




By AMITA KANEKAR

Demonetisation, both Economic and Social

It seems to be Achche Din for attacks on the citizen, economic as well as social, open as well as insidious. The open one is of course the demonetisation of currency. In 50 days there will be a new India, claims the Prime Minister; the ATMs will take 21 days to function normally, say the banks. Such is the gap between the hot air spouted by our leaders, and the situation that is actually killing people on the ground. Enough people—including even the BJP itself in its earlier avatar as opposition to the Congress government's small demonetisation attempt—have pointed out that demonetisation never fulfils its purported aim of attacking the black economy; what it does do however is to attack the poor. The real aims of demonetisation are reported to be actually something else: to provide a shot of income to banks that were critically in the red, and also to upset the cash calculations of other parties for the oncoming elections.

The banks are in the red because of lakhs of crores of bad loans. Just 85 princely crooks owe Rs 87,000 crores, but the government does not want to even publish their names, let alone arrest them. No, the ones who have to pay the price are, as always, the poor. They are not being just 'inconvenienced' like you and me, but hammered. And so this newest manmade disaster unfolds, upturning the lives of the already-vulnerable, mostly people of SC, ST and OBC communities, those working in the informal sector, without bank accounts and ID proof, let alone plastic money. In Goa, there are reports of daily wage earners not being paid, pharmacies refusing to sell life-saving medicines, and small vendors losing all their daily customers. While the big moneybags laugh all the way to the Swiss Banks, or to their next 500-crore wedding.

The more things change, the saying goes, the more they remain the same. The very idea of a new India is a joke, given the entrenched social hierarchies we live in, which the establishment works hard to protect. This can be seen in another government intervention, this one in Goa, which took place quietly just a few days before the big announcement of demonetisation—an insidious, but no less audacious, intervention to ensure that the social hierarchy stays well in place.

 In earlier columns, I have pointed to how bad things are in Goa with regard to the implementation of the constitutional provision of caste-based reservations in jobs and education. The rules regarding reservations have been brazenly flouted by most government bodies and educational institutions in the state, including Goa University, the Directorate of Higher Education, and so on. And this was the norm, so much so that the local press did not consider this wholesale flouting a newsworthy issue. But the number of complaints, challenges, and struggles against this scam are now growing, with the authorities having to respond, in the courts, or press, or other fora, to questions about their casteist practices.

The standard response is to plead ignorance. But this is a fake argument. The problem is a systemic one, for the misdemeanours happen repeatedly and only in one direction, i.e. to reduce the intake and promotion of reserved category candidates. And now there is incontrovertible proof that the government is just not interested in following the rules: a government directive to the Chairperson of the Goa Commission of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, stating that the Commission has no jurisdiction in service matters.

But, according to The Goa Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act, 2010, one of the functions of the Commission is 'to investigate and monitor all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India'. The Commission is supposed to be a safeguard for especially vulnerable groups who despite various laws intended for their protection and development, are still discriminated against. The Commission, according to the same Act mentioned above, has hence the authority of a Civil Court trying a suit. And even though its rulings are only recommendations and not enforceable, the government has to give a reasoned explanation if it does not accept any.

In keeping with the mandate of the Act, the Chairperson of the Commission took up a service matter where it appeared that the rules for reservations had not been followed. The directive he received in response is however an attempt to snatch away his powers and cut the Commission down to size. And it is an attack on all those from the discriminated-against communities who are fighting for their rights as citizens.

It is interesting to see that, in the immediate aftermath of this directive, the Goa University has issued an advertisement for recruitment to various administrative posts, even though complaints regarding the violation of reservation rules in its earlier recruitments are pending before the Commission. The directive thus seems to be taken as a sign that such complaints can be ignored.

And, although the Commission says that it will challenge the directive, the situation now is that all service matters are to be kept on hold till the issue of the Commission's scope is resolved. This will obviously be a blow to petitioners, all of whom come from socially and economically vulnerable circumstances.

But does that matter? A government that can blithely say 'please bear the pain' when people are actually dying in queues to get their own small savings, is unlikely to shed a tear. Whether 50 days from now, or 500, Achche Din can never be for all in a caste society.

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