CASTE

Violence Against Dalits in Maharashtra Is Not New, but Dalit Reaction to It Is Changing

While the state's approach in dealing with Dalit protests may not change, the changed context in which Dalits are successful in bringing their issues centre stage has the potential to bring out new possibilities.

Members of the Dalit community shout slogans as they block a highway during protests in Mumbai, India, January 3, 2018. REUTERS/Danish Siddiqui
The commemoration of the battle of Bhima-Koregaon and the events that have unfolded since new year’s eve became national news after the violence on Dalits. The mainstream media did not initially cover the grand celebration that began on new year’s eve to mark the 200th year of the end of Brahmin Peshwa rule in which the Mahars (Dalits) fought together with the British. It was only when
Dalits organised protests on the evening of January 1 to express their anger against the violence unleashed by the caste supremacists’ on Dalits and Bahujans who had peacefully gathered at the Bhima-Koregaon, that it caught the eye of the media.

That same evening, Prakash Ambedkar gave a call for a Maharashtra bandh, in which all Ambedkarite organisations participated. Raosaheb Kasbe, an eminent scholar from Maharashtra, remarked, that the scale of mobilisation was unprecedented and the last time such a large mobilisation had taken place was during the Namantar (renaming) movement centred around renaming Marathwada University. Several commentators also mentioned how socialist trade union leader George Fernandes and Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray could earlier enforce such bandhs. The success of the bandh clearly established Prakash Ambedkar’s position as the pre-eminent Dalit leader in the state. The protests also gave a clear message to the ruling establishment not to take its citizens for granted. Since the Ambedkarite student protests in the wake of the death of Rohith Vemula and mobilisation of Dalits at Una in Gujarat, this is the third time that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled state governments have gone into a defensive mode. Following the success of the Maharashtra bandh, the state hit back at the Dalits by organising a combing operation and arresting scores of youth, charging them with serious cases that would will eventually ruin the future of some of the brightest minds.

This tendency of going after Dalits by implicating them in police cases, many of which turn out to be false, is not a new phenomenon. The state had responded in the same way to Dalit mobilisation during the early 1970s in Worli and Naigaum in Mumbai, the Namantar movement during the late 1970s, and the Khairlanji protests about a decade ago. In comparison to the previous incidents, however, the arrival of social media and a vibrant Dalit public sphere have paved the way for the Bhima-Koregaon incident to come centre stage for debate and discussion.
Violence Against Dalits in Maharashtra Is Not New, but Dalit Reaction to It Is Changing - Thewire

Across Maharashtra; Minor Boys Worst Hit

Anti-Dalit violence

Violence against Dalits is an everyday phenomenon. However, not all crimes against Dalits are reported because of the hostility displayed by the ruling political and state establishment. Whenever Dalits face violent attacks from upper caste members, the state is either complicit with the latter or it displays its unwillingness to take legal action. Instead, the state tries to silence the protesting Dalits by implicating them in false cases. Commentators on the Bhima-Koregaon have referred to the 1997 brutal killing of innocent Dalits living in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar. Like today, back then too, the reins of the state were in the hands of the Shiv Sena-BJP combine. The protests in 1997 began over the desecration of Ambedkar’s statue. The situation became extremely volatile and Dalits were angry at the ruling parties as well as leaders from their own community. Ramdas Athawale narrowly escaped death as an angry mob threw stones at him. The Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), who were then in opposition, promised the protesting Dalits that they would punish the police officer, Manohar Kadam, who had ordered the firing. In 1999, the Congress-NCP combine did come to power and ruled Maharashtra until 2014. However, Kadam never faced any legal action. In fact, promoted subsequently, he now receives all post-retirement benefits.

While discussing Dalit protests in Maharashtra, one is reminded of the 1974 anti-Dalit riots in Mumbai, where the state, together with upper-caste perpetrators of violence, attempted to silence the Dalit Panthers. Dalit Panthers – an organisation that emerged in the early 1970s – were the only militant force in Mumbai posing not only an ideological challenge to the state, but also demonstrating its willingness to confront its political opponents with physical violence. The Dalit Panthers’ critical stance on the state’s inability to control atrocities against Dalits in the villages, and their critique of the Hindu religion brought them into direct conflict with the Congress-led state as well as the Shiv Sena.
The Dalit Panthers also criticised the leadership of the Republican Party of India for allying with the Congress as well as Communists and Socialists who did not address the caste question. During the 1974 anti-Dalit violence, Dalit Panthers confronted the upper caste perpetrators with counter violence. That the Panthers’ response was effective can be determined from a telling cartoon then drawn by the Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray in his magazine *Marmik*. The cartoon depicted an angry Panther who was being requested to follow Ambedkar’s path of Buddhism and jettison violence.

While the Panthers were successful in responding to the upper caste attacks, the state machinery, most notably the police, colluded with upper caste elements. During the 1974 riots, not only did the upper caste perpetrators receive state patronage, but several children of policemen wore their parents’ uniforms and unleashed a wave of terror in the Bombay Development Division (BDD) *chawls* of Worli and Naigaum, an area inhabited by Dalits. The Marathi magazine *Saptahik Manohar* carried detailed reports about these incidents. Later, under
political pressure, the state appointed the Bhasme Commission, but none of the accused were ever punished.

The Namantar controversy in the Maharashtra state assembly in 1978 revolved around renaming the Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University. The Marathas opposed the move and even the socialist-leaning newspaper Marathwada Dainik invoking the asmita (pride) of Marathwada, was against renaming the university. Prominent socialists such as Govind Bhai Shroff and Anantaro Bhalerao were in the forefront of the opposition. It thus provided a moral justification for the opponents of renaming. These divergent views, as Gail Omvedt succinctly documents in her book, Reinventing Revolution, resulted in massive violence against Dalits in which the state gave a free hand to the upper castes to carry out violence. Soon after, thousands of educated Dalit youths were implicated in false cases which destroyed an entire generation’s livelihood and chances of social mobility. The cases filed against 900 upper caste perpetrators during the Namantar movement in Marathwada were later dropped by the Sena-BJP in mid 1990s.

Closer to our own times is the case of the Khairlanji Massacre that took place in 2006. Here, too, none of the accused of the brutal murder and rape of women in a Dalit family went to the jail. In fact, in 2010, the then Congress-NCP-led state awarded Khairlanji village a prize for being a “tanta mukta gao” (dispute-free village). In addition to being soft on the perpetrators of casteist violence, the state became increasingly hostile towards Dalit protestors. The state implicated Dalit activists in false cases by branding them “Naxals” and therefore anti-national. By branding Dalit protestors as Naxals, the state took an easier route as it could then give up the responsibility of listening to their protesting voices. Despite large-scale mobilisations organised by various Dalit groups, none of the cases reached its logical end – that is, putting the perpetrators of casteist violence behind the bars.

Also read: Bhima Koregaon and the Dalits’ Never-Ending Search

https://thewire.in/ caste/violence-dalits-maharashtra-not-new-dalit-reaction-changing
While dealing with Dalit protests, which at times take violent forms, the mainstream media treats it on par with the violence unleashed by the Brahmanical Hindutva groups. However, there are several differences. First, the state is either soft on Hindutva groups or actively supports them in carrying out violence against Dalits and other socially marginalised groups. However, when protesting Dalits take to violence to make their voices heard, they face legal action. Second, and this is very crucial, violence by Dalits is directed towards state property, whereas upper caste violence is towards people from socially marginalised groups. Third, Dalits’ use of violence is supplemented with a rational critique of the state’s failure to protect their rights as citizens. Upper castes use violence to maintain their caste privileges and ‘teach’ a lesson to the protesting Dalits.

**Dalit protests and state**

But things have changed. Dalits protests, as I have shown, have historically met with extremely hostility from the state and society. In the aftermath of the Bhima-Koregaon incident, the views that have been expressed by the mainstream media, the state and the Hindutva groups are not new at all. Like in all such previous incidents, the state in this case too gave a free hand to the upper caste perpetrators of violence and implicated scores of Dalit youth in false cases. However, what is new is the current context is that Dalits are effectively using social media to communicate with the wider society. In fact, while the mainstream media remained initially silent and later biased in covering the Bhima-Koregaon incident, it is the social media which played a crucial role in the success of bandh call by Ambedkarite groups. The second factor that is different from the previous incidents is the presence of a vibrant Dalit public sphere, both in the vernacular languages as well as in English. Fourth, Dalits are also using the revised Atrocity Act for filing cases against upper caste perpetrators of violence. Fifth, there is a loosely connected group of Dalit lawyers who are volunteering to help the arrested Dalit youths. Sixth, the international presence of Ambedkarites has meant that every major incident results in solidarity and protests, such as ones in London, San Jose.
(California, USA), and Hannover (Germany). Lastly, unlike in previous times, all major political parties, from the Left to the Right, are desperately trying to woo the Dalit constituency.

These factors pose a major challenge to the establishment and especially Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, who, while in the opposition, had criticised the then Congress-Nationalist Congress Party-led state for the increase in the number of atrocities against Dalits. He had even claimed that the accused in casteist violence were related to the members of the ruling parties. One had, therefore, expected him to govern differently. However, current events suggest that irrespective of the shade of the political party that comes to power, there remains a strong element of continuity in the state’s approach towards Dalits and their protests. While the state’s approach in dealing with Dalit protests may not change – at least in the near future – the changed context in which Dalits are successful in bringing their issues centre stage has the potential to bring out newer possibilities.

*Sumeet Mhaskar* is an Associate Professor at the O.P. Jindal Global University and Junior Research Partner with the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.