

Incomplete scan

Examining the economy, polity and Indian society as a whole to understand why instead of flying like a phoenix, the country remains caged. BY C.T. KURIEN

In medical treatment, scanning is a diagnostic tool to study the internal structure and interconnections. In his book *The Caged Phoenix: Can India Fly?*, Dipankar Gupta attempts something of a scanning of India's economy, polity and, indeed, Indian society as a whole to understand why instead of flying like a phoenix, the country remains caged.

He contests a standard diagnosis of the Indian malady, put forward largely by foreigners but not rarely endorsed by Indians also, that the problem with India is excessive spirituality at one level and long-standing social arrangements like caste at another; essentially cultural, that is. Gupta asks: "Should we not resist cultural typification that treats only the West as 'normal' and everybody else as an obstinate riddle?"

He says what is needed is a sociology and not a 'culturology' of India and goes on to say: "I believe that India is rising from the ashes of its past, like the phoenix, but cannot yet spread its wings. Instead of seeing this incapacity as an effect of traditional culture, I would rather see it as the conjoint effect of status differentials, extreme scarcity at the lower levels, and inaccessibility to institutions of democratic governance."

Having thus set the stage, Gupta moves on to one of the more obvious paradoxes of India: the sharp differential between the affluence of the few and the extreme poverty of the many. Another manifestation of the same malady is that India's information



IN REVIEW

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technology demonstrates intellectual capacity at its best, but its social services sector is abysmally poor. In general, India demonstrates the capacity to generate one of the highest growth rates of the world, but even that does not remove the misery of the masses.

The explanation that Gupta offers is what has been generally accepted now, thanks to the work of many economists. India's growth strategy is a distorted one, concentrating on the performance of a few sectors where

profits can be high but where absorption of the labour force is limited ("jobless growth"). Secondly, the fastest-growing sector is services, where the 'growth' is essentially the rapidly rising earnings of those at the top, while in the agricultural sector, which provides employment to vast sections of the workforce, growth has been low and erratic, and wages pathetically low.

Gupta goes a step further. He has a detailed analysis of the informal sector, which provides employment for the bulk of the non-agricultural workforce, and of agriculture in the context of the happenings in rural society. There are several studies by economists on these two. But Gupta provides a sociological flavour. One of his key observations of the informal sector is that while there is plenty of manufacturing activity there, the entrepreneurs who organise production are merchant capitalists who make profits not by increasing productivity but by keeping wages low. Their factories are modern sweatshops "capitalising on low-cost workers, their poor educational and health status, and their inability to voice their views or represent themselves". On the basis of his field studies, Gupta provides revealing accounts of the plight of these workers, a good number of them migrants from remote parts of the country and employed as contract workers.

By far the best part of the book is Gupta's descriptive and analytical account of the transformation of the rural economy and society, "the emptying out of rural India, emotion-



A MIGRANT LABOURER takes a break at a construction site near the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi. “The emptying out of rural India, emotionally, economically, and, obviously, also in terms of numbers” has resulted in a “hollowing from within” of Indian villages.

ally, economically, and, obviously, also in terms of numbers”, a “hollowing from within”. This transformation is not adequately understood, claims Gupta. With the abolition of zamindari, the large and powerful landlords of yore have disappeared. There is a clear decrease even of medium operational holdings of above two hectares, but there is a sharp rise in the number of holdings below that size. The net result is that farmers (whether owners or tenants) are becoming increasingly smaller and poorer.

An important consequence of this is that non-farm employment is increasing, not only for rural people who seek employment in the neighbouring urban areas but within villages themselves. The official definition of a rural area is both in terms of density of population – less than 400 per square kilometres – and in terms of occupational status – at least 75 per cent of the male workforce engaged in agriculture. With agriculture declining and non-farm employment within villages increasing, many rural areas will fail to be designated ‘rural’ on the defining occupational category. This is the reality of rural India today and it has tremendous impact on the rural economy and society.

This background is necessary to understand the changing role of caste in Indian society and polity. To the extent that caste was strongly correlated with occupations, with the decline of agriculture and the drastic changes in the patterns of land ownership and holding, caste as it once existed has become dilapidated. But caste has not disappeared. On the contrary, it is emerging powerfully in the political sphere as arguably the main criterion of identity. Caste is also being reconstituted with each major group discovering or inventing its historical origin and status distinctly different from what mythology and tradition suggested. Gupta cites the example of a Dalit woman who claimed that her people were “all descendants of a proud caste of warrior Rajputs that ruled this very region where we are now based” and that “a day would come when they

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would reclaim their rightful place as proud Rajput warriors". Not that such 'caste turnaround', as Gupta designates it, will easily happen. After all, Mahender Singh Tikait and his Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) had created quite a bit of sensation by proclaiming the power and might of the Jats, but finally nothing much came of it.

But such instances show that the current attempts to reconstruct caste are not merely or primarily to bring back anything like the caste regimes of the past. They are mainly mobilisation strategies in a democratic polity based on adult franchise and are driven by the desire to capture (or at least significantly influence) political power to promote secular objectives of *roti, kapda aur makan*. Another emerging aspect of this radically different caste resurgence is the manner in which caste regroupings are being attempted, as Mayawati did in 2007 in Uttar Pradesh and remarkably succeeded in bringing together Dalits and upper castes, including Brahmins, on the basis of a secular agenda. Caste today is not what caste yesterday was.

Gupta's treatment of the themes mentioned above (Chapters 4 to 9 in particular) is quite commendable because of his competence in analytical description. But there is a perceptible fall in the standard in the rest of the book, Chapters 10 to 14, where the style suddenly changes to polemics. It begins with the discussion of the second reservation regime following the implementation of the Mandal Commission's report in 1990.

Gupta has strong reservations about the new reservation regime. Apparently, he is not against reservation *per se*. He accepts reservation for the Scheduled Castes (S.Cs) and the Scheduled Tribes (S.Ts) because they are based on a constitutional mandate. He concedes that when the Constitution provided reservation for the S.Cs and the S.Ts, it also added that in due course of time similar legislation ought to be devised for other backward classes (OBCs) also.

There begins Gupta's quibbling. How come reservation meant for

backward *classes* turned out to be for backward *castes*, he asks. He concedes that attempts made on more than one occasion to indicate the criteria for backwardness so as to identify backward classes had to be abandoned. "The empirical reality was far too complicated and multifaceted to allow a clear and just notification of OBCs," he admits.

Earlier on, Gupta had also confronted the fussy nature of class as an empirical entity though at the theoretical level it is a valid and useful concept. He has a whole chapter where he makes a not particularly successful attempt in providing empirical identification of the Indian middle *class* and has no qualms about making frequent references to politicians as a 'class'. If class then defies unambiguous empirical identification, it is not clear why the use of caste as something of a second-best means to locate those who are backward is totally unacceptable in the Indian context.

That economic factors are more pertinent for the identification of backwardness can be conceded under certain circumstances, but that too does not rule out the use of caste as a proxy for backwardness, especially in the light of the evidence and arguments that Gupta has put forward to show that even the landowning, and therefore, somewhat higher castes too are economically backward.

There is a broader issue also. If economic status is to be accepted as the sole or even primary criterion of backwardness, surely the way to deal

with it is to provide financial support for education, rather than reservation. And to the extent that educational qualifications are the deciding criteria for access to professions, job reservation also will have to be provided for educationally backward sections of the population.

How long the reservation should continue is, indeed, a very legitimate question, but then that applies also in the case of the S.C./S.T. reservation. The real issue is that a democratic polity based on adult franchise gives emphasis to individuals, but we have a very long history where individuals were seen primarily as members of specific groups (castes) and the vast majority of people were kept under subjugation on such group considerations. How the variety of hurdles that the majority of people faced and continue to face are to be removed is the underlying question.

Gupta is right when he points out that the much-celebrated micro credits are no substitute for state-sponsored poverty eradication programmes and that the elitist advocacy of the power and effectiveness of non-governmental organisations is over-rated. The chapters that deal with them (Chapters 12 and 13) are unnecessarily long and disappointingly thin.

I had hoped that at least the concluding chapter (Chapter 14) would restore something of the strength and vigour of the middle chapters. I was disappointed. It is a movement from polemics to platitudes: "We need to fundamentally rethink the fundamentals." An exaggerated view of the role of intellectuals in the release of the phoenix is also put forward. "Of course, we need better infrastructure, better schools, hospitals, roads, energy provisions, housing and water. Everybody knows that, but why is little done towards making public goods available? Among other reasons, it is because intellectuals have shied away from calling a spade a spade and have sided with one or the other popular constructions of reality." If that is what the scanning report finally comes to, somewhere it did not go deep enough. □

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