

A Study on Historiography of Dalit Depressed Movement in India

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The socio-religious approach based on the human-rights consciousness started to arise in the colonial period, followed by the steps for their political rights and proper representation in politics. There have been a number of enactments in order to protect the fundamental rights and to ensure the representation of Dalits in the late colonial and the post-independence era.

The legal guarantee for the fundamental rights and numerical representation in politics and administration neither accomplished the ideal of equal society nor entirely fulfilled the uplift and empowerment of Dalits. I attempt in this work to examine the legislative efforts and their limitations for Dalit empowerment and to delineate the political challenges by the Dalit political parties as a pursuance of political power. Further analyze a non-political Dalit movement spontaneously generated from the civil society, suggested as an alternative approach.

All the approach mentioned above have worked for the uplift and empowerment of Dalits in order to establish them as equal citizens of the Indian Republic from the different perspectives. The Indian state was facing an important task of consolidation and strengthening national unity at the time of independence. To forge nationality out of religious, linguistic and communal dissonant factors seemed not to be a plain job, though there had been the political tradition of parliamentary democracy and consensus. If we focus on the social scene of independence era, caste system and untouchability was still dominating and prevailing among the lay people especially in the rural area, calling for total transformation. The transformation of society could be achieved, in the thoughts of the founders of the Indian Republic, by two significant innovations, namely building 'democratic and civil libertarian society' and undertaking economic development within a democratic political structure.

The provisions of preferential discrimination meant that mere removal of untouchability and equal treatment were not enough to uplift the lower castes, especially scheduled in the Constitution, and that more affirmative methods for their empowerment were to be undertaken.

Background Ideas

Most social phenomena in the contemporary India are more or less related with the social and political milieu and discourse in the colonial period and the present situation of Dalit does not make exception. Foreign understandings and accounts on various castes and caste system as a principle of social relationship have affected indigenous views on caste to a certain extent. These understandings functioned as foundation of social and caste-related policy-making of colonial government and these colonial policies had partial influence on the development of the Depressed Classes.

The social movements of the Depressed Classes for their uplift were formulated in the late eighteenth century and activated in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Significantly enough, the Depressed Classes movement of this period saw the emergence of outstanding figure B.R. Ambedkar, who was later to contribute to building independent India by drafting the Constitution.

The trend of the Depressed Classes movement and the activity of Ambedkar in the colonial period deserve attention in the sense that many of the Dalit activists and their groups of the present days find their roots in the movement of the colonial period and try to continue their movements under the name of Ambedkar. He and his movement have significance especially in the sense that he was a pioneer of Dalit political parties claiming their own political identity. However, not all the activists stayed on accordance with Ambedkar; rather, there were considerable number of figures who did not join him, such as Jagjivan Ram, who agreed more on the Gandhian idea. Gandhian way of Harijan movement formed different but important trend of uplift of the Depressed Classes, though two different

trends made major fissure among the Depressed Classes groups. Disputes between Gandhi and Ambedkar, their distinct ideologies on social emancipation, and their conflicting political steps produced lots of divergence and impacted on contemporary policies and politics. The same have relevance in the present situations since both the trends are still alive in the fields of politics, administration and social movement.

In fact, the historical evolution took place with Buddha's revolt against Varnashram dharma. Buddha not only rejected supremacy of Brahmins but also of the Shastras.

Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins and knowledge their sole domain and Buddha not only demolished their knowledge base of Brahmins but also popularized among the masses by sermonizing in Prakrit. And this tradition of revolt continued at the later stage also. All the indigenous reform movement and religions in India had inherently revolted against the Brahmanical value system, which gave divine sanction to untouchability and caste system. After Buddha, Mahavir Swami rejected the notion of caste and violence in the brahmanical structure. Even the birth of Sikhism is related to the caste prejudices rampant in varnashram dharma system. In the 15th century Kabir talked of rejection of caste system and talked of one God. He attacked rituals and Shastras and talked of a society based on equality.

On December 25th, 1927, Ambedkar launched a Satyagrah in Mahad town of Maharashtra for the water rights of Dalits and against the Manu Smriti. He burnt Manu Smriti terming it a document of discrimination with a number of his supporters. It was an act of great courage to do so in the den of violent Chitpawan Brahmins in Maharashtra. It is interesting that Ambedkar fought for the rights of Dalits and had a broader vision for his community. Unfortunately, when he started thinking of giving them a vision in 1955, he died. It was time when he embraced Buddhism and gave them an identity. Many people question Ambedkar's motivation to embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar has his own definition of Buddhism. He wanted his people to

give an identity so that they get out of Varna System. Whatever we say, as long as we are a part of the Varna Vyavastha, whatever we do reflect our caste identities. Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar, all, wanted their followers to be provocative and proactive. Reject caste system and for that complete break up from the Hindu social order and embrace a better system.

Ambedkar wrote many things over a period of 30 years. Some time he was living in deep anguish, elsewhere working with the government or framing constituent and at the end as a Buddhist. And on each of these occasions he had different moods. There was a time when he became frustrated with the Varnavyavastha and he tore the Shastras. Then a time came when Ambedkar's main concern was to ensure fair participation of Dalits in political life of the country and he succeeded in getting separate electorate for them which he had to withdraw to 'save' the life of Gandhi, in 1932, known as Poona Pact. Then as a constitutionalist when he drafted constitution and later worked very hard to ensure fair deal for women in the Hindu Code Bill. In the last phase of his life when Baba Saheb embraced Buddhism, his main concern was providing a political alternative to Dalits.

It is also interesting to note that that Dr Ambedkar was a humanist to the core of his heart. Even when his so-called followers have converted him as a caste man or narrowly interpreted his ideologies and perception, Ambedkar could be termed an international humanist. A person who the persecuted all over the world today look to get inspiration. The narrow minded political fringes in the name of Dalit vision should think that Ambedkar first formed Indian Labour Party and later Republican Party of India and at no point of time he formed vision based on caste. Even on his 'thought on Pakistan' Ambedkar suggested that there should be a party representing poor Hindus and poor Muslims, entirely secular, only that could save India. Muslim communalism only feeds Hindu communalism.

I speak for my entire community. I speak for my philosophy and experience. Because if identities are our point of speaking then one should remember

Dalits are not a homogeneous community. In fact no community in the world is homogeneous. They are as wide as any body else and hence these identities fit in there also.

Review of Literature

Caste and untouchability, pointed out as a very peculiar social system unique in India and as 'one of the important factors to be dealt with for the achievement of democratic society, have drawn attention from many researchers both domestic and abroad. Since there have been huge numbers of valuable researches on the caste system, its function, and its historical development, or of individual castes, the review of literature in this thesis is limited to that on the avarna castes, traditionally untouchable, and their empowerment in various aspects.

Zoya Hassan's recent research deals with various issues of affirmative action, including reservation for religious minorities. Debates on the issue of affirmative action had been instigated especially after the implementation of Mandai report and produced lots of studies on the same. Conversion to another religion or the invention of a new sect has been used as a way out of the traditional untouchability. Religious mobility of lower castes often became an important theme of anthropological studies as we see the works on the Ezava community of Kerala and on the Ad-Dharm movement of Punjab.

Shastree and Beltz studied the Mahar caste focusing on their religious conversion to Buddhism, while Clarke discussed the Christian theology and the Dalits with the case study of the Paraiyar caste. There is an interesting comparative study of two different communities which had converted to Buddhism and Christianity, respectively. The political approach of Dalit empowerment has a broad range of literature⁸⁴ but the regional case studies or party-wise studies are usually about the political mobilization of traditionally marginalized castes by big political parties. Researches on the Dalit-based political parties or on independent political mobilization are limited in number because remarkable political activities of Dalits have been

limited to a certain regions and small number of political parties. For the pre-independence era, many anthropological studies, dealing with the political awareness of particular community, covered the political issues⁸⁵ while some researches dealt with the notable lower-caste parties, the Scheduled Castes Federation(SCF) and the Justice Party.

Contextualising Dalit Movement in South India

The Dalit movement in South India charted a distinctive course highlighting the Dalit question but at the same time making it integral to the larger question of emancipation and enablement. But it is at cross-roads today and the larger issues of emancipation and Dalit oppression as integral to it seems to have been side-lined. The internal conflicts and fragmentation within the Dalit movement and its inability to set the course of public life are amply in evidence everywhere. In this context it is not merely necessary to recall the contribution of Dalit movement in South India to the larger project of Dalit emancipation in the country as a whole but also to reflect on the central questions before the Dalit movement in South India. Given the distinct trajectory of Dalit movement in different regions of South India, it may be worthwhile to focus on Tamil Nadu, keeping this perspective in view.

Three distinct concerns of Dalit movement in South India may be highlighted in this context. It recognised that the denial of selfhood to Dalits in the prevailing social relations that are embedded in both the public and social institutions from early on manifests in such deprivation as self-respect, human dignity and rights. It joined hands with concerns of other similarly oppressed groups in struggling for those sources, which would facilitate the development of a confident self. It can be said that even today this remains one of the primary drives of the dalit movement holding out the possibility of bringing Dalits and the allied groups on a common platform. The issue of dignity and self-hood are centrally related to the question of culture. Dalits laid claim to such resources as language, religion, symbols and traditions and on their basis attempted to carve out a distinctive cultural autonomy for their future. This legacy which it shared to a great extent

with the self-respect movement remains in tatters today as a succession of ruling regimes have attempted to own up these resources and tried to use them and reproduce their dominance over Dalits. Besides, Dalits through their movement have generated their own cultural resources. But a fragmented Dalit movement has not been able to effectively make use of these resources. A number of concerns that the social movement of dalit have raised closely reflect on their search for a self, which can elicit its due recognition and anchored in an egalitarian community.

Contemporary Dalit Movements in Tamil Nadu

In the contemporary climate of economic globalization, military aggressions, new forms of exclusions, the significance of the Dalit movement as a liberalized principle is undeniable. The struggle for the liberation of Dalits has now moved somewhat to the centre stage in contemporary TN politics. Last decade was a decade of new social movements. The new mobilisations by women, Dalits, tribal, unorganised sectors and ethnicity's raised issues and demands that could not be easily understood or dealt with in the theoretical and political paradigm. Hence, to understand this 20th century moves one has to take a position. In the words of Antonio Gramsci's it would mean a different position, a 'war of position'. It simply means that earlier Dalit history means that they were pushed outside the central arena and excluded from the power game of acquiring offices of governance. If there is a change in the Sanathana Hindu society, it is only because of the collective struggles of the oppressed and the suppressed in the caste-ridden Indian society. All these realities were possible because the oppressed united under the banner of revolt irrespective of the losses. If at all the dominant forces and the ruling government are afraid of anything it is nothing but the unity of the Dalits. There is a theoretical vacuum especially in understanding "struggle".

Most of the time it is understood as a struggle against "victim-hood". But it is a struggle to articulate the collective will of the emerging Dalit conscious in Tamil Nadu. If peace and calm pervade the life of Dalits without a struggle, it only means

that either a violent oppression has taken the upper hand or that there liberation is at hand. (It is not real peace; it is nothing but the silence of the socially dying). Today, if Dalits fight breaking all obstacles and barriers, it is only because they have become united and organized. To put it plainly, struggle which was a part of the daily life of the oppressed became their life itself. Formerly, struggle itself was a tradition in the life of a Dalit. Now it has become their lacerative life in totality. It is this movement that has created and necessitated the Dalit movement today.

Many have used different criteria to understand and analyze the experience of the struggles in the Dalit movement that came into existence in Tamil Nadu in the past 15 years. The Marxist, Periyarist and Revolutionist interpretations of Dalit movements arise out of such judgements or conceptualizations. Let me share the context from where try to understand the Dalit movements. As contemporary Dalit movements were awakening, the “Dalit Resource Centre” that was established at Madurai, had contributed to these Dalit movements in a significant way. Many Dalit movements have in fact associated themselves with the Centre. Since I am also part of this Centre, I can’t but take a critical look at the contemporary Dalit movements from the point of view of the role that has been played by the Dalit Resource Centre. From this background, the present essay tries to focus on the Dalit movements from 1989 to 2004 with the backdrop of the role, played by Dalit Resource Centre, Madurai. Since this Centre functions in Madurai and has Madurai as its field of action or its pivot, I have taken only the Dalits movements in the southern districts and I am specific to this region only. I accept the fact that this essay does not fully deserve to be called ‘Contemporary Dalit Movements in Tamil Nadu’ since it concentrates on the southern districts only.

History of Dalit Struggles from the Perspective of ‘Movement’: The writings of Dalits cannot be considered as a mere social analysis, or a mere discursive study of social structure. More importantly, there is a compelling necessity to discover and reclaim the hidden and buried history of

the Dalits. In this way, I do not take this essay to be a mere analysis but an effort at situating Dalit movements in history. Buddhism remains the root for the research regarding the history of liberation and cultural identity. Similarly Buddhism is the beginning of the tradition of struggles against the suppression of Dalit movements and for the identity-based politics. The first revolution of the oppressed people against dominance started in Buddha. “In the days of the Vedas, Buddha with his followers started a social struggle for the liberation of the oppressed in society. This movement was given the name Sangam. This movement was started on a full moon day, in Vaikasi, in 589 BC on the banks of the Ganges at Isiyadhanam in the city of Kasi. This was the first movement for the liberation of the oppressed people against the orthodox Brahminic religion that shaped into a dominant institution through its four Varnas based on caste injustice. The Buddha was the first to oppose this. The Sangam emerged as the opposing force against the Aryan Brahminic principle of born capitalism; and Buddhism emerged as the camp for humanist social liberation.”

In the 2400 years, starting from Kosar invasion to the British invasion or rule, all the 104 dominant characters who came to power through invasion carried out only the principles of modern Brahmanism. Only from there, the Dalits learnt the lesson and the tradition of struggle to oppose the tradition of dominance. Inspire of this the Vedas, Puranas, the Law of Manu, and the Hindu Varnashrama dharma, continued, retained and maintained their supremacy even today. On the contrary, throughout history, only the Dalits in the mould of oppressed Buddhists, Chakyas and Nagas continue to fight for a humane society.

Dalit Movements in Andhra Pradesh

This section is an attempt to construct a narrative of the evolution of the dalit movement through its various phases, and its interaction with the naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. It argues that the contours and changes in the dalit movement can be made sense of through the impact created on the and by the three major massacres against dalits, in Karamchedu in 1985, Chundur in 1991 and

Vempentta in 1998. Around these gruesome events, the dalit movement shaped and re-shaped its agenda, political discourse and strategy of transformation. In course of its struggles against caste atrocities, it perceived the naxalite movement as both an ally and at times representative of the same caste hierarchy that society at large replicated. The issue of solidarity between these movements therefore becomes extremely crucial not only in shaping these movements but also in determining the nature of social transformation in times to come. Ironically, in a transitory phase glorifying and eulogising the 'proliferation' and 'fragmentation' of identities and struggles, there seem to be radically new possibilities to forge solidarity.

Karamchedu: The Independent Dalit Movement
The contemporary independent dalit movement originated with the massacre of dalits in Karamchedu, incoastal Andhra Pradesh, in 1985. The Karamchedu massacre had its roots in the complex economic, political and cultural changes that this village witnessed over the past quarter century. In the 1970's the Kamma small peasants of Karamchedu, who were well versed with tobacco cultivation, began to migrate to far off districts like Karimnagar and began to cultivate tobacco on larger portions of land. "While the migrant Kamma farmers struck gold in tobacco and cotton on larger portions of land. "While the migrant Kamma farmers struck gold in tobacco and cotton cultivation elsewhere, the others in Karamchedu did experience the spill over effects".

The scheduled castes filled this vacuum and graduated to share cropping and field tenancy. Most scheduled caste (SC) families graduated to become small peasants. Some among the youth also got educated and acquired jobs. These changes in the economic positions of the SCs were in conflict with their extremely demeaning social position in the village. Practices of untouchability, extreme subordination, sexual exploitation of women and bonded labour, all began to be questioned and experienced in a changed context. Politically Karamchedu did have a history of Left politics, which made a decisive difference to their consciousness. "Almost isolating the landlords, the

Kamma small peasants, tenants and agricultural labours along with the harijans and others aligned themselves with the communist party. In 1950's, Karamchedu was a veritable bastion of the communist party and the major segment of Kamma settlement in the village is even now unbelievably called 'Moscow'.

The contradictions between all these 'levels' compounded to only result in the ghastly massacre of the 17th July 1985. The incident clearly depicts a cultural assertion by the dalits and the intolerance of the Kamma's to the changing situation. On July 16th a Kamma boy bathed a buffalo at the steps of the water tank of the dalits and directed the dirty water into the tank which was meant for their drinking water. A lame dalit youth and a young dalit woman protested against this.³ The Kamma community retaliated against this protest by massacring several dalits in the early hours of 17th July. Six dalit men were killed and more than 25 others, including several women, were injured. The incident has severe repercussions in terms of the physical and mental health of the dalit community of the village. Immediately after the incident, the dalit villagers fled to the nearby Chirala town and set up a shibiram (camp). It is around this shibiram that the dalit struggle with demands and issues 'specific' to the community emerged. Initially, leaders began to mobilise their community all over the state around the issue of cultural assertion against the dominance of upper castes. This assertion for an autonomous movement demanded autonomy from both the state institutions and the mainstream parties and also the radical left movement led by the various ML groups. Dalit leaders protested and rejected the Marxist Leninist (henceforth ML) group's depiction of the incident as 'landlords attack against labourers' (title of the pamphlet distributed by the People's War Group (henceforth the PWG). Instead, they represented it as an attack by 'Kamma landlords' on 'Madiga coolies'.

Dalit Movement in Karnataka

Karnataka has occupied a unique place in the history of social movements of the country. In the 12th century Basaveshwara made a sincere attempt to reform the orthodox society. During his time such liberal attempts were not acceptable by the fundamentalists. But Basaveshwara's attempts were for the first time helped Dalits to go near social equality. His disciples like Madara Chenniah, Doara Kakkaiyah, Holare Haralaiah could break the shackles of caste system because of Basaveshwara's initiative. However, such attempts failed to create a new movement which Basaveshwara had thought instead it created again the rigid society. Bhakti Movement in the 16th century saw some non-Brahmins particularly from Backward castes walking on the path of social reform.

Bhakta Kanakadas like Basaveshwara preached his pupils through his Keerthanas which were simple but powerful weapon to reform the social system. Progressive kings like Sri. Krishnarajendra Wodiyar introduced various welfare measures to emancipate that exploited subjects. Wodiyar's rule in Karnataka produced far reaching changes by creating progressive leaders like Holiyar Gopalswamy Iyer and others. With the advent of Babasaheb on the National scene, social movements began to grow strong. Sr. Jayachamarajendra Wodiyar granted 5 acres of land at Bangalore+ to Babasaheb Ambedkar spoke about the commitment of Wodiyars towards social justice. Encouragement given by the rulers towards Dalits in the field of education created a strong base for the emancipatory discourse. Babasaheb's visit to Dharwad and Bangalore further inspired the Dalits to seek entry into Bureaucracy and Political fields. Babasaheb's desire of separate electorate will produce real representatives of his community was nullified through Poona Pact. In Karnataka to some extent the real representatives of Dalit Community emerged within the system of Reserve Constituency. One such great leader was B. Basavalingappa who was instrumental to the raise of Dalit Movement in Karnataka. Circumstances Leading to the Formation of Dalit Sangharsha Samiti Babasaheb's gospel has created Dalit movements in

various States. Inspired by his thoughts the Dalit movement in Karnataka began to take its shape with the formation of the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti.

By merging various Dalit Organisations Karnataka Dalita Sangharsha Samiti came into existence in June 1977 though it was registered in the year 1974-75. Sri. Devanoor Mahadeva, Prof. Siddalingaiah, Devaiah Harave, Prof. B. Krishnappa, K. Ramaiah Indudhara Honnapura, Manchaiah, Govindaiah and others played a very important role in this task. At the first meeting held in December 1978, Prof. B. Krishnappa was unanimously elected as the State Convener.

Conclusion

In the past 15 years, at many platforms of debate and discussion, seminars, symposia, and public platforms the media, the writings and researches have thrown a lot of criticisms and questions at the Dalit movement, and the Dalit leaders. So if none of the dominant castes (whether he places criticism within his own caste or not) has hesitated to extend his long arm of critique towards Dalit movements, it does not mean that Dalit movements should not be criticized. Now the Dalit movements have to nurture the democratic practice of taking in criticisms, and finding a solution to them. There was a broad consensus among the nation builders on the equal citizenship and the special protection for the traditionally discriminated group of people, though there had been a die-hard uneasy sentiment against the concept of reservation from a certain section.

The new nation not only ensured the equal rights for all the citizens but also promised the compensation for the past discrimination against the Untouchables in the statutory forms. It includes the protective reservations in the government services, the educational institutions, and the legislative bodies of different levels. It was a meaningful step especially in the sense that the Constitution of India guaranteed their representation according to their population proportion. However, there have been the constant suggestions that the institution of reservation has not fulfilled its aims. Reservation in the field of government service has not fully and effectively implemented so that quotas

have not filled even after sixty years of independence, with only minor cases of exception. The political field is where the reservation has been surely put into practice in the numerical sense. This thesis found out that the constitutional amendments allowed stretching the range of potential beneficiary to a certain extent, by including such religious minorities as the Buddhists and the Sikhs, while other religious minorities are not entitled to the benefit of reservation.

The change of electoral system tended to confine the SC and ST politician to the boundary of reserved position: It has become increasingly impossible for them to represent the non-scheduled population. Moreover, having a certain proportion of the SC members in the Parliament does not guarantee the same proportion of share in the political power. It has been difficult for the SC lawmakers to be united to exercise their power, being divided into various political parties in which most of them can play a very limited role. It is noticeable that the SC lawmakers have not played a significant role in a shift in policy for the broader Dalit interest. Although, historically, Dalit movements have been fighting for their own liberation on one side, how far they have been helpful or conclusive to social change is the question that leads us to look into the impact of these movements. Before finding a solution to this, I should know where I stand? With whom do I identify myself? What is the action in coordination with Dalit movements? First, I must put these questions to myself and get an answer that will also show the future strategy for the movements.

In conclusion, one can say that among the different Dalit groups there is a need to re-alter their cultural practices to the ideology and the politics of Ambedkar. This alone would break the cultural bondage to the feudal reality of Tamil Nadu. The Dalit Resource Centre has visualized this need in a small way. But disciplined research is a must. Most of the time at the grassroots the Dalit masses derive their cultural meanings from the traditional

Mahabharatha and Ramayana. But this cultural borrowing is very much resented by the mainstream writers from the Dalit literary establishment. Does this lead to cultural hierarchies with in the Dalit situation? This question needs to be probed further. Finally, it was clear by 1998 that it is not enough to say 'we must become a ruling community', a political movement has to have a broad agenda and a vision of transformation or development; it has to say why it should rule and what it has to offer.

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