

Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods

Recent debates on caste-based reservations have called attention to the need to fine-tune the process of selection of candidates but have overlooked the deeper problems that confront the average scheduled caste person. Socialisation patterns, sanskritisation, experiences in the public sphere and the educational institutions compound the subjection of dalit personhoods, leading to the loss of agency, orientation and sense of self-worth. Recognising this is imperative for the public and for all institutions so as to enable, integrate and scaffold the talents, skills and worth of scheduled community members.

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The intricacies of caste, as a system, as an idea, and as a form of social stratification have been much debated and written about. But, what has been the impact of the caste system on the personhoods of those who are at the receiving end of its rules of hierarchy, pollution and untouchability? As Berreman has noted, "The human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety" [cited in Raman 2003: 89]. While descriptions and representations of such lived experiences are just beginning to be highlighted, little has been noted about how caste as a system creates in people dispositions that define not only relations between different caste members, but also their own notions of personhood, identity and self-worth.

This article indicates some ways in which caste indignities or its violence and inequities mark individuals and groups of scheduled communities, leaving them with subjected personhoods. The idea of personhood refers to the social and cultural norms by which individuals are recognised by society, and to the relational contexts and transactions by which a person's interactions and positions in the society are defined. An individual cannot be or become a person on the basis of her or his

own capacities or nature. "People cannot be treated as being simply persons in themselves, they owe their personhood to others" [Shotter: 2004: 7]. If groups, communities and societies play a significant role in defining the personhood of individuals, then furthering this, by subjected personhoods I refer to the personalities and orientations in which there is an erosion of agency, and the sense of self-worth of individuals or groups is not individually defined or directed but is marked by the violence of persistent and pervasive humiliation, deprivation and indignities.

It is important to identify the ways and contexts in which the identities and personhoods of dalits are subjected to and marked by caste indignities, and how these subjected personhoods are manifested in the context of educational institutions and in the larger public sphere. In such a context, the role and contributions of educational institutions becomes significant as there is an urgent need to address and remove the sense of inadequacy and the deep socio-cultural and psychological marking to which many dalits have been subject.

Although not widely acknowledged by the general public, caste derived and defined indignities persist so much so that the dalit Kannada writer Devanoor Mahadeva (2001) has called untouchability and its attendant forms of segregation and separation as the "great grandfather of apartheid". In identifying it as a precursor to the institutionalised and deeply

entrenched system of apartheid, Mahadeva calls attention to the ways in which caste as a system also encodes and impacts a systemic disadvantage on the low-ranked caste groups. There are several contexts, arenas and structures in which this disadvantage of caste discrimination is internalised and articulated in the formal and informal structures of the nation and its cultures. And, as Narendra Jadhav notes in his sensitive and compelling autobiography, "caste discrimination may have changed forms, but it has certainly not changed its substance" (2003: 267), and discrimination at the individual and collective level persists for many.

That this is so has been documented by several human rights groups and enquiry commissions. For example, Human Rights Watch, in its review of atrocities and violations of the human rights of dalits (1999), records the pervasive indignities which range from a high court judge cleansing his court chambers which had earlier been occupied by a dalit judge; the reintroduction of untouchability in the form of the two-tumbler system in the villages of Andhra and Tamil Nadu; to the rampant and everyday violence against dalit men, women and children. And more tragically, the reports about caste-based discrimination during rehabilitation after the December 2004 tsunami disaster attest to the entrenchment of caste in our private and public lives.

While the above examples is an evidence of the continued public humiliation of scheduled communities, it is important to clearly identify the more subtle, persistent and systemic forms of indignities that corrode their sense of self-worth and lead to the making of subjected personhoods. Some of these processes and forms of marking difference and instilling insecurity are evident in the ways in which children of scheduled communities are socialised into passivity, in the processes of sanskritisation, and in the representation of scheduled community members in the public sphere and their experiences in educational institutions.

Socialisation and the Acceptance of Indignities

Perhaps one of the primary sources of the internalisation of such indignities is linked to the socialisation process itself

which, in turn, has led to the scarring and particular marking of dalits' subjected personhoods. The dominance of the caste system, with its prescription of a low, segregated position and status to low-ranked caste members, has led them to internalise low social status and to accordingly articulate and interact with others on terms of submission and subordination within a hierarchical system. Several autobiographical accounts make a note of this. Kancha Ilaiah (1996) notes that in his own childhood, they were taught to "shake with fear" in interacting with higher castes and to be submissive, subordinate and passive students. Referring to the denial of literacy and education, he goes on to note that, "childhood formations are important for a person – female and male – to become a full human being. But our childhoods were mutilated by constant abuse and by silence, and stunning silence at that" (1996:101). Similarly, Tumbadi Ramaiah (1999) details how he did the homework for upper caste boys in his school just so that he could receive their share of the food served at school, which he then took home to his starving family. Viramma [Viramma, Racine and Racine 1997], in her oral narrative describes how she has to curb and control her son from defying the landlord's autocratic ways, as she considers the landlord to be her master and food provider. Such caste-based subservience to the order is reinforced by the general Indian socialisation pattern in which submission to the interest of the group and to linear structures of authority are upheld and reinforced in multiple forms [Saraswathi 1999]. Internalised ideas of natural and given hierarchies have been the legitimising bases for not challenging utter humiliation and degradation. Take for instance, Bama's description of her grandmother's justification for accepting stale food from her upper caste employers: "These people are Maharajahs who feed us on rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?" (2000: 14).

Bearing the burden of a stigmatised identity persists longer than in the childhood phase and continues to mark many dalits for much of their lives. Thorat, writing about the experiences of untouchable children elaborates this: "Although [the untouchable child] would have been identified even earlier as a child of an untouchable father, this would not have

affected his thinking process directly. It is when he begins to walk independently, and when the play of his own will takes him to other people and things, that he experiences a stigmatised identity personally; and this makes an impression, subtle and indirect, upon his thinking process" (1979, p 67, cited in Raman 2003).

While such subservience and servitude were linked to and compounded by the fact that dalits had no resources of their own and were economically dependent on the upper castes, the long-term impact of it has meant that such subservience and submission have become strategies of survival and are internalised and accepted as unquestionable structures. This in turn means that such socialisation and internalisation of caste norms has led to non-defiance of established and hegemonic forms of exploitation and discrimination at individual and collective levels.

Sanskritisation and the Reproduction of Caste Norms

If dalit children are socialised into internalising subordinate and submissive identities, then at the macro cultural and social level, the processes and patterns of sanskritisation play a role in marking the personhoods of scheduled community members. This is observable in the extent to which sanskritisation and replication are widespread and have resulted in the appropriation and practice of upper caste rites and rituals. Most popular and widespread are the practices of conducting annual 'Satyanarayana vrats', secluding girls and women, adopting dowry practices instead of bride-price, vegetarianism, and most significantly, practising caste discrimination against other groups, etc.

Different theories and perspectives review the meaning and implications of sanskritisation. The replication of upper caste practices among the low-ranked caste groups indicates, as Moffat (1979) elaborates, a form of consensus which largely accounts for the reproduction of both the culture of the caste (with its norms and ideology of purity, pollution, hierarchy and differentiation) and the system (of exclusion, identification, rules and regulations) across generations and in different spaces. The implications or direct results of such a process are that even the positive characteristics of dalit culture and society are being eroded. The outstanding example of such a process is the decline

of bride-price and the adoption of the practice of dowry among dalit groups and the subsequent decline in the status of women among these groups.

Barring the cases in which some low-ranked castes in Kerala have drawn on cultural, religious and political mobilisation to contest and overcome indignities, most other attempts to challenge caste-based atrocities have been only partially successful. Dube observed this among the satnamis of north India, who even as they formed and charted new organisations which challenged untouchability, "also reproduced the significance of meaning(s) and power embedded within the ritual schemes of the caste order" (1998: 216).

Currently, many dalit activists and intellectuals deny the hold of sanskritisation over scheduled community members and assert their march towards modernity. However, not recognising the hold of sanskritisation and its implications for the reproduction of the caste system and of subjected identities is myopic. Some scholars see such emulation of upper caste norms as a reproduction or replication of the caste system and link it to the assertion of identity and to attempts towards status parity with recognised superiors [Karanth 2004]. Views such as this attempt to give recognition to such social practices as the only way to gain acceptance in the dominant and hegemonic order and do not assess the implications of these practices in terms of what their significance for the constitution of caste identities and the reproduction of the system itself. As astutely pointed out by Chakravarti, "an analysis of the ideological underpinning of sanskritisation can be sharpened by arguing that hegemonic ideology works to limit the cultural imagination of the lower orders and makes it difficult to radically re-conceptualise society" (1998: 57).

Recent scholarship sees the formation of caste associations and caste political parties among the low-ranked caste groups as a form of "civil society" in India and asserts the need to understand such mobilisation as a form of "alternate modernity" [Chatterjee 1997]. While such perspectives rightly challenge the simplistic dichotomisation of societies as modern and non-modern and call attention to the nuanced and varied routes to modernity, we must critically consider if caste-based mobilisation can lead to modernity (as the challenging of inherited identities and of reproductive regimes of

discrimination), even if of an “alternative” type of modernity.

Caste and the Public Sphere

That the reading of caste-based mobilisation as modernity is problematic is to be seen in the results and impact of such mobilisation. While the political apparatus retains most scheduled community members as clients, without catering to the needs of their constituencies, the economic system has eroded the vast repertoire of knowledge and skills that members of the scheduled communities possessed. And, in the context of the non-absorption of a majority into a viable economic system, the members of the low-ranked caste groups, especially the labouring poor, are subject not only to processes of displacement, but also to a disorientation. This is observable in the extent to which the submission to state agendas of nomenclature and identification has led many scheduled communities to appropriate such terms and to refer to and identify themselves as “scheduled castes and scheduled tribes” instead of to their jati or occupation-linked names. This process, in which official categories have become social categories [Jaffrelot 2003], compounds the problem of identity leading to the loss of ancestral links and a sense of belonging. In addition, although the term and identification as dalit is being promoted by activists, the term and identity are yet to gain widespread acceptance.

The dominance of sanskritisation as a mode of social and cultural change can be linked to the failure of the modernisation agenda and to the fact that it has not provided an alternate non-caste basis of identity formation. Pandian makes a note of this when he indicates that in the case of Tamil Nadu, among the poorest and the most marginalised of the dalit caste groups, “...caste identity seems to compensate their marginality in other domains” (2000:515). In this vacuum created by the failure of a genuine modernity (associated with ideas of egalitarianism, individual rights and democracy) to have taken root and the fact that the processes and structures of democracy and modernity are based on caste organisations and alliances, mean that the caste system is also being reproduced. Witness the extent to which patron-client relations of the agrarian order are replicated in the political order and in many cases members of the scheduled communities occupy political positions only in terms of

being the domesticated [Kaviraj 1998] clients of the upper caste leaders. As caste-based mobilisation gains ascendancy, several questions can be posed about its implications for the reproduction of caste as a system and the reaffirmation of caste-based identities as the basis for the personhoods of low-ranked groups.

The marking of dalit youth identities by processes of erasure and amnesia must be contrasted to what is happening among upper caste youth. Based on the privileges of urbanisation and their own engagement with western modernity and globalisation, upper caste youth are re-invoking and asserting their caste cultures and identities as markers of superiority. This reinvention and reassertion, that is also linked to the growth of Hindu nationalism and its associated fundamentalism, then marks the low caste, non-sanskritised dalit as an object whose identity must be realigned and reworked. The range of re-Hinduisation and integration rituals that the Sangh parivar has resorted to in north India highlights the extent to which dalit youth are sought to be domesticated and their emerging identity as dalit is sought to be checked [Shah 2004].

Compounding these experiences in the public institutions of the nation are popular and public images that portray dalits as inherently disabled and limited in personality. Take for example, the popular film *Lagaan* in which the last member of the village cricket team is the handicapped Kachra, whose very name means “rubbish” and who is not given the option to join the team but is commanded by the team’s de facto leader to do so. Such images and representations reinforce conceptions that the low-ranked are inadequate and incapable of any independent volition and thought [Anand 2002].

These negative public images and the lack of support for scheduled community members from the elite compound the isolation and continued degradation of scheduled community members. Marc Galanter (1998) and Devanoor Mahadeva (2001) have noted, unlike the whites of the US who fought both the civil war and led the civil liberties movement to help African Americans gain equality or established associations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, there is no similar support from upper caste persons in Indian society. In fact, a greater sense of caste awareness and a widespread sense of loss and deprivation have contributed to strengthening upper

caste assertions about themselves. High-rank caste groups remain embedded within their caste cultures and their ideology of varied capabilities and rights. Widespread hostility towards caste-based reservations confirms the lack of empathy for the low ranked caste groups and the continued resentment that they experience in the public sphere.

Educational Institutions

In such contexts, the role of institutions, especially education institutions, has also been dubious. Ranging from overt discrimination and hostility in elementary schools, to covert discriminatory practices and policies at higher education institutions, members of scheduled communities continue to be subjected to a culture of hostility and indifference.

The recent National Focus Group on Problems of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children [NCERT 2005] highlights this.

Teachers are observed to have low expectations of SC and ST children and girls and a condescending and downright abusive attitude to poor children from slums. Teachers also have stated and unstated assumptions of “deprived” and “deficient” cultural backgrounds, languages and inherent intellectual deficiencies of SC/ST children. They follow discriminatory pedagogic practices of labelling, classifying and teaching styles and operate on the basis of “realistic” perceptions of low caste children’s limited cognitive capacities and life chances (p 31).

Several studies of schools and the treatment of dalit children have observed the ways in which discrimination accounts for the higher dropout rates among such children [Subrahmanian 2003; Vasavi 2003]. Segregating children during mid-day meals at schools, prohibiting them from drinking water from common sources, forcing them to perform menial tasks in the school, etc, are ways in which dalits’ rights to education is challenged. In fact, linked to the range of incentives (such as free uniforms, texts, scholarships, etc) available to scheduled community students and as a way in which to express their resentment against the reservation system, it is not uncommon to hear government schoolteachers refer to children from scheduled communities as “government children” and treat them with disdain and resentment. Such treatment often leads to high dropout rates and, worse still, to an internalisation of a sense of inferiority and despondency. A case of this

is graphically described by the writer and activist Bama.

Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the dalit children in many matters, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate (2000:89).

Such experiences not only challenge dalit rights to education, but also pose the problem of reinforcing notions of inadequacy and difference. This is compounded by the fact that no institution has recognised the knowledge and skills of such communities and has instead enforced a body of knowledge that is alien and unfamiliar to them.

More particularly, in the larger culture in which labour itself is neither recognised as valuable nor respected as an important dimension in human capability and contribution, the work of millions of dalits continues to be overlooked. Identities and subjectivities formed on the basis of work, crafts and artisanal abilities, knowledge forms of medicine, ecology, agriculture, animal husbandry, etc, are continually eroded not merely on the basis of their non-viability in the industrial era but through their association with pollution and degradation in the forms of work itself. The non-recognition of these skills as legitimate and valid knowledge forms and their lack of integration in the formal education and training structures, has meant that dalit youth are expected to do a double bind: on the one hand, they must eschew and reject their familial and customary knowledge and skills; on the other hand, they must learn new skills and knowledge in a context in which teaching learning practices are inadequate and that in most cases does not afford them the opportunity to use these skills.

Further, teachers' insensitivity to the culture of orality and to the conditioning and orientation of first generation learners is not an issue that is either understood or addressed. Studies have noted this and indicated the extent to which this lack of recognition has led to feelings of "loss of self and self-confidence" [Aggarwal and Sibou 1994: 401] and accounts for the poor performance in academia among the scheduled community students. These institutions, despite functioning under the mandate of the constitutional obligation to cater to such scheduled communities, have been particularly negligent and even resentful

of the presence of scheduled communities in colleges and universities and of the government schemes made available to them. That a supportive environment would have and will help realise the objectives of the programme is noted in the suggestion that Weisskopf makes in his comparative review of positive discrimination policies in India and the US:

In order to overcome the kinds of obstacles to good performance..., many [Positive Discrimination] beneficiaries are likely to need access to support mechanisms in their study or work environment – over and above what is routinely available to all students or employees. Thus the average quality of performance of PD beneficiaries will surely vary positively with the extent of support for the PD beneficiaries – in the form of facilities and programmes provided by the institutions into which they are selected and special attention from the personnel under whom they are performing (2004: 70).

In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to note that the experiences of scheduled community students in universities and in institutions of higher education are the extensions of such sharp discrimination at schools. Periodic outbreaks of caste-related violence in hostels and universities are reported from various parts of the nation. The Anveshi report on caste-related violence at the Central University, Hyderabad highlights such persistent and extant discrimination where:

...the sense of self-worth is the first casualty of university life. Dalit students are embittered by the way they are perpetually on probation at a university that at best suffers their presence... They are ignored in the classroom, invisible in the curriculum. Try as they might, their grades never improve. They are regarded as "unteachable". They are watched while they eat, mocked at by teachers and students, suspected for their corruption, hounded for their misuse of hostel rooms for guests from the village, chastised for their inability to pay bills on time, condemned for their violence (2002: 101).

Culture of Antipathy towards Dalits

Conditions such as these have made universities the new sites for the production of casteism. Most upper caste students are insouciant about the disadvantages and differences of dalit students and form opinions about them primarily on the basis of competition, resentment and apathy towards them. Under such conditions, is it

any wonder, then, that the rates of retention in education institutions remain low [Aggarwal and Sibou 1994; Weisskopf 2004] and poor academic performance or achievement levels are then seen as the indicators of the "inherent incapability" of members of the scheduled communities? Low performance and negative experiences at institutions and the subsequent attrition or elimination have reinforced stereotyped notions and images of the unworthy and incapable low-caste. Experiences such as these which result primarily from lack of empathy on the part of the dominant groups and from poorly implemented policies have, in turn, led to the low self-esteem and poor self-image of the youth of the scheduled communities, a condition compounded by the large-scale unemployment of such persons.

This also accounts, in large measure, for the failure of policies such as reservations in higher education. For despite the years it has been in implementation, the results of the policies have not been significant. As the few studies on the impact of reservations in higher institutions have indicated, the experience of stigma, social divide and even segregation account for the poor academic performance of most scheduled community students who also come from socio-economically disadvantaged families [Kirpal and Gupta 1999]. The failure to address the localised, institutional contexts of reservations, the continued hostility of others to the policy, and the association of it with decline in standards, have led to making the policy itself less effective than it could have been [Weisskopf 2004]. While assessments see the failure of the reservation policy in terms of its intended effects – that is of providing scheduled community members with opportunities to new occupations and social and economic status – the impact of failure in such contexts remains largely undocumented. Very few studies so far make a note of this. From their detailed observations and interviews with educated unemployed chamar youth in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004) note that these youth refer to themselves as "useless", "empty", "wandering" and "unemployed". More importantly, they note that a fallout of such large-scale unemployment has led to the new generation of parents educating their children only up to the 8th standard level and or questioning the value of higher education. In continuing her summative work on the scheduled communities of India, Marika Vicziany (2005)

refers to college educated dalits as the “breakthrough generation” but also goes on to note how many of the educated unemployed have become vulnerable and submit to fundamentalist agendas. Ravinder Kaur’s (2004) observations of the functioning of reservations in the IITs indicates that a lack of openness and concerted support to these students continues to be the basis of their segregation, low self-esteem and poor academic performance. In fact, the association of differential capabilities has meant that many institutions continue to allocate upper caste or general caste category students to higher-ranked specialisations and allocate unpopular or low-ranked specialisations to students from the scheduled communities. Such blatant discrimination and the overall culture of antipathy towards them mean that not only is the reservation policy defied vicariously, but the ideas of public institutions addressing issues of national inequity and discrimination are bypassed.

Although most studies do not make a direct link between education experiences and the political and cultural orientation of dalit youth, there is a need to assess and

understand what rejection, discouragement and negative experiences mean for their identities and orientation. One result of such reinforced marginalisation is the absorption of these people into agendas and programmes by fundamentalist associations which give them a sense of agency but only by providing another enemy and another “other”. The mobilisation of large numbers of dalits into the RSS and the Bajrang Dal and the violence that they have perpetrated against Muslims are representative of this. This was singularly visible in the 2002 Gujarat riots against Muslims [Breman 2002]. What energy and agency should and could have gone into reclaiming their own rights and contesting upper caste and class hegemony has now been diverted into fundamentalist pogroms in which their role itself is that of being a perpetrator of violence.

In instances where scheduled community members seek to mainstream into the dominant society, they also face opposition and violence. Much of this violence stems from upper caste resistance and resentment against the socio-political changes that are taking place in rural society and culture. New forms of mobilisation

and political rights for the low-ranked caste groups, and their resistance against the ritual, economic and social forms of discrimination, have led to various forms of retaliation by upper caste leading to the emergence of the new and more violent forms of caste discrimination. Documents from Navsarjan, the Gujarat-based organisation that works for dalit human rights, provide a summative purview of the forms of intransigence that provoke violence against dalits: when dalits are elected and attempt to sit on a chair in the local government office, when they do not give up their seats to non-dalits in the bus; when they dress well or ride their scooters in the village or if a dalit falls in love with an upper caste girl [Macwan 2002].

The end result of such persistent and widespread humiliation and indignities is that a majority of scheduled communities’ persons experience what Shorrock identifies as “the lack of opportunity for being” (1989: 162). Such a process or marking highlights the combination of a cultural and political economic ethos in which scheduled community members are constantly in a state of contest with others for the “very nature of (their) being, for the kind of person

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(they) would feel (they) would like to be” [Shotter 1989: 162]. Given these trends and conditions it is urgent that the further erosion of the personhood of dalit youth be halted and dalits be scaffolded into an agenda in which their agency and sense of self-worth is asserted. The importance of personhood as “a status conferred upon one by others, and if others do not take one’s expressions of self seriously, if they do not respond to your utterances and other expressions as you intend, then you are being denied your opportunity to be a person – you are being degraded and humiliated” [Shotter 2004:7], needs to be given due recognition. Challenges to subjected personhoods should lead to the possibility of enabling all scheduled community members to craft their identities in order to realise their abilities and interests. Yet, this cannot be an individualised endeavour, and it must be recognised that the formation of personhoods is a dynamic and relational process [Giovanola 2005], and it is the larger society and its institutions that must scaffold this process.

Some forms of resistance to the system, alternative identities and political mobilisation among dalits are now on the horizon [Clarke 1998; Raj 2001]. A long overdue recognition of Ambedkar as an icon of the community and his message of “educate, organise and agitate” are now being recognised as a clarion call to emancipation. And, enunciations and calls for recognising their rights have become most strident. But the challenge remains as to how dalits can craft identities and personhoods that will draw on their own defiance of inequality, retain the strength and advantages of their own culture and mold this with the ideals of modernity so as to generate a culture that is oppositional to caste culture. It is to enable such possibilities and in understanding and seeking to address these multiple forms of indignities and their impact on the subjected personhoods of dalit youth that institutions must strive towards. Continuing to support this until these subjected personhoods are challenged and a sense of independent identity and personhood for every student has emerged will be the basis of breaking the cycle of reproduction of indignities. This will also ensure the establishment of a genuine modern society that breaks from its past of placing a significant number of people in an oppressive and total institution, that of caste. ■■■

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