



DALITS AND THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT - THE ISSUE OF POWER

A. Bala Mary

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Presidency College, Chennai.

Abstract

According to the Caste system that prevailed in Indian society throughout these last three thousand years, Dalits have been considered to be so low that they were kept outside all castes. Even in these modern times the elite as well as the ordinary people treat them as Untouchables. Having undergone three thousand years of slavery and discrimination, Dalits find it nearly impossible to get out of this terrible trauma. More than 85% of Dalit Christians continue to live in the same segregated place, in the same “Cheri, Colony or Slum”, even two generations after becoming Christians. A Dalit is not given the luxury of a new environment. Dalits continue to work in the villages for low wages for their masters, enduring tyranny, abuses, beatings and killings. Their wives and daughters face molestation, rape and burning of huts and killing of their children. A Dalit always remains a Dalit in every sense of the word: ethically, lineally, racially, socially, economically, culturally, vocationally, geographically, relationally, contextually, and emotionally.

Keyword: Federation, Movements, Struggle, Discrimination, Superstition.

Introduction

Dalits, a modern term for untouchables in India, are underprivileged people in all social, economic, cultural and political fronts of our society which led to their misery, discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated social stratification of India. The Constitution of India classifies Dalits as Scheduled Castes (SCs). They are the people who cultivate the land, mend shoes, wash clothes, clean toilets, scavenge dead animals or unknown human bodies and do all types of menial works. They share the stigmas of untouchability and are frequently denied the chance to eat, smoke and even sit with the members of upper castes. They often use separate wells and tube wells from those maintained for others. These pitiable conditions of Dalits were seen and addressed by some eminent social and political philosophers like Jyotiba Phule, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and others.

Dalits represent a community of about 170 million in India constituting about 17% of the total Indian population. Thus one out of every six Indians is a Dalit. Yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens in India. They are the people who usually do the works which are usually not done by the people of upper castes either for themselves or for the society. They cultivate the land but they are usually landless, mend the shoes but usually don't wear shoes and clean clothes but usually don't wear clean clothes, clean the toilets but they have no toilets of their own, sweep the buildings and roads but no buildings of their own, they scavenge the dead animals or unknown human bodies but their dead bodies can't be scavenged by the people of higher castes etc. They do all types of menial works which common people usually even avoid to see.

The Rise of Dalit Movements

Though attempts were begun by the Dalit castes from the late 19th century to organise themselves, the various sections of the Dalit liberation movement really began to take off from the 1920s, in the context of the strong social reform and anti-caste movements which were penetrating the middle-caste peasantry and the national movement which was beginning to develop a genuine mass base. The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab (organized 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra mainly based among Mahars which had its organizational beginnings in 1924; the Nama-shudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu; the Adi-Andhra movement in Andhra which had its first conference in 1917; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in UP; and the organising of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.



Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942

The founding of the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942, and its later conversion into the Republican Party, gave Dalits a genuine all-India political organisation though this remained weak except in certain specific localities and did not by any means constitute the entire Dalit movement. The social reform and anti-caste movements played an important nurturing and facilitating though often an ambivalent role in relation to the Dalits. Thus the movements in Maharashtra and Madras to a significant extent came out of, and were influenced by the non-Brahmin movements in those areas, especially their radical sections the Satyashodhak Samaj and Self-Respect movements.

The Need to Organize Dalit Movements

In nearly all these cases, the ambivalence in the relationship and the reason why Dalits in the end found it necessary to organize on their own came from the fact that the caste-Hindu-based movements failed to create a really radical anti-caste unity among Dalits and lower-middle caste Hindus. The Arya Samaj and non-Brahmin movements in particular aspired to create such a unity and did succeed to an extent in establishing a basis for radical action among sections of the middle caste peasants. But this, proved insufficient. Even here, there was an important difference: the northern-based Arya Samaj never really challenged the 'Aryan' notion or 'chaturvarnya' as such; rather, it sought to 'purify' the lower castes, whereas the non-Brahmin movements mounted a thorough-going ideological challenge to the whole notion of caste hierarchy as such and sought to create a mass unity on the basis not only of modern secularism and scientific thinking but also in terms of being once-united original inhabitants of the country.

The Pattern of the Dalit Movements

In Madras, educated Dalits were part of the Justice Party; but a rift grew after the party won power, partly stimulated by disputes in a textile mill strike and partly due to charges that the Justice Party was not giving sufficient representation to them but was monopolizing posts for higher caste non-Brahmins. M C Rajah, the most prominent untouchable leader, withdrew with his followers; though after this many participated in E V Ramasami's Self-Respect movement which represented the more radical thrust of the non-Brahmin movement.

In Punjab, the young educated Chamars who founded the Ad-Dharm movement had first been in the Arya Samaj, attracted by some of its ideals which held open the promise of purification (shuddhi) to the low castes, then became disillusioned by the control of upper castes in the movement and rejected completely the paternalistic implication of shuddhi that untouchables needed to be 'purified'. The pattern of these regional configurations needs to be more thoroughly studied.

But, in contrast to the ambivalence of the Dalits' relations with caste-Hindu-based anti-caste movements, their relationship to the national movement was, even worse, an antagonistic one. The fact was that, with the notable exception of Kerala where the Congress leaders themselves undertook anti-caste campaigns, almost everywhere the Congress leadership was in the hands of upper-caste social conservatives who were often not simply indifferent to Dalit demands but actively resisted them. Thus Dalit spokesmen were inclined to argue that "British rule was preferable to Brahmin rule" and to look for any means special representation, separate electorates, alliance with Muslims that might prevent them from being swamped by caste Hindu nationalists.

It has to be stressed that this alienation from the organised national movement (the Congress) was not just the result of the self-interest of a few leaders but was a widespread opinion wherever Dalits were organised on militant lines, and that the Congress leadership up through the time of Independence did almost nothing to heal the split and build up Dalit confidence and unity. Though Dalits under Ambedkar did take a nationalist position, it was as a result of their own conviction that Independence was necessary. Ideologically, in spite of their very diverse origins, it is remarkable how many themes the Dalit movements shared in common. Central to their thinking was the 'adi' theme, a definition of themselves as the original inhabitants of the country, a claim that their own inherent traditions were those of equality and unity, and a total rejection of caste (chaturvarnya, varnashrama dharma) as the imposition of the conquering Aryans who used this to subjugate and divide the natives. Very often, this went with a rejection of Hinduism as the religion of the invaders and the main support of caste society.



Ambedkar's movement was the most important one that did not stress such an adi identity, yet the theme was still a strong one among Mahars. Ambedkar himself, in initiating the later conversion to Buddhism was in a way doing the same thing — rejecting Hinduism and attempting a return to an 'original' and equalitarian Indian religion. Along with this went a strong secular and rationalist stress on equality, the necessity of modern education, the rejection of traditional superstition and traditional ritual subordination.

The Impact of the Mass Movements

These movements then organised struggles in various ways over the rejection of all the forms of feudal bondage imposed on Dalits. The most spectacular mass campaigns in the 1920s were efforts at the ritual level that is to break down the restrictions barring Dalits from use of common temples and water tanks. The biggest, and very carefully planned, campaigns took place in Maharashtra (the Mahad Tank Satyagraha of 1927 which culminated in the burning of the Manusmriti, the Parvati Temple Satyagraha of 1928, and the Kalaram Temple Satyagraha in Nasik of 1930-35) and in Kerala (the Vaikom temple road satyagraha of 1924-25 and the Guruvayoor Satyagraha of 1930-32). But it seems that, wherever Dalits organized militantly, there was always some direct action or threat of it: after Ad-Dharm rallies "people would swarm into the village bathing tank and use it in defiance of upper caste prohibitions" and, during early Adi-Andhra conferences caste Hindus closed temples completely for fear of entry attempts.

Also at a symbolic level was the adoption of particular forms of dress in defiance of feudal 'consumptionary' rules in which the upper castes tried to prohibit untouchables from wearing fine clothes: the followers of the Ad-Dharm wore red turbans and sashes which, up to then, had been only a high-caste colour; low castes in Tamil Nadu and Kerala claimed the right to cover their breasts which they had not been allowed to do previously, and so forth. In terms of economic relations, the movements and struggles centered around two themes. On the one hand was the growing refusal to perform the traditional caste duties, carrying away dead animals, playing music at funeral ceremonies, performing forced labor for village headmen and government officials, a battle that was fought in countless ways under varying auspices in countless villages and never totally won. Ambedkar's long struggle to abolish the Mahar witan was an expression of this. This was the direct fight against feudal forms of bondage within the village.

Related to it was the struggle for education and employment; for, by and large, Dalits saw their opportunity, the positive alternative to the negative fight against feudal bondage, in escaping from the village to 'modern' industrial and service employment. Thus the movements were highly involved in founding schools, hostels, and other educational associations; and they consistently demanded fellowships, positions in existing educational institutions and reserved government jobs. The final outcome of this was the system of 'concessions' which has become so controversial today. It is important to note that such concessions were necessary, because existing caste discrimination had resulted in a heavily divided working class.

Breaking down this division, fighting the feudal relations that had stamped themselves on the emerging classes of the capitalist system, was necessary to build the unity of the working class and of the Indian people in the fight against colonial rule. But the nationalist leaders and the working class leaders (the communists) rarely saw it this way. As a result, rather than the class itself fighting to build its unity, or the people organized under national leadership taking up consciously the fight against feudal relations, the Dalit movement was isolated and, instead of becoming a vanguard part of the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist movement, fell into the position of asking for concessions from the nationalists as well as from the British. This, then, brings us to the relation of the Dalits to the national and communist movements, and the related question of how the issues of power and land were posed in colonial India. There is no freedom unless we gain some political power. This was the quest of Dalits in the course of time. "We want to become a ruling community", was a saying of Ambedkar, and in fact the drive to achieve power or a share in power was seen by him and by many not simply as the negation of the extreme feudal subjugation of Dalits but as the basis for achieving any other kind of gain. But, because the national movement did not consciously organise to build alternative revolutionary systems of power in which Dalits would find a place, this demand for a share in power became expressed in the demand for special, separate representation within the bourgeois parliamentary forms being institutionalized in India. An additional motivating fact was the



strong feeling among Dalits that they must represent themselves, that caste Hindus could not be trusted to represent them (nor for that matter could the British government), that the nature of caste and class conflict was so great that no caste Hindus could speak for their interests. That is how Dr. Ambedkar and Sri. Rettamalai Srinivasan represented them in the Round table conferences. Here we shall see the recent emancipations and the founding fathers of Dalit movements and two of eminent personalities who stand distinct in the political power struggle of India.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar – A Legend and a Visionary

It will be unjust if we speak of Dalit movements without referring to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He was one of the prominent pioneers of Dalit movements. He was a legend and a visionary. His whole life was dedicated to the upliftment of the marginalized. He not only fought for the rights of the Dalit people but also he gave them new identity. He paved a way for their political participation

Works

From December 1920 he had brought out a Marathi fortnightly, “the Mook Nayak” (leader of the Dumb).ⁱ In January 1919 he had also given evidence before the South Borough Reforms (Franchise) Committee, claiming political rights for the depressed classes of India. In July 1924 he started an organization in Bombay named the “Bahiskrit Hitkani Sabha” for the moral and material progress of the untouchable students. For propagating the same cause and improving the conditions of untouchables he started a Marathi fortnightly, the ‘**Bahiskrit Bharat**’, in April 1927 and a weekly, the “**Janta**” in November 1930. In September 1927 he started the “**Samaj Samta Sang**” for preaching social equality among the untouchables and the caste Hindus. Inter-caste dinner and inter-caste marriage formed important parts of the programme of the organization. As the organ of this body he started another paper, the ‘Samata’ in March 1929.

His Struggle for Independence

In December 1927 he led a Satyagrah to establish the civic rights of the untouchable to draw water from a public tank, “**Chavadar Talen**”, at Mahad district Kolaba. The Hindus claimed the tank as a private property and a prolonged litigation followed. Ambedkar won the case in the Bombay High Court in March 1937. He led another Satyagrah in March 1930 to establish the rights of the untouchables to enter the famous temple of Kalaram at Nasik. The Satyagrah was withdrawn in 1934.

Sri. Rettamalai Srinivasan

Diwan Bahadur R. Srinivasan (1860–1945), also known as Rettamalai Srinivasan, was a Dalit activist, politician and freedom fighter from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He is a Dalit icon and Mahatma Gandhi’s close associate, remembered today as one of the pioneers of the Dalit movement in India.

Works: Srinivasan established and led the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha in 1891 which later became the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. He founded a Tamil newspaper called **Paraiyan** in October 1893 which started selling as a monthly with four pages for the price of four annas. However, Paraiyan experienced great difficulties in its early days. Srinivasan was a participant in the freedom movement and an arrest warrant was issued against him claiming that he was fleeing the nation. In 1896, a case was filed against the newspaper and he was dragged to the court citing a letter to the editor. The editor Srinivasan was fined Rs. 100 for his writings.

Round Table Conference

Rettamalai Srinivasan represented the Dalits in the first two Round Table Conferences in London (1930 and 1931) along with Dalit leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In 1932, Ambedkar, M. C. Rajah and Rettamalai Srinivasan joined the board of the Servants of Untouchables Society established by Mahatma Gandhi. However, shortly afterwards, the three of them withdrew from the Board. In 1939, with Ambedkar's support, he established the Madras Province Scheduled Castes' Federation.

Thol. Thirumavalavan in Tamil Nadu

Thirumavalavan or Thol. Thirumavalavan (born 17 August 1962), is Dalit activist, Member of Parliament in 15th Lok Sabha and the current President of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi a political party in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. He rose to prominence in the 1990s as a Dalit leader, and entered politics in 1999. His political



platform centres on ending the caste-based oppression of the Dalits, which he argues can best be achieved through reviving and reorienting Tamil nationalism. He has also expressed support for Tamil nationalist movements and groups elsewhere, including Sri Lanka.

His Dalit Activism

In 1988, when working for the government's Forensic Department in the southern city of Madurai, he met Malaichamy, the Tamil Nadu state convenor of the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI), an organisation that fought for the rights of Dalits. The next year, following Malaichamy's death, Thirumalavan was elected the leader of the DPI. He designed a new flag for the organisation in 1990. As part of his work, he also began visiting Dalit villages in the Madurai region, and began learning about the problems faced by Dalits. The killing of two Dalits in 1992, he says, made him more militant. Against the background of increasing Dalit assertiveness, he emerged as one of two major Dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu, with a large base of grassroots support, particularly in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. During early 1997, he was suspended from his government job on account of his increased political activity. He resigned from his job formally in August 1999 to contest in the 1999 Indian general elections. He is now a boost and hope to many oppressed people of Tamil Nadu.

Thirumalavan's politics are grounded in a retheorisation of Tamil nationalism, which seeks to turn it into a force for the elimination of the caste system. Oppression of Dalits, he says, is institutionalized in India, including Tamil Nadu. Although the Dravidian parties which dominate the politics of Tamil Nadu are ideologically committed to the eradication of the caste system, Thirumalavan argues that they have in practice drifted away from the original ideals of the Dravidian movement. Their policies, he says, have mainly benefitted the middle castes, and had actually led to an increase in the oppression of Dalits, with the middle castes replacing the Brahmins as the oppressor. Dalits cannot and should not expect much help from the Dravidian parties. The solution, according to Thirumalavan, lies in Tamil nationalism. Caste oppression, he says, can only be ended by building resistance from below, through appealing to Tamil sentiments, as happened in the early days of the Dravidian movement under Periyar E. V. Ramasamy. If a properly Tamil government is formed in Tamil Nadu, he says, caste oppression will immediately disappear.

Sri Mayawati in North India

Sri Mayawati was born on 15th January 1956 in a Jatav (untouchable family) in Delhi. She studied B.A, B.Ed., and LLB. Kanshi Ram, a dynamic leader stepped into her career. She entered politics with the thought that she would be able to do the substantial work for the socio-economic upliftment of the weaker sections of the society. Both Kanshi Ram and Mayawati decided to float the BSP which soon received an appreciable attention from millions of people. The manifesto of the party would always devise ways and means which would develop the socio-economic structure of the economically weaker sections. Mayawati was the first ever Dalit woman to head the government of a State of the Country.

Mayawati, the first Chief Minister to complete 5 years in U.P. On assuming her power in Uttar Pradesh on May 2007, she said that each policy of her government would be based on Sarvajana Hitay, "Sarvajana Sukhay", meaning thereby happiness and welfare of all. Under the leadership of Mayawati, the government has taken the following decisions (from Mar 2007 to May 2008) in the interest of the weaker sections;-

1. Special derive for filling backlog of reservations.
2. Provision of reservation to SC/ST in private sector.
3. Computerisation for transparency in the distribution of SC/ST scholarships.
4. Mahamaya housing scheme.
5. Shri Kanshi Ram Shabri Hharib Awasyojna for providing housing facility to urban poor Construction of community halls for Dalits.

Though the efforts made by our social reformers and the recent emancipations through many political struggles in few states of the nations have a Dalit leader as a Chief Minister and provisions made in law are praiseworthy, but still the forces of status quo and discrimination is going on. It is a shame on us to be divided among ourselves and paving way for the so called powerful to again and again boss over us. It is also shame that in the 21st century



(where India is going to be a world super power), we are facing the practice of untouchability and hatred between high castes and low castes. It needs to mention here that it is due to lack of political will and awareness among Dalits that the laws are not properly followed. The matter does not end here but I want to conclude here with the message of Swami Vivekananda **“Arise awake and rest not till the goal is reached.”** So it is our duty to respect each other equally and try our best to abolish the untouchability and hatred among us. These personalities pave the way for the future generation to come up and fight for their rights and achieve political power.

Conclusion

“All the unclean and polluting tasks were assigned to them so that others may remain pure”. Dalit liberation meant liberation for the kind of religiously imposed and religiously sanctioned degradation. In this context the Church is called upon to identify itself with the poor and the marginalized in the imitation of her Lord, Jesus Christ. He manifested special love and compassion for the poor, marginalized, the distressed and the oppressed, living in total solidarity with them. Therefore we need to empower the poor and the marginalized for their human dignity and well being and thus enable them to realize their destiny as God’s children, made in his image and likeness. We have to work together to help them regain their true humanity and thus bring a complete change in the existing unjust situation. An Overview of Factors Causing the Problems Faced by Dalit .None of the problems faced by Dalits can be taken in isolation. The socio-cultural aspect, economic-political condition and personal community struggle of Dalit themselves have to be taken together to understand their reality.

Endnotes

1. Lourdhuswamy. (Ed). Education for Empowerment of Dalits. New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2004.
2. Massey, James. Roots for Dalit History: Christians Theology and Spirituality, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.
3. Dhananjay, Keer. Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954.
4. Pathil, Kencheria, Trends in India Theology, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005.
5. Raj. M.C. Dalitology - The book of the Dalit, Tumkur: Ambedkar resource centre, Rural Education for Development Society, 2001.p. 10.
6. Basu, Raj Sekhar. Nandanar's Children: The Paraiyans' Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850 – 1956, Culcutta: University of Culcutta, 1956.
7. Hanumanthan. Untouchability: A historical study Upto1500 A.D with special reference to Tamil Nadu (Madurai,1979). Pp.71-73, 111-112.
8. Abraham Ayookuzhiel, “Dalit History and Culture: Its and Dalit Response,” Bangalore Theological forum, no.1 (March, 1989)pp.30-48.
9. J H. Hutton, Caste in India: its nature, function and origins (4th edition; London,1936).
10. G. Omvedt, Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2006), p.65.
11. Mohan, History of Dalit Struggle for Freedom: Dravidian Parties and Dalit Up rise in Tamil Nadu (Dhamma Institute of Social Sciences, 2001), p.74.
12. Antony Raj, Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu, pp.223-224.
13. Mani. B. R. Debrahmanising History, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2005.
14. Juergensmeier, Mark. “Ad Dharm: Religion of the Untouchables”. Times of India, October 12, 1975, p.4.
15. Webster, John C. B. The Pastor to Dalits, Delhi: ISPCK, 1995.