



## **DALIT PANTHERS: AN ANTI-CASTE STRUGGLE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN HISTORY**

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### **Abstract**

*The Dalit Panthers movement as though born in Mumbai aimed to protect Dalits from caste atrocities in rural areas. It has challenged the dominant casteist forces and changed the nature of the anti-caste struggle after the demise of Ambedkar. It has brought a new direction and new vigour to the Dalit movement. The basic nature of the movement is militant in its approach. Dalit Panthers organization, inspired by Black Panthers of America, was formed on 29 May 1972 and it was disbanded in just five years after its inception but created a stir in the ideological world inimical to Dalit interests. It was a short-lived, highly dynamic Dalit militant organization. It was an apolitical, socio-cultural organization. It was an anti-caste struggle to provide justice to Dalits. During its short life, the Dalit Panthers movement made a lasting impact on the contemporary history of the anti-caste struggle and earned the greatest admiration from its followers as well as critiques.*

**Key Words:** *Ambedkar, Dalit history, Dalit Panthers, Dhasal, Dhale, Pawar.*

### **Birth of Dalit Panthers Organization**

Dalit Panther movement was the most impactful and highly influential anti-caste struggle and militant movement after Ambedkar in contemporary Indian history. The failure of the Republic Party of India formed by Ambedkarite Dalits to represent voice against rising atrocities on Dalits particularly in villages had created a leadership vacuum. The idea of Dalit Panthers was originally floated by Namdeo Dhasal and Jairam Vittal Pawar. In a casual meeting between Dhasal and Pawar while walking on the streets of Bombay, from Kamthipura to Charni road both decided to form an organization with militant nature to prevent atrocities on Dalits and to fight for their rights. Dhasal had suggested 'Panther' and J.V. Pawar had suggested 'Dalit' and thus the word 'Dalit Panther' was coined on 29th May 1972 and on the same day Dhasal went to the office of the socialist leader George Fernandez located in Charni road area to prepare typed press note and the press release was appeared in many Marathi newspapers- *Nava Kaal, Nav Shakti, Sandhyakaal and Maratha*. Thus, a new organization of Dalits called Dalit Panthers, that would be adding new pages to Dalit history and a new motto to the Dalit movement was taken birth in the George Fernandez office and had grown on Mumbai streets. George Fernandez, a famous socialist leader who sympathized with Dalit Panthers allowed them to use his office for their intellectual activities.<sup>1</sup> His office became virtually an unofficial office of Dalit Panthers in the initial days. The idea called Dalit Panthers was created and translated into an organization in a day itself by mere two ordinary Dalit activists but with great vision. Therefore, with certainty, it could be said that Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar - the two Dalit writers and poets were not only the founders of the Dalit Panthers organization but a great movement to be known in history with Dalit pride and self-respect.

### **From Organization to Movement**

Why does an organization need to be transformed into a movement through struggles? An organization is a theory on paper and a movement is practical in the laboratory called society where people are materials to experiment. Social animosity between Dalits and non-Dalits has thousands of years of history. At every given historical time Dalits rise to the need of the time to organize themselves into a



movement to fight against atrocities. Why there are atrocities against Dalits? Whenever Dalits assert their rights there was violent retaliation in the form of physical attacks by the non-Dalits. The Dalits in rural areas are the most exploited, and whenever they asserted their civil rights they were subjected to inhuman violent atrocities and even social ostracism. The fundamental nature of the Dalit movement is a non-violent assertion. Dalits always believed that violence is not the weapon to be used to overcome ideological differences with non-Dalits. However, when all doors are closed even a cat becomes a tiger or panther to fight for its survival.

Ambedkar used to describe Indian village as garbage dump of casteism. Dalit Panthers raised voice for Dalit rural masses as well as the urban middle class. The slogan of Dalit Panthers was 'Power to Dalits.' Dalit assertion for civil rights is indeed more than merely acquiring material benefits, it is also for gaining self-respect. In a casteist system, the only way Dalits could be free from atrocities is to become servants of non-Dalits. Self-respected Dalit is attacked by using different methods. If Dalits want to live with dignity, there is no other way except to destroy the caste system. How to destroy the caste system? The anti-caste struggle can destroy the caste system and only without Dalits can live with self-respect and dignity.

Dalit Panthers adopted militant method to build the anti-caste struggle. It was a civil rights movement and meant to combat atrocities against Dalits such as raping women, parading women naked, ostracizing families, forcing them to eat human excreta and drink urine, polluting drinking water wells by dumping human excreta, human sacrifices, lynching, murders, burning alive, burning houses and agricultural crop, grabbing land, denying the place for burying or cremating the dead. The Dalit life in a village is like standing on dynamite, sitting on the burning volcano and living with the perennial enemy. The reason for this kind of heinous assaults on Dalits is that casteists don't want to treat them as their fellow humans. Physical intimidation is the means adopted by non-Dalits to prevent Dalits from using a public water source, wearing good clothes, shoes or slippers. Under the prevalence of such atrocious social conditions, the Dalit Panthers was born as an organization and transformed into a militant movement of Dalit youth. It was a movement of young Dalit writers and poets. The Siddharth Nagar rally of Dalit Panthers on 9 July 1972 was the turning point in its history. Raja Dhale, the would-be strategist of Dalit Panthers joined Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar in this rally and making Dalit Panthers intellectually more formidable organization. Thus the trio virtually built Dalit Panthers in the initial days.

When it comes to transforming the Dalit Panthers organization into a militant movement of Dalits, another Dalit writer and activist Raja Dhale's contribution was immense. J. V. Pawar the co-founder of Dalit Panthers organization testifies, "...while assigning the paternity of the Dalit Panther organization to Namdeo Dhasal and myself, I consider the nurturing of the movement by Raja Dhale as important."<sup>2</sup> Namdeo Dhasal was a fierce orator and Raja Dhale was a good orator with logical arguments. J.V. Pawar was a sensible person with great organizing skills. It was an organization led by the Marathi Dalit poets who earned credibility and reputation by their sheer sacrifices of life comforts, struggles and hardships to lead such a high magnitude anti-caste civil rights movement in highly challenging times of Indian history particularly when India was under emergency from June 1975 to 21 March 1977 and there were restrictions on press freedom and organizations. Who were the Marathi poets who led the movement for Dalit's self-respect and created a new history by adding new pages to the history of contemporary India? Prominent among them were Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Ramdas Athawale, Arun Kamble and others.



History testifies the fact that given the opportunities, Dalits always have shown their intellectual prowess and never fall into the trap of nursing a grudge against fellow non-Dalit Indians even though they have been subjected to social discrimination for generations. This could be seen in the way Ambedkar led the Dalit movement throughout his life and the same could be seen in the nature of the Dalit Panthers movement. Even though it was a militant movement, Dalit Panthers never targeted all non-Dalits just because they were non-Dalits. The Dalit movement was always an ideological movement even in the case of a militant movement like the Dalit Panthers.

### **Dalit Freedom**

On the eve of the silver jubilee of Independence Day that was on the night of 14 August 1972, Dalit Panthers led the freedom march to highlight the importance of socio-economic freedom for the Dalit community and freedom from caste-atrocities from *Azad Maidan* to State Assembly in Mumbai. It was the first protest march of Dalit Panthers. While the midnight special Assembly session was going on to commemorate the silver jubilee of Independence Day, outside the state assembly building the Dalit Panthers, held mock legislature, making speeches by youth criticizing casteist forces and demanded the government to protect the civil rights of Dalits. A resolution was passed to condemn atrocities against Dalits.

Pune based Marathi weekly, *Saadhanaa* in its special issue, brought on the occasion of the 25th Independence Day with the theme “Freedom of Dalits”, published Raja Dhale’s fearless straight forward article which indeed popularized Dalit Panthers all over Maharashtra.

### **Ambedkar Raj**

The Republican Party of India (RPI) visualized by Ambedkar is the first Dalit political party at the national level in independent India. Its leadership instead of developing an independent Dalit political movement, interested in short term political gains. As a result, though Ambedkar visualized one RPI his followers created their factions of RPI. Dalit Panthers aim was to bring ‘*Ambedkar Raj*’ the rule of Ambedkar, in other words, the rule of the Constitution of India written by Ambedkar. They adopted unique methods to achieve this goal. First, they wanted to expose Dalit political leadership particularly the leaders of RPI who were hobnobbing with Congress and Shiv Sena for selfish gains at the cost of Dalit interest. Among them Rupavate and R.S. Gavai were notorious. Rupavate ditched the Republican Party of India to join Congress and R.S. Gavai started his faction of RPI to channelize Dalit votes in favour of Congress.

Dalit Panthers staged a demonstration on 18 September 1972 at the felicitation venue of Rupavate who became state minister of social welfare in the Congress-led Maharashtra government. It was the first arrest of Dalit Panthers leadership including Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar. The popularity of Dalit Panthers among the Dalit youth challenged the political existence of different factions of RPI. Hence, the senior leaders of RPI tried to tarnish the image of Dalit Panthers and they even went to the extent of denouncing the Dalit identity given by Ambedkar and pitted it against the Republican identity which is also given by Ambedkar. Some misdirected Buddhist Dalits even tried to construct a narrative against the Dalit identity without knowing the fact that Dalit identity is given by Ambedkar. A Republican leader V.S. Asware went to the extent of urging that Republicans shouldn’t entertain the Dalit Panther and his organization Republican *Kranti Dal* “would do everything it could to wipe it out.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Asware’s Republican *Kranti Dal* soon wiped out.



In this background, Jagjivan Ram, a Dalit leader of Congress at the national level visited Mumbai on 24 September 1972. Dalit Panthers staged a demonstration against Jagjivan Ram for not raising his voice against atrocities on Dalits and felt that he had no right to address backward class employees. The protest had resulted in the arrest of 64 Dalit Panthers. The mass arrest of Dalit Panthers consolidated their support base across the state of Maharashtra particularly in Thane and Pune districts and inspired the Dalit youth, especially in the villages.

Another method Dalit Panthers adopted to bring *Ambedkar Raj* was to free Dalits from caste atrocities. Hence, Dalit Panthers visualized *Dalitstan* – a separate settlement for Dalits within India away from others, so that they live with dignity, self-respect, self-reliance and become free from the fear of caste atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

By now Dalit Panthers movement overshadowed all the factions of the Republican Party of India. Dalit Panthers gained strength in northern Maharashtra and Nagpur regions. One thing for sure that Dalit Panthers erased the stereotypes like Dalits are meek and gullible and instilled confidence in Dalit youth that Dalits could also retaliate against casteists. J.V. Pawar explains the impact of Dalit Panthers on society, “Even established goons would tremble whenever they heard the words ‘Dalit Panthers’. It was a miracle of sorts. The local police, who were hand in glove with criminals when it came to atrocities against Dalits, had to mend their ways given the rise of the Dalit Panther. We thus won the goodwill of the common man who had nothing to do with the organization. The news reached the villages, where its humble residents saw a ray of hope in us.”<sup>5</sup>

Dalit Panthers had to fight with workers of Shiv Sena and also with different factions of RPI. Dalit Panthers and Shiv Sena activists were perpetually at war with each other. Dalit Panthers always opposed the Republican-Congress alliance and also the Republican-Shiv Sena alliance. They opposed Shiv Sena and RPI alliance for Municipal polls in 1973.

### **First mega protest march**

Dalit Panthers organized their first mega protest march on 14 August 1973 along with 40,000 men and women and submitted a memorandum to the government and made Congress Chief-Minister of Maharashtra Vasant Rao Naik to discuss with them on Dalit issues for about two hours. In the rally, very powerful slogans were raised expressing the ideology of Dalit Panthers. Some of the slogans are – *Dalitanchi Satta, Janatechi Satta* (Power to Dalits is the power to the people), *Bol Dalita, Halla Bol* (Say O’ Dalit, Say Attack), *Golila Dalit, Polila Bhat* (Dalit is being shot, Brahmin is being fed), *Dalit Gulam, Desh Gulam; Dalit Swatantrata, Desh Swatantrata* (If the Dalit is a slave, the country is a slave; If the Dalit is free, the country is free).<sup>6</sup>

### **Bhagawat Jadhav, the first martyr**

On 5 January 1974, Dalit Panthers organized a public meeting at Ambedkar maidan, Worli, aimed to give a call for boycotting by-election for the Mumbai South –Central constituency, which included the Worli locality where Dalit migrant mill workers were in majority and whose votes were crucial for Congress to win with the support of RPI. Politically motivated communal riots were allegedly orchestrated by vested interests with motivate to desist Dalit Panthers campaigning against Congress. The public meeting became a place of riots and spread to nearby localities and many Dalits got injured. Dalit Panthers held a rally on 10 January 1974 to condemn the riots perpetrated by communal and casteist elements and a Dalit Panther Bhagwat Jadhav became the first martyr for the cause of justice to Dalits. Ramesh Deorukkhar was another martyr who gave life for Dalit rights. Both of them were killed



by casteist forces. RPI leaders particular R.S. Gavai stood with the Congress government and failed to stop riots against Dalits. Dalits boycott of by-election helped Communists to win and Congress had lost it badly. The result is the riots continued for three months in Dalit localities. Bhiyasaheb Ambedkar (Ambedkar's son) supported Dalit Panthers and gave a warning to the government to stop the riots otherwise Dalits take law into their own hands. His support to Dalit Panthers continued till the end of his last breath.

### **Expansion of Dalit Panthers**

Dalit Panthers by 1974 had become not only a formidable pan Indian Dalit organization and also an international organization. It expanded all over India – Gujarat, Delhi, Chennai, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, and also in London by name the Dalit Panther of India. To spread Ambedkar thought in the state of Gandhi, Dalit Panther's main leadership visited Gujarat. They participated in the Ambedkar celebration on 14 April 1974 in Ahmedabad, where Pawar spoke "... people were interested in combating corruption, which was just a few decades old, but they were not uttering a word against 3,500 years old casteism."<sup>7</sup> Rameshchandra Parmar led the Dalit Panthers movement in Gujarat.

### **Communists and Division of Dalit Panthers**

The history of Dalit Panthers testifies the fact that Communists were instrumental to bring division in the Dalit Panthers leadership. *Economic and Political weekly* published the reportage of the first protest march drawing the attention of left minded scholars towards Dalit Panthers. As a result, Dalit Panthers prepared a manifesto, which is a mission statement of Dalit Panthers making its motto emphasized on economic empowerment of Dalits. Thus, from the socio-cultural organization, Dalit Panthers had been transformed into economic issues pertaining to non-Dalits also.

Writers and leaders of Dalit Panthers like Namdeo Dhasal and Arjun Dangle were fallen into the trap of Communists and became left-oriented Dalit writers going away from the stated ideology of Dalit Panthers. It is said that Communists are a green snake in the green grass and Dalit Panthers allowed Communists to become their friends only to find themselves at the receiving end of police brutality and also to get themselves divided ideologically. However, Dalit Panthers like Raja Dhale, Pawar, Ramdas Athawale and others stood with Ambedkar's ideology and challenged the communists who tried to use Dalits same as Congress and Shiv Sena for their selfish political gains.

Dhasal along with Arjun Dangle started his own faction of Dalit Panthers in Pune to combine Ambedkar with Marx. Raja Dhale along with Pawar emerged as the main Dalit Panthers and held the first Dalit Panther Convention in Nagpur on 23-24 October 1974. The Nagpur convention was participated by Dalit Panthers who came from different parts of India- Gujarat, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. Namdeo Dhasal was removed from Dalit Panthers because of his drifting away from Ambedkar towards Marx. Unlike Republican leadership who were divided for selfish political interests, the division in Dalit Panthers was ideological.

On 6th December 1974 the death anniversary of Ambedkar popularly known as *maha parinirvan divas*, Dalit Panthers organized a public rally at *Chaityaboomi* (burial of Ambedkar) at Dadar. Communists made Dhasal observe *dharna* (sit-in-strike) along with members of his faction of Dalit Panthers in Mumbai to fight against the exploitation of poor people by the rich on the same day. However, two programmes under the Dalit Panthers banner on the same day in the same city demoralized ordinary Dalit workers. Speaking on the occasion Dhale said that while the Dalit Panther was on the right path,



the communists who masqueraded as revolutionaries had become perverts and were conspiring to break up the Dalit Panther. Taking a jibe at the communists, he said that those who had undertaken the job of creating revolutionaries had to beg for justice by staging a *dharna* instead of giving a befitting reply to the culprits.<sup>8</sup> Influence of Namdeo Dhasal was mostly restricted to Pune. And also he couldn't speak English because he was less educated. Raja Dhale and Pawar were graduates and could speak in English. Hence, Dalit Panthers led by Raja Dhale and Pawar emerged as the main organization of Dalit Panthers and made its presence all over India.

### **Dalit Manifesto**

According to Dalit Panthers Manifesto, Dalit means 'Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Nav-bouddha (neo-Buddhists), the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.' The manifesto was made by Namdeo Dhasal under the total influence of Communists. Hence, it declared communists as its friends which was opposed by Raja Dhale and others.<sup>9</sup>

### **Opposition to 'Harijan' identity**

Gandhi used to call Dalits by the name Harijan. Ambedkar opposed calling Dalits by name 'Harijan'. Bhaurao Krishnarao alias Dadasaheb Gaikwad an ardent follower of Ambedkar questioned Gandhians, 'if we are children of Hari (a Hindu God), then are you children of the devil?'. Maharashtra government led by Congress in memory of Ambedkar released fortnightly titling it 'Harijan fortnight' which was opposed by Dalit Panthers and organized a protest march against the usage of *Harijan* name for Dalits all over India on 29 April 1975. This has resulted in banning the usage of the term *Harijan* to identify Dalits.

### **Dalit Literature**

One of the outcomes of the Dalit Panther movement was the growth of Dalit literature. Without reading, no person or community can be powerful. Dalit Panthers was the movement started by Marathi poets. Hence, it caused the growth of Marathi Dalit literature. Wherever, the movement spread, it caused the growth of Dalit literature in those regions. For example, the spread of the Dalit Panther movement in Gujarat had resulted in Gujarati Dalit literature. Jeev Patel a revolutionary Gujarati poet was a product of the Dalit Panthers movement in Gujarat. More and more authors across India came under the direct and indirect influence of the Dalit Panthers movement and became part of the Dalit knowledge echo system. They started writing poetry, short stories, novels and autobiographies. Thus, Dalit Panthers were successful in creating a parallel narrative in the realm of Indian literature. It is because of the literary contribution of Dalit Panthers, Dalit literature carved its unique space in the Indian literary world.

### **Disbanding of Dalit Panthers**

There is no movement in history without division. All successful movements see division in their ranks someday. How long you lived is not important but how much you contributed to society is important. The same way how long a movement survived is not important but how much impact it made on the lives of people for their empowerment? And how much it contributed to change the direction of history for the betterment of society? This matters the most. More than personality clashes, Dalit Panther was divided into two main groups – Dhale and Dhasal was because of ideological schism.

In due course of time, many claimed to be Dalit Panthers involved in working for the political parties to get money. Hence, the name Dalit Panther was used in different places for selfish gains by unknown people. The brand image of Dalit Panther was under attack due to that kind of anti-Ambedkarite



activities. Raja Dhale and Pawar declared disbanding of Dalit Panthers organization and movement all over India at a press conference in Mumbai on 7 March 1977. Thus the great movement of Dalits came to an end, though Arun Kamble and Ramdas Athawale found the *Bharatiya Dalit Panther*<sup>10</sup> and some others continued to lead smaller factions of Dalit Panthers without much consequences on the affairs of Dalit society.

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