

A Case Study on Dalit's Position and Development in Politics through the Ages

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ABSTRACT

One of the prominent aspects of economic, political and social relations revolves around the issues of inequality based on class, caste, race and gender. In the context of India, caste based politics has always remained in the forefront. But during the last two decades, the assertion of the people from low castes including the Dalits has assumed unprecedented significance. The Dalit question is one of the most important questions in today's political and academic debates in India. Dalit assertion, Dalit leadership and voting pattern of the Dalits etc., are the elements of these debates. This paper is also made an attempt to understand the social structure of our society and the legal and social position of Dalits in reference to the time period.

KEY WORDS: Indian Social System, Varna Vyavastha, Shudras, Dalits, SC/ST

Untouchable is a name of comparatively recent origin applied generically of persons in the lowest classes of Hindu society.(Malley p 137) In north India generally there is no idea that the untouchable have any right, as it were, an emanation of impurity extending to a certain distance. The untouchability is a matter only of actual contact. It means that orthodox Hindus of higher caste cannot take food or water from one of them, that it is thought necessary to bathe after contact with them.(Ibid p143) they came to be known as the dalits. Social disabilities vary from province to province and even in different parts of the same province. The cases of the Punjab and Assam are an exception. with reference to a statement prepared by the Punjab Government for the senior commission, some 2, 268,000 persons in the Punjab might technically be regarded as be regard as belonging to untouchable caste's but untouchability is merely held to mean that food touched by them cannot be eaten by high caste Hindus, it is only in the case of actual scavengers that foodily contact involves pollution.(Census Report 1911) There is scared a problem at all in Assam, where there is little difference between them and non Hindu aboriginals.(Simon Commission Report1930 p 39-67) In the Punjab, a sweeper, walking through the streets usually carried a broom in his hand to identify himself from general masses that he was a scavenger and shouted "Bacho, Bacho" with a view to preserving people from being polluted.(Census Report 1911) In Malabar and elsewhere in south India a Nair could kill an untouchable who did not taken the trouble to get out of his way.(Forbs, 1834p254)

It was not till 1855 that the Travancore state issued a proclamation liberating all state slaves, forbidding the law court to admit the claim of a share owner, and allowing slaves the right to hold property and to obtain redress for injuries. Imagine that once in the state, the untouchable were forbidden to wear shoes or carry umbrellas. A state order was there for shaman women not to wear any clothing above the waist of course this order was withdrawn in difference to representation made by the British Government, in 1859.(Thurston,1909,p428) Hindu judges in outlying places have been known to be influenced by prejudice. According to evidence given in Madras before that Lee Commission in 1924, the untouchables in such places and before such judges were not permitted to enter the courts even though they were parties to a case on witnesses, but had to stand after and their examination was conducted by a go-between who would go out, question them. And take back their answers to the judge.(Malley, op cit, p151) Even basic education was denied to the dalit children. In 1931 an untouchable women in Baroda was brutally assaulted and her crop destroyed because she sent her son to a public elementary school.(Ibid p 154-156)

There were resentments to the issue of admittance of the dalits to the temple in Madras which led to outbreak of fierce fanaticism. In 1858 there were riots in Travancore

because woman converts to Christianity took to wearing cloth as above waist accompanied by 1899 riots in Tinnevely over the issues of admittance to the temples by the dalits. The outbreaks were so grave and wide spread that a military force had to be drafted to the district to suppress them in 1902, riots too broke out in consequence of the Shana's that their women should not carry loads on their heads not go to market and that they should be free to wear better ornaments than ladder bracelets and beads (Ibid) Acting on Gandhi's Teaching of non-violence they started to show active persistence at Viacom, demanding the way to temple area in the state of Travancore. They sat down before the barrier spinning wheels. They are joined by the Brahmin sympathizers at last Gandhiji' visit to the town and on his intercession the barriers were removed and roads were open to all.(Tolland,1926 p76-80)11 Mr. J.T. Gwyne found that the untouchables reluctant to join any movement because of ignorance and religious sentiment which makes them believe that their low position is not mercy national but divinely instituted he wrote in 1922 that classes must be attributed entirely to and determined opposition of the whole man of the orthodox . That is the view expressed by two delegates to the round table conference, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Srinivasan then president of the Madras Depressed Classes Federation, in a statement setting both the position and political claim of the depressed the word dalit was first used during1931. The attitude of the fellow Hindu's towards then changed gradually owing to two influences, one philanthropic, the other political. Gandhiji himself took up the cause in 1931 and declared in 'Young India' that when swaraj is established, there will be no untouchability. The untouchables will have the same right as any other.... the Brahman will not be able, as same are now, to punish the untouchables for daring to walk in the public stretch of for using public wells. Under swaraj there will be no such scandal and that of the use of public temples being denied to untouchables when allowed to other Hindus.

Unfortunately today, there is a little difference except in the philanthropic context politically the concept of dalits except as it was prevailing and its existence sometimes acts as a pressure group for political going. The question is sarcastic during high profile social and political gathering. The domination of the Brahmin has also been challenged by the non-Brahmins. A new spirit of science has sprung up among the younger generation of the educated classes, apart from the exceptions on orthodoxy, who are often wink at, forget and forgave.

After 1970 the observations of the Indian Government on the cast issues were predominant. The Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the early 1970s gave currency to the concept and word 'Dalit' to highlight the sufferings and struggles of the Untouchables. Later, they extended their movement to include all oppressed groups, namely the SCs, the STs, workers, landless laborers, small farmers and other poor people and also the neo-Budhist coverts. However, now a day, the SCs (earlier called Depressed Classes under the British and Harijans by Gandhi) prefer calling themselves 'Dalits' or 'the oppressed', while the tribal prefer to call themselves 'shoshits' or the exploited (Michel p108).

Acchutyaanand in Uttar Pradesh attacked the system of exploitation at all levels, cultural, economical and political. They developed their vision of Indian society as an alternative to the upper caste understanding of India.(Gail,1996)

The Age of Nationalism in the modern sense of the word is a recent phenomenon. It developed in the eighteenth century in the West and emerged at a later as a universal political concept. Two stands of thought emerged from upper-caste Hindus: one led to an attempt at reconstructing Indian Society on the basis of Western ideas originating in the age of Enlightenment and Liberalism, and the other wanted the reconstruction to take place on the basis of ancient Hindu traditions. These two visions of India developed their own ideology, leadership and organization in the course of the freedom struggle in India. A third vision was voiced by the oppressed and marginalized people of India. These three

visions of modern India shaped the course of dialogue in India at the birth of the Indian nation and the framing of her constitution.(Michel, op cit p110)

Jotirao Phule (1826-90) was the first Indian to proclaim in modern India the dawn of a new age for the common man, the down Godden, and the underdog and for Indian women, Phule argued that the low castes, whom he sometimes called 'Shudras and Atishudras' and were simply listed as 'Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars.... Bhils, Kolis, Mahars and Mangs', were the original inhabitants of the country. Joitirao's attack on Brahmanism was uncompromising. The Satya Shodhak Samaj assumed a vital role as the ideological conscience for all those who identified themselves with the lower castes, whether they belonged to the Samaj or to one of the numerous other groups working for the uplift of the lower castes. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of a violent and controversial movement of protest amongst western India's low and Untouchable castes, aimed at the effects of their lowly position within the Hindu caste hierarchy. (Rosailand, 1985)

Ambedkar was revolutionary. He led the fight against untouchability, Hinduism and the Brahmin caste. He was very critical of the two contemporary approaches to the reform of the caste system, namely, those of Dayananda Saraswati and Gandhi (Baxi 1994). Ambedkar also rejected the position of Gandhi with regard to caste and its reform. Gandhi felt that the ancient Hindus had already achieved an ideal social system with varna vyavastha. According to Gandhi, 'The law of varna means that everyone will follow as a matter of dharma-duty the hereditary calling of his forefathers ... how will earn his livelihood by following that calling' (Zelliot, 1992:154). In contrast, Ambedkar believed that an ideal society had yet to be achieved in India. For him, the priority was not making 'Hinduism' or Hindu society 'shine forth' but building a new, equal, free, open, nonhierarchical, modern India. Ambedkar launched his revolutionary movement for the liberation and advancement of the Dalits. On 20 July, 1942, he decided at Nagpur, with justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of full joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or sordid in it. For our struggle is our freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human respectability which has been suppressed and mutilated by the Hindu social system and will continue to be suppressed and mutilated if in the political struggle the Hindus win and we lose. My final word of advice to you is, 'educate, organise and agitate'; have faith in yourselves and never lose hope.(Das,1995) The traditional established by Phule, Periyar and ambedkar represents the effort to construct an alternative identify of the people, based on non-Aryan and low-caste perspectives, that was critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant Hindu caste society but also of its claims to antiquity and of being the dominant Indian tradition.(Omvedt 1994)

With the growth of democratic institution and the emergence of the 'politics of numbers' in contemporary India, the Dalits began to assume some importance in national politics. Dalit leaders in different political parties, in order to take advantage of the situation and bring about their liberation, began to mobilise forces.(Michel op. cit p121)

Economic development in general as well as the reservation policy and the special component plan has led to some improvement in the educational and economic status of the Dalits. Their literacy rate has increased. Enrolment in schools doubled between 1981 and 1991. The number of Dalit employees in government service has risen, the number of Dalit employees in public sector undertakings increased, in rural areas, the percentage of the poor among Dalits declined while in urban areas, that percentage went down. Despite these improvements, Dalits still lag far behind other groups in India society. While their literacy rate in now 37 percent, that of non-Dalits is 57 percent. civil rights violations and atrocities against Dalits continue to increase. The increase in crimes against SCs and STs in 1994, as compared with crimes in the preceding year, was as high as 36 percent and 27.4 percent respectively (Godbole, 1997: 14), Studies indicate

that these atrocities were committed over land disputes and minimum wages as well as to prevent Dalits from securing justice under civil rights laws.

The new economic policy also affects the Dalits adversely. After the new reforms were implemented in 1990, both unemployment and poverty levels increased. The persistence of poverty and caste injustice remains a shameful blot on Indian society. Over the past 10 years, an emerging Dalit identity and social consciousness has created a new political consciousness among poor rural Dalits. Javed Alam observes that the oppressed castes have begun to realise their power.

Today the Dalits are asserting themselves much more than before (Vanaik, 1997: 323-26). They have decided that they will not call themselves 'Harijans' simply because it is a paternalistic expression. Unfortunately, Dalits are also divided among themselves and their leadership too is rife with both confusion and schism. The Dalit movement is best by the virus of endemic co-option—from the old days of the Scheduled Caste Federation and the Republican Party to the Dalit Panthers to the various anti-reservation movements to the recent controversy on Arun Shourie's book on Ambedkar (Shourie, 1977) Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, Propagated the idea of the need for a cultural revolution or a total transformation of Indian society. They rejected the vision of the upper castes and values of Manu and Varna vyavastha; they propagated the principles of equality, justice, liberty and rationality. This broad-base stand point is widely accepted among the Dalits.

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