis. He argues that though the ideology of purity and impurity plays a role, it is the proximity to the high/dominant castes that determines the status of a dalit caste in the village as also within the scheduled castes. Not all 'untouchable' castes are treated equally by the dominant castes. Some of the dalit caste groups participate more in agricultural labour. Some of them even get to participate in the village rituals, albeit performing 'low roles'. These groups who were closer to the dominant castes enjoyed higher status than others. From this he concludes that factors that determined the status of a dalit caste amongst 'ex-untouchable' castes are different in nature from those that govern the village caste structure.

Though the nature of his argument is rather different, Kancha Ilaiah too argues against the popular sociological understanding of the caste system that underlines the presence of a cultural consensus among all caste groups with regard to the ideological framework of hierarchy. He contends that epistemologically the dalit world view has been radically different from that of the upper caste brahminical Hindu world view. The 'brahminical epistemology', he argues, is constructed around supernatural forces and idealism. Therefore it is alienated and has no elements of progressivism. Dalit-bahujan epistemology, on the other hand, is constructed around materialism and has all along had a different history from brahminical Hinduism. Notwithstanding an element of essentialism in his arguments, Ilaiah is certainly provocative.

The rise of new dalit politics during the decade of 1980s also brought in a new language of politics. It was in the 1980s that the category dalit began to be used more widely. Simultaneously, the category of harijan, which was popularised by

Gandhi, began to be criticised. This was obviously a direct reflection of the growing autonomy of dalit identity and their conscious distancing from the patronising politics of the upper castes. In an extremely interesting paper, Gopal Guru explores the changing "language of dalit-bahujan political discourse".

In the domain of politics, Guru argues, categories are not "an aimless or passive representation of the world out there. They are conscious constructions with either a positive or negative agenda as chalked out by their users". He examines in detail the uses and meanings of different categories that are popularly used to talk about the ex-untouchables populations of India, viz, scheduled castes, harijans, bahujans or dalits. Of these, the category dalit seems to be the most potent one. Though its use has recently attracted some criticism from different quarters (including from within some sections of the scheduled castes), it represents an important radical shift in the discursive politics of caste.

In another paper on Dalit Movements and Search for Identity, Ghanshyam Shah further elaborates upon the politics of categories. The category dalit, he points out, was popularised by the Marathi neo-Buddhist activists in 1970s and referred to "those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way. There is, in the word itself, an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy" (p 196).

The most important symbol of the contemporary dalit identity politics is B R Ambedkar. Apart from researching and writing on the subject of caste and untouchability, he inspired various cultural movements among the dalits. Contemporary dalit literature, for example, cannot be understood without taking into account the critical influence he has had on generations of dalit writers all over India. As Eleanor Zelliot points out in her piece on 'The Meanings of Ambedkar', he is perhaps the only pre-independence leader who has continued to grow in fame and influence throughout the contemporary period. For the dalits, he is a source of pride and self-respect. Perhaps the most important symbolic aspect of Ambedkar is the fact that despite his western education and style of dressing, he identified completely with the dalit cause and everyone recognises him so. Though within Maharashtra, some may identify him by his sub-caste, outside the state he is owned by all the dalit communities.

As mentioned above, there has been a very close link between the rise of dalit identity and the dalit literary movements, particularly those in Maharashtra. In his paper, S P Punalekar focuses specifically on this subject. Given that the level of literacy has been particularly low among dalits, the emergence of a dalit literature where both the writers and readers are mostly dalits is itself an evidence of a profound change taking place in Indian society. Short stories, novels, poems, critical essays and autobiographies written by dalit writers provide useful insights on the question of dalit identity. They also contain a criticism of the prevailing structures and cultural/religious values that have been responsible for their subordination. In their search for alternatives, dalit writers have rediscovered the low caste saint-poets of the bhakti movement. He also highlights the fact that, dalit literary movements have all along been urging for a unified identity that would bring all the 'ex-untouchable' communities together in their fight for change.

Further extending Punalekar's subject, Gopal Guru in another paper offers a close and critical examination of dalit cultural movements in Maharashtra. Unlike Punalekar, Guru finds many faults with dalit cultural movements, including the literary movements. While during the initial phase, dalit cultural movements played a positive and progressive role, of late they have been appropriated by the state and tend to have a regressive impact on the emancipatory project of the dalit masses. There has also been a growth of professionalism among dalit singers, who now sing for money with scant concern for any kind of political agenda. The dalit writers too have become inaccessible to the common dalits. In order to establish their credentials as writers, they have increasingly begun to write in an abstract language. The dalit literary establishment, according to Guru, has become a hindrance for an emerging 'mudhouse dalit writer' who has to struggle against it apart from the struggle against the dominant culture.

Gail Omvedt too seems unhappy with the current state of dalit politics. "The post-Ambedkar dalit movement", she argues, "has come under an eclipse. It is floundering without a total vision" (p 144). This has happened because after Ambedkar, dalit movements became reformist in nature. Though they use caste for mobilisations, they do not try to destroy

caste completely. While some changes have indeed come about and a small section of dalits has surely benefited, a large majority of them continue to live a life of poverty and misery.

The other papers on dalit politics in north India also tend to support Omvedt's argument. In her paper on identity formation and electoral mobilisation among scheduled castes in Uttar Pradesh, Sudha Pai, for example, concludes that though the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) "represents a more radical and militant phase in the SC movement in UP, yet it does not aim at a revolutionary transformation of the existing system—social and economic" (p 259). Since 1995 it even began to enter into alliances with upper caste parties that were earlier identified as enemies of the dalits.

However, Pai does not suggest that the rise of BSP in UP has not made any difference. Though it has been in power only for a short period, the BSP under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayavati has been able to instil a new sense of confidence amongst the dalits. They no longer submit to the brahminical ideology. The vertical ties of patron-client relations have also broken down, leading to a process of democratisation of civil society.

A K Dubey's essay on Kanshi Ram reinforces much of what Pai says about the dalit leader. Dubey argues that the emergence of Kanshi Ram represented a new phase in the history of dalit politics. Though born in a Sikh dalit family in Punjab, he acquired his first experience of caste politics in Maharashtra. As a child, he did not suffer any major stigma for being a dalit. He has always had a sense of pride in his origin.

After consolidating his position in the dalit bureaucracy, he launched himself into politics and gained considerable success and influence. However, over the years, he entered into electoral alliances that did not go well with the spirit of radical politics. "Political strategies based on manipulation with short-term gains and without ideological considerations, cannot bring about social transformation in favour of dalits", Dubey concludes.

However, despite all these factors, the political mobilisations of dalits by people like Kanshi Ram and Mayavati have changed the grammar of electoral politics. This is what Pusheendra shows though his analysis of their participation in the electoral politics. As against the popular assumption that dalit identity politics has

helped only the better-off sections amongst them, he found that "the assertion of dalit identity in politics is essentially the assertion of non-lettered but politically conscious dalits" (p 333).

In a strongly argued paper on dalit Christians, Lancy Lobo points to the fact that of about 20 million Christians living in India, as many as 70 per cent are converts from dalit castes. Not only do they come from dalit background, they continue to be treated as such within the church. They also continue to suffer the disability of the traditional caste order because despite their having left the Hindu religious fold, the locally dominant castes still discriminate against them. They are also discriminated against by the state as they are denied the benefits of reservation which are given

to those who did not convert. And, when they mobilise for reservations, the non-Christian dalits oppose their movement for fear that the Christians would eat into their quotas of jobs.

As mentioned in the beginning of the review, though the book covers different dimensions of dalit identity and politics, its source material comes largely from the western India and UP experiences. Lancy Lobo's paper on Christian dalits tries to bridge this gap but is certainly not enough. A closer look at dalit politics in the states from a comparative perspective representing other regions too could provide a different picture. This, however, is not to underplay the importance of the volume which is an extremely useful contribution to the growing literature on dalits. [PW](#)