

Caste, Cultural Studies, Politics and Political Theory, History

Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics

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Foreword: The Labour of Theory by Susie Tharu

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Some day historians and political theorists are likely to speak of the 1990s in India (as they now do of the 1960s in France) as a period of epochal changes in politics, the arts, democracy itself. In the West, Michel Foucault writes, a plurality of questions that had not sprung from a political doctrine was addressed to politics. He lists among them questions about women, relations between the sexes, medicine, mental illnesses, minorities, delinquencies. Apparently similar questions emerged here too- about caste, religious affiliation, region (I am deliberately not listing- not yet at least- 'women') revealing vital yet obscured dimensions of national culture and history. However, in a rarely commented on yet key sense, as event, what happened and indeed is still happening here, would appear to be critically different from what took place in the West. The demands there have been characterized as ones for recognition of identity, inclusion, and civil rights- implying a democracy already in place. In contrast, here the new questions rejected post- independence consensus of the 1950s, reopening the question of the republic and reintroducing, in a fundamental mode, questions of interests, democracy, minority, secularism and rights. These brought an immense new energy into public life. Neither existing vocabularies of politics, nor the disciplinary formations of the social sciences, however, was equipped to engage that energy or those questions.

For instance, the consensus around the caste question fell apart following the erosion after the fall of the Soviet Union of the centrality of class analysis, a series of massacres of rural dalits, and the unprecedented eruption of upper caste fury, widely endorsed in the national media, against the caste-based reservations recommended by the Mandal Commission in the late 1980s and 1990s. What is important, however, is that far from the erasure of caste demanded by the protesting groups, it led to a new recognition of the pervasive presence of caste as a source of social and political capital and as a mode of power in the everyday life of secular modernity. Another unprecedented consequence of the anti- reservation protests was a renewed confidence and energy of the dalit movement.

It is one of those Nietzschean accidents of history that these years also witnessed the countrywide Ambedkar Centenary celebrations and the systematic translation of his collected works, hitherto available only in English, into regional works. Overnight as it were, pietistic discussions of untouchability, that had served national life for a century and a half, were unhinged. The term 'harijan' made a hasty exit from national discourse. And a

new set of writers, thinkers and activists proposed altogether new ways of understanding the significance of caste as a domain of Indian politics, public culture, knowledge formations, the arts, and, not least, subjectivity and personal life.

This led among other things to a reinterpretation of caste politics, hitherto denigrated as vote bank manipulation, as an interest-based politics, a revisiting of the practice of reservations, its meaning, as also the silent ways in which the promise of these constitutional safeguards and compensations had been undercut. Other themes included the casteism of policy and of education, the politics of the media, the meaning of censorship, the history of agricultural land ownership, the importance of conversion and the shapes of violence.

Extract

Ch 6: April: Dalit History Month

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In 'The Philosophy of History', the German philosopher Hegel says that 'the Hindus are incapable of writing history... Periods of time are mentioned in the Hindus' writings and large numbers which have often an astronomical meaning, but which have still often an arbitrary origin. Thus it is related of certain kings that they had reigned 70,000 years or more! It would be ridiculous to regard passages of this kind as anything historical. In their poems, kings are often talked of: these may have been historical personages but they completely vanish in fable; they retire from the world and then appear again after they have passed ten thousand years in solitude. Hegel even accused brahmins of having no conscience in respect to the truth: 'They even lie knowingly and designedly where misapprehension is out of the question', he observes. So much that myth, backed by an undefined religion, has replaced history in India; in fact, myth is re-staking its claim to historicity more dangerously than ever in post- Independence India. But this revisionism has affected dalits much before textbooks came to be rewritten.

To counter these fabrications, we need concrete history. Ambedkar, standing on solid Buddhist ground, was the first to try and unravel the real history that lay wrapped up in these Puranic myths in his writings such as 'Revolution and Counter- Revolution in Ancient India'. He appealed to the students of Indian history to bear in mind that the history of India is nothing but the history of struggles between Buddhism and Brahminism, a fact that has largely been neglected by the historians who have written about it. The fact is that Brahminism, prone to the preservation of myths, ensured that the scientific and historically accurate Buddhist texts were destroyed. History was burnt. Most of the important Buddhist works have been recovered off Indian shores.

Ch 17: Is Sonia a Foreigner?

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The BJP says that a foreigner should not be allowed to occupy high office, because it would result in the leakage of the country's secrets. What is so secret about this country? Everything in the world is under the surveillance of the USA satellites. Ninety percent of the defence equipment used in India was brought from foreign countries- F16 from America; MIG from Russia. We cannot even move a muscle without the USA taking note. So what's this uptightness vis-à-vis secrecy about? What do our governments do other than implement the orders of the superpowers, be it in the economic sphere or the military?

Leaving these issues aside, let us see how we can approach Sonia. As Sangma said, the background of Sonia, who married Rajiv in 1968, remains mysterious. The country still does not know about her role in the Bofors deal. Sonia is following the populist politics of Rajiv Gandhi. It is obvious that despite being a Christian by birth, she cannot transform the Congress into a secular party. In fact, her past activities show us that she will not hesitate to appropriate a mild Hindutva ideology for political gain.