

'Dalit movement has to see itself as part of a class-wide movement'



Reservation is an issue that only affects a small proportion of Dalits, says sociologist Vivek Chibber.

The ferment on campuses across the country following Rohith Vemula's suicide and the recent crackdown on free speech at Jawaharlal Nehru University have drawn international attention, with many academics, students and activists across the world expressing solidarity.

The mobilisation of Dalit students and the increasing awareness of caste oppression were some positive outcomes amid the troubling instances of attack on dissent and democratic rights. Vivek Chibber, Professor of Sociology at New York University and author of Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital spoke about these developments. While appreciating the significance of struggles around identity in India and the United States, Prof. Chibber argues that movements of the oppressed can be sustained and strengthened only if they take up issues of economic justice.

Meera Srinivasan – Following the death of Rohith Vemula, the Dalit scholar from Hyderabad Central University, several thousand students in India came together in protest. The incident also sparked spontaneous, nationwide mobilisation of Dalits, many of whom were already engaged in local struggles.

Around the same time a strong criticism of the mainstream Left emerged that pointed to its perceived indifference to Dalit causes and, more broadly, caste-based discrimination in India. Here in the U.S., we see Black Lives Matter – a campaign against violence targeting black people in the U.S. – that has become a prominent movement in the last few years, drawing enormous attention and support. All the same, some activists within the movement are said to be questioning the exclusive emphasis on racial identity. Are there any parallels?

Vivek Chibber – I think in India it is quite necessary, essential even, for Dalits to organise around their social marginalisation and the various forms of exclusion that they face – both within mainstream society and also within the Left, because it is real.

But it is also the case that any Dalit movement, if it is actually going to address the needs of Dalits as a group, has to see itself as part of a class-wide movement. The reason for that is simple: the overwhelming majority of Dalits are wage labourers either in the rural areas or in the informal sector in the urban settings.

The agitations that have been taking place in the cities are important, but it is important to recognise that the most visible ones have been around issues like reservations and discrimination in colleges, and these are issues that affect only a small proportion of the Dalit population. So, even if reservations were enacted with full force in government jobs and in universities, it would still only benefit a quite small section of the Dalit population.

For Dalits therefore to make progress really requires that they take up issues around wage labour and they take up issues around economic justice.

What has happened is that the Dalit movement, like identity movements across the world, has really narrowed its focus to

forms of oppressions that are very real, but which still constitute only a small subset of the oppressions that the Dalits face.

There is a parallel with the U.S. Black Lives Matter, if you think of it as a movement, has two layers to it. One is a layer of real organisers in urban areas, who were incredibly and very concerted active around issues of economic justice. Because for them the most pressing issues are not so much discrimination in the labour market, but not having a job at all; not so much the exclusion in schools, but not having [access to] schools at all. These activists are very aware that their concerns as black people involve fundamental issues of economic justice, not just narrowly racial justice.

Furthermore, these activists are also aware that what has become Black Lives Matter is as much a name brand and a commodified emblem as it is a movement. And in the past six months or so, we have seen Black Lives Matter has not been as visible as it was a year ago, on the streets. This is partly because many of the most prominent icons of Black Lives Matter are already moving into the Democratic Party, or into Teach for America, things like that.

So it is an avenue that a certain section of the black middle class is using for its upward advancement. We have seen that happen in India too – with Dalit intellectuals and Dalit politicians. Therefore, I think for people who are progressive, there is a simple and clear position to take, which is that one cannot and should not set issues of Dalit identity against issues of Dalit class interests because what they face is not simply economic exploitation but many things on top of that.

Secondly, unless a movement for justice for Dalits is fundamentally and solidly based in class and economic justice it will not address the needs of the vast majority of this section of the population.

Srinivasan – It seems ironic that class politics and identity politics should be in conflict. Why do some of these movements demonstrate that sort of tension?

Chibber – One reason is that, especially in India, the Left has not given issues of social marginalisation and exclusion the importance they deserve. So some of it is an expression of that frustration on the part of especially backward castes and Dalits, of what they faced in Left organisations. I think that has to be admitted.

But that is not the fundamental reason. The fundamental reason is that, all around the world, one of the symptoms of the decline of the Left has been that movements for social justice have been captured by middle class and fairly elite people, who have genuine disdain for class politics and class movements. And they use the language of identity and some of the failures of the Left in the past as a way of setting the class interests of their own constituency aside. This is an inevitable consequence of the decline of the economic organisations of the poor because if and when Dalits or OBCs [Other Backward Classes] start organising as workers, they will inevitably have to confront and push aside many of the current representatives of their movements which have not very much interest in the real, long-term interests of their own constituencies.

So what you are seeing here is a consequence of the fact that the representatives and the articulate exponents of identity politics around the world, especially the Indian intelligentsia, belong to a relatively privileged stratum that has a natural disdain for class organising, because those would affect their own status.

Srinivasan – Do you think that points to a shift – away from a position where the mainstream Left appreciated social marginalisation more than it perhaps does now? I am thinking of the Communist engagement with Dalit farmers in the past –

in Tamil Nadu in the 1960s, for example, around the time of the Keezhvenmani massacre.

Chibber – The Indian and the American Left – their fundamental history is a positive one, on all these issues. The American Left in particular has had actually a very noble and very admirable history on taking up issues of racial justice; in fact all forms of social exclusion. The Indian Left did, I think from the 1930s onwards, take the problems of casteism and gender domination more seriously than any other part of the Indian political culture. Nevertheless, I think within its internal functioning and in its mass organisations it never confronted casteism with the force it should have.

There are a variety of ways in which the Communist parties brought into their own culture the caste prejudices, both at the leadership and the mass organisations. I have talked to older members of the Communist movement who testified that there were separate matkas (pitchers) for the Dalits and Brahmins in the organisation. While they would encourage inter-caste marriages, at the same time, they incorporated many of the rituals of Hinduism. But the thing is that you really cannot separate Hinduism from casteism; it is quite impossible. And once you give Hinduism sanction inside your organisation, inevitably, those rituals are rituals around the exclusion of other castes. You just can't separate those two. So yes, this was a real weakness.

At the same time, we also have to see that within the sections of the self-styled progressive intelligentsia today this weakness on the part of the Left is being used as a reason to dismiss class politics. And that should give you ample indication that the people making such arguments for the dismissal of class politics are not doing it with the interests of Dalits and backward castes and Scheduled Tribes in mind, because it is simply impossible to address their situation without taking up issues of land, jobs, and structural transformation.

So my view is that the appropriate response on the part of people who call themselves Left – and by Left I don't mean just the mainstream Communist Parties – is to say that the Left was weak in these areas, but the solution is to have a better Left. Not to move away from the politics that the Left represents. It is not just because of class, it is also because the Left has been the most consistent cosmopolitan, universal, democratic force in India. It has been the only one to argue consistently for democratic rights, for women's rights, and for social inclusion.

And what we are seeing right now, the viciousness that is becoming part of Indian culture, in urban areas, rural areas, one reason for it is that even in the language of politics, sectionalism, narrow interests, nativism is not being challenged anymore. It has always been the Left that did it.

Srinivasan – Even in the case of Jammu and Kashmir, the current political forces are mobilising predominantly on religious lines, polarising people, as the 2014 poll verdict showed us.

Chibber – The Kashmir independence movement, you know [the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front when it had real social power and social weight](#), was a secular and a democratic movement. It was partly undermined by its own shortcomings, but also because but also by the Indian state and the Pakistani state that worked very hard to make sure that it was marginalised by sectarian groups, because they were easier to handle than the secular ones. That is true across the rest of the country as well.

Srinivasan – What hope do you see for movements, including the Dalit movement, seeking to mobilise people around identities of caste or religion to sustain themselves towards the goal of social justice?

Chibber – I think there is a challenge, and an enabling

condition. The challenge is that Left groups have to immerse themselves in the Dalit movement and other such struggles and show that they are fundamentally committed to the interests of marginalised groups. If they do this, then they can bring these movements into a broader agenda.

The enabling condition, one that will help the Left make this happen, is that the political establishment, as a whole right now, is lined up against the rights and interests of poor people in India, it is not just [Narendra] Modi. It is important to remember that the law that [Mr. Modi is using to crack down right now, the UAPA \[Unlawful Activities \(Prevention\) Act\]](#), was not passed by the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] government, but by the Congress-led UPA [United Progressive Alliance].

In 2004 when POTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act] expired, it was the Congress government that renewed its essentials with the UAPA. And the UAPA is the most draconian, anti-democratic legislation that we have seen in India – ever. It actually quite explicitly arrogates to itself the power to arrest and keep in detention anybody for simply maligning the Indian nation, for simply criticising it or “causing disaffection” against India. And the definition of what that is, is left open, and hence it’s for the state to decide. It was not the BJP that passed the legislation, it was the Congress. The Communist Parties should have quit the UPA right then. But they made a few noises and then stayed on, resigning later over the nuclear pact with the U.S., which in my view is less consequential than the UAPA as a threat to Indian democracy.

What that tells you is that we have been witnessing for the last 12-15 years an [enormous intensification of the crackdown on democratic rights in India](#). One of the consequences of that is that, I think, people who are committed to fighting for democratic rights see that no one party or no one organisation is behind it. It is a quite unified assault by Indian elites, the Indian establishment. And that is going to require a

fairly broad and unified response on the part of ordinary citizens and working people in India.

Srinivasan – How do you view the developments at JNU?

Chibber – That is a straightforward issue. The one thing I'll say is that it shows again the narrowness and complicity of the media and of so many sections of the Left in that there are a very few people who are challenging the very idea of a sedition law. Instead of arguing over [whether or not Kanhaiya Kumar and these people uttered what they said](#), the relevant issue here ought to be, why does India have a sedition law at all? Even the Left, the mainstream Left parties, their position has been not to ask why is there a sedition law, but to say this was at most an act of a few hooligans, and the whole university should not be attacked or undermined because of it.

But the thing is that the moment you say that a few people in a university can be arrested because of the slogans they are shouting or the views they espouse, you've effectively undermined the entire academic institution. You're attacking the whole university. It seems to me that the fundamental issue here is not [whether or not Kanhaiya Kumar was complicit in shouting anti-national slogans](#), but the very idea of something being anti-national, and that the state gets to define what is anti-national. The very idea is a negation of the very essence of democratic rights.

Srinivasan -You think that is not being challenged enough?

Chibber – No, at least not in the mainstream media and certainly not by the political parties, especially the Left. To my knowledge, and I might not have the full information since I am in New York, the CPI (M)'s [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] position has been to call for an investigation and to call for concrete evidence for the charges. This implies that if the students did shout the

slogans of which they are accused, the arrests are justified. But the arguments have to be that the law is illegitimate. This is what the issue ought to be.

Srinivasan – Do you think that this government, which came to power on the promise of development, is using these issues to divert public attention from its own performance?

Chibber – No doubt about it. No doubt. I think the fact is that the Modi government has basically failed in delivering any of its promises and sees that the Indian people are quickly rendering their verdict. Look at its quite humiliating defeat in Bihar. And I think Mr. Modi who initially was, in my estimation, giving a few sops to the Sangh Parivar while keeping his [attention on economic issues, has basically thrown his weight behind this crackdown](#). Because the BJP is thinking this is the only way they will be able to survive, since there is nothing they can do to prop themselves up. But again, I would urge, let us not keep the focus on the BJP because both the BJP's economic programme and its crackdown on democratic rights is an intensification of something that was already happening under the Congress government.

(Meera Srinivasan is the IWMF Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow 2015-16)

[This article originally appeared in The Hindu on March 3, 2016.](#)