



By AMITA KANEKAR

Of Social Smugglers, Spiritual Fascists, and Intellectual Goondas

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd can teach us a thing or two about Goa. The passionate Ambedkarite, social scientist, civil liberties activist, and retired professor of political science at Osmania University, Hyderabad, has been in the news for receiving death threats, and then for being physically attacked, because of his description of the baniya/vaishya community as ‘social smugglers’. The professor complained to the police, but it appears that their only action has been to file a case against *him* for ‘hurting religious sentiments’ with his writing. The only bit of good news is that the Supreme Court has ruled against a petition demanding a ban on the writing in question. The danger has however not stopped Prof Ilaiah Shepherd from speaking out and explaining his ideas in detail.

The work that attracted the attacks is a chapter ‘Social Smugglers’ from his nine-year-old book *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual, and Scientific Revolution* (Sage 2009). Various chapters from the book were translated into Telugu and published as separate booklets, and it was one of these, titled *Samajika Smugglerlu—Komatollu* (Social Smugglers—Komatis), that led to the threats, including violent public statements from two Telugu Desam Party MPs, that he be hanged and his legs broken.

This is not the first time Prof. Ilaiah Shepherd has been attacked. A prolific and accessible writer (rare for an academic), he has been widely published on issues connected to caste, religion, injustice, and social liberation. His many books include the pathbreaking best-seller *Why I am not a Hindu - A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Samya 1996), *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha’s Challenge to Brahmanism* (Samya 2001), *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labour in our Times*, with Durgabai Vyam (Navayana 2007), and others, all of which challenge caste society and tradition.

Post-Hindu India is an attempt to dissect Indian culture from the point of view of the social, economic, and political roles of different communities, and the development by them of scientific knowledge, technology and production. The chapters are titled evocatively, from Unpaid Teachers (referring to the Adivasis and the knowledge base they give to the rest of society), to Subaltern Scientists (cleaning and leather-working castes), Productive Soldiers

(village protectors and weavers), Subaltern Feminists (washer communities), Social Doctors (barber communities), and so on, showing how Dalit-Bahujan castes developed a productive and science-based culture, which fostered the growth of social well-being but was neither recognised nor recorded.

At the top of the social hierarchy are what he calls the Social Smugglers, Spiritual Fascists, and Intellectual Goondas. As can be seen, the titles are not just evocative but also provocative, for Prof Ilaiah, as always, wants to rock the boat of our stagnant and conformist thinking.

The term Social Smugglers refers to how business is traditionally conducted in the subcontinent, in which secrecy is paramount, cheating (via tax-evasion, false measures, etc.) the norm, and wealth stashed away underground, as gold or temple donations, rather than being used as social capital. The latest example of this is demonetisation, says Ilaiah, where 10 companies—7 owned by baniya castes—made huge profits amid widespread Dalit-Bahujan suffering.

By Spiritual Fascists, he means those who foster the Brahmanical spiritual system which 'constructs a consciousness of the indignity of labour, wherein even the notion of God keeps operating around the indignity of labour'; this consciousness sees production as polluting, inequality as natural, and violence as godly. Intellectual Goondas refers to those Spiritual Fascists who occupy all institutions of the modern Indian state, as bureaucrats, teachers, journalists, historians, etc, where they uphold the ideals of spiritual fascism, oppose rational and egalitarian ideas, and teach the Dalit-Bahujans to be silent.

These three groups have been ruling India since 1947, he says, a period which can be called their 'golden age'. And, thanks to them, modern India is notable for a lack of both scientific temper and dignity of labour. Although caste-based reservations have resulted in some openings for Dalit-Bahujans in the government, these get thwarted as much as possible, even as reservations in the private sector are vehemently opposed.

His arguments relate quite well to Goa. Examples of celebrations of spiritual fascism, of widespread reservation scams, of manufactured history, of cheating of Bahujans in the name of development, are legion. As for the freedom to speak, a recent example is the case of Vishnu Surya Wagh's book of Konkani poetry *Sudhirsukt* (Apurbai, 2013), i.e. Shudra's Story, which was selected to get a state literary award. Now, this is hardly the first time that a non-savarna would get such an award. But *Sudhirsukt* is a straightforward exposé of casteism in Goa; it targets caste directly, instead of tip-toeing around it; it differentiates the Sudhir from the Bamon in every aspect of life, from work to worship, language and history.

It seems Parashuram fired an arrow

Into the sea and it receded

Repeating this tale year in and year out

They cheated the Bahujan Samaj

Through this lie they wanted to establish

That this land was created by them

You cheats: if you were the first here

Then who were the Mahars, Bhandaris, Kharvis, Pagis,

Gawdas, Velips, Dhangars, Kunbis...?

(From *Sudirsukt*, translated by Augusto Pinto)

This is clearly unacceptable to Goa's establishment. They might not mind such ideas being published, but celebrating them is out of the question—the next thing, as a critic said, such poems will be read in schools!

So the 'merit' of the work was called into question. A police case has been filed against the author and publisher for 'vulgar content'. And all literary awards are cancelled till further notice. If this isn't intellectual goondaism, what is?



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