

Pan India Dalit movements and contribution of Karnataka

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Abstract

Power can be cut by only power. Hence, to attain power, the first thing required is knowledge. It was thus, Phule and Ambedkar gave the main emphasis on the education of the Dalits, which will not only bestow them with reason and judgement capacity, but also political power, and thereby socio—economic status and a life of dignity. They knew that the political strategy of gaining power is either an end in itself or a means to other ends. In other words, if the Dalits have power, then they do not have to go begging to the upper castes. Also they will get greater economic and educational opportunities.

The upper castes enjoy social power, regardless of their individual circumstances with respect to their control over material resources, through their linkages with the other caste fellows in the political system –in the bureaucracy , judiciary and legislature. And so , the Dalits require power to control the economic scenario and thereby the politics of the country.

Phule thus added that without knowledge, intellect was lost; without intellect, morality was lost; without morality, dynamism was lost; without dynamism, money was lost; without money Shudras were degraded, all this misery and disaster were due to the lack of knowledge. Inspired by Thomas Paine’s —”The rights of Man”, Phule sought the way of education which can only unite the Dalits in their struggle for equality.

The movement was carried forward by Ambedkar who contested with Gandhi to give the Dalits, their right to equality. In the words of Ambedkar, Educate, Organize and agitate. Education, the major source of reason, inflicts human mind with extensive knowledge of the world, whereby, they can know the truth of a phenomena, that is reality. It therefore, would help to know the truth of Brahmanism in Indian society, and will make them to agitate against caste based inhuman practices. Only when agitation begin, in the real sense, can the Dalit be able to attain power and win the movement against exploitation.

Gandhis politics was unambiguously centring around the defence of caste with the preservation of social order in Brahmanical pattern. He was fighting for the rights of Dalits but was not ready for inter-caste marriage.

Key words: Radicalism ,Naxalites, BSP, DSS,Dalit Mahasabha, untouchability, avarna, savarna

Introduction

The human rights violation in this country is one of the major problems. The socio-economic milieu of Indian society is inherently hostile towards protection of human rights of Dalits. It is the cast and Varna system of social stratification which promotes the societal violation of Dalit human rights. The rule laid down by the Hindu law giver, Manu, is that there are only four Varnas of Hindus and there is not to be fifth Varna . The four Varnas are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Gandhiji and others in their campaign against un-touchability contended that untouchables and scheduled Tribes fall under the fourth Varna namely Sudras on the basis of Manus law of stratification. Dr. Ambedkar has pointed out that this theory is not acceptable because Manu speaks of untouchables as varn-baya which means those outside the Varna system. The four classes of Hindus are called Savarnas while those outside the four classes like the untouchables are called Avarnas. Manu has stated in his smiriti that the devilling’s of the Chandals shall be outside the village and their wealth shall

be dogs and donkeys, their dress shall be the garments of the dead, they shall eat their food in broken dishes and black iron shall be their ornaments, they must wander from place to place and they shall not sleep in villages and towns at nights. 3 It is well known that in villages the untouchables live in separate localities, while other castes live in the main village. It cannot, thus be denied that untouchables are not part of Hindu society and they must remain separate and segregated.

Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently it was used in 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of „Depressed Classes“, the term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. Dr. Ambedkar chose the term Broken man as English translation Dalits in his paper- “The Untouchables” in 1948. The Dalit Panthers revived the term Dalit and include in it the scheduled tribes in 1973 in their manifesto. Buta Singh (ex- Chairman National Commission for Scheduled Castes) said the word Dalit is an unconstitutional

Objective:

This paper is an attempt to look at dalit movements in their historical and social context and to find important players of this struggle

Dalit Panthers

Dalit Panther as a social organization was founded by Namdev Dhasal in April 1972 in Mumbai, which saw its heyday in the 1970s and through the 80s. Dalit Panther is inspired by Black Panther Party, a revolutionary movement amongst African-Americans, which emerged in the United States and functioned from 1966-1982. The name of the organization was borrowed from the ‘Black Panther’ Movement of the USA. They called themselves “Panthers” because they were supposed to fight for their rights like panthers, and not get suppressed by the strength and might of their oppressors.

The US Black Panther Party always acknowledged and supported the Dalit Panther Party through the US Black Panther Newspaper which circulated weekly throughout the world from 1967-1980.

Its organization was modelled after the Black Panther. The members were young men belonging to Neo-Buddhists and Scheduled Castes. Most of the leaders were literary figures. The controversy over the article “Kala Swatantrata Din” (Black Independence Day) by Dhale which was published in “Sadhana” in 1972 created a great sensation and publicised the Dalit Panthers through Maharashtra. The Panther’s full support to Dhale during this controversy brought Dhale into the movement and made him a prominent leader. With the publicity of this issue through the media, Panther branches sprang up spontaneously in many parts of Maharashtra.

The Dalit Panther movement was a radical departure from earlier Dalit movements. Its initial thrust on militancy through the use of rustic arms and threats, gave the movement a revolutionary colour.

Going by their manifesto, dalit panthers had broken many new grounds in terms of radicalising the political space for the dalit movement. They imparted the proletarian – radical class identity to dalits and linked their struggles to the struggles of all oppressed people over the globe. The clear cut leftist stand reflected by this document undoubtedly ran counter to the accepted legacy of Ambedkar as projected by the various icons, although it was sold in his name as an awkward tactic.

The pathos of casteism integral with the dalit experience essentially brought in Ambedkar, as his was the only articulate framework that took cognisance of it. But, for the other contemporary problems of deprivations, Marxism provided a scientific framework to bring about a revolutionary change.

Although, have-nots from both dalits and non-dalits craved for a fundamental change, the former adhered to what appeared to be Ambedkarian methods of socio-political change and the latter to what came to be the Marxian method which tended to see every social process as the reflection of the material reality. Both caused erroneous interpretations. It is to the credit of Panthers that the assimilation of these two ideologies was attempted for the first time in the country but unfortunately it proved abortive in absence of the efforts to rid each of them of its obfuscating influence and stress their non-contradictory essence. Neither, there was theoretical effort to integrate these two ideologies, nor was there any practice combining social aspects of caste with say, the land question in the village setting. This ideological amalgam could not be acceptable to those under the spell of the prevailing Ambedkar-icons and therefore this revolutionary seedling in the dalit movement died a still death.

The reactionaries objected to the radical content of the programme alleging that the manifesto was doctored by the radicals – the Naxalites. There is no denying the fact that the Naxalite movement which had erupted quite like the Dalit Panther, as a disenchantment with and negation of the established politics, saw a potential ally in the Panthers and tried to forge a bond right at the level of formulation of policies and programme of the latter. But even if the Panthers had chosen to pattern their programme on the ten-point programme of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the USA, which had been the basic inspiration for their formation, it would not have been any less radical. The amount of emphasis on the material aspects of life that one finds in the party programme of the BPP could still have been inimical to the established icon of Ambedkar.

Radicalism was the premise for the very existence of the Dalit Panther and hence the quarrel over its programme basically reflected the clash between the established icon of Ambedkar and his radical version proposed in the programme. The fact that for the first time the Dalit Panther exposed dalits to a radical Ambedkar and brought a section of dalit youth nearer to accepting it certainly marks its positive contribution to the dalit movement.

There were material reasons for the emergence of Dalit Panthers. Children of the Ambedkarian movement had started coming out of universities in large numbers in the later part of 1960s, just to face the blank future staring at them. The much-publicised Constitutional provisions for them turned out to be a mirage. Their political vehicle was getting deeper and deeper into the marsh of Parliamentarism. It ceased to see the real problems of people. The air of militant insurgency that had blown all over the world during those days also provided them the source material to articulate their anger.

Unfortunately, quite like the BPP, they lacked the suitable ideology to channel this anger for achieving their goal. Interestingly, as they reflected the positive aspects of the BPP's contributions in terms of self-defence, mass organising techniques, propaganda techniques and radical orientation, they did so in the case of BPP's negative aspects too. Like Black Panthers they also reflected 'TV mentality' (to think of a revolutionary struggle like a quick-paced TV programme), dogmatism, neglect of economic foundation needed for the organisation, lumpen tendencies, rhetoric outstripping capabilities, lack of clarity about the form of struggle and eventually corruptibility of the leadership. The Panthers' militancy by and large remained confined to their speeches and writings.

Phenomenon of Kanshiram and Mayawati (Bahujan Samajwadi Party)

In 1971 Kanshiram quit his job in DRDO and together with his colleagues established the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minorities Employees Welfare Association. Through this association, attempts were made to look into the problems and harassment of the above-mentioned employees and bring out an effective solution for the same. Another main objective behind establishing this association was to educate and create awareness about the caste system. This association turned out to be a success with more and more people joining it.

In 1973, Kanshi Ram again with his colleagues established the BAMCEF: Backward And Minority Communities Employees Federation. The first operating office was opened in Delhi in 1976 with the motto-“Educate Organize and Agitate“. This served as a base to spread the ideas of Ambedkar and his beliefs. From then on Kanshi Ram continued building his network and making people aware of the realities of the caste system, how it functioned in India and the teachings of Ambedkar.

In 1980 he created a road show named “Ambedkar Mela” which showed the life of Ambedkar and his views through pictures and narrations. In 1981 he founded the Dalit SoshitSamajSangharsh Samiti or DS4 as a parallel association to the BAMCEF. It was created to fight against the attacks on the workers who were spreading awareness on the caste system. It was created to show that workers could stand united and that they too can fight. However this was not a registered party but an organization which was political in nature. In 1984, he established a full-fledged political party known as the Bahujan Samaj Party. However, it was in 1986 when he declared his transition from a social worker to a politician by stating that he was not going to work for/with any other organization other than the Bahujan Samaj Party. Later he converted to Buddhism.

The movement of Kanshiram markedly reflected a different strategy, which coined the ‘Bahujan’ identity encompassing all the SCs, STs, BCs, OBCs and religious minorities than ‘dalit’, which practically represented only the scheduled castes.

Kanshiram started off with an avowedly apolitical organisation of government employees belonging to Bahujana, identifying them to be the main resource of these communities. It later catalysed the formation of an agitating political group creatively coined as DS4, which eventually became a full-fledged political party – the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Purely, in terms of electoral politics, which has somehow become a major obsession with all the dalit parties, Kanshiram’s strategy has proved quite effective, though in only certain parts of the country.

He has given a qualitative impetus to the moribund dalit politics, locating itself into a wider space peopled by all the downtrodden of India. But he identified these people only in terms of their castes and communities. It may be said to his credit that he reflected the culmination of what common place icon of Ambedkar stood for.

Apart from these broad political trends, there are many regional outfits like Dalit Mahasabha in Andhra Pradesh, Mass Movement in Maharashtra, Dalit Sena in Bihar and elsewhere, etc., some of which dabble directly into electoral politics and some of them do not. So far, none of them have a radically different icon of Ambedkar from the ones described above. They offer some proprietary ware claiming to be a shade better than that of others.

Ghanshyam Shah, a scholar who wrote article on Dalits, classifies the movements into reformative and alternative movements. The reformative is the one that tries to reform the caste system to solve the problem of untouchability. The alternative movement attempts to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by conversion to some other religion or by

acquiring education, economic status and political power. Both type of movements use political means to attain their aims and objectives. The reformative movements are further divided into Bhakti movements, neo-Vedantik movements and Sanskritisation movements, and the alternative movements are divided into the conversion movement and the religious or secular movements. Bhakti movement in 15th century developed two traditions of saguna and nirguna.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule formed the SaytaShodak Mandal in 1873 with the aim of liberating non-Brahmins from the clutches of Brahminism. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur started Satya Shodak Mandal in 1912 and carried forward the movement started by Phule. In the pre-independence period, the Dalit movements comprised of a strong non-Brahman movement against Brahmanism in Maharashtra, Adi Dravidas movement in Tamil Nadu, Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalan movement in Kerala, Adi Andhras movement in Coastal Andhra and the like. Phule tried to formulate a new theistic religion.

Ambedkar at Mahad Satyagrah

The religious reformers of the 19th century were influenced by the work of Christian missionaries in India. The Brahmo Samaj (1828), the PrarthanaSamaj (1867), the Ramkrishna Mission, and the Arya Samaj (1875) are the examples of such institutions founded with a view to fight against social evils practiced by the caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar, on his part, turned to Buddhism. In Tamil Nadu, non- Brahmin movement tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion although both Ayyapan proclaimed no religion, no caste and no god for mankind. All the above movements led, to some extent, to the social upliftment of Dalits.

All India HarijansSevak Sangh founded by Gandhi in 1923 started numerous schools for the Harijans including residential vocational schools. The Congress Government that later came into power in various States under the Government of India Act 1935 did useful work for restoring to the depressed classes their rightful place. Dr. Ambedkar struggled to secure social recognition and human rights for Dalits. The all India Depressed Association and the All India Depressed Classes Federation, the principal organizations of these classes, initiated a movement to improve their conditions.

All these efforts aimed at improving the miserable economic condition of Dalits, and to spread education among them. They worked to secure for them the rights to draw water from public wells, admission into schools, and to the use of roads; and the right to enter the public temples. The Mahad Satyagrah for the right of water led by Dr. Ambedkar was one of the outstanding movements of the untouchables to win equal social rights.

In Una, Gujarat a couple of months ago, a group of Dalits was brutally assaulted by self-styled cow vigilantes (gaurakshaks) for skinning a dead cow. This place turned into an epicenter of anti-Brahmanical assertion for upcoming Gujarat Assembly elections in 2017, threatening to unseat the BJP's 20+ years old run in the state which was and still remains the first ever laboratory of Hindutva's project. Rohith Vemula's mother Radhika Vemula hoisted the national flag in Una shortly after Modi did the same at Red Fort. Among others, the rally had significant presence of Gujarat's Muslims and Muslim

organizations from different corners of the Gujarat, who have not found a political voice since the 2002 pogrom spearheaded by PM Narendar Modi. Jignesh Mevani, Una Dalit AtachiyarLadat Samiti (ULS) convener, raised the slogan “Dalit-Muslim Ekta Zindabad,” with Radhika Vemula. Other social activists and student leaders also joined the protest in solidarity.

Again, another institutionalized murder of Rajini Krishna happened; a student of JNU whose death is suspicious and is the version-2 of Rohith Vemula. Even after couple of days, no proper response from JNU students union as well as social activists raises a big question. The way Dalit NGOs from Tamil Nadu hijacked the case and kept Dalit student’s body aside and Member of Parliaments raised the issue in ongoing parliament session (March 2017) to project Rajini Krishna as a Tamil guy, and not as a Dalit. No justice done to any of the Dalit victims or Dalit movements.

Dalit movement in Karnataka

The emergence of the Dalit movement in Karnataka in 1973 had a far-reaching impact not only among the untouchable communities across the state, but also in challenging the dictates of caste. The movement ushered in a new vision of civil rights across India. In order to understand the dynamics of caste and state bureaucracy, this paper specifically tries to capture the social evolution of a Dalit movement, the Dalit SangarshaSamithi (DSS) in Kolar District of Karnataka. The impact of the DSS among the Dalit communities in the district is analysed by focusing specifically on the ethnographic details of Valagalaburre village. Finally the paper considers how the state machinery responded to the DSS. By taking the fact sheets of the atrocities recorded by the social welfare department of Kolar District the paper contends that the DSS did alter the ethnographic map of social relations, drastically reducing the number of atrocities perpetrated upon Dalit communities. This in turn inspired the committed workers of the DSS to organize villagers to come together to shackle the age-old oppressive caste structures that defined the relations to resources in the villages. This study is well aware that unfortunately the DSS has currently fallen into a sad state of affairs with innumerable factions. However the present situation does not invalidate the very real achievements of the DSS, which are aptly captured in the words of one of those involved: “The Dalit movement in Karnataka in the past three decades was a vigorous march towards self-dignity. But today it sadly gives an impression of being at a tangent turn of events. Indeed, as it emerged from a long historical slumber, it gave rise to a stormy wave of protest against all sorts of oppressive tendencies inherent in the very social fabric of the society in Karnataka. It played a decisive role in awakening the Dalits in Karnataka.

But it also shook the rigid, irresponsible Hindu conscience. The movement spread like a wild fire burning every sluggish mind to transform itself into a zealous flame... It really hailed a new era of hope for Dalits in Karnataka”² It is this saga that will never allow the spirit of the DSS to die in spite of carnages like the Kambalapalli episode. The Kambalapalli carnage took place in 2000, and the following account of it illustrates precisely what the DSS struggles against: “a flock of sheep belonging to both Vokkaligas and Dalits was stolen from KambalaPalli Village. In this connection a ‘Panchayath’ was held in the village and it was unilaterally decided that Venkataramanappa, Anjanappa and Ravanappa - all Dalits - had stolen the sheep inspite of their denial and it was also decided to file a police complaint of theft against them. Fearing police action the above named Dalits left their village along with their families.

A police complaint was filed in this connection and during investigation it came to light that the sheep were stolen and taken to Andhra Pradesh and sold for Rs. 9,000/- by K.M. Maddireddy, Anjaneyareddy, Reddappa, Narayanaswamy, Kittanna alias Krishnareddy and their followers all belonging to Vokkaliga community of the same village. The sheep belonging to the Dalits were recovered and brought back and handed over to the owners. Dalit Venkataramanappa and his two brothers who had left the village took leading part in the detection of the stolen sheep which resulted in the exposure of Vokkaligas' conspiracy. Further it also brought contempt and ridicule to Vokkaligas as a whole in the village.

They wanted to do away with Venkataramanappa and were waiting for a chance for him to come back to the village. According to Section 3(1) (VIII) of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act., 1989 whoever not being a member of a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe institutes a false criminal or other legal proceedings against a member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than six months but which may extend to five years and with a fine. The police should have booked a criminal case against the Vokkaligas who had filed false complaints against Dalits in the matter under the above provision of law. That would have checked them from advancing further with their criminal activities. On hearing the delivery of his wife Venkataramanappa came to the village on 5-6-1998 at about 10.30 p.m. On getting information about his arrival Maddireddy, Anjaneyareddy and another 39 persons including Kittanna alias Krishnareddy formed an unlawful assembly and chased him to his house and stoned him to death in the presence of his wife and other family members. He was buried under the stones numbering about 50. All the above 41 culprits were released on bail and were roaming in the locality.”³ This study highlights the value of the DSS in its continued challenges to local caste relations and to LPG policies (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) in Karnataka. More particularly, the present study challenges the normative theoretical underpinnings of 'caste' to show that Dalit activism did unravel the much-ignored fact of caste as experienced distance from powerful castes that hinders the self-determination of Dalit communities.

Did State really help?

The post-1947 State, which has never tired of propagandising its concern for dalits and poor, has in fact been singularly instrumental in aggravating the caste problem with its policies. Even the apparently progressive policies in the form of Land Ceiling Act, Green Revolution, Programme of Removal of Poverty, Reservations to Dalits in Services and Mandal Commission etc. have resulted against their professed objectives.

The effect of the Land Ceiling Act, has been in creating a layer of the middle castes farmers which could be consolidated in caste terms to constitute a formidable constituency. In its new incarnation, this group that has traditionally been the immediate upper caste layer to dalits, assumed virtual custody of Brahminism in order to coerce dalit landless labourers to serve their socio-economic interests and suppress their assertive expression in the bud.

The Green Revolution was the main instrument to introduce capitalisation in agrarian sector. It reinforced the innate hunger of the landlords and big farmers for land as this State sponsored revolution produced huge surplus for them. It resulted in creating geographical imbalance and promoting unequal terms of trade in favour of urban areas. Its resultant impact on dalits has been far more excruciating than that of the Land Ceiling Act.

The much publicised programme for Removal of Poverty has aggravated the gap between the heightened hopes and aspirations of dalits on one hand and the feelings of deprivation among the poorer sections of non-dalits in the context of the

special programmes especially launched for upliftment of dalits. The tension that ensued culminated in increasingly strengthening the caste – based demands and further aggravating the caste – divide.

The reservations in services for dalits, notwithstanding its benefits, have caused incalculable damage in political terms. Reservations created hope, notional stake in the system and thus dampened the alienation; those who availed of its benefit got politically emasculated and in course consciously or unconsciously served as the props of the system. The context of scarcity of jobs provided ample opportunity to reactionary forces to divide the youth along caste lines. Mandal Commission, that enthused many progressive parties and people to uphold its extension of reservation to the backward castes, has greatly contributed to strengthen the caste identities of people. In as much as it empowers the backward castes, actually their richer sections, it is bound to worsen the relative standing of dalits in villages.

Conclusion

Institutionalized efforts made by Dalit community leaders for the liberation of the downtrodden masses can be termed as Dalit movement. These movements are protests against untouchability, casteism, injustice and inequality in all sectors and for exterior classes, depressed classes or Scheduled Castes. It aims to uplift the Dalits to the level of non-Dalits and to regain self-respect and equal human status for them in the society, as well as to establish a new social order based on equality, fraternity, liberty, social justice, and social, economic, cultural and political development of Dalits. All this is the result of the consciousness of Dalits of their own identity as human beings, equally equipped with physical and mental capacities as other human beings, and equally entitled to enjoy all the human rights “without any infringement, abridgment or limitations. Let’s be a witness to know how far these moments continue to get the justice, equality and freedom for Dalits from the so-called upper caste Brahmins, how many lives they claim to treat man as man, when their thirst of blood will end after killing hundreds of Dalits and Dalit farmers by banning beef which is their livelihood.

New politics or alternative politics need to be started to provide justice to these marginalized communities, as few of the Dalit leaders are tools in the hands of many politicians for their political gains and few Dalit leaders are corrupt to the extent of being ready to betray the trust of their community just for few luxuries.

“And Let not the hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just, that is nearer to righteousness.” [Quran 5:8]

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