

Hero by name and deed. The Hindu, Sunday, January 21, 2001



Caste-based segregation is still practised in schools in parts of western Orissa. A Dalit youth has been fighting this form of discrimination - most visible during the mid-day meal - single-handedly. He has taken on the might and money of the region's elite and brought the issue to the forefront, says noted journalist, P. SAINATH.

Nuapada (Orissa):

"OH no! There is absolutely no segregation here. All the children sit together," said the headmaster of the primary school, Binapur. "See for yourself."

We did. We even took photographs. Dalit children sat together on one side, kept away from other boys and girls. This is the school's mid-day meal. An official programme run on public money. And the students were seated strictly along caste lines.

Apraya, Sumanta, Purnananda, Prithvi, Hitesh and Tulsa - all children of Scheduled Caste (SC) background, seated together. Well away from them are Pushpa, Jayanti, Tilottama, Sushmita and Lala, all non-SCs. No, they are not divided on a gender basis. Down the Dalit row, Pushpanjali, Basumati and Janki sit next to boys Minketan and Purna (all SCs).

Caste counts here. "We are harijans, that is why we sit here," little Prithvi Jagat told us innocently. That is the way it has been for a long time. The children have never known any other way. "If we go to that side," he explained patiently, "they say bagho yahan se (run away from here). If we touch their glasses, they will turn over their plates and throw out the food. So we always sit here."

Headmaster Damrudhar Bishi and his staff had not expected visitors at lunch time. Not four journalists anyway. One or the other engaged the teachers while the rest spoke to the students - out of official earshot. "Let us sit that side," we told one of the non-SC children, pointing to the Dalit row. "I have already sat down," said the boy. "I will sit there tomorrow." The non-Dalit girls too, were clear on the pecking order. "They are all harijans," they explained to us. "If they touch our food, we will have to throw it away." We did not attend any classes. So it is hard to say how well the teachers here train their wards to read and write. But someone has done a thorough job of grounding them in the caste system. To the extent that even the dalit children have deeply internalised the difference. They speak of themselves as dom lok (Dalit people of the Dom community). They call the other children bhal lok (good people). It was time to meet Hero Kumar Bagh.

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Almost no one else drives the Nuapada administration so completely crazy. Mentioning Hero Bagh invites a flood of invective from officials. It was he who led the first protest against untouchability towards Dalit children in schools here, who took on the police and got thrashed in the lock-up, who rocked the Collectorate with frequent hunger strikes outside it, who - on his own - created enough chaos to shake the State Assembly in Bhubaneswar for three days.

A Dalit youth not long out of his teens, he is as eccentric as his name appears to be. He also tries to live up to it. He has been threatened, assaulted and has had false cases foisted on him. But he does not let go.

Hero Bagh took on the primary school in Mundapalla, Sinapalli block, where he lives. "They seat harijan children separately. After mid-day meals, our children are also asked to wash up and clean up themselves. A Gaud (Yadav) woman tidies up after the other children, but not for harijans. They have to even sweep up any split food themselves."

Which would be okay, he says, except that it does not happen to the other children.

"I protested but the school ignored me. So I complained to the Collector and Superintendent of Police (SP). The then SP, G.S. Parida, asked me to lodge a First Information Report (FIR) in Sinapalli. But the officer there demanded money saying 'I need diesel for my jeep'. When I refused, he threw me in the lock up and beat me up." And quite badly, too.

"He had difficulty getting up each day for the next two months," says Hero's mother Kunta Devi.

"The next day I went to the SP and wept," says Hero. "He told me to see the Chief District Medical Officer to get medical attention. At the office, they said: 'we can treat you only when we get a court order.' I told the SP this but nothing happened. I tried to meet the Collector and failed. I complained to visiting MLAs from Bhubaneswar in front of the SP, still nothing happened. So I warned them that I would go on a hunger strike in 15 days." And he did. Several times.

The first time: "I sat for nine days in front of the Collector's office. All that happened was the additional district magistrate came out and told me: "The Collector is not here. Go on hunger strike after he returns. Next, Collector P.K. Chand (since transferred) came and assured action in 15 days. I agreed. Nothing happened."

So Hero went on hunger strike again. With uncanny timing, he would launch a hunger strike at the moment most embarrassing to the authorities. When a minister came on a visit and there were many journalists around. When an inspection team from Bhubaneswar came down. When officials held an important meeting in the district headquarters. Or when MLAs of the region showed up.

His tactics rattled the administration. "Three times, they took me to the hospital and fed me forcibly. Three times I returned to the spot and went on hunger strike again." A baffled Chief District Medical Officer, Niranjan Lenka, asks: "Forcibly? Forcibly?" A rare official who seems to bear no personal animus towards Hero, he smiles at us.

"The first time we had to feed him that way, yes. His condition was not good. On the subsequent hunger strikes, when he was brought here, we offered him food and he ate at once with relish. Our job was done, he had revived his energy. We were happy, he was happy. And the moment he had eaten, he would rush back to the spot and resume his hunger strike. We went through this several times. You could say," he laughs, "there was cooperation. Each time he has come here, he eats immediately, eats well and without a fuss. Strike, yes, where was the hunger?"

Fortified by official nourishment, Hero Bagh would resume his protest. His youth and inexperience notwithstanding, he has a high degree of media awareness. He knows the strikes are not so much about hunger as about focussing attention on his issue. And so, despite the odds, plays his few cards the best he can.

Police superintendent G.S. Parida confirmed "the children were being seated according to caste. The sub-collector, deputy superintendent of police, Inspector and others went there and enquired. It was happening." However, he insisted: "Since that time things have changed. The children are sitting together now. That headmaster has been transferred."

Actually, the headmaster, Chakra Meher, is still in place in the same post in the same village and we have spoken to him. The SP expressed surprise: "Is it? I was not aware of this." (Parida himself has since been transferred.)

We pointed out that children were still being seated separately at meal times. "I think only a few villages are like that now," he said of our Binapur example. We, however, saw other villages, such as Nangalajuri, where the practice continues.

Of Hero Bagh, the SP feels: "The young man exaggerates. His family is involved in some land dispute and this is, partly, the fallout. Also, he was demanding employment from us." Surely a legitimate wish, seeking jobs in government? One shared by millions in the region? "Yes, but he was using this to pressure us. He is an ambitious fellow with other motives. You should know that Hero even hit one of the children in that school."

Collector P. K. Chand similarly claimed that the headmaster has been transferred and punished. "Oh! I did not know he was still there. We must look into it." We again learn that Hero is "ambitious". That Hero beat up a child in that school. Indeed, a case has been filed against him at the instance of school chairman, Premanand Naik. "The headmaster said the child had complained. So a case was filed," says Naik. Charges of untouchability in the school are "all lies".

He admits that the parents of the child never asked him to file a case. "But the headmaster wanted it. He said: "If he gets away with thrashing one student, what will he do next?" So I acted accordingly."

Headmaster Chakra Meher repeats the "thrashing" story. But, like the school chairman, he too admits "I never actually saw him beat the child." And then sidesteps. "The chairman filed the case. I never sought legal action. I only said justice should be done." He denies that dalit children were seated separately. But the SP had confirmed it? "The students must have been coached to say these things."

On the one hand, no senior official denies that children were seated separately in the school. On the other, Hero's "thrashing" of a child - which every official in Nuapada speaks of seriously - turns out to be a fraud all the way. Confirming that is the child himself - Sanjay Bagh - and his parents.

The issue was a fight in which Sanjay, 11, chased his cousin Gauri, 12, out of the school - something he is now quite ashamed of. "As we came running out," says Sanjay, "we ran into uncle Hero." (He is Hero's nephew.) "He pulled us apart, gave me a small slap in the back - and scolded both of us. He told me I should be ashamed of treating my sister that way. He did not beat either of us. The other children took me to the teacher and said Hero had beaten me. Headmaster Chakra Meher told me to say this was so. I was frightened and I did."

Sanjay's mother, Mati Bagh, is exasperated: "Children fight and squabble, don't they? An hour after the incident, Sanjay and Gauri were playing together. Look, right now they are out there, playing together." They have to, they are Dalits and upper caste children will not play with them.

During the police inquiry, a terrified Sanjay denied separate seating. However, his younger brother, Kesar Bagh, seven-years-old, innocently spilt the beans before the probe officers.

Yet, the entire machinery of State here ganged up to foist a false case on Hero Bagh. A Dalit who dared to seek justice for his people and himself. It is no accident that most of Hero's adversaries are from the dominant castes.

MLA Biro Sipka, a distant relation of Hero, did take up the matter strongly in the Orissa Assembly. "But the minister simply responded by saying I was lying."

We found that the "land dispute", too, was trumped up. Most Dalits here have lost bits of the little land they hold due to encroachment by others.

And while silent untouchability has been curbed in some schools, it persists in others across the Nuapada-Kalahandi-Bolangir region. Much time has passed since our visit to Binapur. The Collector and SP have been transferred. CDMO Lenka has retired. Ironically, the headmasters who seat children on a caste basis remain in Nuapada.

Headmaster Chakra Meher is in the same school from where he was to have been transferred.

There is, however, a new young collector. Bishnupad Sethi, say activists familiar with the district, has a reputation as a young, dynamic and purposeful officer. Perhaps the new administration can undo the injustice.

For all the damage he was suffered, Hero Bagh has still managed to bring untouchability within schools onto the agenda. In doing that, he has taken on the might and money of Nuapada's elite - and given them an uncomfortable time.

He is driven by his own memories. "People like me did not pass matric. I know what school was like. there were no midday meals in my days but we were made to sit separately. In Class I or II, all of us had new notebooks, being SC students. A non-SC boy kept fiddling with and dirtying my new notebook. When I shoved his hand away, he beat me. Then the master beat me for touching him. It was worse in those days."

If it is getting any better that is because society still has its heroes.