



DALIT MOVEMENT IN CHITRADURGA DISTRICT

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Abstract: *After witnessing the prolonged efforts of the Dalit movements in various parts of the country to bring about radical changes within the social structure and processes, the Dalit movement in Chitradurga district came out with a political agenda, which assumes that the state is an important means to bring about social change. The strategy of putting the political project above all has diluted the identity of the Dalit Movement in Chitradurga District.*

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THE PERSPECTIVE

The Dalit movement in India has roots in the reformative Bhakti Movement. The Bhakti Movement thrived in pockets across the country over several centuries. The Bhakti Movement was not an organized movement but a conglomeration of the individual efforts of various saints and social reformers who pursued their ideas through their writings, folk culture and belief in one divine power. The Bhakti Movement was anti-caste, anti-elite, pro-women, pro-poor, anti-Sanskrit, and affirmed that genuine love of God was sufficient to find solutions to social problems. The movement attracted large numbers of the lower castes and poor, including women (Srinivas, 1996).

Though, the Bhakti Movement has not spoken exclusively for the Dalits or proposed any agenda for radical changes in the social structure of Hindu society, it has established a pattern of questioning the Hindu social order which later provided a platform for an organized Dalit Movement with a strong voice for social reforms. The failure of the efforts of the social reformers of the Bhakti Movement to bring structural changes in the existing social order of Hindu society through non-violence and appeals pushed the present Dalit Movement into politics. The political project has become crucial for the Dalit Movement to improve the lives of the oppressed and downtrodden. It was easy for the successors of the Dalit Movement to use 'caste' as a political strategy to enter into political discourses as the relationship between caste and politics is seen as a relationship for the specific purpose of organizing public activity (Kothari, 1970). These trends were followed by the Dalit Movement that began in Chitradurga district during the late Seventies and Eighties, and accentuated during the Nineties. Chitradurga district had not responded much to the Dalit Movement in the pre and early post independence periods. However, during the late Seventies and Eighties, things changed dramatically and the state witnessed a resurgence of the Dalit Movement with a clear political agenda for social Change. The movement had a leading objective to capture state power for the Dalits. This objective was equipped with the expectation that once Dalits get enough economic and political benefits using state power, it would automatically improve their social status. Enhanced economic and political status has continuously provided enormous power to the upper castes and ensured them a dominant social position.



Even if the Dalit Movement of northern India puts its political project as a top priority, the ideological concepts, such as 'social mobility', 'relative deprivation' and 'reference group', remain central to the Dalits' social, economic and political status (Guru, 1999). Orthodox Hindu culture and traditions are recognized by the Dalit leaders as the factors responsible for the marginalization of Dalits. This ideological stand of the Dalit Movement has influenced its developmental and political priorities and in maintaining Hinduism and the upper castes as its foes. The formation of the BSP as a political party was a strategic part of the Dalit Movement and was expected to continue to be the spearhead of the movement. Fundamental ideological propositions of the Dalit Movement which was supposed to be espoused by the protagonists of the movement. In the mid-1990s and the first decade of 21st century, ideology of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka in terms of setting up political coalitions first with Hindu minded political parties like the BJP and the Congress and later it formed a coalition with its all time opponents, the Brahmins through 'social engineering'.

NARRATIVE OF THE DALIT MOVEMENT

The participation of the Scheduled Castes (SC) in Karnataka in the politics of the state has traditionally been low. Chitradurga district did not witness anti-caste Dalit movements in the colonial period unlike the southern and western parts of India (Pai, 2001). There were diminutive and less influential streams of lower caste agitations, not necessarily violent, during the colonial period in Karnataka. (Then United Province). It was hard for those agitations to keep their identity alive and separate from the vast anti - colonial movement. The anti-colonial movement in the United Province came under the umbrella of the Congress, prominently under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The Gandhian movements were accommodative and provided significant space for lower caste people though they were given minimum representation within the party. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, there was huge participation from the Dalit community. The emergence of Dalit leadership in Gandhian movements was enough for Dalits to raise their voice against the atrocities meted on them by the upper castes and the Hindu religion. But, Dalit mobilization, which was a part of the Independence Movement, could not raise social issues along with the political issues. The Gandhian movements were successful in associating Dalits only with 'political' but not with social or economic concerns. The early years of post independence in



Karnataka were quite celebrative for the Congress as it cemented its political and electoral base in the state. The Dalits were one of the main constructors of the electoral base of the Congress in Karnataka, and there was no striking political turbulence from their side which could exclusively be termed as a Dalit Movement. Sudha Pai (2001) has divided the history of the post -independence Dalit Movement in chitradurga district into three phases. The first is from 1956-1969, when Dalits decided to form their own party under the leadership of Dr B R Ambedkar with the Republican Party of India (RPI). The second phase is about the failure of Dalit political parties that enabled the Congress to secure Dalit support under the leadership of Ms Indira Gandhi by the sharing in the consensus on 'Garibi Hatao'. The third phase starts from the early 1980s when the Dalit Movement entered into competitive democratic politics with the emergence of the BSP with the criticism that the Dalit Movement had distanced itself from the initiatives for social transformation and focused only on political motives and goals. This period was full of political and economic turbulence created by the land reforms. Though, the pace of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka was not impressive, Dalit issues got predominance in the interpretation of the effectiveness and impact of land reforms in Karnataka. Several agrarian reforms were introduced in the post-colonial age within the framework of the socialist view of the Indian state, which of course, is reflected in the Constitution of India to improve the quality of life of the depressed classes with the motive of bringing social and economic equality and equity in society. The results of these agrarian reforms, however, did not prove beneficial for the target groups. Many scholars called the agrarian reforms as a 'failed task' or 'a fiasco' (Joshi: 1970, Sen.: 1962). A study of the agrarian reforms in Basti, a district of eastern Chitradurga, shows that the untouchable class got very little or nothing from the Zamindari Abolition Act of 1954 (Singh, 1978). The real beneficiaries of these land reforms were the tillers of the land. Landowners did not till their land. The intermediate castes (Now OBCs) tilled the land and took their share. After the introduction of the Zamindari Abolition Act of 1954, landowners, who were mainly from the upper castes, had to forfeit land in excess 10 acres. These landowners started to sell their lands. Dalits and other depressed classes did not have the purchasing capacity to buy the land. Therefore, the intermediary castes who tilled the land purchased those lands (Singh, 1982). However, lack of purchasing power was not only reason that prevented the Dalits from taking the benefits of land reforms; it was more a matter of



deprivation of the entitlement. Omvedt and Patankar (1979) have discussed it at length. According to Omvedt and Patankar (1979), two parallel hierarchies developed in the caste system of India. One hierarchy developed in the domain of agrarian relations ranging from landlords to independent peasants to tenant -cultivator to field servant. The last category comprised the untouchables - a form of semi-slavery. The parallel hierarchy developed in field of services ranging from priest at the top to the goldsmith, barber to washer man and leather worker. The entire land policy evolved in the colonial period and during the freedom struggle was focused on the ideology of 'land to tillers' which excluded the lowest hierarchy in the agrarian system i.e. the untouchable field servants' The failure of the land reforms in bringing equality among the Dalits in Karnataka was enough to encourage them to launch the Dalit Movement. This was not a tough task because the contemporary Dalit Movement had a strong presence in the political and social spheres in other parts of the country. Surprisingly so, it did not happen. The Dalits kept their faith in the Congress, which was the chief propagator of land reforms. For the Dalits, snatching away land from the upper caste landowners was a crucial development. Landowning capacity of the upper castes enabled them to exercise the power over the deprived classes. Therefore, taking away land from the landlords was a historical development, even if it proved less beneficial for the Dalits. Therefore, instead of putting Dalits against the Congress as land reforms failed, this phenomenon cemented the trust of the Dalits in the Congress which was also enjoying the reputation it had earned throughout the freedom movement as 'protector of the nation'. The nationalist sentiments also protected the political interests of the Congress and the upper caste people who were then largely associated with it. One important reason for not letting the Dalit Movement take the floor in Karnataka was the social structure based on Hindu traditions and beliefs. The norms and values of Hindu society to a great extent determine the distribution of opportunities to ownership of land and they have influenced the economic and political relation of people in Karnataka (Singh, 1982). Though social and economic relationships based on the religious interpretations have not been accepted by the Dalits they were deeply internalized by them. The second important reason was that Dalits, floating from bondage to one landowner to others could not develop a solid base in rural UP (Singh, 1982). This restricted the ability of the Dalits in rising and maintaining a movement against the well established social hierarchy. During the second quarter of the



20th Century, concern over Dalit's interests was raised at different forums at the national level in public and private under the leadership of Ambedkar. Ambedkar was a national figure and he had an impact across the nation. When Ambedkar was very influential in national politics no second line leadership emerged in Karnataka to carry on the legacy of the Dalit Movement established by him. The Dalits in Karnataka, in the first couple of decades after the independence, could not mobilize themselves socially or economically; thus, their capacity to mobilize themselves politically was also restricted. Table 1 shows that during the early decades in post-independent India, political parties representing Dalit interests were less influential. The All India Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) failed in finding any political room in the state.

THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY

The term "Dalit"...

The term "Dalit" has different meanings for different people. The most common use of the term is to define people who were once known as "untouchables", separated from the rest of society by the caste system. Navsarjan redefines the ideological context of the word to mean three things.

Someone who believes in equality,

Practices equality in his or her life,

And protests inequality wherever he or she sees it.

This redefinition challenges Dalits to be more egalitarian in their own lives, both in terms of inter sub-caste discrimination and sexism; allows for the inclusion of Dalits from different religious backgrounds (Dalits who have converted to a different religion, but still suffer discrimination); and allows for the inclusion of people who are not from the "untouchable" castes, but still believe in values of equality.

A past passive participle of the Sanskrit root *dial* that means to crack or split, the word Dalit is today common across most Indian languages, meaning poor and oppressed people. As it refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way, there is also clearly an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy to the word itself. Though use of the term Dalit in public discourse is of relatively recent origin – the 1960s – it is supposed to have been used first by Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) in his attempt to work for *dalituthan*, that is, the uplifting of the exploited sections of society.



While Dr. Ambedkar did not popularize the word Dalit, his philosophy has remained a key source in its emergence and popularity. Marathi literary figures and neo-Buddhists began to use the word in their writings and contributed to the literary initiatives in replacing *Harijan* (man of God) and *achchuta* (untouchable) with Dalit, in the 1970s. They expressed their anger, protest and aspiration through this new word, rejecting the Hindu caste system and objecting to Gandhi's belief that caste Hindus' "charitable spirit" would be enough to overcome Untouchability.

While the word "Dalit" stems from opposition to terms bestowed upon Dalits by the non-Dalits—terms that legitimized their discrimination and deprivation—it has today essentially emerged as a political category. Dalits in legal parlance are called Scheduled Castes (SCs), and are identified as such by the President of India under Article 341 of the Constitution.

This constitutional identity, however, is exclusive and fails to capture the true picture. Dalits who have converted from Hinduism to another religion no longer qualify as SCs, although their status in society often remains the same. Moreover, Dalit movements in contemporary India are not uniform and each articulates a particular identity, be they Christian Dalits, Neo-Buddhists or Muslim Dalits. Hence, Dalit should not be seen as a term just describing a caste community. Rather, it should be viewed as a symbol of change and liberation, as a progressive ideology, helping the Dalit movement to achieve its end results. Increasingly used as a suffix, Dalit is a part of the identity of a person that holds certain values—those pertaining to equality and humanism.

Dalit is one who believes in equality, who practices equality and who combats inequality

The Dalit movement is regarded by many scholars as the most influential social movement in Independent India. While in the wider sense of lower caste struggle against Brahminical hegemony, the 'Dalit movement' has coexisted with the idea of caste itself; the movement as we know it – as a front of organized political resistance against caste oppression in Hindu society – may be seen to have emerged only in the colonial times. The British colonization with its bourgeois liberal ethos coupled with the imperatives of their ruling strategy created space for the working up of subaltern identities, mainly in terms of caste and religion. The changes during colonial rule – institutional, social, economic and cultural – gave an added impetus to the aspirations of the lower castes and created the environment for the emergence of an opposition to Brahminical hegemony on the basis of strong modern values



of liberty, equality and fraternity; while the strategic compulsions of the British allowed an opportunity for deft political maneuvering within electoral and representational quotas.

In the pre-Independence period, the anti-caste movement comprised strong non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu as well as Dalit movements in Maharashtra, Punjab, western UP, Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, coastal Andhra and Hyderabad. Independent India saw two decades of silence through the Nehru era, before the issue of caste once again burst onto the national consciousness with the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972 and the emergence of the Dalits as a major electoral force through the 1980s and 90s.

The start of the Dalit movement can be placed around the 1920s with the emergence of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar, who was almost the sole national voice of the Dalits in the first 30 years of the movement, provided it with its ideological framework which demarcates the general rubric for Dalit resistance even today. Ambedkar's resistance, in many ways, drew on the ideas of the 19th century Dalit reformer Jyotirao Phule and yet, in other was markedly different. Ambedkar, like Phule attacked Hindu society from a metaphysical perspective and shared his stand on the complete dismantling of an innately anti-democratic and anti-modern Hindu religion as the only way to do away with entrenched hierarchies of domination and subjugation. Both propagated an idea of an equalitarian society with decidedly modern ideals. Phule, influenced by the European 'Aryan theory of race' and the doctrines of the 'Right of Man' proposed that Dalits and the Shudras were the original inhabitants conquered by the invading Aryans. In this, violence and ideology were the driving forces of history. Phule propagated the replacement of Hinduism with a more universalistic, equalitarian and rationalistic religion which Phule called the 'sarvajanik satya dharma'. Ambedkar, on the other hand, rejected the overbearing racial element in Phule, believing the caste system to have come into being through practices of excommunication long after the intermingling of Aryan and indigenous races. Ambedkar chose to look at the caste system as a construct of power relations, as more of a social phenomenon. Moreover, while Phule's criticism is directed more at the oppressiveness of Hinduism and calls on a discourse of benevolence and compassion; Ambedkar's focus is on the irrationality and superstition of the religion, and he felt comfortable only with an alternative like Buddhism -



which had effectively rationalized God – that would allow him recourse to the call of ‘reason’.

The 1920s and 30s saw Ambedkar’s increasing radicalism, and it is in these years that a number of his most crucial ideas were put into practice, like the right of untouchables to public utilities with the Mahad satyagraha in 1927 and the entry of untouchables into temples in Nashik in 1930. Through the 30s, Ambedkar became an increasingly controversial character on the Indian political scene for his dogged insistence on holding to communitarian identities amidst a strengthening nationalist freedom movement built on modern, secular ideals. Ambedkar, like Phule, was willing to appreciate the positive aspects of British imperialism, in that they were harbingers of modernity in feudal India and had been instrumental in alleviating the conditions of the Dalits, in whatever small measure. While he declared categorically his opposition to any form of imperialist hegemony, his primary concerns lay with his own Mahar community’s plight, as was clear in his advocacy for reservations for Dalits in jobs and electorates in British India.

In 1936, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party (India), which won 15 seats in the 1937 elections to the Central Legislative Assembly. The party, the movement’s first attempt at formal political organization stuck to Ambedkar’s Dalit agenda but also broadened the scope and support for the movement by taking up peasant and workers issues which ran closely with those of caste discrimination. As a result, in 1937 the party pushed for legislation on the abolishment of the oppressive *khoti* landlord system prevalent in many parts of the country at the time. As the agitation reached its climax in 1938, Ambedkar was able to conduct a successful one-day general strike of Bombay textile workers in support of the peasants. In 1938, Ambedkar’s ILP joined the one-day general strike against the Bombay Industrial Dispute Bill, with its Dalit cadres fully in support of the workers.

In his attempt to weld together the class and caste movements, it would seem that Ambedkar would have a natural affinity to the Marxist movement which was also gathering strength at the time. But this was not to be, for a number of reasons. The main disagreement between Ambedkar and the Marxists was on the centrality of the caste question. For the Marxists, with their mechanical understanding of class, caste was a comparatively irrelevant category as it was only an outcrop of feudalism that would



disappear with a successful class revolution. For Ambedkar, on the other hand, India could be mobilized to revolution only once its intense caste consciousness had been dismantled, which meant that caste was the bigger problem. For the Marxists, the main enemy was the imperialist, while for Ambedkar, it was upper-caste hegemony. Moreover, Ambedkar alleged casteism even within the ranks of the Communist movement, which drew its members primarily amongst the educated, upper-caste, university-educated bourgeoisie.

On similar grounds he laid out his opposition to the Congress party, which he labeled as also being a preserve of Brahminical hegemony. He accused the Congress of creating the delusion of a unified India, calling it an artifice to maintain the status quo in a country where caste forms the primary identity. He took particular exception to Gandhi's ascriptive and patronizing use of the word 'harijan' and denounced Gandhism as unscientific, traditionalist and as still being within the clutches of Hinduism's oppressive spiritual doctrines. The Dalits, Ambedkar claimed could never be represented by the Congress.

Thus, Ambedkar's radicalism set him at loggerheads with the two strongest political forces of the time, thus foreclosing any possibility of support from them.

The 1940s saw escalating Hindu-Muslim tensions and increased political maneuvering in the run-up to Independence. In 1942 he formed the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) which remained mainly as a pressure group to secure better conditions and legislation for Dalits in the soon-to-be-independent India. This party, after Ambedkar's ambitious effort at a radical fusion of caste and class resistance, seemed lukewarm in comparison. But it was him only trying to make the best of his tactical position to strengthen the community in terms of both social standing and political representation.

As India entered the 50s with a new Constitution framed by Ambedkar's Drafting Committee, he began to look towards a spiritual resistance to the hegemony of Brahmanism. Months before his death in December 1956, Ambedkar along with thousands of his supporters, converted to Buddhism as the ultimate sign of protest. In Buddhism, Ambedkar found a rational, equalitarian philosophy which he found in agreement with his political principles. Through his conversion to Buddhism, it can be said that Ambedkar intersected the ideas of both Phule and Periyar in that all three believed in the need for a weapon at the metaphysical level to combat Hinduism in all its claustrophobic irrationality.



After the death of Ambedkar, however, the Dalit movement began to lose its vitality. The Republican Party of India, which was again an attempt to try and make the AISC's narrow caste agenda into a broad-based movement against inequality, discrimination and injustice. The party, however, proved to be only a name-change and in the post-Independence Nehruvian utopia of industrialization and secular modernity, the call of the Dalits was either ignored or pacified.

But by the 1970s, as promises of development grew stale and the old resentment began to resurface, the Dalit movement returned in a decisively more militant mode. In 1972, the Dalit Panthers came to the fore with the stated intention: "We don't want a little place in Brahman *galli*; we want the rule of the whole country." Strongly influenced by the Naxalite movement, the Dalit Panthers showed no aversion towards violence – meeting Shiv Sena cadres in open street confrontations – and looked to define 'Dalit' in a far broader sense, looking to rally not just the untouchables, but workers, women and all other oppressed sections of society to a people's revolution. The Dalit Panthers, in an attempt similar to what Ambedkar tried in the 30s, welded together disparate issues of land reform, untouchability and communalism. Like Ambedkar, the Panthers also stood as a critique of both the Congress Government and the facile, sold-out Left, and tried to bring together the most diverse groups as a viable political alternative. The group was active through the 70s but by the 1980s, it was rife with internal splits that rendered it ineffective.

With an apparent exhausting of the militant solution, the Dalit movement began to become politically more assertive as caste-based parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party started to gain political weightage. The 1990s have come to be defined by caste politics, particularly with controversy on the Mandal Commission report on reservations in government jobs at the start of the decade becoming a high point of the Dalit struggle.

In the new decade of coalition politics, as caste-based regional parties gain prominence, a few questions still cast a shadow of doubt. Throughout the Dalit movement, its response has always been tactical in nature, depending upon the incumbent circumstances. Consequently, one may at times find the movement's political positions to be in apparent contradiction – their use of caste identity in an attempt to fight caste inequality; their seemingly favorable stance towards British imperialism in India as against their opposition to globalization.



While such a strategic approach may have worked well until now, there is a need to think seriously on the question of ‘what is to be done’, now that the movement is gaining some measure of power – what is the agenda the movement can offer the country as a whole? What is required is a genuine ‘view from below’ based on a solid theoretical foundation, rather than purely empirical assertions. A viewpoint that can build a Dalit critique in every field of study and provide an alternative vision of the world.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The Dalit Movement has not been merely an exhibition of the agitation of the Dalits for social change. It has been cemented with well thought out developmental and political premises. Ambedkar was the chief architect for the foundation of the movement. He left the movement with a mission to be continued to fulfill its goal, even though leadership changes over the time. Ambedkar chalked out a consolidated economic development plan without being influenced by the socialist approach of the radical Marxist thinking that he once found suitable to describe the depressed classes in India. Ambedkar was very concerned about the economics of the deprivation of oppressed classes in India. In State and Minorities Ambedkar laid down the strategy of India’s economic development without closing every avenue of private enterprise and also providing for the equal distribution of the wealth. He advocated an economic framework aimed at providing protection to the vulnerable sections of society against economic exploitation (Jadhav, 1993). The BSP has shown an obsolete separation from Ambedkar’s thinking on economic development. Ambedkar had dealt with economic planning very broadly where he was concerned that the depressed classes should not be excluded from the developmental processes. The focus during the first three tenures of the BSP government in Karnataka was on major social policies for Scheduled Castes. These policies were short-term and hardly had anything to do with sustaining the economic and social advancement of the Scheduled Castes. Capturing state power was a prime objective of the Dalit Movement to improve the social and economic conditions of the Dalits. This objective got favorable attention from Ambedkar as is clear in his address to the first Round Table Conference, London, 1930: “We are often reminded that the problem of depressed classes is a sociological problem and than its solution lies elsewhere than in politics. We take strong exception to this view. We hold that the problems of the depressed classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their hands. If this is true, then



the problem of the depressed classes is, I submit, eminently a political problem and must be treated as such". (Quoted in Jaffrelot, 2005) But, in keeping the political project as a top priority, the identity of the Dalit Movement which Ambedkar maintained successfully, even though he had put all his efforts in making many political parties like the Indian Labour Party (ILP), Schedule Caste Federation (SCF) and the Republican Party of India (RPI). The dilemma now faced whether it should be considered as a part of the Dalit Movement or be restricted to being only a political party which has secured the loyalty of the Dalits like the Congress has for long. This dilemma may turn into reality because of the growing rift between the BAMCEF, a paternal body and the strategic organization of the post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement in India, Since the BAMCEF is not a public organization, it used to work as secret service organization for the BSP. It used to recommend to the party only those candidates who had the potential to win elections. The major political agendas and policies were discussed within the BAMCEF. The party does not seek any suggestion or recommendation from the BAMCEF in deciding the candidates for the elections or in the organizational structure at the state, district and local level nor in formulating policies and political strategies. The recent political moves of the BSP in terms of its coalition with the upper castes lacked among the local Dalit leadership and community. It is very hard for them to accept that the agenda of social change that Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram had dreamed of would come true by association with the upper castes. As a result of being friend with the upper castes, concepts like 'relative deprivation' and 'social mobility' remained undefined. To define these concepts, one must know in relation to whom (opposition or defined enemies) Dalit are deprived, or their social mobility restricted. Though, the voting behavior of Dalits may not be disturbed and they can continue to vote for the party as it is the only available political platform for the Dalits in Karnataka. Social mobility remains at the bottom as Dalits themselves are showing signs of disagreement with the Karnataka government. Therefore the Dalit Movement seems to have lost its momentum. How could there be a Dalit struggle without the definition of its friends and foes (Teltumbde, 2007)? The answers to these questions will give a new direction to the Dalit Movement in Karnataka.

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