

Dalit Politics in India

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Abstract – Post-independence, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar remained a front-runner in the Dalit Politics. He founded the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942 to campaign for the rights of the Dalit community. Along with it, he founded a political party called Independent Labour Party. The party won few provincial elections and also successfully organized the largest peasant protest pre-independence. After his death, the Dalit politics saw many phases and many leaders including some powerful ones. From the Scheduled Caste Federation emerged the Republic Party of India which chose the path of Ambedkarite socialism. But the internal strife and race to power led to split in the party.

Keywords: Dalit, Politics, India

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INTRODUCTION

The Dalit politics saw a definite moment during the Dalits Panthers movement. The erstwhile social organization filled the vacuum created in the Dalit leadership after the split of RPI. Inspired by Black Panthers Movement in America, the Dalit Panthers movement initially emphasis on militancy and revolutionary attitudes. Most members were young men, literary figures whose academic qualifications ranged from not having a basic education to master's degrees. The movement took the Indian politics by storm during the 1970s and early 1980s only to split into three sub-groups in 1977.

In 1984, the Dalit politics again saw a rise of new political outfit catering to the Bahujan community. Kanshi Ram a prolific writer on Dalit Rights and social worker founded the party. His animosity to the major parties like Congress, BJP, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal was known. He laid the foundation of the party in the most populated state of the country Uttar Pradesh which was further strengthened by Mayawati-his successor.

Until the 1970s, Dalit political aspirations were sought to be met through the Republican Party of India (RPI), which was derived from Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation, and through scheduled caste leaders co-opted in the political mainstream – principally, the Congress party. While the RPI was rendered largely ineffective by internal strife, mainstream political parties did little more for Dalits than exalt them as vote banks.

Wishing to move beyond the complacent and self-seeking politics of the RPI and Congress, idealistic young Dalits saw a model in the militant Black Panther movement in the US; while more sober elements, exemplified by Kanshi Ram, chose a path between radicalism and tame collaboration.

J.V. Pawar justifiably claims that *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*, is an 'autobiography' of the movement. "I have actively participated in the movement," he says, "not just as a spectator or writer, but as one of the people who initiated it". As co-founder, organiser and general secretary of the Dalit Panthers, he had personal custody of the organisation's documentation and correspondence, enabling him to compile a meticulous account of the movement's eventful life.

Mayawati-the only leader in last twenty years to serve as a CM of UP for four consecutive stints, was the first female leader from the SC/ST community to be the CM. Mayawati extensively supported reservation in both government and private sectors for backward classes, with an increase in quotas and inclusion of more communities such as religious minorities and economically weak upper castes. Her stint as a CM though controversial but put her as a flag bearer of the Dalit community.

Her downfall after 2014 put the spotlight on the groups like Bhim Army which aggressively fought for Dalit Rights. The incidents like Una gave rise to a new Dalit leader in Gujarat-Jignesh Mewani. He was elected as MLA in Gujarat Assembly Election as an independent candidate.

However, the Dalit youth are now going beyond the established political parties to express themselves. Though the aim is the same i.e. fight for Dalit rights, the expression is different. The Dalit youth is in search of powerful narrative and new organizations that are youth-centric.

DALIT POLITICS IN INDIA

Bheem Army's rise in Uttar Pradesh after 2014 has been meteoric. While BSP is trying to reinvent itself with the help of Yadav coalition, Bhim Army has majorly focused on the Dalit Youth who are ridden with problems like joblessness and lack of social equality.

Adding to that is upcoming political party Bahujan Azad Party. The party is founded by 50 IIT alumnus from around the country. The party is waiting to get official certification from the Election Commission of India. The IITians have quit their jobs to form a political party to fight for the rights of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.

The party members have said that they will start working from the ground first rather than jumping in the race to win elections. The party which has kick-started its social media campaign with videos citing their aim, features B R Ambedkar, Subhas Chandra Bose and A P J Abdul Kalam, Periyar, among others on its poster. The to be politicians aim to give a different direction to the Dalit politics.

Both historically and currently Dalits have adopted four strategies, singly or in combination, in order to attain these ends. The first and most dominant has been the political strategy of gaining power either as an end in itself (if you have power, others come to you and you do not have to go begging to them) or as a means to other ends (e.g., greater economic and educational opportunities).

However, Dalits have been divided over whether to pursue political power independently of other castes or in alliance with those members of other castes and communities whose interests and ideals are close to their own. For example, there are at present Dalit members of Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies, as well as Dalit party workers, in virtually all the major political parties, including the Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party, which in its traditionalist Hindu ideology, is quite anti-Dalit. There are also exclusively Dalit political parties at the regional level and two Dalit-led political parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati as well as the Republican Party of India, have members of Parliament as well. The Dalit debate within and between the various parties over whether to get whatever share of power Dalits can through whatever alliances are most expedient or to maintain pressure from outside on those in power by maintaining some ideological and programmatic

unity, at least among Dalits themselves if not with other disadvantaged groups (tribals, religious minorities, women, the poor in general) as well, has yet to be resolved. As this brief description suggests, there is little political unity among Dalits at the present time and many are wondering out loud whether the political process can deliver what Dalits have every right to expect from it.

The second strategy has been economic. Not only are Dalits extremely poor (almost half of them living below the poverty line as compared to less than one-third of the rest of the population) but they are also almost totally dependent upon the dominant castes for their livelihoods as agricultural or urban labor. Thus many Dalits have sought greater economic independence, both as an end in itself and as a means to other ends (e.g., political power, educational opportunity). During the past decade a good number of international development agencies, both religious and secular, have also adopted this strategy by funding a variety of grassroots Dalit organizations engaged in a range of community development activities. These activities focus on such things as small-scale industries, teaching new skills, educating Dalits on how to take advantage of government development assistance, developing cooperatives. The task is enormous.

DISCUSSION

Over 75% of the Dalit population is still rural and so these activities have to be carried out village by village. They also face opposition within each village from members of the dominant castes who want to keep Dalits as an impoverished and dependent source of cheap labor.

The social strategy was adopted by the Christian missions over a century ago and it still dominates the churches' thinking about improving the Dalits' lot. Today there are churches which are not only giving special priority to Dalits in some of their institutions of formal education, but are also developing joboriented, nonformal educational projects to enhance skill development. The social strategy has also undergirded much of the affirmative action policy built into India's constitution. The assumption is that if Dalits get educated, get better jobs, and earn more money so as to raise their class status, then their caste status (measured in terms of mutually respectful and friendly relations with members of "higher" castes) would improve also. The problem has been that the government (controlled by the dominant "higher" castes) has never fully implemented all the progressive affirmative action legislation it has passed into law. This is a source of great resentment, especially among educated Dalits.

Its moderate form involves reform from within one's own religious tradition. For example, some Hindu sects have renounced caste hierarchy and some

Hindu reformers, Gandhi being the best known, have sought to “uplift” the Untouchables. The more radical religious option, however, has been conversion to another, more egalitarian religion. For example, over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today the majority of the Christian population of India is Dalit! Following the induction of their great leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, into the Buddhist Sangha in 1956, several million Dalits have become Buddhists.

What a new religion offered to the Dalits was a new identity defined by religion rather than by caste, as well as a more egalitarian religious counterculture. This has been only partially successful. No matter what goes on in Christian or Buddhist circles, most Indians still think in terms of caste and so simply assume that anyone who is a Christian or Buddhist is a Dalit. Moreover, both Christian and Buddhist Dalits were denied the affirmative action benefits and protections granted to other Dalits; in 1990 the Buddhist Dalits became eligible and Dalit Christians are still ineligible. By denying these to Christian (and Muslim) Dalits the government is in fact providing strong economic disincentives to conversion and strong economic incentives to Christian Dalits to return to the Hindu fold.

CONCLUSION

If Dalits become literate (10.2% in 1961, 37.4% in 1991) or even educated, they can move beyond unskilled labor, earn more money, and so gain greater respect. The other is making life-style changes which get rid of those practices considered especially “low” or “polluting” and substituting those of the “higher” castes instead. For example, they should give up eating certain meats and cease working at certain jobs (e.g., cleaning latrines). The aim of education and life-style change has been to remove some of the more obvious reasons for anti-Dalit prejudice.

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