

By AMITA KANEKAR



Need of the hour: English MOI and reservations for all

The Dr B R Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series this year saw both the distinguished speakers, Advocate Martin Macwan and Prof Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, speak, among other things, of the same two issues in their speeches. One was about English-language education – a subject of burning debate in Goa – and second about the need to expand caste-based reservations – a subject which is like the proverbial elephant in the room, i.e. always ignored.

Martin Macwan, while speaking of ‘The Growing Relevance of Ambedkar Thought in India Today’ providing shocking examples and data to show how, in the villages of the ‘developed’ state of Gujarat, it is caste that rules even today, and not the Constitution. The efforts of organisations like his to encourage education, especially primary education, are making a small but distinct impact, he said, but one step which would help is a policy of caste-based reservations for all, i.e 100% reservations in education and jobs, . Prof. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd in turn, while speaking on ‘Ambedkar, Sardar Patel, and the Shudras’, was interrupted many times by scattered applause, but the clapping was almost thunderous when he said that caste-based reservations should end in 25 years. The largely dominant-caste audience however looked a bit disturbed when he added that the only way to end reservations was to first extend them to all sections of society (including the private sector). What this means is that every caste should get education/jobs as per their percentage in the population. So even the so-called upper castes would get only as many positions as per their percentage in the population.

According to Shepherd, India is today ruled – whether in politics, bureaucracy, judiciary, business, or media – by Brahmins and Banias, along with Kayasthas and Khattris. The Shudras – to which his own shepherd community belongs – comprise more than 50% of India’s population, but are hardly present, as also the Dalits and Adivasis. What is even more remarkable about the Shudras is that this huge community has hardly any well-known writers, novelists, philosophers, or intellectuals of any kind today (except for Ilaiah Shepherd himself, one might add). While the far more oppressed Dalit communities have produced so many writers and philosophers after Ambedkar, the comparatively landed and well-off Shudras have taken after Sardar Patel, who, despite being educated in Britain and a lawyer, wrote nothing about his community or himself. ‘Patel thus followed the caste prescription

that the Shudra should not write', said Ilaiah Shepherd, 'which is why he is the perfect Shudra nationalist for the RSS-BJP.' Shepherd added that Patel was India's 'Iron Man' (not Mahatma or Pandit) for benefit of the Brahmins (like Nehru) and the Banias (like Gandhi) who actually ruled.

The fact that the rampant caste violence across India, from lynchings to honour killings, happens at the hands of members of Shudra communities, has caused some Brahmin liberals to claim that it is Shudras, not Brahmins, who really uphold the caste system. According to Shepherd however, this is just the same old caste story of the Shudras working for the dvijas, in return for being considered Hindu. But, if Shudras are Hindus, why don't they demand priesthood in Hindu temples? Why don't they wear the sacred thread? Or are they Hindus only for the purpose of attacking Dalits, Muslims and Christians? Shudras must stop being the 'iron men' of the dvijas, he said; they must stop being the protectors of Brahmanical culture. But for that they need two things: good education and reservations.

Both Shepherd and Macwan declared that reservations should be 100% in jobs/education; the demands for reservations by even dominant village communities like the Jats, Patels, and Marathas are thus a good step in this direction and must be supported. This also means that the current 50% cap on reservations by the Supreme Court needs to be challenged, as the actual population of just the Shudras is estimated to exceed 50% of the total. Along with the Dalits and Adivasis, the population that is socially and educationally discriminated against would stand easily at more than 75%, while that of the privileged castes is estimated to be less than even 20%. Capping reservations at 50% thus gives the privileged castes more than double the positions they should have, and also flouts the very purpose of caste-based reservations: to ensure that the communities reach adequate representation as per their demographic numbers.

It is another matter, of course, that we have no clue of the current demographics, since the last census (2011), which counted caste populations, has not been made public; all discussions and government policies connected to caste percentages are based on the 1935 census done in the British Raj. But estimates point to the dominant caste percentages having declined.

Things in Goa are even worse, with rough estimates of privileged caste population being less than 15% of the total, while they seem to enjoy over 80% of the best jobs. As for the others, caste-based reservations totals only 41% here, and even this is not implemented. Despite protests as well as legal challenges, the authorities continue to flout the rules, as can be seen in the recent recruitment drives by the Department of Education and the Department of Art and Culture. The Gauda, Kunbi, Velip and Dhangar Federation (GAKUVED) has exposed how the recruitment drives completely ignored the huge backlog of unfilled reserved posts. Perhaps the only solution for this gross and wilful neglect is this: removing the 'general' category, and making 100% positions reserved according to caste population.

The other necessity is good education, said both speakers, which means English medium of instruction, which must also include education about the dignity of labour. But English education has been covertly reserved for the Brahmins and Banias, who can pay for private schools, said Shepherd, and who also benefit from the best of the Catholic educational institutions, since these institutions have never focussed on Bahujans as their target students. The Bahujans have to go to government schools which teach only in regional languages - in the name of protecting 'national culture'.

But this culture has never been that of the Bahujans, said Shepherd; in fact, it was this culture that kept Bahujans illiterate all these centuries. English schools for Bahujans are therefore a must, which teach respect about the Bahujan way of life and contribution to creating society. Let the privileged castes protect whatever they call national culture. This is why the first slogan of his new political party in Telengana was: 'Bahujan children, study in English! Brahmins, study in Sanskrit!'

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