

# Negotiating Gender and Caste

## A Struggle in Hyderabad Central University

*This paper discusses a recent episode over elections to the Student Union at Hyderabad Central University. The active negotiation of women's invisibility in student electoral politics underwent a radical transformation when issues of caste were addressed simultaneously with those of gender.*

### JOINT ACTION COMMITTEE

*The Place:* University of Hyderabad (HCU)  
*The Year:* 1998.

A group of women sat around on the hostel lawns. They sipped watery tea and tried to hammer together ways to battle sexual harassment on campus. Strategies got discussed back and forth and then someone said, "If we have to take up these issues consistently what we need is a woman in the Students' Union". It was the enormity of her almost casual observation that caused the silence that followed. Not one of them could recall the last time there was a woman in the Students' Union. And some of them had been in the university for close to 10 years.

It is not only for its dramatic character that this anecdote is recalled. It is to make two preliminary, perhaps obvious observations.

(a) 'The invisibility of women' is not a metaphor. It is a reality. Even for those of us who are actively negotiating gender. We have often to stumble upon it, to fall over it, before we see how women are being excluded from public spheres right under our eyes. Even when one undertakes to make women visible, certain sections of women might continue to be excluded. But more of that later.

(b) The entry of women into a space that claims to be modern and free, in this instance the university, does not by itself ensure their equal participation in it.

Of course, that 'discovery' made by a group of women students in 1998 has been made before, at other times, in other circumstances, and in other institutions. It had, as we later learnt, been made in our own university at least four times before. It has, we also know, been made recently at the national and parliamentary levels. Even so, each "discovery" is important and the events that follow upon each of them require close examination. It is such an exercise that the rest of this paper carries out.

The first section focuses on the institutional space of the university and the ways in which it framed the context of the struggle. It also examines some of the important players in it. The second section delineates that significant point in the struggle when Dalit women demanded that they be heard. The last section traces out the radical alterations within the movement when issues of caste were addressed simultaneously with gender. It is argued here that it is precisely the dyad of gender and caste that operationalised the alliance between various sections.

### I Institutional Space of the University

The University of Hyderabad, a premier institution of post-graduate teaching and research...

The University's sprawling, scenic and serene campus spreads over a vast stretch of land...

... and about of 33 per cent of the students are women.

—Prospectus, University of Hyderabad, p 2.

Clearly, Hyderabad Central University (HCU) advertises itself as a picture-postcard university whose undoubted business is the pursuit of academic excellence. For a student in this institution any demand for social equity is made illegitimate and irrelevant on at least two counts.

(1) 'They have no other business': This is a common enough response to people associated with such demands, suggesting that any mention of social problems distract from the 'real' objective of being in the university – academics.

(2) 'Arre Yaar, we are not in any village where untouchability and wife beating are practised. What gender and caste?'

This suggests that social equity is the foundational aspect of the university. And any demand made in its name is anachronistic.

These, then, are the dominant claims of a university, which sees itself as a modernised space where free and equal agents interact. Any actor who performs within it has to necessarily reckon with these claims and take positions 'for' or 'against' this idea of the university.

Since the everyday experience of many sections, especially women and dalits, disprove the all-is-well myth of the university, they have formed important groups challenging it. As has already been indicated, sexual harassment is an anxious enough topic among women. And dalits have borne witness to the daily exercise of discrimination in hostels, TV halls, not to mention classrooms.

When one looks at the oppositional politics that now predominate on the campus, one is struck by the strong vein of identity politics that runs through it. Some of the important players who position themselves against this conception of the University are, therefore, the Women Students' Forum, the two dalit organisations (Ambedkar Students Association and Dalit Students' Union) and the BC Students' Association. Besides these, another group, the Progressive Students' Forum, identifies itself with dalit politics and has also taken stands on gender issues. In recent years there has also emerged a group whose members are largely from left organisations. They have organised a few talks under the banner 'University Discussion Forum'. Even though their individual agendas do not always intersect, these groups have on important occasions come together in an alliance to address particular issues. The relatively recent struggle against the imposition of the credit system is one important example.

Conspicuously, the students' union absents itself from any assembly that articulates oppositional politics. Its primary job appears to be that of the mouthpiece of the administration. The agitations against the imposition of the credit system, fee hike and the service charges in messes can be marked as some of the many instances in which the Students' Union took sides with the administration against the protesting students. There is a discernable pattern in which the Union is invoked every time certain sections of students make demands upon the university. It then becomes the authentic, elected voice of the students, though in every day situations its irrelevance is legendary. Paradoxically, it is from this very image of itself as fumbling, useless and yet well meaning, that the students' union draws much of its powers. One cannot accuse a union that projects itself as inefficient, of scrupulously plotting its composition to be almost always upper caste, always male, or of actively silencing certain voices.

The Bermuda Club, an anonymous pamphleteering (now e-mailing) male, mostly upper caste group was another important player. Couched in humour, its anti-women, or as it would now insist, 'anti-pseudo-feminist' jokes point to the same thing: that any attention given to the exclusionary practices within the University is unacceptable to the larger good, never mind if that has been repeatedly shown to be upper caste and male. The administration does not acknowledge this group; it refuses to sully its mouth by speaking of or to it. Meanwhile, Bermuda Club members go around merrily sticking anti-women or anti-pseudo-feminist, as they will, posters. These were the main players in the struggle, and this, then, was the less than encouraging context in which the issue of women's representation was raised. We pick up the drama from a very crucial point in the next section of the paper.

## II

### 'What About Us?': Interrogations by Dalit Women

*Place:* Women's Hostel  
*Year:* 1999

After being prematurely thwarted in 1998, the issue of women's representation was reintroduced in the campus. A GBM was announced to discuss the amendment of the Students' Union constitution. Many

preliminary meetings were held in the ladies' hostels, trips seeking support were made to the men's hostels and poster campaigns launched. At a crucial meeting on the eve of the first GBM, the following scene took place. A few dalit women stood up and asked: 'What about us?' The women's movement on campus has long been accused of being casteist and exclusionary, of ignoring dalit women's interests; and it had done so yet again. A representative post for women that did not take into account the differences between women (specifically between dalit women and upper caste women) was as guilty of practices of exclusion as the Students' Union had been for the last 25 years. And here were dalit women asking for representation, for their rightful share of the post. In retrospect, that tiny moment of assertion was the most crucial one in the two month long struggle. In spite of the history of dalit oppression on campus; in spite of being aware that the campus had never reacted adequately to dalit women's issues – the case of the suicide of a dalit girl being the most stark of examples; in spite of knowing that dalit women have been consistently left out of both women's organisations and dalit organisations, the struggle so far had blinded itself to their issues. In remarkable contrast to the national scenario, the dalit woman had stood up for herself and staked her claim to be partners in the struggle. Unlike in parliament where male members have been the most visible advocates for sub-quotas within the women's reservation bill, dalit women took the initiative here to articulate their cause. This is important, also because we feel it is a pointer of things to come – dalit women and women from minorities and backward castes, even as they are slowly, grudgingly allowed into modernity, will increasingly pose their demands themselves. The women's movement, that has been largely upper caste, and the dalit movement that has been largely male, will both be forced to listen, will both have to re-examine their agendas, revise them and negotiate space for the dalit woman.

But all this is in retrospect. At the meeting, after the dalit woman stood up and demanded to be included, a hurried strategy was worked out to add the dalit woman to this movement for representation. It was then decided that the post would be on a rotational basis; that one year it would be reserved for dalit women and the next year it would be 'open' for all women to contest. This process of adding on is familiar

– of seeing women as an undifferentiated group even when the figure representing this group is inevitably upper caste, middle class and urban – and later in the plot of events, when the issue of dalit/backward caste/minorities' women come up, to tag them along as after-thoughts. In HCU the initial group which worked for women's representation was guilty of doing the same. But as the movement got underway it was realised that the addition of caste to gender was not a simple exercise in arithmetic. It altered the movement itself. The following sub-sections look at the attempts to address gender and caste simultaneously and the changes this effected in (a) the definition of the issue, (b) the alliances which were formed, (c) the nature of post, and (d) the strategies that were employed.

## III

### Gendering Caste, Cast(e)ing Gender

#### Changes in Definition

The question of representation for women had, over the years, undergone substantial changes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, women had, despite heavy odds and sure failure, sporadically contested openly against male candidates and their alliances in elections. By the late 1990s women were trying to ensure that they had at least one seat in the students' union. This was undoubtedly influenced by the events in the larger theatre of the nation. In 1999 the initial demands had been for 'women's representation' in the students' union.

With the forceful entry of dalit women, however, the demand changed to 'women's representation on a rotational basis'. This also opened the floodgates for debates and a series of questions were asked about the choice of the word 'representation'. The upper caste women who had hitherto dominated the movement had been distinctly uncomfortable with the word 'reservation'. They had been willing to discuss 'the special problems' faced by women, to demand a post for women but were not happy about using the obvious word for it – reservation. But as dalit women and men became active participants in the struggle the word reservation became imbued with new meanings – it came to signify a history of struggles and became a word to be used with pride.

There were other things that changed as well. So far women had been making an elaborate case for why they need represen-

tation – ‘because we have special problems’, women said; ‘because we face sexual harassment’. But with the acceptance of the concept of reservation women became more assertive and reservation was posed as a question of rights. It should be noted that the signposts that marked the changes in definition also mark important stages in the alliance that was steering the struggle.

### **Alliances: Possibilities and Challenges**

With the dalit question being articulated alongside the gender question, various organisations – the Ambedkar Students’ Association, Backward Caste Students’ Association, Dalit Students’ Union, Progressive Students’ Forum, Women’s Student Forum and various individual students came together in a heady coalition – the Joint Action Committee (JAC). The power of a gender-caste coalition to threaten the status quo came home to us in HCU very early and very visibly. The Students’ Union had been willing to discuss the ‘gender question’ in the first GBM. But as soon as the issue of caste came up, and the need for the post on a rotational basis was articulated, the students’ union froze. So much so, that the proceedings of that GBM were stalled and the union refused to reconvene it for the next one month. This, despite incessant pressure. It is precisely the possibility of an alliance simultaneously addressing gender and caste that was threatening to it. This alliance between dalit women, upper caste women, dalit men and progressive upper caste men is remarkable also because it offers possibilities that are different from those before parliament today. It is by actively pitching these groups against each other that the upper caste men in parliament are able to script their own roles as heroes who are pro-women, caring and sensitive. This scenario was changed in HCU because of the active intervention of the dalit woman. By foregrounding her rights, she forced a re-examination of the existing agendas on caste and gender, and made possible the coalition of two groups which had been largely mutually exclusive – upper caste women and dalit men. Meanwhile, the newly constituted Joint Action Committee, even as it was coming to terms with the conflicts within it, was marvelling at the power of a gender-caste coalition to threaten the status quo. While there is much to be celebratory about, such alliances also bring with it its own sets of challenges: How does it take into account

conflicting identities within women? What about the differences between scheduled castes? How does the dalit woman state her agenda within this alliance and simultaneously guard against its brahminical-patriarchal appropriation? The JAC was constantly addressing these questions, and holding daily meetings. Thus, this alliance changed the very course of the movement.

### **Changing Conceptions of the Post**

It has been pointed out to us that we went against accepted lobbying techniques. A group that raises demands usually first places a highly inflated version, which they later, upon bargaining, pare down. We, on the contrary, had begun by asking for one post in the Student Union, later adding that the post should be nothing short of that of the general secretary as it bears financial powers. Then we insisted that the post should be instituted on a rotational basis. That we began by grabbing the crumbs thrown at us and went on to delineate our demands along bolder lines is thanks entirely to the working of the alliance in the form of the JAC.

But there were other changes as well in the conception of the post. Recall the group of women in 1998 on the hostel lawns when they first discovered women’s absence in the students’ union, and imagined their representative in the students’ union as the caretaker of women’s issues. Cut now to early 1999 when the post became more ambitious. It was now envisioned as presiding over the entire domain of women’s issues and was even armed with veto powers. The concept had travelled a long way. It travelled a longer way along a different route when the JAC got together to prepare a bill and decided after much discussion that the women’s representative would have no special powers on women’s issues. The initial points raised in this discussion were the following:

- How does one decide what a woman’s issue is? Surely it cannot be reduced to sexual harassment alone. Don’t the fee hike and credit system qualify as issues concerning women?
- How does one guard against women’s issues being ghettoised in the student’s union, being dumped on the woman member as her problem and no one else’s?
- Even more important, what would be the effect if she sees herself as the sole and authentic voice of all women on campus? The administration has on many occasions

shown its propensity to simplify matters in this manner. What then if she takes stands that are detrimental to certain sections on campus?

### **Shifting Strategies**

The students’ union had at one point during the struggle come up with an infamous poster, signed by the president, which opened with the following words. “Mr President throws an open challenge to JACs. Hey, illegitimate, cowardly and irresponsible JACs. Just face me. I will teach you what democracy is....” The infamous Bermuda Club, proud male-chauvinists and closet casteists, had been wall-papering the University with perfectly offensive posters. In the midst of this daily performance of hostilities, the JAC concluded that what passes for civil society on campus could not be appealed to as it was caught up in a carnival of misogyny. The students’ union had proven itself as starkly partisan. The GBM had demonstrated that it was not the liberal, democratic free space it claimed to be, for women had been actively discouraged from attending it and asserting themselves.

Further, even a pro-active Students’ Union, it was felt, would be unable to resolve a minority issue through majoritarian (two-thirds) politics. The JAC believed that the University administration should intervene. The dalits who have had to persistently battle a hostile civil society also actively advocated administrative intervention. But when appealed to, the administration tended to see the demand for reservation for women as the problem. They were slow to respond. Their excuse was that they were hesitant to intervene in matters between students. The irony of the situation is that in different circumstances many in the JAC would have been as averse to administrative intervention in students’ affairs. And yet here we were applying to them through petitions, open letters, hunger strikes.

A certain shaky parallelism suggests itself at this point. Perhaps the sort of bind we found ourselves in is not unlike what many social movements, dalit and women’s movements included, find themselves in. They see civil society (in our situation, roughly, the general body of students) as a site in which to institute change. They have, like us, a history of suspicion of administrative mechanisms and institutions – and yet, faced with the hostility of civil society they are forced to apply to the state for intervention.

This contradiction comes upon us forcefully when we examine some of the administrative responses to the issue of women's reservation. This, especially in the context of the emergence of another group demanding women's representation. The United Discussion Forum – the left-wing group on campus – hoped to cut short the debate and to strike an alliance with upper caste men who had been taking anti-JAC positions.

Despite some precious support that the JAC had received from the teaching staff, the UDF was readily and unquestioningly accepted as representing majority views. They were subtly used against the JAC to delegitimise it as unreasonable and undemocratic. The finesse with which the administration coaxed and coerced the student movement towards what was for them a manageable direction gave the lie to any hope the JAC might have had that the administration would prove reliable where civil society

did not. We bring this up because it is a common enough impasse and we need to collectively work out strategies to navigate it.

### Concluding Coda

We were forced into another GBM. As expected, reservations for women did not get the requisite two-thirds majority to force an amendment. This resolution of events raises yet again the problem of accountability of majoritarian politics in relation to minority interests. However, the wide debate on these matters in a University where issues of social justice have been beleaguered was seen by all as no mean victory. The University went in for fresh elections. Those who actively campaigned against women's reservation reappeared in an election alliance of upper caste and pro-hindutva groups. As never before they fielded a woman candidate for cultural secretary. Predictably enough, she won the elections. And they can sit back

with the confidence that they have choked off the call for reserving a post for women in the students' union for the next 25 years. Her victory brought to sharp focus the ambivalence that was always dormant about the relevance of representative politics. A letter to the editor in *The Hindu* unhesitatingly dismisses women's reservation in parliament and holds that "what Indian women need is good basic education... that will lift them hundred times higher than the mere presence of more women in the legislatures" (Veera Raghavan, December 27, 1919). We know from the HCU experience that even higher education for women does not always translate into empowerment. Nor is the presence of women in decision-making positions a guarantee of the same. Clearly we need to ask more than one question. Besides ensuring women's presence in public offices, we need to simultaneously ask how this can be made to alter women's everyday lives. **EW**

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR INDIAN CENTRE FOR PHILANTHROPY

The Indian Centre for Philanthropy (ICP) is a national, nonprofit organization based in New Delhi. Its objective is to promote and strengthen Indian philanthropy in order to provide indigenous local resources for social development. ICP is looking for a highly motivated, creative and experienced individual as a Chief Executive to succeed the present Founder Executive Director. The new incumbent will be wholly responsible for all the management functions from strategic planning to programme implementation.

We are looking for:

- Education and training at a post graduate level, preferably in management /communication/ journalism, humanities or social sciences.
- At least 10 years experience, of which five should have been in a senior management position in the social corporate sector/ journalism/ public relations/ advertising /communications/ or management consulting.
- Expertise in planning and building a programme team, administrative and financial management, and fund raising.
- While experience in the voluntary sector is not essential, those with such an experience will be at an advantage.
- Language proficiency of a high order in English, with ability to articulate well, orally and in writing.
- Facility in interdisciplinary team pursuits, good PR skills and organizing abilities, and self sufficiency in computer based communications.

The selected candidates will overlap/understudy the present Director for six months from the date of joining.

Salary will be commensurate with experience and qualifications and competitive with good practice in the sector.

Applications with CVs should be sent to :

**DR M.B. Athreya,**  
President , ICP,  
A-28 Chittaranjan Park  
New Delhi – 110 019  
E-mail: mb.athreya@gems.vsnl.net.in

The applications must mention how the applicant's profile fits the requirements listed above and the expectations of compensation, benefits, work conditions and time needed to join. All applications will be handled in strict confidence.