Division bell

A searing commentary on caste, class and the Dalit movement, and the cause and effect of deepening inequality

SOBHANA K. NAIR

On Tuesday, probing the alleged Maoist involvement in the Elgar Parishad meeting in Pune on December 31, 2017, that led to violence, the police searched homes of nine human rights activists and lawyers and arrested five of them. The list included author Anand Teltumbde whose home on campus premises at the Goa Institute of Management, where he is a senior professor, was raided.

In this context, it is eerily prescient that Teltumbde writes in his book Republic of Caste that “'Naxalite ideology, whatever that may be holds no terror for the state, but the simple fact of dissent does.” His book is an angry outburst on living the caste reality for 71 years after the birth of India.

Seeing through a prism

What sets his book apart from other tomes on Dalit writing is that it is not a compilation of the movement. It doesn’t even evaluate commitment towards the Dalit cause of various political parties. Instead, it directly engages with readers prodding them to look at current developments from the Swach Bharat Mission, to the state of education or the campaign against so-called urban Maoists, through the prism of caste.

For example, in the chapter ‘Manufacturing Maoists: Dissent in the Age of Neoliberalism’ that details repression against activists many of who figure in Tuesday’s list, he writes, “Maoism and nationalism are simply modern day euphemisms for outcaste and caste, respectively.”

This book is not to comfort anyone as social scientist Sunil Khilnani notes in his foreword. Teltumbde spares no one. He slams the Leftists who comfortably ignored caste politics confabulating it with class dynamics. He tears through Ambedkarites for repeatedly celebrating caste identities, reducing him to an “inert godhead”, instead of following Ambedkar’s own vision of annihilation of caste. He dismisses the “Dalit bourgeoisie” for failing to pull out their fellow brethrens. He fumes at the Sangh Parivar and the BJP’s efforts to appropriating Ambedkar. He mocks the Congress and prescribes homegrown politics for its president Rahul Gandhi.

“Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from coming and mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind,” Ambedkar had said in his seminal work Annihilation of Caste. Teltumbde’s book reminds you of the very principle as though it was inconceivable. He quotes the example of textile mills of Bombay where despite communist control over the workers, the practice of untouchability continued. At the same time he blames Ambedkarites for not participating in leftist movements, which would have paid richer dividends than reservation.

Teltumbde has reserved the most acerbic remarks for the Sangh Parivar which he accuses of not just appropriating Ambedkar but also attempting to control the terms on which people engage with him.

The book starts going off on a tangent as it looks at political parties and their idea of caste. Especially the last chapter on Aam Aadmi Party looks completely misplaced.

The general election is just nine months away. The Narendra Modi government is struggling to prove its Dalit credentials. As the election season nears, the cacophonous tug-of-war between the government and opposition each trying to outdo the other as a Dalit champion will intensify. At such a time, Teltumbde’s book will come in handy as a critical guidebook on Ambedkar’s vision, which has been distorted over the years.