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Dalit Dreams

A brilliant student who majored in economics, went to the IMF and now heads economic research at RBI. Narendra Jadhav is a dalit professional who defies stereotypes. For instance, he rejects the alarmist prognosis that economic globalisation would further marginalise those living on the fringes. Rather, he tells Suman K Jha, the downtrodden — especially, the dalits — should make the most of the new opportunities, and, "in another 50 years or so, a truly globalised India would sound the death knell for the caste system":

Has the idea of reservations for the weaker sections of society in government jobs outlived its utility?

Absolutely not. The idea behind "positive discrimination" was to eliminate caste-based exclusions, and create a level-playing field between the dalits and non-dalits. While reservations have been helpful, there is still a long way to go.

Is this the reason why dalit politicians — cutting across party lines — are concerned over the state withdrawing itself totally from the economic sphere?

The concern over the withdrawal of the state from the economic sphere emanates from a static view of the future, which

is alarmist in my opinion. With the state withdrawing from economic activity, it is argued, government jobs would be reduced. And since the policy of reservations applies at present only to government jobs, this would amount to fewer employment opportunities for dalits. If one takes a

dynamic view, however, it would be clear that the process of reforms does not involve withering away of the state. While the state will withdraw from economic activity in favour of the private sector, it will apply itself more vigorously to the social sector. Such a re-definition of the state's role, I think, is desirable. The fears expressed are, therefore, baseless.

You are one of the few dalits who believes that liberalisation/globalisation holds emancipatory potential for the community...

Please recall that when Gandhiji was telling people to "go to the villages", Ambedkar was advising his followers to do just the opposite — "Go to the cities". Ambedkar believed that moving out of the confines of caste-ridden villages to the anonymity provided by the cities would offer dalits a better chance of realising their potential. In a dynamic sense, the same argument can be extended to globalisation where professionalism and competitive efficiency would be the guiding force. Therefore, there will open up possibilities of diversification into jobs unrelated to the caste system besides a wide range of opportunities for education and professional training. Therein

lies the emancipatory potential of the drive towards liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG). With appropriate state intervention, this potential could be harnessed in the national interest.

Many argue that the LPG drive has, in reality, accentuated the divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Are the weaker sections, especially the dalits, ready for the far-reaching changes ahead?

There is a silent revolution going on in society. The dalits, inspired by Ambedkar, are realising that education is the only panacea for their problems. You will be surprised to know that the proportion of income spent on books by the dalits is significantly higher than that of others. On December 6 every year, about 15 lakh dalits come to Mumbai to pay their respects to Ambedkar on his death anniversary. The volume of trade in books during those two days has to be seen to be believed. Also, of the resources realised through the ongoing privatisation process, a substantial share should be explicitly and transparently earmarked for the social sector — education, housing, health and sanitation for the poor and the underprivileged. This would unleash the productive potential of a large majority of our people, and ultimately, would help India become

an economic superpower in the non-too-distant future.

How do you evaluate the role of the dalit intelligentsia in the entire debate?

There are some signs of emergence of a dalit middle class and intelligentsia. Those who are vocal among them often tend to blame the system as

their one-point programme. Some, especially those with strong political leanings, tend to play to the gallery. After all, it is easy and convenient to provoke the ordinary people by appealing to their base fears.

Entrepreneurship has long been seen as a neglected area among dalits. For instance, a large number of dalits have traditionally worked as cobblers. But few of them have graduated to manufacturing of shoes.

Dalits have not ignored entrepreneurship. Rather, it's the other way round. As regards the cobbler example, I know at least one person from the cobbler community who went abroad for higher studies in leather technology and rather than settling there — which he could very well have done — he returned and worked with the government of India for several years. He, in fact, was instrumental in making Kanpur a major centre for leather exports.

Would the status of dalits be any different in a "globalised" India vis-a-vis the upper castes, say 50 years down the line?

I am convinced that 50 years from now, globalisation will have succeeded in breaking down the caste barriers and burying the 3,000-year-old history of inequity.



Narendra Jadhav

Q&A

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