



## DALIT MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA

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### Abstract

Dalit movement had begun in Karnataka in 1920s as an offshoot of non-Brahmin movement in princely state of Mysore. Before independence, Tipu Sultan had played a crucial role in the development of Mysore state. Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, then Maharaja of Mysore had played a historical role in ensuring educational, social and economic justice to Dalits. Gopal Swamy Iyer played a prominent role in the creation of first generation of educated and employed Dalits as a true patron of social justice. Shyam Sunder launched Dalit struggle in Hyderabad Karnataka region through constructive ideas and approaches in 1960s. Basavalingappa played a prominent role in the implementation of land reforms under the leadership of Devraj Urs. The real Dalit movement in Karnataka started with the Bhusa Uproar of B.Basavaligappa. The Karnataka Dalit Sangharsha Samiti played a historical role in the democratic struggle for the empowerment of Dalits. The leadership bankruptcy has impeded Dalit movement but millions of activists are committed to this movement. Hence, intellectuals and progressive activists have to take the caravan of Dalit movement by maintaining distance from both class enemy and caste enemy.

### Preamble

Karnataka is the eighth largest state in Indian Republic in terms of geographical area and population. It was formerly known as the princely State of Mysore. It was renamed as Karnataka state on November 1, 1973 by late D.Devaraja Urs, the then Chief Minister of Karnataka. The state is also predominantly rural and agrarian in character. About 65% of the population lives in rural Karnataka according to Census Report (2011). Karnataka is also well known in the country as the cradle of the social transformation movement which has gained the attention of the nation. The Karnataka's Caste Census (2017) contains the latest demographics of various caste and communities in the state. The report reveals that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes form the single biggest caste group in the state. The Dalits in Karnataka are pampered by the major political parties keeping in mind the vote bank politics. Concerted efforts are not made by the various governments in the post-independence era to achieve the goal of the empowerment of Dalits in the state. The growth and development of Dalit movement in Karnataka is primarily examined in this article on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

### Dalits in India

The problems and prospects of Dalits have been examined by the scholars to a limited extent in India. The empowerment of Dalits in the country has attracted the attention of scholars in social science academia. The social movements have facilitated active social mobilization and action for social justice, economic equity, political transformation and empowerment of the weaker sections of the society. Buddha had laid a strong foundation for social movement in India by organizing the women and weaker sections under the banner of humanism. Basava had established democracy as a way of life in Karnataka in 12<sup>th</sup> century. Kabir, Phuley, Periyar, Narayana Guru, Ambedkar, Lohia and other statesmen sustained the social movement across the country for better social and economic orders. These social movements were carried out by various social reformers and statesmen to reverse the processes of governance and development in the country. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country witnessed series of significant social movements.

### Social Movement in Karnataka

Karnataka state has a notable history of social movement led by Basava who ignited the light of welfare state as an alternative to the caste ridden society and caste oriented fascism led by King Bijjala. The Sharanas were organized by Basava to transform the social, economic, political and cultural orders. Scholars and saints like Allamaprabhu, Siddarama, Chennabasavanna, Akkamahadevi, Madar Chennayya, Madival Machideva, Ambigara Chowdayya and others sustained the social movement launched by Basava. The Vachana movement was the foundation stone for the social justice and economic equity based movements in Karnataka.

### Backward Class Movement in Karnataka

The backward class movement in Karnataka was an important part of the non-Brahmin movement in Mysore state. The backward classes pleaded for judicious representation in education, employment, politics and other sectors in 1870s. There was a conflict of interest between Brahmins of Madras and backwards of Mysore during 1880-1910. Many social organizations such as Veerashaiwa mahasbha, vakkaliga association and Kurubara sanga were established during this period



to fight for the rights of the backward sections of society. Subsequently, Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the King of Mysore appointed a committee under the Chairmanship of Sir Lessely Miller in the year 1918. This committee was submitted its report on July 1919. Government of Mysore accepted the recommendations of the Miller committee and issued an order in the year 1921 and provided the reservation benefit to non-Brahmin communities.

The Government of Karnataka appointed backward class commissions and provided reservation to the socially and economically backward sections of society. The Lingayats and Vakkaligas were also given the benefit of reservation in education and employment sectors. D.Devaraj Urs appointed Havanur Commission in 1972 and the commission classified the backward classes into three categories as Backward communities, Backward casts and Backward sections. Some most disadvantaged communities were also classified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes during this regime.

### **Early Dalit Movement**

Dalit movement had begun in Karnataka in 1920s as an offshoot of non-Brahmin movement in princely state of Mysore. Murugesh Pillai established the Adi Dravid Abhivradhi Sangha and Chikkahanumantayya and Chennigayya established the Adi Jambava Sangha in 1920s. R. Gopalswamy Ayyer and Govindacharayya founded the Central Pancham Boarding school for dalits at Bangalore in 1920s. They were the true patrons of Dalit education and laid the foundation for the welfare and progress of Dalits before independence. R. Gopalswamy Ayyer supported the activities of Adi Karnataka Sanga and contributed notably for the educational and social progress of Dalits. He laid a strong foundation for the transformation of the lives of Dalits in Karnataka.

The linguistic difference as the cultural marker has kept the Dalits across the states apart in many respects. There are sub-castes within the Dalit category known for distinctive cultural differences also adversely affected Dalit fraternity and unity in the state. The Adi-Karnataka (Right Hand) and the Adi-Dravida (Left Hand) factions had grown against the spirit of Dalit solidarity. The regional variations have also created hurdles to the consolidation of Dalit force in Karnataka. Mysore League was a joint organization of the Praja Paksha and Congressmen which opposed the practice of untouchability and supported the right of Dalits to use all temples, roads, public places and tanks during 1930s.

### **Dalits in Princely Mysore State**

Before independence, Tipu Sultan had played a crucial role in the development of Mysore state. He had distributed the land to the landless Dalits and implemented the land reforms much earlier in the country. The Wodeyars ruled the Mysore province and continued the legacy of social justice in this region. Chamaraj Wodeyar was influenced by Swami Vivekananda and opened separate schools for the untouchables in Hosur, Narasapur, Malavalli, Malur and other places in 1894. These schools were named 'Panchama Schools', and helped the educational development of the Antyajas.

Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, then Maharaja of Mysore had played a historical role in ensuring educational, social and economic justice to Dalits. He was supported by Balasubramanyam Iyer, Maridandaiah and others in his social service activities. Yuvaraja Narasimha Raja Wodeyar had great concern for the welfare of Dalits and played a notable role in the establishment of the Depressed Class Mission in 1917. Gopal Swamy Iyer played a prominent role in the creation of first generation of educated and employed Dalits as a true patron of social justice.

In 1930s, Murugesh Pillai was a prominent spokesman of Dalits. He prevailed upon the administrators to provide funds and facilities for the development of the untouchables. The Wodeyars in the Mysore Province were highly concerned about the untouchables and implemented educational schemes. The Government of India Act, 1935 was a great milestone in the field of public administration in the country. It had many provisions for the development of Dalits including reservation of seats in the state and central legislatures. The Dalits actively followed Ambedkar since he played an important role as the emancipator of Dalits. Ambedkar also visited the Mysore state and persuaded Dalits to fight for their rights. The Adi-Karnataka Abhivridhi Sangham and the Adi Jambava Abhivridhi Sangam of Bangalore had organized certain activities for the development of the untouchables.

### **Shyam Sundar and his Bhimsena**

Shyam Sunder was a contemporary of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. He launched Dalit struggle in Hyderabad Karnataka region through constructive ideas and approaches in 1960s. He had some differences of opinion with Ambedkar but started a militant form of organization under the banner of 'Bhim Sena' at Gulbarga. He demanded surrender of twenty five percent of villages in every taluk, a separate electorate, a separate scheduled caste university in each state and a strong political organization for untouchables before independence. He also demanded a separate state for the untouchables called 'Dalitastan'.

He strongly advocated for a greater alliance between the Dalits, the Muslims and the backward classes. He was also a prominent intellectual and organizer. He heralded active Dalit movement in Mysore state and laid a strong foundation for the



organized Dalit struggle for social justice in the state. The emergence of Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, in 1972, attracted the masses of Karnataka. Shyam Sunder was the first to start a vehement struggle in Karnataka for awakening the Dalits. He had not only thoroughly analyzed the works of Ambedkar but also had high reverence for his life, mission and achievements (Shetty, 1978:10).

### **Basavalingappa and Boosa Issue**

Basavalingappa, a Dalit leader was staunch Ambedkarite in 1970s. He had worked as a prominent minister and managed important portfolios such as municipal administration, home, and revenue. He never compromised with the ideology and social commitment. He followed the footprints of Ambedkar and fought against certain misbeliefs, superstitions and customs which were responsible for the backwardness of Dalits. He played a prominent role in the implementation of land reforms under the leadership of Devraj Urs. B.Basavalingappa abolished the carrying of night soil on the heads by the Paura Karmikas in the state. He termed the Kannada literature as 'Busa' and earned the wrath of the dominant powers in the state. This issue had triggered off a bitter controversy in the whole state. He was dropped from the ministry for his progressive policy and measures. A conclave of Dalit writers, poets and artisans was held at Bhadravathi in 1973 to deal with this situation.

The educated employees and students started an organization in 1974 called Karnataka Dalit Sangarsh Samiti under the leadership of B.Krishnappa. It had organized protest marches and arranged conventions of Dalit students and Dalit writers across the state. Many social problems and land disputes were taken on top priority. The activists had agitated against injustices and atrocities meted out to Dalits and other marginalized sections of society (Mane, 1994:03).

Basavalingappa had called upon Dalits to fight against dominant castes which had oppressed them socially, economically and politically. He attracted educated and employed Dalits and advocated for conversion to Buddhism to overcome the problem of untouchability. Dalits were angered by the removal of Basavalingappa from the ministry and started 'Dalit Sangharsha Samiti' for education, organization and emancipation of Dalits in 1975. Dalit movement had begun through this forum which was supported by the intellectuals, officials and social organizers.

The landed gentry had its own reasons to oppose Basavalingappa's ideas. Dalits, as tillers, were trying to own land with the help of the Land Reforms Act. The vested interests including the politicians, the press and the intellectuals joined hands against Basavalingappa in the guise of protecting Kannada language, literature and culture. The real Dalit movement in Karnataka started with the Bhusa Uproar of B.Basavalingappa. In the process, the rise of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti proved to be a non-parallel event in the history of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka (Yadav, 1998:13).

The Dalit Movement in Karnataka got a new dimension when the government under the leadership of D. Devaraj Urs, came into power in Karnataka. The government, which was in power during the period of 1972-80 organized the Dalits, other backward castes and minorities against the power game played by the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga castes. Under the leadership of D. Devaraj Urs many reformist and development programmers were launched for the empowerment of Dalits (Naik, 2000:06).

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. Further, this has also given rise to a Dalit literary trends that exposed the caste-nuances in Kannada writings. Theoretically this can be situated in the recent trends in cultural anthropology that gave a radical shift to Dalit autobiographies (Davidappa and Shivanna, 2012:01).

### **Dalit Sangharsha Samiti and Dalit Movement**

A conference of the Dalit writers, artists and activists was organized at Bhadravathi in 1976 to discuss the future Dalit movement in Karnataka. The Karnataka Dalit Sangharsha Samiti came into existence in 1978 in Bhadravathi under the leadership of B. Krishnappa. The Dalit Sangharsha Samiti adopted a separate constitution in 1984 at Dharwad. The founders of DSS include - B. Krishnappa, O. Sreedharan, Devanoor Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, Devayya Harave, Chandra Prasad Tyagi, M.D. Gangaiah, N. Giriappa, Kolar Venkatesh, C.M. Muniyappa, K. Ramaiah, Muni Yellappa, Mangalore Vijay, M.Venkata Swamy, N. Muniswamy, N. Shivanna, L. Hanumanthaiah, Chandraprakash Tyagi, H. Govindaiah, Indudara Honnapura, V. Narayanaswamy and a host of others. B.Krishnappa, Devanoor Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah were the trio of this organization which fought for the fundamental rights of Dalits in Karnataka.

Within half a decade of its existence, the DSS was able to muster sufficient strength to fight any atrocity against the Dalits at all levels of the state - the village, the taluk and the district. The branches of DSS at all these levels organized their own determined, devoted and morally committed cadre. It was a rare combination of writers, scholars, poets, dramatists and singers that came forward to give the Dalits the voice, vigour and strength (Murthy, 2001:04). The leaders and workers



contributed in their own unique way to the growth and development of Dalit movement in Karnataka state. A new generation of Dalit thinkers, writers and organizers also emerged in the state and strengthened the ideological and practical foundations of Dalit movement. The Dalit movement had brought about a new identity to Dalits and created powerful pressure groups at various levels. There were several outfits for Dalit women, students, youth, employees and other sections. These branches contributed their efforts for the strong and stable struggles for justice and equality. The DSS was closely associated with the Janata Party Government headed by Ramakrishna Hegde in 1983. Devanoor Mahadeva was the Convener of DSS who developed close affinity with the new government and nourished political ambitions. Several Dalit intellectuals and activists had opposed political orientation of DSS and expressed their strong opinion about retaining DSS as a 'pressure group' rather than 'rubber stamp' of the ruling party (Hadimani, 2011:02). Ideological differences and power politics had adversely affected Dalit movement in the decade of 1980s. The leaders practically misled the cadre and took the movement for granted (Natarikar, 2015:08).

In 1985, DSS leaders had openly declared support to Janata Party led by Ramakrishna Hegde. They had even dreamt of achieving progress through political compromise. This ugly development had caused several splits in the DSS based on the whims and fancies of the leaders. The objective of Dalit movement was obviously to liberate Dalits from untouchability and other social evils. Within a short span of time, this organization has achieved great success in regaining the civic personality and all the civic rights for the Dalits in Karnataka (Yatanoor, 2010:14). The anti apartheid revolutionary movement launched by Nelson Mandela in South Africa influenced the rebel writers and organizers of Dalit movement in Karnataka state. Mandela humanized both the exploiter and the exploited. He is the icon for millions of exploited class as his life represents their desire for freedom. He taught self-respect and not aggression. He is a book of lesson for the world (Shivakumar, 2013:11).

### **Major Dalit Struggles**

Dalits had organized series of struggles such as Hangarhalli struggle (abolition of bonded labor), Tagadur struggle (granting of land to the landless), Kambarapalli struggle (against massacre of Dalits), Badanavalu struggle (against massacre of Dalits), Tsundur struggle (demand for social justice), Taladimmana Halli struggle (granting of lands), Kuligodu struggle (granting of lands), Bhadravati struggle (granting of lands), Kunigal struggle (against massacre of Dalits), Salagarahalli (against money lenders), Chennena Halli (granting of lands), Jadana Halli (atrocities against Dalit women), Nayakana Halli (atrocities against Dalit youth), Chandagalu village (granting of lands), Bidrikaval (granting of lands), Jannagatti village (atrocities against Dalits), Heggadadevanakote (granting of lands), Nagasandra (granting of lands), Chandragutti (against superstition), Bendigeri (atrocities against Dalits), Malavoor (granting of lands).

The DSS retained its mutual links with other movements as well. But it did this with a clear perspective of its allies and enemies (Rudraswamy, 1991:09). It regarded the farmers, peasants, landless laborers, factory workers and the left parties as its allies, whereas, capitalistic, feudalistic and communal forces were treated as enemies. The main organizers of DSS had acted as middlemen between the politicians and Dalits on the one hand and between the police and Dalits on the other hand (Nair, 1993:07). 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 (Nagaraj, 1993:05). The movement ushered in a new vision of civil rights across the country. 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 (Yadav, 1998:13).

### **Dalit Movement at Cross Roads**

The ruling class is always bent upon smashing progressive movements by attracting their leaders towards power politics. Ambedkar never indulged in power politics but pursued emancipation oriented politics all through his life. He had called upon Dalit intellectuals, activists and organizers to work for the attainment of the goal of social and economic democracy in the country. The leaders of DSS betrayed Ambedkar and Dalit community by actively participating in power politics. The educated and employed Dalits did not strengthen the Dalit movement since they were fully preoccupied with their own selfish pursuit and family oriented activities. Dalit leaders, officers, intellectuals and others had formed a class of their own. They practically constituted neo-Brahmin group and remained as the major hurdle in the progress of a great majority of disadvantaged Dalits in Karnataka and elsewhere. The Coordination Committee, Praja Vimochana Chaluvalli, Samata Sainkika Dala, Karnataka Dalita Sangarsha Samithi (Active Committee), Karnataka Dalita Sangarsha Samithi (Coordination committee), Karnataka Dalita Sangarsha Samithi (Ambedkar Vada), Karnataka Janandolan Sangha, Karnataka Dalita Kriya Vedithe, Karnataka Samata Sainka Dala, Karnataka Dalit Federation Committee, Karnataka Dalit Kriya Samiti, Karnataka Dalit Jagruthi Samithi, Ambedkar Jagrutha Maha Samithi, Karnataka State SC/ST Federation, Karnataka Madiga Dandora and other Dalit splinter groups had come into existence in 1980s and 1990s. D.M.Thimmarayappa, M.Venkataswamy, Sreedhara Kaliveera, D.G.Sagar, Lakshmi Narayana Nagavara, Mavalli Shankar, Keregodu Guruprasad and others had





become the leaders of the splinter groups. The Bahujan Samaj Party, Congress Party, Janata Dal, Bharatiya Janata Party, Sarvodaya Karnataka Party and other political parties also attracted a good number of Dalit leaders and activists.

These negative developments had made the Dalits the targets of new and varied atrocities and earned them the hostility of other political groupings such as the Raitha Sangha (Nair, 1993:07). Dalit movement suffered a setback due to political differences between B.Krishnappa and Devanur Mahadeva in Karnataka state. B.Krishnappa joined the BSP and unsuccessfully contested the parliamentary election in Kolar while Devanur Mahadeva joined Sarvodaya Karnataka. Dr.Siddalingaiah enjoyed various positions such as MLC and Chairman of Kannada Development Authority and Kannada Book Authority at the cost of Dalit movement and social justice. The politics of opportunism pursued by Dalit intellectuals and organizers has dealt a death blow to Dalit movement in Karnataka.

Dalit movement had created a new spirit in the minds of the exploited people in Karnataka. It broadened its base by supporting the Backward Classes and Minorities in their cause for justice. The Dalit Movement always upheld the dignity of women in a patriarchal society and served as a weapon of social change by vigorously addressing, indignities and atrocities heaped on Dalits. By supporting different political parties the movement got divided. However majority pulse is in favour of capturing political power, The Dalit Sangharsha Samiti has played a notable role in the promotion of human rights of Dalits in Karnataka state. It has led the Dalit movement which protected the human rights of women and weaker sections of society. It effectively sensitized the various stakeholders of human rights protection and regional development on the welfare and progress of Dalits in Karnataka (Suhasini, 2012:12).

### **Conclusion**

In reality, the Dalit movement in Karnataka pioneered by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti had succeeded in creating awareness among Dalits about their rights. The self-centered leaders are mainly responsible for the failure of Dalit movement in the age of economic liberalization. A greatest majority of the workers have remained alive, active and accountable despite these setbacks. The Dalit movement is a multidimensional process which has educational, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. It has not failed in letter and spirit but it is incomplete in India. The leadership bankruptcy has impeded Dalit movement but millions of activists are committed to this movement. Hence, intellectuals and progressive activists have to take the caravan of Dalit movement by maintaining distance from both class enemy and caste enemy.

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