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**Not all  
together equal**

**D**EMOCRACY, as someone said, seeks to provide equal opportunity but not necessarily the equality of conditions to access those opportunities.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta in this book explores how inequality and the crisis of accountability have together impeded collective action to achieve this end. Mehta doesn't say anything new but manages to put things in some perspective, without being excessively judgmental about the ideological stance of different political and social groups that are fighting for space in our fractious democracy. Whether it is a debate on caste politics or the process of economic reforms in the backdrop of globalisation, the key issue Mehta raises is whether our democracy is capable of delivering an institutionalised framework of "redistributive politics".

Redistribute politics necessarily operates at both the social and economic level. It does not always deliver optimal results. No democracy does, really. Of course, the pace and content of economic liberalisation is determined by the nature of benefits claimed by different political constituencies operating within the democratic framework. He rightly suggests that the State must, at the very



**THE BURDEN OF  
DEMOCRACY**  
by Pratap Bhanu Mehta  
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**FIRST LOOK**

least, ensure some equality of conditions so that marginalised sections are empowered enough to access the equal opportunities that the democratic market framework theoretically provides. Mehta suggests one way the State can attempt this is by sending the proceeds of privatisation on health, education and other social infrastructure that will create better conditions for people to participate in the market. However, achieving equality of social conditions within a modern nation-state is much more complex. This is because we have had a history of one of the most "egregiously hierarchical caste systems of rank ordering the entitlements and privileges".

The problem here is that all the institutions that run our democracy had willy-nilly been hijacked by the upper castes. This is somewhat changing with the assertion of the dalits and backward castes in different parts of the country. Mehta rightly says much of the upper caste effort in reforming caste remains motivated by the effort to consolidate Hinduism. So one is not sure how modern democratic institutions can deal with a thousand years of caste oppression, still embedded in our collective consciousness. Someone like Ashish Nandi argues that India is actually many nations and that the notion of one democratic nation state is an illusion which will not sustain.

**M K VENU**

**T**HERE is no dearth of books being written on Dalits and their saga of sufferings. Yet, Narendra Yadav's *Outcaste*, written in an autobiographical style depicts the woes of Dalits, their self-assertion and the speedy progress in a three-generation saga.

The story begins with Yadav's parents Damu and Sonu, and their tough life as Dalits. But when Yadav starts narrating his own life, memoir like, a perceptible change in the lives of this marginalised class is apparent. And his daughter in America finds---she is just Apoorva with no tag of being a 'Dalit' at all. Yadav, a career banker and presently a top official of the RBI, has adopted a unique style of narrating stories of his parents in first persons, giving readers an interesting reading. However, the beauty of the book lies in Yadav's tactful blending of stories of his own family members and that of the Dalit movement in the country.

The book also depicts Babasaheb Ambedkar's championing the cause of the Dalits and how "Ambedkar turned out to be a cult figure for millions of Dalits all over the country. His fight for allowing Dalits to enter the Hindu temples for prayers and his decision to embrace Buddhism were given much importance in the book. Damu, Yadav's illiterate fa-

**Of oppression and  
progress**

ther, belonging to the Mahar caste, had undergone a transformation under the spell of Ambedkar. The person, who had left his small village Ozar to Mumbai to avoid persecution, created a niche for himself and gave his kids an excellent upbringing.



**OUTCASTE**  
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Yet, Yadav could have avoided bits of megalomania especially apparent in the farewell scene when he was to board an aircraft to the US to take up a prestigious assignment in the IMF. Even without spelling it out, readers could have gauged how Yadav "made it big despite coming from a lowly caste". Is it necessary to elaborate---"Have I not reclaimed my dignity through my achievements? Why should the caste into which I was born count now?" In America, however, his daughter Apoorva knows that she is just another Indian---not tied down by race, religion or caste. Representing the third generation of Damu's family, she says: "My ancestors carried the burden of being a Dalit and bowing down to demeaning tasks even after India's Independence. I have the torch, they have lit for me..."

**SHANTANU NANDAN SHARMA**

