

Sreelatha Menon: The dalit treasure hunt

The social justice and empowerment ministry is linking dalit research with dalit activism, which may some day lead to celebration of dalitism

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There is no end to the variety of demons that the mind can engender. The feeling of hatred or fear based on one's position in the caste hierarchy is only one of them.

In a Madurai village, some people recently went to the extent of building a wall so that they are saved the "impure" sight of dalits living in the other part of the village.

In north Indian villages, a Harijan basti is a common sight. Caste-based discrimination is a mental illness, a virus that hits the brain, as Dr A Rosaiah of Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai puts it.

In this lunacy, all institutions become suspect. Recently, the social justice ministry's Ambedkar Chair at Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) and Pria, a non-government organisation, organised a workshop on dalit leadership in panchayats. At the event, activists pointed fingers at the panchayati raj system itself.

Is panchayati raj the right way to go? Is it right just because Mahatma Gandhi recommended it? It was something BR Ambedkar, known as the father of the Constitution, was against. He felt it could not work in a caste-ridden society.

There are so many cases of dalit panchayat presidents acting as rubber stamps, of panchayat presidents being forced to sit on the floor, of being forced to wash their chairs at the time of leaving.

Today, if a dalit becomes a panchayat president, he becomes the worst enemy of his community, says Paul Diwakar, who heads the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights. The reason is that he is chosen by the upper caste leaders of the community. So, he acts in the interests of his "masters," leaving the dalits feeling betrayed.

This proves right the thesis of dalit leaders that India got freedom from external masters but continued to be a slave of internal masters.

There had to be a cultural revolution, Ambedkar had said, to reverse the hierarchical system. How can dalits get their due?

Quotas are like a balm. But a balm is not enough, for there are fresh wounds every day.

Five years ago, Arun Khote, a dalit activist, started an online news magazine to document atrocities on dalits. It goes to almost everyone who matters in the country. Yet, the country doesn't recognise the apartheid that is being played out in the name of democracy.

Just shedding tears about these atrocities is not enough. There has to be a celebration of the wealth that the community stands for. The wealth of its tradition and history needs to be studied.

The social justice and empowerment ministry's Budget allocation has seen a huge jump in this Budget. It beats both the National Employment Guarantee Scheme and the government's education and health programmes.

The Ambedkar Foundation under the ministry has already made a beginning by setting up ten research chairs in ten different states. In New Delhi, the IIPA conference brought together researchers and dalit organisations. This will lead to more information on dalit culture, where seeds of a cultural revolution lie. Khote is talking about dalit festivals, dalit music. It's a new beginning to kill the virus of hatred.