

Mapping Dalit Politics in Contemporary India: A Study of UP and AP from an Ambedkarite Perspective

Sambaiah Gundimeda

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For

Sharmila Sreekumar (Sharmi)
Shashikantha Koudoor (Sasi)
Vijay Kumar Boratti (Boranna)
Beena M.R.
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Dilip Menon,
Sasheej Hegde and
Shamla Medhar (Shammy)

But for whose support, affection and love I am not what I am today

Acknowledgements.....

During the course of my PhD many people have said that PhD is a journey through which one would discover oneself. At the end of my PhD I was not sure whether I have discovered myself, but surely the world in which I am an inhabitant. It is a nasty, brutish and selfish world that ever prepared to unleash its brute force to marginalize its opponents. I have come to this conclusion because of the people that I met during my long-journey, while during my PhD and outside it. Yet the very fact that I have survived all those brutal forces is a testimony that still they are a few good people and institutions (of course, they may have their selfish intentions in that) with whose help and assistance that I was able to fight back those those cruel forces against me.

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I thank Prof. Sudipta Kaviraj for accepting to be my supervisor at SOAS. Although I could not complete the thesis by the time he left for Columbia University, it was only with his support that I could design it systematically and give some order to my material. I must mention here that when I reached London I was not sure how my relationship with my supervisor would be. I was told that he had never supervised a Dalit student during his JNU years. Hence I thought he did not like Dalits or did not think much of Dalit students' abilities. I was afraid that he would treat me as a Dalit, and if that were to happen, there was no point in my going to UK for PhD. But nothing of that sort happened. He was very cordial and supported me in every way possible. What I really liked about him was his willingness at all times to engage in a dialogue to understand things. Once in a discussion on the disempowerment of Dalit society by the upper castes, I told him that he would not understand it because of his Brahmin background. He said he was not Brahmin but a Vaidhya. Until then I didn't know that he was not a Brahmin. But how does it matter to me, a Dalit? Whether Brahmin, Vaidhya or Vaishya – they are all upper castes. Among the Dalits also there are several hundred castes. Do they (the upper castes) treat those individual castes as separate castes? The answer is No. Likewise, for us, the Brahmins, Vaidhyas, Kammas, Reddys etc. are all upper castes. That is how I put it to him when he mentioned his caste to me. But his response is something I will never forget. He said, he would leave it to me how I wished to recognise him, but he wanted me to make him understand if I had a point to make, and it did not matter whether I was a Dalit or someone else. Although years after that conversation, I am still trying to understand the deeper meaning in what Kaviraj told me that day, I think he was suggesting that I should speak without fear of labels if I have a point to make. Also, I must add here that I was surprised that he did not respond angrily when I called him a Brahmin. Although I could not read his mind just then, his non-response could have meant that he saw himself just as a human being or as an intellectual, who could not be boxed in with identity tags. Or did the place have an effect? The conversation had taken place not in India, but Central London. In any case, I knew for sure that I would not have said this to an upper caste academic in India. None of them, not even those scholars who speak of Marxism and secularism day in and day out, would have appreciated my observation. They would have taken it personally and would have shut their doors on me. Yogendra Yadav's response to Ambedkar's cartoon controversy is a case in point. Needless to say, I am proud that I worked under Kaviraj and will always be thankful to him.

I was horrified when I was told that I should complete my PhD under the supervision of a young lady academician who was an Indian. From her name I knew that she was a Brahmin and on enquiry, I came to know that she had recently got her degree from Oxford University. I thought the association was going to be difficult for both of us. As I had established a good working relationship with Kaviraj, it was not an easy task for me to move to another Supervisor. As a Brahmin who grew up in India, it may be a hard for her to supervise me as my thesis also talks about Brahmins, Brahminism, upper castes and caste discrimination. I asked Kaviraj either to supervise me from Columbia or shift me to another India expert from a different department. He said he could do nothing and that I would be fine with her. However, contrary to my fears, I was very happy with her. During the supervision sessions, she would listen to me patiently and take down notes of our discussion and then email those points to me for my record. I understood that she was sincere and passionate about her work. Whatever may be her personal views, we laughed together at the idiosyncrasies of Brahmins. It is a fact that but for her constant encouragement and gentle pressure, this thesis would not have seen the light of day. I am proud to be her first PhD student. Thank you, Rochana.

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