

Dalit Vision of a Just Society in India

The word "*Dalit*" in Sanskrit means "broken", "downtrodden" and is akin to the Hebrew root word, '*dal*' meaning broken, crushed or torn asunder. Dr. Ambedkar had often described the "untouchables" as broken people. So the *Dalits* are socially weak, economically needy and politically powerless, despite the protective policies followed by the government under provisions of the Constitution (guaranteeing them educational concessions and scholarships, employment and political reservations and socio-economic welfare benefits). The term '*Dalit*' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on account of their lowly birth. The word '*Dalit*' is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, anguish and frustrated aspirations of a victimised section of the Indian population, down through the ages. The word '*Dalit*' was first used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writings. Following this, the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the early 70s, gave currency to the concept and word "*Dalit*," to highlight the sufferings and struggles of the untouchables to begin with, but later included all the oppressed groups, namely the Scheduled Castes, the tribes, the workers, landless labourers, small farmers and other poor, and also the neo-Buddhist converts. However, more recently the Scheduled Castes (earlier called Depressed Classes under the British and Harijans by Gandhiji) prefer calling themselves "*Dalits*" or "the oppressed", while the tribals prefer to call themselves "*Soshits*" or the exploited. Both words are evocative of the anguish and the frustrated aspirations of these victims of social injustice for several thousand years. The word "*Dalit*" particularly emphasises the dehumanising "caste-oppression" that makes them out-castes and untouchables (which degradation is not shared

by the tribals or soshits), within the context of the Hindu caste-system with its religio-social organising principle of "purity and pollution"¹

The ideology of the dalits for a just society has been mainly developed by eminent personalities like Mahatma Jotirao Phule, E. V. Ramaswamy Periyar and Babashaeb Ambedkar, with many others throughout India (Narayan swami Guru in Kerala, Acchutanand in U. P., Mangoo Ram in Punjab). They attacked the system of exploitation at all levels, culturally, economically and politically. They developed their vision of Indian society as an alternative to the upper caste understanding of Indian nationhood. Hence it is important to pay some attention to this historical context in which the dalit ideology has been developed.

1. Two Visions of Indian Nationhood :

In India the idea of a nation state is of recent origin. Modern nationalism which emerged in Western Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century quickly spread throughout the world in the nineteenth century. In India it can be traced to the political and administrative unification which was later followed by economic unification.

The first expression of the national consciousness in India was in the form of social and religious reform movements. The spirit of English education was liberalism, rationalism and utilitarianism, a spirit that challenged the very presuppositions on which the orthodox Hindu systems of conduct were based. With ruthless self-criticism they sought to lay the ground for a total social transforma-

1. Zelliott, Eleanor, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. Delhi, 1992; Prabhakar, M. E., "Developing A Common Ideology for Dalits of Christian and Other Faiths," *Religion and Society* Vol XXXVII, No. 3 (September 1990) pp. 24-39; Massey James, "Christian Dalits in India: An Analysis", *Religion and Society* Vol. XXXVII, No. 3 (September 1990) pp. 40-53; Irudayaraj, Xavier, ed., *Emerging Dalit Theology*, Madras; Jesuit Theological Secretariate, 1990.

tion, to weld science and rationality to Indian culture, to recreate India.

The beginning of this social revolt can be easily identified with the thought of Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). Roy vividly described the degraded state of society and acknowledged without embarrassment the virtues of Western learning, liberal legal and social institutions, and the Western social ethic². His revolt against Hindu society and his appeal to Indians to purify their religion and reconstitute their social institutions echoed throughout the century after his death.

He founded the Brahmo Samaj to transform Hindu culture and society of its weaknesses and incongruities. The purpose of the Brahmo Samaj was to restructure Hindu culture in terms of modernity with the principles of equality, justice and fraternity.

While Rammohun Roy held a vision of an Indian society ultimately renovated by centuries of exposure to Western science and Christian morality, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) on the other hand urged a regeneration of Hindus through adherence to a purified "vedic faith".

The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayananda Saraswati in 1875. The aim of the Arya Samaj was to bring about social and religious reform through the renaissance of early Hindu doctrines, its favorite mottoes being "Back to the Vedas" and "Aryavarta for the Aryans"³.

It is in this context of the upper caste Hindus identifying the 'nation' and the 'national culture' as basically Hindu, as deriving from Vedic times, and as fundamentally a creation of the Aryan people we should view the alterna-

2. Damle, Y. B., and Jacob Aikara, *Caste, Religion and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Cxford & IBH Publishing Co, 1982 p. 77.

3. Smith William Roy, *Nationalism and Reform in India*. London: Yale University Press; 1938 p. 57.

tive vision provided by Jotirao Phule who was born in a Shudra caste.

2. The Vision of Jotirao Phule (1826-1890) for a Just Society:

Jotirao Phule was the first Indian to proclaim in modern India the dawn of a new age for the common man, the downtrodden, the underdog and Indian woman. It was his aim to reconstruct the social order on the basis of social equality, justice and reason.

As we have just seen the "Aryan theory of race" constituted the most influential common discourse for discussing caste and society in Phule's time. European 'Orientalists' used it to assert an ethnic kinship between Europeans and the ancient Vedic peoples. The constant interest of European scholars in ancient Aryan society and their praises of this society was an important moral boost to high caste Indians. Thus, Indian civilization was seen as primarily derivative from Aryan civilization, and the caste system was lauded as a means by which people of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds were brought together and subjected to the civilizing influence of the Aryans⁴.

At one level, Phule simply reversed it, arguing that the low castes, whom he sometimes called "Shudras and Ati-Shudras" and sometimes simply listed as 'Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars...Bhils, Kolis, Mahars and Mangs', were the original inhabitants of the country, enslaved and exploited by conquering Aryans who had formulated a caste-based Hinduism as a means of deceiving the masses and legitimizing their power.

It was the confirmed view of Jotirao that the ancient history of India was nothing but the struggle between

4. Omvedt, Gail, Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India, 1873 to 1930. Poona; Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976 p. 103.

Brahmins and non-Brahmins⁵. Hence, Phule consciously sought to bring together the major peasant castes (these were, besides the Kunbis or cultivators, the Malis or 'garden' cultivators and Dhangars or shepherds) along with the large untouchable castes of Mahars and Mangs in a common 'front' against Brahman domination.

Jotirao's attack on Brahmanism was unmistakable. He realized that the seeds of the Brahmans' power, supremacy and privileges lay in their scriptures and puranas; and these works and the caste system were created to exploit the lower classes. Phule also reinterpreted sacred religious literature, for example, by reading the nine avatars of Vishnu as stages of the Aryan conquest and using King Bali as a counter symbol to the elite's use of Ram, Ganapathi or Kali. So, Jotirao attacked the brahmanical scriptures and puranas, revolted against priestcraft and the caste system and set on foot a social movement for the liberation of the Shudras, Atishudras (untouchables) and women.

To fulfil his life's ambition for a casteless society, Phule founded the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* on September 24, 1873. The Samaj founded the first school for girls and untouchables. He also organised marriages without Brahmin priests, widow remarriage, etc. Thus, Phule's view of exploitation was focused on cultural and ethnic factors rather than economic or political ones.

3. Cultural Controversies in National Congress :

A second stage in the modern development of Indian nationalism emerged in 1885 with the foundation of the National Congress by Allan Octavian Hume. The Indian National Congress tried to define a new India in terms of

5. Keer, Dhananjay; Mahatma Jotirao Phule. Father of Indian Social Revolution. Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1964 p. 120.

refers to a people united by a common country, blood, history, religion, culture and language. This idea became the foundation of the RSS's activities.

Members of all castes are welcomed into the RSS if they conform to behavioural standards considered proper by RSS leaders. Those standards continue to reflect, to a large extent, the Maharashtrian *brahmin* values of the founders of the RSS.

According to M.R. Golwalkar who succeeded Dr. Hedgewar as the chief of the RSS, at the heart of the Hindu culture is Hindu religion, and at the heart of Hindu religion are the noble ideas of the Vedas. He also asserted that the diverse languages of India are offshoots of Sanskrit, the dialect of the gods and the enlightened Aryans.

Golwalkar felt sorry for the fall of the Brahmin in Hindu society which, according to him, was deliberately brought about by the British. Thus he presents what may be called the Golwalkar notion of social structure in the following outline: The unique picture of our society is the diverse functional groups (castes). The present day mind accustomed to viewing through foreign 'isms' and their high sounding slogans of equality, has failed to grasp this unique feature and they talk of classless society. The glorious main feature which once distinguished our society was the *Varna Vyavastha*. "But it is being dubbed as casteism and scoffed at". There are some who never tired of propagating that the caste system was responsible for our downfall. This is not true, the so-called caste-ridden society has remained undying and unconquerable whereas the so-called "casteless" societies crumbled at the very outset of foreign conquests.¹¹

11. Golwalkar M. S., *Book of Thoughts*. Bangalore : Bharat Prakashan, 1968 pp. 89-120.

5. Gandhian Approach to Caste and Varna :

Hindu reformers including Gandhi were of the opinion that the untouchables could maintain the identity of being a Hindu as also a Vankar or Malliga without the stigma of being untouchables. The Hindu reformers delinked the problem of untouchability from the caste system. Untouchability, according to them, was not an essential part of Hinduism and, for that matter, of the caste system. It resulted from the violation of the basic spirit of Hinduism. "Varnashram, Gandhi asserted, was for the preservation of harmony and growth of soul".¹² Gandhi repeatedly harped on the evils of untouchability. He himself adopted a dalit girl as his daughter. He voluntarily decided to live with the untouchables to become one with them. He symbolically called untouchables "harijans", that is, people of God. He started Harijan Sevak Sangh to launch programmes to remove untouchability and improve the economic conditions of the untouchables.¹³

It is in this context of Hindu revivalism and Gandhian approach to caste and varna one has to view the ideas and visions of non-brahmin leaders like Periyar and Ambedkar.

6. Periyar's (1879-1973) Vision for Justice :

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as "Periyar" (Great Sage), was born in 1879 in Erode of a respectable middle class family of artisans. He married at the age of 13, but after six years, he became a *sanyasi*, travelling as a religious mendicant over the whole of India. In his visits to pilgrim centres, he gained an intimate knowledge of the evils of popular Hinduism and also the exploitation of the masses by the Brahmin priests.

12. Shah Ghanshyam, "Dalit Movements and Search for Identity", in *Contradictions in Indian Society*. (eds.) Mahorama Savur & Indra: Munshi, Jaipur; Rawat Publications, 1995 pp. 23-45.

13. id., *ibid.* pp. 28-29.

more there to guide Ambedkar. Nevertheless, his example had an indelible imprint on the mind of Ambedkar. He was determined to complete the work started by Jotiba and no wonder, it became his life's mission¹⁶.

Ambedkar was a revolutionary. He led the fight against untouchability, Hinduism and the Brahman caste. He taught that caste not only was unjust but also was immoral. He established a new dispensation, a new religion (Neo-Buddhism) whose foundation is its unequivocal rejection of Hinduism.

Ambedkar criticised the caste system violently. For him, the fight against casteism and untouchability was central, at the heart of his agenda. Hence, he was very critical of the two prevalent approaches to reform the caste system of his time, namely: Dayananda Sarasvati's and Gandhi's¹⁷. According to him neither could be a real solution to casteism. Society should be based on the three fundamental principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

If caste was to be destroyed, he said, then its religious foundation in the Vedas and Shastras must also be destroyed. Faith in these scriptures was nothing more than a legalized class ethic favouring the Brahmans. "If you wish to bring about a breach in the system, then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras, which deny any part to reason, to the Vedas and Shastras, which deny any part to morality. You must destroy the of Religion the "*Smritis*".¹⁸

16. Rajasekhariah A. M., B. R. Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation; Bombay: Sindhya Publications, 1971 pp. 18-19; Keer, Dhananjay; Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission. Bombay; Popular Prakashan, 1974, p. VII.

17. Baxi, Upendra, "Emancipation as Justice: Babasaheb Ambedkar's Legacy and Vision", in ; Ambedkar and Social Justice Vol. 1 (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1994).

18. Ambedkar, B. R., Annihilation of Caste, Bangalore; Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1945, p. 70.

Ambedkar also rejected the position of Gandhi with regard to caste and its reform. Gandhi felt that the ancient Hindus had already achieved an ideal social system with "varna vyavastha". So according to Gandhi, "The law of 'varna' means that everyone will follow as a matter of 'dharma'-duty the hereditary calling of his forefathers... he will earn his livelihood by following that calling"¹⁹. Ambedkar, on the other hand, believed that an ideal society had yet to be achieved in India. For him, the priority was not in making "Hinduism" or Hindu society "shine forth" but building a new, equal, free, open, non-hierarchical, modern India.

According to Ambedkar, "It is wrong to say that the problem of the untouchables is a social problem... the problem of the untouchables is fundamentally a political problem (of minority versus majority groups)"²⁰. Thus Ambedkar was able to put the untouchability issue on the centre stage of Indian politics.²¹

Ambedkar painfully realised that in Hinduism the untouchables would never be able to get equal status and receive just treatment. He was also convinced that individual and group mobility was difficult within the Hindu social system for the untouchables. In this context, he saw two possibilities of social emancipation: the political unity of untouchables and an *en masse* conversion. Hence, in 1935 he talked of conversion to another religion: "Though I have been born a Hindu, I shall not die as a Hindu" (1936-31st May, Bombay). His first mention about conversion was made at the Yeola conference of 1935.

19. Zelliot, op. cit., p. 154.

20. Ambedkar, B. R., What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables, Bombay, 1945 p. 190.

21. Shashi, S. S. (ed.), Ambedkar and Social Justice, New Delhi : Government of India.

Hearing the conversion call of Ambedkar, the Hindu leadership was very much disturbed. Several leaders began to persuade him not to undertake this. Ambedkar on the other hand, was surprised that the caste Hindus who had never shown any fellow-feeling for the untouchables were suddenly beseeching them to stay within Hinduism. He said that caste Hindus had no basis to claim a community of interest with the untouchables when over the centuries that the untouchables were dependent on the caste Hindus, they had only been illtreated and humiliated. After long deliberation and a conscious choice of Buddhism, on the 14th October, 1956, Ambedkar took his "*diksha*" at Nagpur at 9.30 a.m. Assembled were about five lakh "*Mahars*", who all got converted to Buddhism on that day. His embracing Buddhism was a strong protest for all that the Hindus failed to do. For him "*swaraj*" did not mean anything if it did not also put an end to the slavery of the untouchables.²²

Ambedkar's view that the problem of the Untouchable is economic, social and political, as well as religious, widely prevails in India.

The above Phule/Ambedkar/Periyar tradition represents the effort to construct an alternative identity of the people, based on non-*Aryan* and low-caste perspectives, that was critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant Hindu caste society but also of its claims to antiquity and to being the dominant Indian tradition.²³

8. Politics of Number In Independent India:

With the growth of democratic institutions and "politics of number" in contemporary India the Dalits began to assume some importance in national politics. The Dalit

22. Gore, *op. cit.*, 144.

23. Omvedt, Gail, *Dalit and Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi; Sage Publications, 1994.

leaders, in order to take advantage of the situation and bring about their liberation, began to mobilize forces.

To fight untouchability which was spread throughout the country and was deeply rooted in the minds of the people, was not a simple task. Firstly, the Dalit leaders had to lift their brothers and sisters from their ignorance; to teach them to agitate against injustice and to organize them into a force. The response was at first, weak, clumsy and slow, but later it became positive and healthy. Secondly, they had to face the reactionary caste Hindus. Every step towards the liberation of the Dalits was followed by sharp reaction from the caste Hindus in the form of boycotts, atrocities, arson and other crimes. In all such critical situations the Dalit leaders had to stand by their poor brethren, to raise their morale and to wage a peaceful and legal battle against the forces of reactionaries. Thirdly, the Dalit leadership had to convince the government to accept their demands of human rights.

Today's political scene in India cannot be understood without understanding the phenomenon of the upsurge of Dalit - OBC - self - consciousness that has spread from the South and the West to the North. The backward castes hold immense political potential, if they could be united into a powerful force. They would really bring a social revolution for equality and justice.

9. An Unfinished Revolution :

There is growing awareness that weak, relatively passive, official policies of affirmative action and reservation have produced poor results. In 1981, some 126 million of 156 million [S.Cs and S.Ts were illiterate, the proportion of rural female illiterates being as high as 91.5 and 93.2 percent. The Government admitted on April 22, 1994, in Parliament that there were 62,113 cases of atrocities against Dalits and tribals between 1991 and 1993. In Class

I and II of the Central services (leave alone State government jobs) Dalit representation is as low as 6.9 and 10.4 percent. The persistence of caste injustice remains a shameful blot on this society.

At any rate, the Dalits have decided that they will fight their battles directly, in their own way, independently, without mediation of brokers and upper caste sympathisers. They want to represent themselves, not be represented by others. They have decided that they will not call themselves "*Harijans*" - simply because it is a paternalistic expression. There are numerous small and large organizations of the Dalits all over the country such as "*Dalit Sangharsh Samiti*" in Karnataka, "*Indian Dalit Federation*" in Kerala, "*Dalit Maha Sabha*" in Andhra Pradesh, "*Bahujan Samaj*" in U. P. and Bihar etc. The Dalits are trying to get organized into a well coordinated political movement with an all-India organization and all-India leadership that can challenge the established socio-political order. This consciousness inspires in them resentment against the existing social system which is expressed through various forms of agitations and struggles and this is bound to acquire the momentum of a national movement in the years to come.²⁴

However, the movement is always opposed by external and sometimes by internal forces. Every process is virtually followed by a counter-process. Hence, this movement requires strong unity among the members of the community for which it is meant. This will not be an easy task because to achieve unity among the Dalits, who are internally divided into several castes and subcastes, externally scattered almost throughout the vast country and who are prone to be a prey of divisive forces, will be a challenging task. Therefore, the Dalit leadership has to strive consistently for

24. Ayrookuzhel, Abraham, A. M., "The Ideological Nature of the Emerging Dalit Consciousness", *Religion and Society* Vol. XXXVII, No. 3 (September 1990) pp. 14-23.

bringing about unity among the Dalits to fight against their common foes and enemies.²⁵

10. Conclusion:

The pioneers who worked for the liberation of the Dalits and other backward castes like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar-propagated the need for a cultural revolution or a total transformation of Indian society. They rejected the vision of the upper castes identifying the Indian nation as basically Hindu, as deriving from Vedic times, and fundamentally as a creation of the *Aryan* people. While rejecting the ideals of the upper caste notion of Indian society based on the ideas and values of "*Manu*" and "*Varna Vyavastha*", they propagated the principle of equality, justice, liberty and rationality. This broad based standpoint is widely accepted among the Dalits.

There is, however, much discussion and dispute on the means to its attainment. This problem is worsened by the multiple divisions existing in the Dalit ranks, for example, the Dalits are divided among themselves along sub-caste lines and like the proverbial crabs keep clawing at each other, pulling down those who move up, and thus every one of them remains in their lowly position. They are also hindered by the present political climate where the upper castes are trying to establish a unified Hindu cultural nationalism.

All the same it is true that if the goals of a movement are clearly outlined and well defined, and if they find active support, first, in their own ranks, and second, in

25. Kshirsagar, R. K., *Dalit-Movement in India and Its Leaders*. New Delhi; M. D. Publications, 1994.

those of others more likely to be sympathetic to their cause, the movement will become an organically living one. What is needed is good and able leadership. If the cause is right and the leadership is good, then the movement will certainly grow even if faced with antagonism and hostility. Every step ahead will encourage the dalits to move forward towards final victory.

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