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Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression

Bela Malik

A purely dalit or a purely feminist movement cannot adequately help dalit women. But no matter. Dalit women participants at the Convention against Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression were willing to help themselves. Even as they narrated their problems and humiliations, there was pride in a new identity, in being able to withstand hardships, and in the strength and courage to wage attritive battles.

FIFTY years after independence ritual pollution, caste exploitation and all the other legacies of Indian civilisation that those who oppose affirmative action in the name of efficiency choose to ignore, and which those who oppose it from more prejudiced motives would like to perpetuate, are alive and well, keeping in good cheer the less polluting 'citizens' of the nation. And the images of all of these were graphically brought out at the Convention against Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression, organised by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) on December 20, 1998 at Delhi. All that was recounted at the convention highlighted the need to address the specific problem of caste oppression compounding the burdens imposed by a generalised patriarchal exploitation. Thousand-odd dalit women from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh participated in the convention, along with several guest speakers and AIDWA activists and sympathisers. The turnout of a thousand-odd was impressive.

Dalit women speakers used the forum to articulate their problems and to share the experiences of their struggles. They were from diverse backgrounds, belonged to different age groups and had varying degrees of consciousness about the gap between the reality of their socio-economic conditions and the legal rights that they notionally possess. The degree of passion expressed varied accordingly. The younger women, for instance, were more militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence. The women were mainly rural, though some activists were based in urban areas. Some women were politically active and held political office at the panchayat level. Others were agricultural workers or construction labourers. Despite these differences, there were common threads running through their accounts. They narrated their experiences without hesitation, and in a wide and mutually

incomprehensible variety of dialects rendering the term 'Hindi-speaking-belt' somewhat of a misnomer.

For the dalits, caste and class merge in subjecting them to the margins of India's political economy. The convention foregrounded the indignity being experienced and resisted by dalit women. Concentrated in the primary sector, only a fraction of land is owned by dalits, and holding on to land that is legally theirs more often than not involves protracted and tenacious struggle. Resorting to a mere language of rights is inadequate as a solution to the experiences of this section living away from the middle class world of rhetoric and debate.

In Haryana, for example, according to the 1991 census, only 8.06 per cent of scheduled castes own land, while 55.08 per cent are landless agricultural labourers. Land 'pattas' are never in dalit women's name. For dalits in general, access to schools and education is minimal. As an instance, in Rajasthan, only 8 per cent of dalit women are literate.

While it is true that dalits in general are oppressed, dalit women bear a disproportionately higher share of this burden. Given the division of labour within the household, women have to suffer more from the lack of access to water, fuel sources, and sanitation facilities, exposing them to humiliation and violence.

Upper caste women are often among the perpetrators of oppression. In this general environment, the contexted significance of a purely dalit or, more specifically, an exclusively dalit women platform seems only natural. Given the nature of oppression, a struggle for a better life for dalit women cannot, perhaps, be divorced from a wider social emancipatory agenda. It is often the case that a purely theoretical feminist argument asserting the equality of women is not adequately sensitive to the larger context of caste and class context in which oppression and inequality of women is practised. It remains a matter

of reflection that those who have been actively involved with organising women encounter difficulties that are nowhere addressed in a theoretical literature whose foundational principles are derived from a smattering of normative theories of rights, liberal political theory, an ill-formulated left politics and more recently, occasionally, even a well-intentioned doctrine of 'entitlements'.

Dalit women face discrimination in access to a dignified life, to legal redress to claim what is theirs in principle, to equal wages, to the decision-making process, and to benefits from government initiated programmes targeted at their welfare. Issues of childcare and health are relegated to the background in a struggle for subsistence. The problem of being marginalised and therefore discriminated against is worsened by the practice of untouchability. Sharecropping, for example, is not extensive among dalit families due to the observance of ritual purity by caste groups. The grim reality of untouchability appears inescapable. It is there in schools, in tea shops, while labouring, while walking on public roads. The fear of indignity, humiliation and rape is always present. For instance, speakers reported that food was thrown to them as if they were dogs. The abuses were casteist "she looks like a 'chura'". Speakers also pointed out that casteism was practised by people across religions. Caste becomes convenient in reinforcing existing inequities. Control over resources that fulfil fundamental human necessities is established unequally, in conformity with the coercive power of class. Its distribution, therefore, can only serve the ends of extended coercion.

Women participants were keenly aware that caste pollution, by either presence or touch, that operated so strongly in the case of conflict over public resources seemed not to matter at all in the extraction of labour. When it comes to taking water from a hand pump, notions of ritual purity are invoked, when it comes to the extraction of labour in the field, it does not matter at all that the seed is planted, the crop tended and the grain harvested by the same untouchable. The same applies in the case of rape as social revenge/punishment/coercion. By a curious quirk, the untouchable becomes socially touchable in more ways than one. The image of a homogeneous Hindu people in pursuit of a single civilisational dream was seen for the eyewash that it was by many speakers. Even in the case of purportedly so fundamental an aspect of life as worship, the invocation of the existence of caste to create separate places of worship was emphasised. Even in the aftermath of the

demolition of the Babri masjid, which was ostensibly the act of a united Hindu community, all temples were not open to dalits.

The speakers were aware of the work of mobilisation by the hindutva brigade in their midst. A strong sense of the limiting practice of untouchability was manifest. This consciousness raised some broader self-evident questions. Once this awareness exists, what is the mode of politics that becomes necessary? Secondly, what are the implications for a sociological analysis of Indian society insofar as a transformative knowledge or a transformative self-realisation exists? Some sociological and anthropological, and from it, uncritically imitative historical writing pursuing knowledge from the perspective of identity, seems to evade altogether the transformative possibilities presented by such consciousness.

Be that as it may, this experience was common to the urban and rural parts of north India. While a comprehensive legislation, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of) Atrocities Act, 1989, exists on paper, social, political and economic pressures ensure that it remains ineffective. Of the innumerable cases of rape of dalit women, only a fraction of the victims lodge reports, an even smaller fraction is filed by the police, while actual conviction is negligible. The problem lies not so much with the law itself as with the context in which it exists.

The gravest problem is that of both an absolute and relative scarcity of drinking water. At common water sources, dalit women face humiliation, and are even deprived of water because upper castes assert their privilege in respect of drawing water. Unequal relations are compounded from the lack of equality in access to resources. The inequality is reproduced when, in exchange for permission to draw water from a public source, dalit women are forced to perform various menial tasks for upper caste women. The everyday act of collecting water invites many abuses and jibes. Many speakers complained of how they were made to beg for water, and after they were given permission to draw it, were made to scrub the hand pump clean.

In a country where sanitation is a scarce facility, and since what is scarce is subject to public disputes, the principle of distribution operates along a caste-class axis. The landless suffer, the dalit landless suffer even more and dalit landless women suffer the most. Dalit women are often forced to use fields that belong to upper castes, leaving them susceptible to physical and mental harassment.

The problems arising from lack of literacy and education were reiterated. Dalit children face discrimination at schools. Their objective conditions force them to drop out of school. Many speakers felt that without education, the next generation too would be trapped into the same iniquitous social world that their parents inhabit. Lack of electricity in villages and alcoholism among men were problems which found mention.

The mode of transformation in demonstrably unequal societies is the political organisation of socially oppressed groups to assert their purportedly guaranteed equal rights. Right comes alive when claimed, and it can only be claimed when those who are guaranteed the right, but deprived of it, organise and struggle to attain it. Mere organisation does not secure it permanently. Neither do stray acts of militancy, successful or otherwise, necessarily enable the transformation of a backward social reality. The organised force needs to assert itself constantly until such time as the right is secured permanently. Only then can the legal framework itself be said to be reasonably democratic, and, most importantly, only then can the judiciary, especially at the lower levels, be forced to think and act differently.

Instances of such assertions were recounted at the convention in colourful and pithy terms, far removed from the customs and protocols of genteel society.

Accounts were given of women organising themselves to ensure that policemen do not harass them, or even enter their village. Such organising also ensured that land legally theirs, but coveted by upper caste groups, was not lost. Most importantly, there was a pride in being hardy, in not being pampered, in being able to withstand great hardships, in having a new identity, other than the caste-designated identity, in the strength and courage to sustain and endure attritive battles. It was a feeling of "we do not have the strength to bear any more, we only have the strength to fight". A poignant account of the struggle of the women of Kitmai village, in the Fatehpur district of Uttar Pradesh, was given. Rape of women in this predominantly dalit village was a routine matter. Collective action through the organisation of a Mahila Samhiti led to an improvement in the condition of women in the village.

The convention brought to the fore the need to look at the different forms of exploitation that take place and then to link these up so that a practicable emancipatory strategy can be devised. What also became obvious was the prevailing and worrying disjuncture between the more avant garde practices of the social sciences and the grim Indian political reality that awaits transformation. That the social sciences, such as they are, can exist, even flourish, in such a context is itself a telling statement.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISLAM

*N.K. Singh (Director, International Centre for Religious Studies,
New Delhi)*

The author goes deep into the evolution and current form of the Islamic viewpoint on social justice and human rights. Comprehensive discussions on the Islamic concepts of human rights, the social roots of justice and the Islamic theory of social relations are offered. Today the society is craving for modernity which means liberty, openness and rationality. Against this backdrop, the author shows that there exists a conflict within the Islamic society between the orthodox and the progressive sections. The book provides a complete coverage of its subject including every aspect of social justice and human rights in Islam.

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