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May 11, 2010

First Published: 23:00 IST(11/5/2010)  
Last Updated: 09:28 IST(12/5/2010)

## A blinkered vision

The headlines scream almost every day: 'Girl allegedly murdered because of inter-caste romance', 'Couple killed by relatives because of caste honour'. The matrimonials are unabashed: 'Match sought for fair khatri girl' or 'Brahmin boy seeks Brahmin partner.' A Delhi mother whispers that her daughter's choice of husband is not "our kind of person," but stops short of admitting that the prospective groom is not from the same caste. Characters in Bollywood films bear surnames that are drawn from the very narrow social pool of Sharma, Mehta and Roy. Indians may be holidaying in Phuket, shopping at Mango and devouring Sex and the City. But one social reality just refuses to go away. And that reality is caste.

Should caste matter to a modern Indian? Of course it shouldn't. Yet, whether we like it or not, caste is still a defining category. Excluding a narrow westernised elite band, Indians marry according to caste, socialise within similar castes, education is determined by caste and caste, by and large, corresponds to class when it comes to backwardness. Twenty years ago when then Prime Minister V.P. Singh implemented the Mandal recommendations reserving 27 per cent government jobs for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), many caste Hindus heard the word OBC for the first time. Today there are similar feelings of dread that the government has decided to include caste in the 2011 census. But it's time that the elite and middle class came to terms with caste, debated it openly and exorcised caste demons.

When Parliament pushed for a caste census there was near panic about an impending caste war. It was argued that counting OBCs would only add further muscle power to the caste chieftains to once again lobby for that terrible 'Q' word: quotas. But will counting OBCs make caste loyalties deeper or will it, on the other hand, provide, for the first time, hard reliable information on how many OBC castes are there and what their numerical strength is? Confronted by real numbers, it may be more difficult for the quota warriors to argue for reservations. The Constitution makers aimed to progressively abolish caste discrimination, not abolish caste as an identity. Unless we all understand and study caste, we will never be able to fight it or develop a genuinely anti-caste mindset.

Political scientists Yogendra Yadav and Satish Deshpande say that a colonial caste-based census where all castes, including the Hindu 'upper castes', are counted and ranked is neither feasible nor desirable. What we need is to count OBCs in the same manner as we count SCs and STs. We need to count Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs) in order to get an accurate picture of their actual number. We are, thus, not counting all castes, but only backward communities. When reservations for OBCs have been provided for at the Union and state levels, surely a census is essential to find out what the hard numbers are and whether the quotas are accurate.

So how does caste operate nowadays? There is the robust argument that caste is irrelevant in contemporary India. What matters is quality health and education for all irrespective of caste. Increasingly, elections are showing that caste is no longer the sole criterion for voting preferences: voters are voting for bijli, sadak, pani, padhai and hardworking candidates and not for Gujjars, Reddys and Ezhavas. But while caste may be irrelevant for a minority, it is highly relevant — indeed saliently — for others.

When it comes to social and economic progress, certain castes have done better than others and the advantages of the English language and a modern education are distributed along caste lines. Generalisations are risky, and rural Brahmins can be impoverished and backward too. Yet, access to English and to quality education has traditionally been the monopoly of upper castes. Class and caste are still by and large coterminous, and there is every likelihood that an upper class person in India is also 'upper

caste' and a 'lower class' person is also 'lower caste'. Secure amid our Krishnamurthys, Sens and Vermas, we never stop to think about how we got so secure in the first place.

The English-speaking elite is overwhelmingly 'upper caste' that is comprising the forward levels of the Hindu varna system. The Bengali 'bhadralok' class, or the genteel class, which was supposed to be the only non-caste class in India, is also a caste-based category, as the bhadralok are restricted to the upper caste even though they may not be exclusively Brahmin. A Bengali Dalit bhadralok is still unheard of. In 1996, when B.N. Uniyal undertook a survey of national newspapers, he found that among 686 journalists accredited to the government, 454 were upper caste, the remaining 232 did not carry their caste names and in a random sample of 47, not a single one was a Dalit. In a survey of matrimonial advertising carried out in 2000, ad agency McCann Erickson noted that caste remains as important in the new century as it was four decades ago. In 2002, Virginius Xaxa found that only six of Delhi University's 311 professors are Dalits.

Thus, a caste census should not be seen as simply a political instrument designed to secure quotas. The fight against caste is best fought when we know the enemy. Caste is an immutable, invisible and overwhelming reality in our daily lives. If we continue to act as if caste does not exist, or deny its existence, we would be failing to do battle with one of the most urgent social inequalities of our time.

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