By AMITA KANEKAR

A Much-Needed Ferment

India, said The Economist famously some years ago, is a 'continent-sized embarrassment'. The description, which attracted outrage from sections of India's ruling establishment, is actually a mild one, if you go by the recently-published book '*The Ferment: Youth Unrest in India*' (Macmillan, 2019) by Nikhila Henry. The book paints a picture of contemporary India that is at once both depressing and inspiring. Depressing because it relentlessly and meticulously confirms the suspicion that must haunt every thinking Indian today: this country is just not working. Henry's book interviews diverse young people across the country united by their involvement in protests of one kind or another, trying to find out just why they are angry. And, from almost all the vantage points she presents, the country resembles less a functioning republic and democracy than a disaster zone; a disaster zone in which millions of the weakest, poorest, most vulnerable of its citizens are trapped in poverty, violence, hierarchy, patriarchy, illiteracy, criminalisation, you name it, most of it based on caste, and with no freedom in sight.

Many of the protests Henry documents are not new. Who has not heard of student strikes or the 'Kashmir problem'? But there was a huge upsurge in all these agitations in the 2nd decade of the twenty-first century, says Henry, and the big reason for this was education. The increased enrolment of students from SC-ST-OBC-Minority backgrounds resulted in a sea-change in the socio-economic composition of student communities everywhere, which till the 1980s had been the monopoly of the dominant castes.

These students changed things – they challenged the rampant and overt Brahmanism in their institutions, formed new associations based on their background, and began to expect and demand respect and justice from a system saturated with opposing values. For, what India calls unity in diversity, says Henry, is actually the infinite internal divisions of caste. And the dominant castes did not just monopolise education, they expected to do so indefinitely. The Sachar Committee Report of 2006 noted that, despite a growing enrolment ratio among all communities, among 21- to 30-year-olds, just 3.3 per cent of Adivasis and Dalits, 4.5 per cent of Muslims, and 6.5 per cent of OBCs were graduates, compared to 18.6 per cent of the General Category. The Universities thus not only failed to teach students from oppressed and marginalised communities, they provided a hostile and discriminatory environment which rusticated many and drove others to drop out, even commit suicide. All the while denying the very existence of caste.

'Rohith Vemula, who walked out of his hostel room carrying an Ambedkar portrait in hand days before he committed suicide, was perhaps the first one to establish what student agitations in isolated colleges and universities had pointed out in the past: that educational

institutions had turned into Khap panchayats; modern killing fields that repackaged age-old practices of deprivation and discrimination.'

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The rest of the world sees India's caste system as an affront to modernity, says Henry, when caste is actually embedded in India's very modernisation process. It is nothing less than the backbone of India's most modern institutions. And having faced and survived this system, what confronts many young adults, with hard-won degrees and diplomas in hand, is joblessness. The government's much-vaunted technical revolution, championing technical skill development to become jobworthy, actually resulted in thousands of engineering colleges dotting the country today, many of them privately-owned and extortionist in their fees, but no jobs. The government should have invested in boosting manufacturing, says Henry, which creates more jobs, including skilled ones. It should have focussed on the fact that it has the biggest youth population in the world, something to be seen as an asset. Instead it has just allowed the service sector to grow and grow, leaving engineering-diploma-holders to drive Ola cabs in Cyberabad. Meanwhile, the engineering curriculum has been revamped to include the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, and *Tarka Shastra*—the science of dialectics and logic – in January, 2018.

Another difference in the twenty-first century protests is their public visibility and therefore uncontainability by the establishment, not least thanks to the internet and social media, but also crucially thanks to the rise of alternate media like Dalit Camera and Round Table India web portal which have provided space for emerging voices, especially from marginalised communities. There is also the influence – thanks to the telecom revolution – of agitations elsewhere, like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. The protests of today are thus aware, confident, aggressive, and in-your-face, resounding to the beats of leather drums, *takbir* calls, *Jai Bhim* salutes, church bells and Buddhist chants, not to mention the celebration of suppressed cultures of food, music, religious practice and political behaviour, sometimes openly, sometimes otherwise.

At the end, Henry's well-written, almost poetic in places, account is one of hope, or even inspiration. For what it chronicles are the lives and opinions of young people who are not just fiercely unhappy with India's infinite failings, but unwilling to quietly accept them. From the Indian universities with their vocal and sometimes-banned Ambedkar-Birsa-Phule-Periyar student associations, and their Beef and Asura festivals, to the Saharanpur-based and teenager-filled Bhim Army and its determination to fight back against ingrained social violence and deprivation, the marginalised Adivasi youngsters flocking towards the Left Wing Extremism (as the Home Ministry puts it) in 106 of India's 683 districts today despite the promise of being 'hunted like vermin' and killed by the Indian paramilitaries or other Adivasis co-opted by the State, the battered but unbowed students in the north-east states and

Kashmir once again facing the armed might of the Indian State, and the young women like Kerala's Hadiya, fighting for the right to convert to Islam and to marry whom they want, the second decade of the twenty-first century finds young Indians everywhere expressing revulsion with the system and willing to suffer to 'wake India out of its caste stupor'.

Is the ferment missing in Goa? Or is it taking different forms, given a different culture? Or is it that the protests are individual and small enough – like Goa itself – to be conveniently ignored, even as the media is caught up with the acrobatics of political parties who share a lack of interest in social justice? The establishment is struggling to invisibilise a million real and burning issues connected to young people, from the widely unimplemented reservations policy in education and jobs, the anti-Bahujan Medium-of-Instruction policy, the general lack of dignified employment, the caste atrocities in villages like Ibrampur, the running down of Christian culture, and the wholesale destruction of Goa's environment, but without success. The fight is on.

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(Nikhila Henry's *The Ferment: Youth Unrest in India* is published by Macmillan India, and was released in Goa at the International Centre Goa on 13 July 2019. A shorter version of this review was published in *O Heraldo* on 20 July 2019).