Reforms with a Dalit Face?

Dalit Diary: 1999-2003–Reflections on Apartheid in India *by Chandra Bhan Prasad;*
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Chandra Bhan Prasad started writing the newspaper columns that would become this book when he read B N Uniyal's article in *The Pioneer* in 1996, 'In Search of a Dalit Journalist', which stated that in more than 30 years of journalism, Uniyal had not met a single dalit journalist. Prasad went on to become the country's first (and only?) regular dalit columnist, beginning in 1999 in *The Pioneer*.

His book is a collection of essays united by two themes. First, it offers an impassioned survey of caste discrimination, and of upper caste responses. Second and relatedly, it argues against a dalit-OBC alliance, saying that OBCs, or shudras, to use the term Prasad applies here, are opposed to dalit empowerment. Indeed, Prasad suggests that a dalit-shudra caste antagonism shapes Indian politics and society today.

To discuss caste discrimination might seem a tedious civic ritual, at least for many upper caste readers, invoking ideals observed only in the breach. But if you read Chandra Bhan Prasad, you will find a fresh and powerful writer who shows how caste pierces through layers of confusing social commentary, and illuminates contemporary trends.

The author provides evidence of both old and new kinds of oppression faced by dalits, despite the abolition of untouchability and the introduction of caste reforms. Forty-nine out of 100 dalits are landless labourers, and 63 out of 100 cannot read or write. Almost 25 crore people, or roughly a quarter of India's population, is dalit, Prasad writes (grouping SC and ST categories together). Reservations made in their name routinely go vacant, and of course such quotas are only in the public sector.

Institutions of higher learning continue to be dominated by upper castes, and have negligible representation of dalits. Furthermore, the author notes in a

discussion of Delhi University, where barely 1 per cent of the teachers are dalit, that caste is all but absent as a category for understanding economics in India. This, he suggests, leads to reinforcing the caste-biased perception that untouchability is merely a social and not an economic evil.

But poverty is never solely economic, Prasad says. For example, he suggests, try to find a single 'dwija' (twice-born) who has taken on the occupation of an untouchable to mitigate his or her poverty, and become a cobbler, grave-digger, or scavenger.

Although the Indian elite prides itself on its cosmopolitan character, Prasad points out that in the matter of caste representation they are retrograde. The US, for example, has significant representation of African-Americans in both the private and public sectors. By contrast, dalits are not only absent in India's private sector, but any prospects of remedial measures are rejected by Indian upper classes.

One of the results is that dalits are socially and culturally invisible. If there is no dalit representation in the editorial departments of the media in India, as political scientist Robin Jeffrey points out in his lucid introduction to the book, "think of the stories that are never heard because no one in the newsroom ever encounters them" (p x).

Prasad notes that in the mid-19th century, students in the Madras Presidency College were largely from the upper castes. Apparently, most of the students were unable to pass their final examinations in the first or second division. It was to improve their results that a third division was added. According to official reports (cited as 'Selections from Educational Record', 1781-1838, 1840-1859, 1860-1887), the performance of Indian students was so poor that many professors returned to Britain in frustration.

Today, the offspring of these 'third division pass' students defend the principle of merit against lower caste students. But history suggests that concessions may be required before they can overcome their handicaps in a new institutional environment.

Sir Thomas Munro, governor of the Madras Presidency, reported in 1822 that there were no students of the depressed classes (as dalits were then known) in the indigenous system. The next year, governor Monstuart Elphinstone, arrived at the same conclusion about Bombay Presidency. Thereafter, following Wood's Despatch of 1854, it was decided that no student was to be denied admission on the basis of caste.

But the entry of dalits into schools was violently resisted. In the Kaira district of Bombay Presidency, six dalit villages were burnt down. Schools had to be closed because non-dalits refused to let their children attend class alongside dalits. As a result, separate schools were instituted for dalits. The author himself was a product of one such school in Azamgarh. In the US, the corresponding history vis-à-vis racial discrimination is known to every schoolchild. Reading *Dalit Diary,* one may learn what is omitted in Indian history textbooks, whether saffronised or not.

The triumph of Indian nationalists over colonial power resulted in idealising the pre-British past. Indian civilisation appeared to receive a certificate of distinction from the west without any qualifying provisions. Acknowledging the need for social reform within India became much harder thereafter. If the nation had achieved greatness in the past despite caste injustice, that was surely an endorsement of the ancient order.

But lower castes saw British power as a reprieve from caste domination. Jyotiba Phule and later, E V R Periyar, insisted that for sudras and dalits, 'Pax Britannica' with its insistence on equality before the law was preferable to Manu's *Dharmashastra*, since the latter did not recognise equality and instead specified different laws for each caste.

In his submission to the Southborough Commission in 1919, B R Ambedkar described the Congress as comprising 'political radicals but social Tories'. In this phrase, Ambedkar captured the compromise of Indian nationalism. The rise of Hindu nationalism, seen from this angle, was not so much in opposition to secularism as in succession to it, as submerged tendencies eventually rose to the surface.

The depth and breadth of orthodox control over Hindu society has been forgotten in the after-glow of national liberation. It can be measured, for instance, by the protest over the age of consent bill proposed by the British in 1890. The marriageable age for girls was to be increased from 10 to 12 years, but the bill had to be withdrawn. Lokmanya Tilak and others made the struggle an issue of national sovereignty, but it was also a victory for social conservatives who opposed reforms in toto. Nearly 60 years later, things had still scarcely changed. Ambedkar had to resign in protest when the Hindu Code Bill was blocked due to conservative opposition. Many of its provisions came to be passed piecemeal to avoid offending social orthodoxy.

This is part of the context for the author's argument that, despite extensive social change, the symbolic order of Hindu society continues to be upheld. Meanwhile, shudras have replaced brahmins as the dominant caste in many regions of India, and very nearly match dwija numbers in parliament.

Prasad therefore rejects arguments that identify brahmins as the oppressors faced by dalits. Shudras have benefited from land reforms and economic development. Whereas in most democratic countries the power of the landowning classes has diminished, in India the democratic process has led to its increase in the guise of shudra power. Since they are a conservative caste devoid of the ideals of the dwijas whom they have replaced, the consequences are onerous for those beneath them, Prasad argues.

Brahmins and kshatriyas have left the land in many regions of India and have been replaced by shudras, e g, in the south, in Gujarat, Maharashtra and western UP. But they are denied the esteem and legitimacy commensurate with their new social status. Shudras have reacted to this 'brutalisation' with extreme levels of violence, and with more vigorous expressions of Hindu religiosity. Dalits and minorities bear the brunt of this violence, says Prasad.

For example, in Tamil Nadu, Prasad writes, dalits are paying for their mistake of supporting the Dravidian movement. Successive Dravidian governments have managed to sabotage land reforms in the state. Today the percentage of dalits who are independent cultivators is a mere one-third of that in UP (14.62 per cent against 42.63 per cent), where brahmins are nearly three times as numerous as in Tamil Nadu (p 206).

Let the government decree that 5 per cent of its purchases will be from dalit suppliers, Prasad suggests. Just as the demand for African-American inclusion at every level of US society has yielded, gradually, a more representative society, dalits too will finally begin to get a more just share of the nation's wealth. Within a decade there will be several dalit millionaires, the author predicts (p 106).

Such a demand will hardly find favour with those focus on building a dalit people's movement and ensuring structures of political accountability. But as an argument for rethinking the character of reservations, it cannot be dismissed either.

It can be objected that the author substitutes one form of caste-based reasoning for another, and that he fails to transcend casteist thinking as such. Prasad anticipates this objection by pointing to the overt or covert endorsement of caste discrimination by varieties of left and secular intellectuals. To the charge that Prasad is a caste partisan, he might be pleased to plead guilty, arguing that without explicit representation, dalits will remain at the bottom of the social ladder.

This cannot be the last word, however, on what seems suspiciously like dalit identity politics. We can admit that oppression of dalits is one of the outer frontiers of politics today without embracing dalit identity as inherently emancipatory. To take only one possible point of tension, would dalit men and women be equal in a progressive dalit politics? To mention another, is there any guarantee that tribals, being formally outside Hinduism, would be guaranteed equal treatment?

We should also note that Ambedkar, whom Prasad would presumably take as a model, was critical of British colonialism, and also of the limitations of western liberalism. Prasad himself is known for his provocative statement that the British came too late and left too early. He does not criticise the effects of colonial rule, nor does he refer to the drawbacks of liberal western societies, whether British or American.

The most favourable interpretation we could put on these limits of Prasad's work is that his writing has occurred in newspaper columns, crafted for the distracted reader, rather than systematic theorising. What he offers us instead is theory on the go, short, highly readable analysis and commentary on the caste-biased character of events.

Enough of theoretical talk and enough of tilting at the windmills of globalisation and capitalism, Chandra Bhan Prasad says. These are matters beyond anybody's control. Dalits must fight the casteism that has resulted in their systematic exclusion from all spheres of social and economic power. Nearly six decades after independence, untouchables remain the most disadvantaged social group.

The shared oppression of untouchables is what unites the different 'touchable' Hindu groups, Ambedkar maintained, and that untouchability is the glue binding the disparate segments of Hindu caste society. Returning to the derailed project of Indian social reform would be a salutary move, in an era when the need for 'reforms' is being trumpeted from every television station and political party. If reforms are to have a 'human face' they must be social in character. Would it be too much to ask for reforms with a dalit face? EPW

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