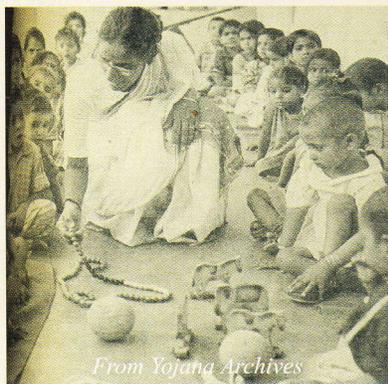


Re‘forming’ Caste in New India

Amita Bhide



From Yojana Archives

Caste has been a subject of considerable debate and reform in Indian society, predating the struggles for independence and a constant accompaniment to the same as well. The debate is tumultuous, often embroiled in pitched political battles and not lending itself to rational policy decisions. And yet, it is also very evident that the contours of the caste equations have been ‘reformed’, changed in several positive ways in the past seventy-five years. This article traces some of the contours of these changes while also articulating some of the contemporary complex challenges in relation to caste.

In pre-independence India, caste was seen as a ‘social’ question; it was a subject of social reform which necessitated the creation of more universal opportunities in sectors such as education and jobs (by the government), deliberate efforts for inclusion through actions of voluntary organisations, by several social reformers, and efforts by activists and advocates to open previously denied spaces such as drinking water commons and access of temples to castes which were denied the same. It was a period where there was some cognition of issues linked to discrimination and exploitation on basis of caste, and on the other hand, caste continued to be the basis of the organisation of communities at large.

Caste: Subject of State Policy and Reform

Caste discrimination was a subject of considerable debate in the Constituent Assembly and the adoption of specific provisions for prevention of discrimination as well as the adoption of principles of affirmative action,



From Yojana Archives

The author is Professor, Mumbai Campus, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Email: amita@tiss.edu



From Yojana Archives

especially for the Scheduled Castes, was a significant and foundational reform. With these moves, the post-independence state took on the mantle of transformative action, heralding a shift of domain of caste reform to the political and economic sphere and not just restricted to the 'social' sphere as in the pre-independence era. The other significant shift is seen in terms of the transformation in the 'agency' of the castes who were previously labelled only as victims, depressed, and lacking a voice.

The shift to the state as an institution that has the onus of transformative action in relation to caste has not been easy and is highly uneven. Institutionalisation of practices such as reservations in education, jobs, and election of people's representatives has been much easier than the transformations in the structure of these institutions and the texture of actual governance. The adequacy of transformations initiated by reservation, and their outcomes are a subject of more substantive debate. However, it is undeniable that they have enabled the organisation of the Dalit castes, given an impetus to mobilisation and organisation of other castes in subsequent years, and more importantly, created a critical space and voice within State organisations that can speak for the excluded. While stories of extreme oppression, crime, and denial

of opportunity to those who are highly vulnerable abound even now; the fact that State agencies including police are constitutionally bound to investigate and deliver justice is not a small matter.

The second shift, i.e. the transformation of the agency is perhaps even more significant as it has been responsible for expanding the opening given by the constitutional commitment. Several examples can be given of this change – the articulation of action against atrocities as a crime, demands for effective budgetary allocation for the Dalits, the exposition of how practices of exclusion and discrimination are embedded in systems and institutions, the evolution of an entire discipline of Dalit Studies that takes inspiration from racial studies, the rising associationism among Dalit businesses, the increase in several Dalit castes articulating and visualising themselves in a disaggregated way, the emerging genre of

The post-independence state took on the mantle of transformative action, heralding a shift of domain of caste reform to the political and economic sphere.

films and other cultural forms that give an expression to the hitherto faceless and amorphous Dalits, all illustrate the emerging power of the Dalit voice, and perhaps point the attention of society to more critical voices and concerns that have been invisibilised. A Dalit is no longer content to be a passive victim but seeks to be an active interlocutor in events. Moreover, this is seen as a

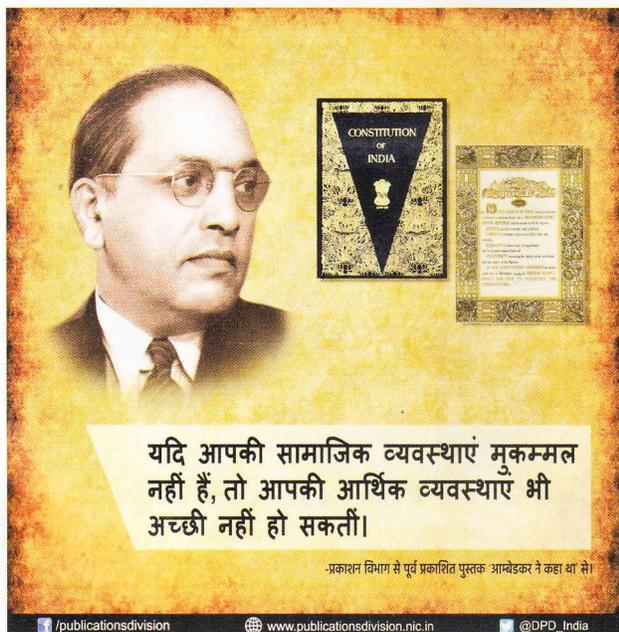
We may be very far from a casteless society but we have definitely moved the needle from a society in which caste was an accepted dispenser of privilege to one where such dispensation of privilege on the basis of birth is contested and challenged.

matter of right and not as a favour to be granted by the authorities.

Existing Challenges

What is outlined here is not meant as a celebratory record, for one needs to recognise that we are far from an equal society. It should be recognised that the lower castes and several sections of Dalits bear the unfair burden of these inequalities. Within this structure, Dalit women bear these burdens even more. Furthermore, some of the dreams as articulated at the time of independence are turning out to be sour. For example, Dr Ambedkar viewed cities and urbanisation as possible sites of liberation for Dalits from tradition and suffering-bound villages and rural societies. As urbanisation becomes a significant phenomenon, it is seen that cities only shift the domains of caste expression. Thus, certain 'unclean, insanitary' occupations are considered to be exclusively practiced by Dalits, thereby perpetuating the tradition. Similarly, the predominance of Dalits in slums in the cities can be seen as an expression of their legacy of spatial exclusion from the villages. The dream that cities are a force of liberation by their very nature is proving to be wrong.

We also need to be aware that while some of the meanings of what caste means in social discourse have



From Yojana Archives

blurred and transformed, there are ways in which the imagination of caste has become even more entrenched. To illustrate, some studies show that the digital space is highly casteist. Elections at all levels of the government accept and build on caste equations and mobilisations. Caste is ever-present and visibilised in even more domains of our everyday life but what needs to be noted is that visibilisation is a progression over invisibility, perpetuated neglect, and systematised exclusion. We may be very far from a casteless society but we have definitely moved the needle from a society in which caste was an accepted dispenser of privilege to one where such dispensation of privilege on the basis of birth is contested and challenged.

Reflections

The question of caste is an extremely complex one, given its deep embeddedness in our society. A review of our efforts in the last seventy-five years indicates that we have been successful in changing the contours of the caste question. We have not been as successful in creating effective alternate principles for inclusion and in the distribution of opportunities. However, the track for a positive change has certainly been set in motion. □