

Contravening- caste Initiation: A question of identity

Dr. Amandeep

*Associate Prof in English,
DES. MDRC, Panjab University, Chandigarh*

Abstract: The Dalit movements arose in the early years of the 20th century independently in various parts of the country. Their activities ranged from awakening the Dalits to their human rights to demanding concessions from the government for amelioration of their socio-economic condition. Some of them also strove to do away with evil customs and traditions prevailing among them so that they could claim higher ritual status in the society. As yet there was no explicit articulation against the caste system. Some tried to claim a superior lineage for themselves and strove to revive their lost heritage. But some directly challenged the caste structure and rebelled against it with their raw force. These movements together contributed to the creation of consciousness of human rights among the Dalits and inspired many of them to work for ameliorating their lives. In this paper an attempt is made to look at the differential developments of dalit communities. The paper deals with the history of caste system by referring Buddhism, Bhakti movement and pre Ambedkar movements. It also analyses different trends in Caste initiation and how the quest for one's identity is a prime mover in the struggle for social equality and justice. And one cannot gain justice and freedom without struggle and mobilization.

Keywords: Dalit, traditions, ameliorating, Buddhism, Bhakti, Ambedkar, identity

History of caste system

The revolt of caste system goes back to the birth of upper caste Hinduism. It can surely note in the ideological realm in the form of Jainism and Brahmanism'. Some scholars found references to caste at the earliest levels of evidence of Jainism, and it is unlikely that the jains have been less caste-organized than the surrounding population.¹

Unlike Jainism, Buddhism was philosophically as well as existentially opposed to the caste system. It became a dominant ideology of the subcontinent and remained so for almost a millennium. Although ideologically it certainly opposed the caste inequality but contrary to the commonplace notion, it also did not have much impact on the life world of the people which was informed by castes. Buddhist literature is often appropriated by dalits as their own for the simple reason that Ambedkar converted to Buddhism towards the last phase of his struggle for Dalit emancipation. During this period, one more wave of anti-caste movement emerged in the form of the *Bhakti* movement, which originated in the South between the seventh and tenth centuries. While many scholars traced in this movement the influence of the Semitic religions like Christianity and Islam which were well established in the South by that time, insofar as its emphasis on monotheism; emotional worship; self-surrender; adoration of the teacher; indifference towards rituals; rejection of Sanskrit and usage of local language and the caste hierarchy were noted, it appears to have drawn from diverse sources like Tamil literature and Buddhism as it evolved. One critic says: The *Bhakti* movement was not a unified movement but in relation to caste, it reflected, at least in some of its radical strands like Kabir panth, individualistic and anti-corporatist rebellion against caste. It had raised many low-caste individuals like Ravidas, Chokhamela, Kanaka and Nandnara and women (Andal of Tamil Nadu, Meerabai in Rajasthan, Akkamahadevi in Karnataka and Sairabai [Chokhamela's wife] in Maharashtra) to the stature of sainthood and gave a hope of salvation to millions of people from among low-caste groups and women (Teltumbde, 35).

The Bhakti tradition rejected the authority of the Vedas, Brahmin priesthood and ritual practices, he failed to recover the lost identity. The revolt continued in various forms till the eighteenth century. However, each of revolting group was reabsorbed into Hindu fold. Perhaps, the last saint poet in this stream was Narsi Mehta, from Gujarat, who coined the term "Harijan". The term Harijan literally means children of God. There is considerable debate on the meaning of the term. In fact, the term initially was used only to refer to the children of *Devadasis*, the female temple dancers. Symbolically speaking, they were children of God and *Devadasi* (*deva* means God and *dasi* means servant) were dedicated to the services of God/Goddess and the sexual union between the agents (priests and nobility of the village) and the servants of the God was mystified and even invested with an aura of divinity. However, the children of Devadasi had a stigmatized identity among the general population because of their ambiguous paternal identity. The term "Harijan" surfaced again, when M. K. Gandhi picked it up in the early twentieth century and popularized the term. But, it was totally rejected by the conscious "untouchables" as in this terminology, the Dalits perceived another attempt to subtle segregation from the rest of society.

Initially, these mobilizations took the form of caste associations. The innate aspirations of castes to be ranked higher in the caste hierarchy manifested in constructing a self-image of high origin based on myths. Every caste, including the untouchable castes, had such myths that it originated from the ruling stock but was degraded by the intrigues of the priestly Brahmins. Paradoxically, while it hated Brahmins, it tried to emulate them culturally to claim hierarchical status, the process of *Sanskritisation*. When the British conceded the demands of the Dalits and adopted affirmative policies in their favour while extending self-government to the natives, the number game came to the fore. It further fostered interrelated processes of formation of caste federations, giving fillip to caste mobilization to enhance their numbers (to claim higher representation) and in the process began assimilating castes with loose boundaries. With the development of means of communication, some castes took the opportunity for horizontal integration, bringing about pan-Indian caste-unification. This process eulogized by some sociologists as *ethnicisation* basically transcended the 'classical' caste boundaries and brought the collective to bear new 'ethnic' identity.

As for the Dalits, with their cultural awakening, spread of education and economic upliftment, a new middle class came up during the post-independence period, with their aspirations manifesting in a wave of assertion of their identity. While they were seen as role models by the vast masses of the Dalits, their innate aspirations failed to bind them together. Even with a unified anchor in Ambedkar, they dragged along various identities – Dalits, Buddhists, scheduled castes, bahunas, Dali-bahunas, Dalit Panthers, *mulnivasis* and even harijan, but essentially founded on basic caste identity, effectively disorienting the masses from their prime goal of annihilation of castes. The identity assertion was directly proportional to the prosperity of the middle class.

Dalit literature gained discernible momentum during the colonial period. The contribution of the non-dalit writers to dalit cause was most remarkable during this phase. Reformist of Indian renaissance had generated critical interest in dalit issues. Swami Acchutanand in Punjab and Jotibha Phule in Maharashtra through movements such as Arya Samaj and Satyashadhak Samaj had sensitized the upper-caste Hindus on issues pertaining to Dalit oppression, and caste-hierarchy. The criticism of caste system by Dayananda, a Gujarati Brahmin, or Vivekananda, a Bengali Kayastha inspired many writers to create a public opinion against untouchability. In 1910 Tagore also wrote a powerful poem⁷ in which he condemned the champions of caste system. Oxford Anthology believes: 'Untouchability' are placed outside the pale of Hinduism as 'others'. (Azharagan, xxvi).

Many caste Hindu writers in their novels and biographical accounts did refer to caste oppression in clear disapproving terms. A. Madhaviah in his English novel *Thillai Govindan* (1908) and Mannan Dvivedi in his *Ram Lal* (1917) refer to Hindu antagonism towards converted Christians. T. Suryanarayana's Telugu novel *Himavati* (1913) reflects the middle class sympathy and concern for the upliftment of the Harijans. Venkata Parvatisvara Kavalu wrote the novel *Matrmandiram* (1919) on the issue of Harijan's entry into Hindu temples. In 1921, another Telugu novel *Malapalli* by Unnava Lakshminayana also touched upon caste issues.

Dalit Movement under Ambedkar

The Dalit movement arose in the early years of the 20th century independently in various parts of the country. Their activities ranged from awakening the dalits to their human rights to demanding concessions from the government for amelioration of their socio-economic condition. During Ambedkar's lifetime, dalit discourse was dominated by non-dalit writers, and no division was sought between the dalit and the non-dalit writers as long as the former wrote sympathetically for the dalit cause. Around 1920 writers S.M. Mate wrote *Asprishyanicar* for untouchables. Also writers represent the miserable conditions of the dalits to the British government.

From 1970s onwards, Dalit literature gained real ascendancy and established itself as distinct stream of literature, not easily subsumable within the so-called national Hindu literature.

After Ambedkar death no leader could take his place, the leaders had to constitute a presidium², a form of collective leadership, as they knew no single individual would be able to hold together disparate over all the institutions Ambedkar founded.

As a part of his efforts to get safeguards for the Dalits incorporated into the constitution, Ambedkar had undertaken to write a memorandum to be submitted to the constituent assembly. The memorandum not only listed the safeguards for the Dalits but suggested a thoroughgoing framework of state socialism for new independent India. It included nationalization of land with compensation to the landowners in the form of debentures; parceling them out to village cooperatives to be supported by the state with provision of implements, finance and technology against the recovery from their produce; nationalization of all key and basic industries to be run by the state; and insuring all people compulsorily by the state.

Around the same time, he had written an important tract *Annihilation of Castes* as a speech to be delivered at the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, Lahore. It could not be delivered as the conference was cancelled on

account of his refusal to change his 'harsh' remarks against the Hindu scriptures in his speech as requested by the organisers. In his comprehensive analysis of the caste question, he came to the conclusion that castes were rooted in the Hindu *Dharmashastras* and unless they were destroyed castes could not be annihilated. This extreme emphasis on non-material aspects when he sought to struggle against material exploitation of peasants and workers was clearly contradictory. He would launch a trade union (Municipal Kamgar Union) and found the Mahar Panchayat at the same time. There were many such apparent contradictory moves during this decade. Actually, in contention with the communists his core argument in *Annihilation of Caste* unwittingly supported them that the castes were super structural in aspect when he argued that 'political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolutions', making caste to be just social-religious and not economical-political. Basu writes: the major assumption in the cultural politics of Ambedkar is that the caste system is organically linked to all forms of life in Indian society. (161).

The movement spread to surrounding cities like Pune, Nasik and Aurangabad, but it failed to channel the youth energy beyond the radical rhetoric expressed mainly through poetry and militant speeches. By 1974, the classical issue of Ambedkarism versus Marxism that seeded factionalism in the RPI surfaced in the Panthers too, which culminated into the split between the Dhasal and Dhale camps. As a matter of fact, within two years of formation, there were three more factions of the Dalit Panthers: Dhale-Pawar, Dhasal-Dangle and Sangare-Mahatekar. The rise of the Dalit Panthers had enthused communists and particularly the Marxist Leninist activists in the city, and they tried to infiltrate and impart Panthers a radical orientation, but they could not go beyond the manifesto's wider definition of Dalit. It is a tragic-comic feature of Dalit intellectualism that it smells Marxism without ever understanding what it is. In any case, Namdeo Dhasal, the 'most Marxist' of the Panthers, would soon fall for Indira Gandhi's *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty) rhetoric, much like the CPI, and later make allying with political parties into an art form for his self-aggrandisement. While the entire world was aghast at the destruction of democracy by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency, this stormy petrel of Dalit Panthers was penning a book-length paean, *Priyadarshini*, to her! Dhale swearing by Buddhism as the true path of Ambedkar would float 'Mass Movement' but which would fail to move for want of the mass. Dalit Panthers would soon go the RPI way, splintering into numerous factions under local chieftains. While it shocked the ruling establishment by its militant sounding name and rhetorical noises, it utterly failed to live up to it.

Dr. Ambedkar conceived Buddhism as a path to bring about revolutionary change. But many scholars have disputed the capacity of Buddhism to propel such a change. They argue that Buddhism was basically a path of individualistic salvation through renunciation of the world. While it in itself did not subscribe to any of the social evils, it did not fight any of them, including castes and slavery. The eminent historian D. D. Kosambi pointed out that in the recruitment of monks, the candidate's social position was not entirely disregarded: 'Runaway slaves, savage tribesmen, escaped criminals, the chronically ill and the indebted as well as aboriginal Nagas were denied admission into the order. Its radical orientation was limited to its own sphere of influence but because of its thrust towards renunciation, it did not have proactive dimension to struggle against the social forces that sustain these social evils. As such, they tend to dismiss any possibility of revolutionary change coming through the spread of Buddhism as imagined by Ambedkar.

Question of Identity

The transformation of even a cultural identity through the conversion to Buddhism has been problematic. Since there was no existing Buddhist community to merge with, the Dalit identity of converts survived even after conversion. Dalit itself is a construction for assimilating all the ex-untouchable castes. Even conversion to Buddhism could not achieve this trans sub-caste identity. Ambedkar imagined that when he converts, all the seven crores of Dalits will at once follow suit. This was no to be. What happened was only Mahars in Maharashtra (and Jatavas in certain parts of Uttar Pradesh) followed him and became Buddhist. Buddhist thus became synonymous with Mahar. Even in terms of superfluous identity, the conversion failed to bring about change. Even after 50 years there is no significant change in the situation. Buddhists still mean Mahars in Maharashtra, Jatavas in Uttar Pradesh and so on. Even if all the Dalit castes had gained the Buddhist identity, it would not have made a huge change – socially, politically and culturally. After all, de-casting Dalits is not a mean achievement. This is precisely what Ambedkar appears to have thought while expecting the Dalits would convert along with him. If conversion could de-caste the Dalits from their primordial caste identity, they would be able to effectively counter the orthodox religiosity of Hinduism. This contention could bring about the destruction of the caste system and truly democratise the society. But this proved to be wishful thinking. Conversion to Buddhism did not change anything for the Dalits, and as a result they carried on with their pre-conversion Hindu practices and beliefs. It could not even threaten the Hindu chauvinist groups who were vehemently opposed to Dalits converting to Christianity or Islam. Right from the beginning, they were happy with Dalits embracing Buddhism, as for them it was just a branch of Hinduism.

Is Dalit a viable identity? Ambedkar tried to bind all untouchable castes with a single identity 'Dalit', but it was not to be. Deep entrenched hierarchical caste consciousness as well as material interests of various Dalit castes thwarted it. While his own castemen (Mahars) enthusiastically followed him, not many from other Dalit castes supported him. In the early phase of his movement, when the struggle reflected an assertion of social and religious-cultural rights of Dalits (e.g. Chavadar tank satyagraha, temple entry satyagrahas) mainly focusing on the feature of untouchability, it appeared to work with other Dalit castes. But once he turned his sight to politics, the ruling classes could easily lure them away. What happened in Maharashtra was replicated in other states. It is only with the passing of time, as the advanced elements in other Dalit castes, largely a product of reservations, realised Ambedkar's contribution to their own advancement and also the organisational strength of the Ambedkarite Dalits that these castes began to respect him as their leader and began to accept the Dalit identity. From the late 1960s, with the increasing competition in electoral politics (see Chapter 6 for explanation of this aspect), ruling classes began competitive promotion of the Ambedkar-icon to woo Dalits and thereby expand his appeal across Dalit castes. Even then the next most populous Dalit castes (anywhere) do not seem to have accepted him wholeheartedly. The ruling classes have used this sentiment in promoting their own caste leaders as an alternative to Ambedkar. For example, Mangs in Maharashtra were given Annabhau Sathe, paradoxically, a communist balladeer, as their caste icon. In Andhra Pradesh and even elsewhere, the attempts to build up Jagjivan Ram as the icon for the next populous castes were tried for quite some time without much success. Notwithstanding these undercurrents, over the decades, 'Dalit' has emerged as the overriding identity for all scheduled castes.

Untouchability with its manifold manifestations is rooted in the notions of purity, pollution, which is believed to have developed in the later Vedic period, when the Brahminic literature emerged in the form of *Smritis*, *Samhitas* and the *Upanishads*. The Rig-Veda shows no acquaintance with people, with whom contact was even remotely tabooed. In the later Vedic period texts refer to the *chandala* and the *poukasa* as manifest objects of spite and abhorrence. They existed at the lowest ritualistic and social ladder, but were not treated as untouchables. According to *Baudayana Dharama Sutra*, a *Chandala* is an offspring of Shudra father and a Brahmin mother. The notion of pollution become a potent reality and was seen in full display with respect to the *Chandalas*. Although the Brahminical texts are not unanimous on the origin of *Chandala*, he was represented as an instrument of derivative pollution as well as transmitting contagion through contact. Further, the references to infection from the *chandala* through sight, speech and proximity occur. These are *Nisada*, the *Kaivartha*, the *Dasa* the *Bidalakari*, the *Malaga*, and so on. The commensal and connubial taboos in relation to the *chandala* became severe and absolute. Subsequently, several castes were begun to be treated as "untouchables".

The Missionaries' attitude towards the Untouchables was marked by humanism and zeal to solve their problems by satisfying their immediate needs. But such an attitude was badly lacking in the fragile efforts made by many caste-Hindu reformers. The first generation Untouchables became either ideologies of or activists of Dalit cause. They made efforts to educate the Dalit masses, seeing education as the most effective way to break the strongly embedded caste hegemony. Through their writings in journals, pamphlets, political addresses, novels and poetry, they ridiculed the efforts made by the caste-Hindu reformers and exhorted the Dalits to realize the importance and effectiveness of education. Chinna Rao writes: No concrete and collective social movement for Dalit education was taken up by the enlightened caste-Hindus. This is true even of the Communists. Thus, the Dalits did not receive much support from any non-Dalits (44).

As regards the role of Dalit writings in providing an alternative conception of history, it would not be proper to either equate or contrast this with other acknowledged paradigms of history, e.g. Marxist history, cyclical history of Toynbee or Spengler or the nostalgic history of the Roman Empire written by Gibbon. These writings also do not possess subtle historiographical nuances of the post-Enlightenment period, in which history was constituted by the principle of rationality or the post-modernist notion of end of history. The need of the oppressed to use the past in their favour leads to an exploration of the dominant texts of Great Traditions and the grand history patronized by elites. Local histories appeared as alternative spaces providing alternative historical symbols. In north Indian rural society, the dominance of the epics and scriptures was countered with folk histories. That is the only space for a dialogue with dominant history. But such space as existed in the epic texts was not sufficient, and attempts were made to find local roots, especially in the Hindi region which, in the past, had developed various models of protests. It is time the writers to imbibe the spirit of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who fought for human values and Women Liberation through their writings, especially of oppressed classes. Pity, compassion and compromise derail one's self-worth and dignity. Dalits should stay away from such trappings, the Dalit writer's advocate. To them, there is a fundamental difference between rights and concessions; the latter rest on appeal to tendencies of accommodation and gradualism. Dalits should abandon such a path, this literature proclaims.

Notes

- [1]. Helmuth Von Glasenapp, *Jainism: An Indian Religion of Salvation*, Oxford University Press, 2001. 352.
- [2]. The Presidium comprising Brar, B.D. Khobragade, Dadasaheb Gaikwad, G.t. Parmar, A.Rajam etc was formed in a meeting on 1 January 1957 at Ahmadnagar. See J.V. Pawar, *Ambedkarottar Ambedkari Chalwal (Marathi) Post Ambedkarite Movement*, vol1, 1956-1959, Asmita communication, Mumbai, 2012, p-40-41.

Bibliography

- [1]. Azhagarasan R and Ravi Kumar, *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- [2]. Basu swaraj. *Readings on Dalit Identity: History, Literature and Religion* Orient Blackswan, 2016.
- [3]. Teltumbde, Anand. (2017). *Dalits: past, Present and Future*. New York: Rutledge.
- [4]. Rao Chinna. Yagati.(2007) *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*. New Delhi; Kanishka Publishers, Distributors.