

CASTE AND QUOTAS

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The ideology and politics of Hindutva are geared to protecting and promoting the hegemony of 'high' caste Hindu elites. The twisted logic of 'Hindu majoritarianism' is deployed in the service of the immensely powerful 'high' castes, who form only a minority of the 'Hindu' population. Claiming to speak on behalf of all 'Hindus' Hindutva formations have made no bones about defending 'upper' caste privilege.

This is clearly evident in their opposition to caste-based reservations, although, from time to time, some Hindutva leaders, driven by political compulsions, may appear to support protective discrimination for Dalits, Adivasis and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). But on the issue of extending such provisions to 'low' caste Muslims and Christians, who form the vast majority of the Indian Muslim and Christian population, Hindutva ideologues are unanimous in their vehement opposition. They have stiffly denounced moves to extend caste-based quotas to these groups, although these communities continue to be discriminated against and are among the poorest of India's poor. They argue that since Islam and Christianity do not sanction caste, 'low' caste Muslims and Christians have no right to be treated by the state on par with 'low' caste 'Hindus' for purposes of affirmative action.

A good illustration of this distorted logic is an article by a Hindutva polemicist Sandhya Jain that appeared some months ago in the *Organiser*, the official mouthpiece of the RSS (23 July 2006). Titled 'Minorities Cannot Ask for Caste Quotas', the article denounces proposals for reservations for 'low' caste, Muslims and Christians. Caste, Jain writes, going against what Hindutva apologists otherwise often insist about caste being allegedly alien to Hinduism, 'is the building block of Hindu society'. The romanticised picture of the caste system that she goes on to paint is deliberately designed to conceal its horrors, including the cruel oppression of the 'low' caste majority that receives sanction from the Brahminical religion.

Jain describes the caste system as a means by which 'the myriad groups of the Indian landmass were historically integrated into a cultural and social unity, which nevertheless respected the diversity of their beliefs and practices'. No talk here, of course, of the cruel subjugation of the bodies and souls of the 'low' caste majority that provided the very foundation of the system which Jain so lyrically extols. And, of course, her claims about the 'cultural and social unity' that the caste system allegedly engendered are even more outrageous. As anyone who has read the classics of Hinduism would know, the 'low' castes were forbidden, on pain of severe punishment, to learn the Vedas or Sanskrit, don the Brahminical thread, enter temples and so on. And even today, violations of the iron law of caste in large parts of rural India can invite punishment by slaughter. In no sense did any feeling of 'unity' that Jain talks of even remotely exist between the different castes, who existed in a state of mutual repulsion bound together by intricate rules of 'purity' and 'pollution' devised by the Brahmins that kept the exploitative system intact. In other words, the different castes were forced to be and remain different, and in no sense could they be said to be collectively a 'social' or 'cultural' unity.

So far does Jain seem to go in her passionate defence of caste that she denounces critiques of the system as a conspiracy, finding no merit in their arguments. Hence, she claims that 'concerted intellectual attacks upon caste, in both the colonial and post-colonial phases' stem from a realisation that it is the caste system that has prevented mass conversions to Islam and Christianity. Without considering their arguments, she appears to generalise about all critics of the caste system, seemingly suggesting that they are all motivated by missionary zeal to deplete Hindu numbers.

Faced with the brutal reality that Hinduism has, for centuries, provided theological sanction to caste and caste based brutalities, 'upper' caste Hindu apologists, including Hindutva ideologues, sometimes react by claiming that caste is foreign to 'true' Hinduism, which, they argue, has no room for discrimination. This argument is, of course, completely fanciful. But when faced with demands for extending caste-based affirmative action policies to 'low' caste Muslims and Christians, these apologists for Hinduism completely reverse their stance. Caste, they now insist, is integral to Hinduism, and since only Hinduism or Hindu society has sanctioned caste-based discrimination, affirmative action policies cannot be extended to Muslims and Christians. Thus, Jain argues, 'Caste does not exist in the theology of Christianity or Islam'. Hence, she says, 'they cannot be allowed to make a political expedient of caste and use it to undermine Hindu society from within! By conflating the theory of Islam and Christianity with their practice she seeks to deny the legitimacy of demands for affirmative action to 'low' caste Muslims and Christians, who, although they identify themselves with theoretically egalitarian faiths, continue to face varying forms of discrimination both within their own religious communities as well as the larger society.

Since Jain sees caste as unique to Hindu society, she denounces what she calls efforts 'to snatch caste-based quotas from Hindus and extend them to Muslims and Christians'. But that does not mean that she enthusiastically welcomes such quotas for those 'low' castes that are treated as 'Hindus' by the state. She appears too much of an ardent Hindutvawadi to look kindly on any such move that might threaten to undermine 'upper' caste privilege. Thus, in order to discredit current demands for quotas for OBCs in educational institutions, she claims, without adducing any proof, that 'there is currently a welcome review among the OBCs themselves about the desirability of reservations in academia'. Worse still, her irrepressible hostility to protective discrimination drives her to declare that 'Hindu society as a whole perceives the current move as a ruse to divide the society in conflicting caste camps'. By 'Hindu society' Jain presumably means the 'upper' caste minority, for no major Dalit or OBC leader, social movement or political organisation has opposed caste-based affirmative action. Obviously, and this reflects the general 'upper' caste Hindu way of imagining the world, the 'upper' castes are here automatically presumed to be the authoritative spokespersons of 'Hindu society as a whole'. 'Upper' caste interests are thus easily projected as the interests of all 'Hindus'.

Presumably, the 'low' caste majority could well be damned. Making no effort to conceal her defence of 'upper' caste privilege, Jain goes on to denounce talk of extending caste-based affirmative action to the private sector on the grounds that this would lead to the 'disempowerment of India's assertive and upwardly mobile educated middle class', which, needless to explain, is almost entirely 'upper' caste in composition.

As Jain's diatribe against caste-based affirmative action clearly reveals, talk of Hindutva as the ideology of 'Hindu communalism' is completely misleading. It must be identified as a political project geared to promoting essentially the interests of the 'upper' caste ruling minority, while using the logic of 'Hindu majoritarianism'. It is as much of a menacing threat to the Bahujan majority—Adivasis, Dalits and other marginalised and oppressed castes—as it is to non-Hindu Indians. ❧❧❧❧