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The Hathras Tragedy

In rural India, the coming together of benighted hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and religion, held in place by seven decades of Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, are manifested periodically in monstrous crimes against the oppressed. The normal business of day-to-day living is unsafe for those who belong to marginalised groups. Efforts towards self-betterment – in the social, political, economic, or educational spheres – are crushed if they threaten the position or interests of upper castes or the politically powerful.

Such atrocities have risen in number in recent years, partly because of the leniency shown by the state towards the perpetrators of such violence. The brutal gang rape of a 19-year old Dalit woman by four upper caste men in Boolgarhi village of Hathras district in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) in September 2020 is a particularly horrific example of gender and caste oppression. Indeed, under the enabling regime of Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of BJP-ruled UP, the occurrence of social atrocities against minority groups have been all too frequent.

In the young woman's rape, we see the conjunction of every social, economic, and political blight in our social order. Thus, while the specific alignment of reactionary social forces has given the Hathras atrocity a particularity, especially in respect of the cruelty and brazenness shown by the perpetrators of the crime, the recognition of the larger context is equally pertinent in understanding why Hathras happened.

The victim belonged to the Valmiki caste and the four perpetrators named by the victim were from the powerful Thakur caste, to which the Chief Minister of the State also belongs. Caste status conferred impunity on the men – they committed the crime in daylight and not far from her home, dragging her away into the fields ripe with the standing millet crop as she was winding up a morning's work with her mother. Her mother, who is deaf, did not hear the screams of her daughter, who was only a hundred metres away. The men raped and tried to strangle their victim, breaking her spine in their savagery, and causing grave injuries to her abdomen. They then left her near dead and went back home, seeing no need to flee the village or hide.

In the fortnight that elapsed between her rape and her death on September 29, the victim was shifted three times – from the Hathras District Hospital, to the Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College Hospital (JNMCH) in Aligarh, and finally, on September 20 to Safdarjang Hospital, New Delhi, where she finally died. She gave a clear statement to the police, describing the incident and naming her attackers. The doctors at the JNMCH in Aligarh said she was admitted with severe trauma including paralysis of the lower body.

Crimes against Dalits and Dalit women have been rising in most parts of the country, but more so in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. In this shameful ranking, Uttar Pradesh pulls well ahead of the others. A look at the recently released data from the National Crime Records Bureau puts the picture in perspective. There was a 7.3 percentage point increase between 2018 and 2019 in India in the number of crimes committed against all women and girls (3,78,236 to 4,05,861), with rape alone accounting for 32,260 cases. Similarly, there was a 7.3 percentage point increase between the same years in the number of atrocities committed against Scheduled Caste persons (from 42,793 to 45,935). If the India picture is dismal, Uttar Pradesh is even more so. In 2019, it topped the States in the number of atrocities committed against Dalits with 11,924 cases, constituting 25 per cent of all such cases in the country. Uttar Pradesh was well ahead of Bihar (7061), Madhya Pradesh (4753), and Rajasthan (4607). The State also led in the number of crimes against all women and girls, Dalit and non-Dalit (59,853), as well as in the number of crimes specifically against Dalit women (3161). With regard to cases of rape against all women, it followed second after Rajasthan (Uttar Pradesh: 3131, Rajasthan: 6051), levelling with Rajasthan in the number of rapes committed against Dalit women and girls specifically (Uttar Pradesh: 545, Rajasthan: 556).

If the data are shocking, the reality is much worse, as the Hathras atrocity (and others like it) show. Following the death of the rape victim, the State and district administration and the State police attempted a cover-up of what happened. The police cremated the body of the victim at night without the consent of her family, with the District Magistrate even threatening the family for having gone public on the issue. The administration then denied the rape, a position the State government still holds.

In her statement, the victim said that the accused had tried to assault her on an earlier occasion too. The father of one of the accused had attacked her grandfather in the past. She was taken out of school after primary school because her family felt that education would only make her more visible and therefore more vulnerable and unsafe.

The support for the family from sections of the vocal political opposition, especially the Left, from women's and citizen's organisations, and from some sections of the media, has helped to rally public opinion and expose the role of Central and State agencies. It is

now over two months since the atrocity occurred, and it would appear that justice for her family is nowhere near. Indeed, as often happens in such cases, after the initial publicity wears off, the upper castes have reasserted their dominance, with the families of the victims rendered threatened and vulnerable. The challenge of reversing the deeper issues of social inequity and injustice is one that only a democratic coalition of peoples' movements can mount and sustain.