

The Hindu, Chennai, 04 Apr 2008

Power and prejudice

Uttar Pradesh has been spared the spectre of a caste conflagration by the timely defusion of the crisis set off by Mahendra Singh Tikait's incendiary casteist remarks against Chief Minister Mayawati. The mercurial farmer leader, who surrendered to a local court and apologised for the slur, realised the futility of continuing a confrontation from an indefensible position. Ms Mayawati might have been overzealous in ordering her administration to lay siege to Sisauli, Mr. Tikait's village in Muzaffarnagar district. But the provocation was grave, and there was no question of not proceeding against the Bharatiya Kisan Union leader under the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Had Mr. Tikait turned himself over to the police quietly, there would have been no cause for the use of tear gas and other administrative measures. Instead he lent tacit support to the violence of his followers. Mr. Tikait's surrender, and the Chief Minister's reciprocal instructions to her officers to go easy on the farmer leader, have prevented the situation from spiralling out of control. Yet law and order is only the physical manifestation of a problem whose roots are endemically social. The situation bristles with irony. Mr. Tikait's barbs were aimed at a leader whose independent rise to the stewardship of a majority government has been hailed as a victory of Dalit power and secondarily of a clever social mobilisation strategy.

If Ms Mayawati, in her 'sarvajan' avatar and with all the resources at her command, cannot escape casteist vilification, how much worse must be the fate of ordinary Dalits? For an idea of their daily ordeal, consider Mr. Tikait's atrocious what's-this-fuss-all-about reaction at the time of his arrest: "This is the type of language we generally use in this belt." Anti-Dalit prejudice is not specific to U.P. In neighbouring Haryana, dominated by the powerful Jat community — Mr. Tikait is a Jat leader — this often takes the form of extreme violence against Dalits. Even southern States have not been strangers to intermediate caste venom directed at Dalits. It is not that the law is inadequate to tackle the problem. Between them, the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (PCR Act) and the SC/ST (POA) Act, 1989, cover a wide definition of atrocity. But no law can 'uplift' a wronged community in the absence of a socially enlightened polity. As of 2004, the rate of conviction in cases disposed of under the Indian Penal Code was 40 per cent. It was 8.03 per cent under the PCR Act and 15.71 per cent under the SC/ST (POA) Act. That both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party should find themselves on the wrong side in *l'affaire Tikait* is a distressing symptom of this malaise.