



## **DALIT VISION: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION THROUGH AMBEDKAR**

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### **Abstract**

*Dalit vision is Dalit idea of Indian society. However it is more than that. Dalit vision is about an ideal egalitarian Indian society visualized by Dalit and non-Dalit equalitarian thinkers throughout history. Hence the core of the Dalit vision is social equality. It doesn't matter whether the thinkers belonged to the Dalit race or not, if social equality constitutes their thought that becomes part of the Dalit vision. The Buddha, Kabir, and Phule were non-Dalits but their thought is about social equality. Their life was a mission against caste-racism. Many Bhakti saints visualized social equality through their struggle against caste inequality. And of course, the great Indian social thinker of modern times is Ambedkar. His thought constitutes the nucleus of Dalit vision. This paper tries to make a historical exploration through Ambedkar's life and writings to construct a Dalit vision. It tries to define Ambedkar's vision of Indian society as Dalit vision and at the same time it positions itself as an all-encompassing vision that represents the thought of all other Indian social thinkers in Indian history who defended egalitarian values.*

**Key Words;***Dalit Vision, Ambedkar, Social Justice, Social Equality, Dalit Phobia, Bhakti Saints, Buddha, Kabir, Phule.*

### **Introduction**

Dalit vision is a social vision. Its object is to establish a society on the principle of social justice. The society of social justice is based on three principles namely liberty, equality and fraternity. These are social ideals and not political. Equality is the centre of the social justice world. In the world of equality, there is no privileged community. In India Brahman is a highly privileged race or community. A tiny population of Brahman Indians occupied a major share of Indian institutions due to the culture of Brahman appeasement. The culture of Brahman appeasement supported by religion has made Brahman a highly privileged race in India. And many allied races (races that are socially allied with the Brahman race) do enjoy privileges though less than the Brahman race. When the privileges are removed from the races that have had privileges for centuries, they feel that injustice has been done to them. From social equality perspective, privileges are injustices. Removing privileges of historically privileged races or communities is a pre-condition to establishing a society based on the rule of equality. Affirmative actions like reservation in jobs and educational institutions are social safeguards given by the Constitution of India architected by Bhim Rao Ambedkar against the privileged position of Brahman and its allied races.

Brahman and its allied races like Kshatriya (Rajput) and Vaishya (Baniya) are termed as caste Hindus by Ambedkar. There are two reasons why generally caste Hindus hate Dalits. 1. Caste Hindus inherit caste-race privileges as a cultural heritage. And 2. Caste-race privileges protect the socio-economic interests of caste Hindus. The purpose of caste Hindu life is to protect his/her cultural heritage at any cost. Thus, they become Dalit-phobic. Dalit phobia drives them to go to any extent to hate Dalits for the protection of their cultural heritage which is a caste-race privilege. Caste-race privilege is nothing but caste-racism. In other words, caste Hindus inherit caste-racism as a cultural heritage. Hence being a Dalit phobic is an inherent characteristic of caste Hindu.



There is a love-hate relationship between Dalits and non-Dalits in modern times. But in olden times there seemed to be only a 'hate' relationship between them. The practice of untouchability has made the Dalit race socially excluded in all kinds of societal interactions. Another name of untouchability is Dalit phobia. As a result, a kind of racism developed in Indian society to discriminate Dalit race. That could be called Caste-racism. Caste-racism is a result of Dalit phobia. White racism is different from Caste-racism. White racism is based on skin colour-Black and White. It has no support for religion. Caste-racism is based on caste. Hence it is called Caste-racism. It has the support of the religion of the Brahman race.

'Hate Dalit' has been an integral element of caste-racist personality. Every race in India would hate the Dalit race irrespective of affiliation to religion because the social philosophy of Brahman religion is the social philosophy of all religions practised in India. Various Religions in India differ in their spiritual philosophy but largely follow the social philosophy that is Caste-racism of the Brahman religion. Non-Dalit Christians and Muslims also follow social philosophy of Brahman religion. Irrespective of religion, 'hate Dalit' has become an inherent characteristic of Indian social life. Hence almost all races in Indian society hate the Dalit race for it is a core character of Indian society. In American society, the White man hates Black for the reason of the racial difference. In Indian society, non-Dalits hate Dalit not merely for the reason of racial difference only and also because it is regarded as religion sanctioned sacred duty.

Dalit hate is religion sanctioned sacred duty for the believers of the Brahman religion. But for others it is an initiation of Brahman religion. Since Brahman is the dominant race in every walk of Indian life, people of different religions socially imitate Brahman's social culture and treat the Dalit race as socially untouchable. Stereotypes such as inferior, incapable and unequal are attributed to Dalit Indians.

Dalit Vision is a vision for upholding the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity against caste racism. Historically the roots of Dalit vision could be traced to the anti-caste discrimination and pro-humanity traditions. It gives importance to humanism. Individual justice is the core of the Dalit vision. From the Buddha to Ambedkar, many Dalit and non-Dalit philosophers and social thinkers contributed to shaping the Dalit vision. The historical exploration of Dalit vision is meant for an exploration of Dalit social philosophy with the object to reconstruct Indian society based on human values.

### **Historical Roots of Dalit Vision**

The word Dalit is originally a Hebrew word. In Hebrew, it has positive and constructive meanings. There are three meanings for the word Dalit in Hebrew. Dalit means 'God's chosen one'. It is not a direct meaning. It is an inferred meaning. The direct meaning is 'God has drawn water'. Water is a symbol of life. God has drawn water means God's chosen life. The inference is Dalit means God's chosen life or God's chosen one. Dalit also means vine tree. In Hebrew spiritualism, the vine tree is a symbol of God's chosen life. The third meaning is gentle. Dalit means God's chosen one; vine tree and gentle. Generally, Jews use Dalit as their name word. Many Jews in Israel have Dalit as their first name. Since Dalit means gentle, the person whose name is Dalit is expected to possess gentle nature. Dalit God means 'gentle' God. Dalit man means gentleman. Dalit lady means gentle lady.

Since the Dalit identity has Hebrew-Jewish Semitic roots, Dalit vision naturally has the same roots. Hence the socio-spiritual philosophical core of Dalit vision is Hebrew-Jewish cultural values such as 'God made all humans equal' in other words social and racial equality and 'God is justice giver' in



other words social and racial justice. Social equality and social justice are two core objects of the Dalit vision. Principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are the main agencies of Dalit vision to realize its core objects.

### **Devotional Dalit Vision of Dalit Bhakti Saints**

Ambedkar dedicated his book titled: *The Untouchables: Who were they and why they became Untouchables?*, written in 1948 to Nandanar, Ravidas and Chokhamela, the three renowned Dalit bhakti saints “who were born among the untouchables and who by their piety and virtue won the esteem of all.”<sup>1</sup> An attempt is made here to explore the vision of the three Dalit bhakti saints.

Nandanar (7 A.D.) was one of the most famous Nayanars, who were Shivite Bhakti saints of Tamil Nadu. He faced oppression and humiliation from Brahman's priestly class. He fought against caste discrimination in the Hindu religion and society. He used religion to bring a casteless society. Being a devotee of Shiva, Nandanar had a strong desire to visit Nataraj (dancing Shiva) temple in Chidambaram town. But he couldn't enter the town as untouchables were not allowed by Brahmans. To enter the temple he needed to walk through the streets of the Brahmans locality situated in front of the temple. With the strong desire to worship Shiva in Nataraj form in Chidambaram temple, it seemed that he tried to enter the temple by entering the Brahman locality forcefully. Then what happened was a story of cruelty. Nandanar was burnt alive by Brahman priests of Chidambaram Shiva-Nataraj temple. As usual, Brahmans spread a false story that from the fire Nandanar arose as a Brahman and went into the temple to see Nataraja and disappeared to become one with Shiva. The duplicity in the story reveals the fact that Nandanar was burnt to death for daring to enter the Shiva-Nataraj temple.

*Periyapuranam* a Tamil text from the 12th century narrates a hagiographical account of Nandanar's life. It describes Nandanar becoming a Brahman after he went through fire to purify himself and after becoming a Brahman he was allowed to visit the temple for *darshan* (to see an image of a deity). The Bramanical solution reinforces Brahmanism. It upholds caste-racist superiority.

Ravidas or Raidas belonged 15 or 16th century born in Varanasi. He was a Dalit Bhakti saint of Uttar Pradesh. He struggled against the inhuman traditions of Brahmin Hinduism. He was a great poet and wrote many songs to question Brahmanism. He used his poetry to make critical enquiry into the role of caste in individual worship of God. He opposed the Brahmanic notion of giving importance to caste in devotion to God. Even Brahmans became his followers. His poems have become part of Guru Granth (Adi Granth) a sacred scripture of Sikhism.

Chokkamela was a Maharashtrian Dalit bhakti saint belonging to the 14th century. He also like other Dalit Bhakti saints protested against casteism in devotion. He was a devotee of Vitthal an avatar of Vishnu. He was never able to enter into Vitthal temple at Pandharpur as Brahmans didn't allow him. He complained to Vitthal against Brahmans. He died in an accident. It was said that he was constructing a wall and the wall suddenly fell on workers and many died. He was one among them.

Ambedkar respected Bhakti saints but he was against Bhakti's way of anti-caste protest. Though Bhakti saints opposed Brahmanism and the fundamental role of caste in an individual relationship with God, they tried to reform the same Brahmanic religion without changing the fundamentals of religion. How could Dalits win the game when the rules of the game are decided by Brahman? When the religion is designed for Brahman, by Brahman and of Brahman, reform of the Brahman religion can't



bring any fundamental changes. Caste discrimination that is caste-racism in short caste is fundamental to Brahman religion.

Wendy Doniger a famous historian and author of the highly acclaimed book, *The Hindus, An Alternative History* writing on Dalit Bhakti saints says, “Like Buddhism and all the other so called ancient reform movements that protested against the injustice of the Hindu social system, the bhakti movement did not try to change or reform that system itself...Rather, bhakti merely created another, alternative system that lived alongside the Brahman imaginary, a system in which caste injustices were often noted, occasionally challenged, and rarely mitigated.”<sup>2</sup> Gail Omvedt, an authority on Dalit studies, in the context of Dalit Bhakti says, “The records of the Shiva and Vaishnava devotional movements remained under Brahmin control or upper caste control, and even the role of lower caste bhakts in them was used to increase its mass appeal and not to provide any moral support for a rebellion against caste.”<sup>3</sup>

Dalit Bhakti saints couldn't bring fundamental changes to the Brahman religion because the religion is owned by Brahmans. You can't win the game when the owner of the game is playing against you because the game is designed in his favour. Dalit Bhakti saints fought for temple entry. But for Ambedkar, temple entry is not a fundamental issue. It is only a symbolic issue to ascertain the right to enter public places. The fundamental issue in the fight against caste is the fight for social justice. As a public place, the temple should be open to all, like all other religions. But Dalits who want to be Hindu are not allowed to enter Hindu temples. Dalit Bhakti saints fought for their right to enter Hindu temples for their devotion to the deity in the temple. Ambedkar looked at the issue not as an issue of the right of a devotee but as a social issue. Hence he regarded the temple entry as a public issue. It is an issue to enter a public place.

### **Dalit Vision of the Three Masters (Guru) of Ambedkar**

The Buddha, Kabir and Phule are the three masters (Guru) of Ambedkar. All three were Shudra and their communities today are known as Other Backward Castes. The Buddha belonged to *the Shakya* community, Kabir belonged to *the Julaha* community and Phule belonged to *the Mali* community. The Buddha belonged to Bihar, Kabir belonged to Uttar Pradesh and Phule belonged to Maharashtra. The Buddha belonged to ancient India, Kabir belonged to medieval India and Phule belonged to modern India. All three fought against caste based social inequality and strive to make Indian society a better place to live for under privileged Dalit and Shudra races. The history of these great Shudra thinkers inspired Ambedkar and made them his Guru. Though the Buddha was born in Nepal, he preached his dhamma in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Later on, Buddhism spread all over India and abroad. The opponents in ancient India called Buddhism a Shudra religion indicating it was the religion of the majority of Indians. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 and many Dalits particularly Maharashtra Dalits followed him. Now some people call Buddhism a Dalit religion. In recent times, not only the Dalit race, even the Shudra race (Other Backward Castes) is turning towards the Buddha *dhamma* for spiritual solace. *Kabir Panth* today remains to be popular only in some parts of north India. Phule's *Sarvajanic Satya Dharma* was once popular in Maharashtra but now it exists only as a Phule's identity.

### **The Buddha: Rational Dalit Vision**

Dalits are not Shudra. Today majority of Shudras are known as Other Backward Castes. Shakya is a Shudra community today known as the Other Backward Caste community in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha was born in the Shakya community in Nepal. He preached his *dhamma*



(thought) in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh regions. Though the Buddha was not a Dalit, Ambedkar the great Dalit leader embraced the Buddha. Locating the *dhamma* of the Buddha in Dalit vision means understanding the Buddha and his *dhamma* from the Dalit perspective. The primary source to understand the Buddha from the Dalit perspective is Ambedkar's writings and speeches. '*Dhamma*' is the socio-ethical philosophy of the Buddha. Ambedkar found the social principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' in the religion of the Buddha. Dalit vision is to build a culture of fraternity in society through the *dhamma* of the Buddha because fraternity is another name for humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Every man has to be a social servant. Otherwise, he becomes a selfish man. Dalit vision is to make a man a social servant and not a perfect man, because a perfect man is no use without social commitment. From the Dalit perspective, Buddhism, in Ambedkar's words, "the religion of the Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self-development to all ... Buddhism paved way for the establishment of democracy and socialistic pattern of society in India."<sup>5</sup>

Dalit vision is to create a free speech society that upholds human dignity. In other words, the Dalit vision is to establish a democratic society where equal representation is provided to all races in the institutional structure that controls and operates nation and state. The state has to provide equal opportunities to all races. Buddhism is viewed as a religion that works for the creation of a democratic, socialistic society where the principles of social liberty, social equality and fraternity are driving forces. Ambedkar wanted India to become a Buddhist nation. He said, "To get rid of the caste and to end other social evils, India must embrace Buddhism as that religion is based upon the ethics of morality, equality and universal brotherhood."<sup>6</sup> Dalit vision is to create an enlightened Indian nation by making India embrace Buddha's *dhamma* and making all Indians socially equal.

### **Kabir: Dalit Vision of Religious harmony**

Like the Buddha, Kabir was also a non-Dalit whom Ambedkar regarded as his *guru* (Master). Kabir or Kabirdas was a 15th-century poet who belonged to Uttar Pradesh. He was also a Bhakti saint like Ravidas. His poems are also included in *Adi-Granth* of Sikhism. He is revered by not only Dalits and also by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims for his idea of equality. However a myth was constructed that he was a child of a Brahman mother and Shudra father. The story, on one hand, denounces Kabir as a Shudra child but tries to give credit to Brahman's mother for his wisdom. Since these kinds of mythic stories are constructed by Brahman writers to counter the emergence of any wise hero or leader from Shudra, there is a need to denounce such a myth.

Kabir was born to a *Julaha* a weaver community that is a Shudra. Today it is an Other Backward Caste. *Julaha* a community of weavers converted to Islam as there is no place for the dignity of labour in Hindu society in medieval times. It is a north India-based Muslim community. Kabir was born in 1440 in Varanasi and died in 1518 at Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh. Through his poetry, Kabir critiqued superstitions and religious dogmas prevalent among both Hindus and Muslims. He is regarded as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim cultural harmony. He used poetry to bring social equality to society. He believed in one God. Kabir thought has become a kind of religious sect called *Kabir Panth*. It became popular among Shudra and also Dalit races in north and central India. Ambedkar's father belonged to *Kabir Panth*. Though Ambedkar didn't write much about Kabir, influenced by his family tradition of *Kabir Panth*, he regarded Kabir as his master (*guru*).



### **Phule: Spiritual Dalit Vision**

Jotirao Phule (1826-1890) was born in a Mali community that belongs to Shudra varna. Now it is regarded as Other Backward Castes same as the Kunbi-Maratha caste. The Mali community's traditional work is gardening. Even today Malis are involved in the flower business and other gardening-related activities. Ambedkar made Dalits to accept Phule. Hence more than Other Backward Castes, Dalits follow Phule's ideas for waging a social struggle against Brahmanical dominance over society. Phule termed Dalits as Ati-Shudra. He tried to bring unity among Dalits and Shudra to fight against Brahmanism.

Phule's three major books expose caste philosophy and the Brahmanic social system. His *Gulamgiri* in Marathi attacks caste and explains social slavery imposed by the Brahman race over Shudra and Ati-Shudra. His other book *Shetkaryaca Asud* describes peasant struggles against feudal lords. It explains the oppression of agricultural labourers and marginal farmers. They were exploited by the landed gentry with help of the Brahman priestly class. Another important work was '*Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*' for establishing a religion of social equality in Indian society. He started *Satya Shodak Samaj* in 1875 to liberate Shudra and Ati-Shudra masses from Brahmanical cultural slavery. He propounded this new religion to fight against Brahmanical rituals and superstitions and give the masses an alternative spiritual platform. His ballad on Shivaji denounces Brahmanism.

### **Ambedkar: Dalit Vision of law**

Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891-1956) throughout his life used only one method of fighting against caste discrimination for the empowerment of Dalit masses. That method was the legal method. His submission before the Simon Commission, his representation of Dalits in Round Table Conferences to get separate electorates and his battle against Gandhi's socio-political views that resulted in the Poona Pact were all nothing but the Dalit vision of law. He architected the Indian Constitution, the law of the land, to establish a rule of the law-based Indian nation-state. He was the upholder of the three great principles of social democracy- liberty, equality and fraternity. He made social justice the core mandate of the Constitution of India to protect the civil rights, and dignity of not only Dalit and also other under privileged communities like Adivasi and Shudra OBC communities.

Ambedkar throughout his life fought against philosophy of social inequality called Brahmanism. In Ambedkar words, "By Brahmanism I do not want to be misunderstood when I say that Brahmanism is an enemy which must be dealt with. By Brahmanism I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of the Brahmins as a community. That is not the sense in which I am using the word. By Brahmanism I mean the negation of the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity."<sup>7</sup>

He knew that Brahmanism is practiced by not only Brahmans and also non-Brahmans too. Dalits are denied opportunities by non-Dalits of any caste, race or religion. Though not every non-Dalit subscribes to Brahmanism, most of them believe in it as it gives false social superiority to them over Dalits. Hence they negate the principle of equality. In this context Ambedkar opines, "In that sense it is rampant in all classes and is not confined to the Brahmins alone though they have been the originators of it. This Brahmanism which pervades everywhere and which regulates the thoughts and deeds of all classes is an incontrovertible fact. It is also an incontrovertible fact that this Brahmanism gives certain classes a privileged position. It denies certain other classes even equality of opportunity."<sup>8</sup> He found the effects of Brahmanism not confined to only social rights like inter-dining or inter-marriage and extends to civic rights such as use of public places like public wells, public



conveyances, public restaurants etc.<sup>9</sup> It even influences on hiring of workers in public and private institutions and companies.

Construction of Ambedkar's Dalit vision needs to be seen as an opposite of Brahmanism. Therefore, Ambedkar's Dalit vision is a philosophy of social equality and social justice. Dalit vision means the strengthening of the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Dalit vision doesn't give privileged position to any class including Dalits and stands for equality of opportunity to all races in terms of social and civic rights.

The different facets of Dalit vision can be explored through Ambedkar's thoughts. Ambedkar constitutes the nucleus of the contemporary Dalit vision that is rooted in the history of ancient to modern India. The thoughts of the Buddha, Kabir and Phule made a major impact on making Dalit vision of Ambedkar. Modern western thought certainly contributed to shaping Ambedkar's outlook on Indian history and society. His Dalit vision opposed Gandhian traditional views and Marxists' communist views. Therefore Dalit vision is unique and consists of universal values like social justice.

### Conclusion

In contemporary India, the Dalit community stood like a rock against caste-racism because of the Dalit vision of Ambedkar. An effort is made here to portray Ambedkarism as a Dalit vision because Ambedkar opposed calling his thought Ambedkarism. Moreover, it is easy for opponents to co-opt Ambedkar and dilute Ambedkarism. Hence to give long life to thought of any visionary, his vision has to be identified with a community's liberation. Once Ambedkarism is translated into Dalit vision, the opponent can't co-opt Dalit vision because Dalit vision is not a person, it is an idea, and it is a thought. But if it is identified with only a person, the danger is opponent could co-opt the identity of that person and destroy the thought. It happened with the Buddha and it is now happening with Ambedkar also. Therefore, Dalit Vision is historically an appropriate term to identify all anti-caste philosophies including Ambedkar. Thus, Dalit identity encompasses not only the thoughts of Ambedkar and the thoughts of all other thinkers who fought against Caste discrimination and visualized social equality and social justice.

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