

# From No-People to People: Glimpses of the *Dalit* Movement in India

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## Introduction

When we reflect on grassroots movements in Asia, a new phenomenon that encounters us today is a visible fermentation at the grassroots. The long oppressed and suppressed peoples, like the *dalits* in India are breaking into the contemporary history of humankind with revolt and rebellion. These people who for several centuries have been ignored, sidelined, considered unimportant and made absent from history, are now making their very presence felt with a powerful and creative dialogue. These are the people who have started to break-free from the age-old culture of silence imposed on them and have now started to articulate their pain and suffering and their hopes and aspirations. Their dream is to wriggle out of the influence of those inhuman forces that treat them as less than human, and to demolish enslaving structures like caste, and the accompanying exploitation, oppression and discrimination. As they erupt into history, they are forging into a new humanity based on the values of love, freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, peace, and integrity of the whole creation.

## The *Dalits*

Who are the *dalits*? In India, that category of people who are not included in the *catur-varna* (the four-fold caste structure) system are known as *dalits*. History is not very sure about the exact period in which the evil of caste had been dyed on the Indian social fabric; but it is in the *Itihasa* (Epics) and *Dharmasastra* (Law Manuals) period which consolidated and codified the rules and regulations, rights and responsibilities relating to caste and such other social factors. There are different theories and views about the origin of the caste system in India, the most popular being — the arrival of the fair skinned Aryans on the Indo-Gangetic plains which marked the beginning of the practice of ‘varnas’ or castes. The Aryan settlers not only devised the four main divisions — the *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* (*Rajanya*), *Vaisya* and *Sudra* but also gave the system religious moorings with the introduction of Manusmriti and the ‘creation hymn’<sup>1)</sup> of the Rigveda, with a systematic articulation and interpretation carried out in the Puranic myths and the renditions of the great epics, the Rmayana and Mahabharata.

Accordingly, *Brahmins*, the pure Aryans declared themselves *Bhoo-devas* (gods on earth) and placed themselves at the helm of affairs, both social and spiritual. To have

access to learning and knowledge was their birth right; and to impart the acquired knowledge to deserving pupils was their duty. They had the right to command and demand respect and other material needs from any one and every one. Even the kings had to rule and could rule only by pleasing and listening to the *Brahmin* priests. Thus the *Brahmins* are temporal as well as spiritual leaders.

Next on the ladder are *Kshatriyas*, the warriors. These were rulers and their duties were to protect the land and its people from external and internal enemies. They had to rule, keeping in view the advice given by their *Brahmin* ministers and teachers who were considered to be well versed in *Dharma Sastras*. Third in the hierarchy come the *Vaisyas* whose duty was to provide for the needs of the society. They are traders, the business community and had to carry on their trade in accordance with the rules of *Dharma Sastras*. These three castes are known as *dvijas* (the twice-born) and had the prerogative to be adorned with a sacred thread which was a sign of superior birth. The last in this caste structure were the *Sudras*, the servile caste who had to serve the above three groups.

While all these four castes fall within the fold of Hinduism, there is also a fifth classification, the *panchama* (the fifth caste) or the casteless people — a proud group of people, who zealously guarded and maintained their separate identity and freedom as long as possible from the domination of the Aryan rulers<sup>2</sup>). Several derogatory and degrading terms were and are being used and employed by the upper castes to describe and denote them — *antyaja* (last caste), *asura* (demon), *avarna* (casteless), *chandala* (uncultured), *dasa* (servant), etc., and some other contemporary classifications like untouchables (*assprisyas*) and *hrijans* (children of God).

The term, *hrijan*, was originally coined by a Gujarati novelist Narsimha Mehta (to refer to children with anonymous paternity) and popularised by Father of the Nation, Gandhiji, to refer to untouchables in his effort to redress the atrocious attitude of the upper castes and to cleanse the impurities of Hinduism. Although still used in popular parlance, was rejected by B. R. Ambedkar, the historic leader of the *Dalit* Movement and also later by the *dalits* themselves, not only because of its implications of social patronage reflecting condescension and contempt, but also because of the oblique and pejorative connotation of being children of god, hence, born to *devadasis* (temple prostitutes).

### **The *Dalit* Reality**

The word, '*dalit*' literally means broken, torn, scattered and crushed. According to the traditional caste stratification, the population was divided into two polar opposites — the ritually clean and the ritually unclean; and *dalits* are those who were believed to be permanently in ritual pollution and consequently excluded from social interaction, and stigmatised forever. Their abodes were to be far away from the main settlements and their duties were to do all the unclean and repulsive work of the village/town. They were to sweep, clean and scavenge the habitat of the upper caste people: carrying away the night soil, remove and skin the dead animals, cremate dead

bodies, etc. Thus after forcing all the dirty jobs of the society on these people, the upper castes contemptuously segregated them as untouchables.

The condition of the *dalits* is one of destitution and dehumanisation. They are the most degraded, downtrodden, exploited and the least educated of the society. They have been socially and culturally, as well as economically and politically subjugated and marginalised through three thousand years of Indian history and remain so, even after half-a-century of “protective discrimination” (as scheduled castes) under the aegis of the Government. Even today in most parts of the country, they are denied individual and social identity — self-respect and human dignity.

### **The *Dalit* Consciousness**

While the term *dalit* really came to mean and reflect the plight of those communities which suffer from caste (social) oppression and consequent (economic) poverty, it has also come to be understood, today, as embodying the sense of being oppressed and broken and therefore, the need to revolt against the double oppression of ritual degradation and socio-economic-political deprivation. To the Dalit Panthers, who popularised the concept, the term, *dalit* became a symbol of assertive pride and resistance to or rejection of the linked oppression of caste; it meant change and revolution, rather than caste and bondage. *Dalit* has therefore become the mark of self-respect, self-identity and self-assertion of the untouchable communities and their fighting slogan against the de-humanising caste-oppression. Highlighting the relevance and importance of the term *dalit* in the lives of these oppressed and suppressed people, Antonyraj, a *dalit* leader and an academician declares,

The non-*dalits* prefer to call us *avarnas*, *antyajas*, *panchamas*, exterior castes, outcastes, depressed classes, Scheduled Castes and untouchables. Against these names which attribute hereditary impurity to us, we choose to give a name to ourselves and that the name is ‘*dalit*’. The word ‘*dalit*’ identifies our oppressors, the non-*dalits* that are the cause of our dehumanisation. The word connotes the consciousness of our own un-free existence and outcast experience, which form the basis for a new cultural unity and *dalit* ideology . . . it also indicates certain militancy. The name *dalit* is a symbol of change, confrontation and revolution<sup>3</sup>.

This consciousness of their very being, this identification of their victimisation, and this naming of their social reality is the beginning of a grassroots movement — the *dalit* movement.

### **The *Dalit* Movement — Its Aspirations**

The *Dalit* movement as a widespread social movement aiming at fundamental change of a system seen as exploitative and oppressive can be traced back to pre-Independence years of 1920s and the period between 1930–36 as a turning point with such events as the All India Depressed Classes Conference and the famous conversion episode of Ambedkar. However, a renewed thrust and activity is more visible with the founding of Dalit Panthers in 1972.

The *dalit* movement is not a caste-reform movement, but rather a genuinely anti-

caste movement. For thousands of years, submissiveness and acceptance without questioning was the hallmark of the characteristic behaviour of *dalits*. This combination led them to make voluntary sacrifices in favour of the dominant castes with the tragic consequence of losing their very identity — becoming a no-people. V. Devasahayam, a *dalit* activist and theologian believes that the caste system as a totalitarian system not only forced *dalits* into a comprehensive system of slavery — social, political and economic — but also enforced a cultural slavery through a perpetual psychological genocide, resulting in the *dalit* psyche being distorted and disfigured<sup>4)</sup>. A lowered self-esteem, confusion of self-identity, self-hate have become an integral part of *dalit* psyche. They are neither to complain of their low status nor of the ill-treatment, nor to dream of improving their lot because of the imposed belief that they are born into that situation. And therefore, the first and foremost aspiration of the *dalit* movement is to rebuild the tarnished *dalit* self-image through a renewed social identity. In this process, *dalits* recognise the past and present unjust oppression and challenge themselves to boldly affirm without fear or favour those terms and conditions that were made in derogation and seek to help and encourage one another to restore the lost *dalit* self-image and dignity. In such an effort, today, calling themselves as *dalits* has become a symbol of their quest for an identity and rejection of alien identities forced on them. As such *dalit*-identity basically is an anti-caste identity that stands for the rejection of the caste system totally and completely. It is an awareness of selfhood, self-respect and self-dignity and a rejection of the morals and values that promote and strengthen the caste system.

The other aspiration of the *dalit* movement is the search for an alternative religion. Everything in Hinduism — philosophy, myths, art and culture — convey the single message: “accept caste or perish”. Though caste can be neither visible as in the case of white racism nor is the practice of discrimination on the basis of caste accepted in principle as in the case of apartheid, yet it dominates the individual’s behaviour as well as national polity. Even those who condemn it in public seem to cherish it in private. For *dalits*, caste is not only a uniquely Indian phenomenon sanctioned and sustained by religion, it is the mother of all evils. The Hindu social reformers like Rajaram Mohun Roy and Gandhiji supported the need for scriptural justification for a change or even the abolition of caste, and hence the need to uphold the religious and moral values of Hinduism. However, social revolutionaries such as Jyotiba Phule, E. V. Periyar and Ambedkar strongly felt that the Hindu religious scriptures necessarily implied observance of caste hierarchy and therefore, for the *dalit* movement, annihilation of oppressive caste system necessarily requires repudiation of Hinduism and adoption of an alternative religion.

Moreover, the *dalit* movement also strives for a broad economic radicalism, often interpreted as socialism and a political re-orientation for an alternative political solidarity. While these naturally lead to a broad unity to take up the economic and political issues that are to be decisive for the true liberation from oppressive forces, this is possible only through education. As Jyotiba Phule advocated:

There can not be a 'nation' worth the name until and unless all the people of the land of King Bali, such as the Shudras and Ati-Shudras, Bhils and fishermen etc., become truly educated and are able to think independently for themselves and are uniformly unified and emotionally integrated<sup>5</sup>).

The *Dalit* movement is a dynamic process of empowerment through the Ambedkarian slogan, "educate, unite and agitate".

## Conclusion

Sociologists have shown through empirical studies that the process of knowing and thinking is very much controlled by one's social milieu and the social position one holds in it<sup>6</sup>). Hence it is the *dalit*'s perspective that influences their very world view and sustain their struggle to become a people. Merely adopting the perspective of the *dalits* and other oppressed groups is not enough. It should lead to an option to be in solidarity with them in their struggle for their full humanity. However, this kind of preferential option for a particular people does not do away with the universal option — the good of all. *Sarvodaya* (liberation/welfare of all) can not be attained without *antyodaya* (liberation/welfare of the last and the least) and *antyodaya* can not ignore *sarvodaya* as the final end<sup>7</sup>).

But then, *antyodaya* recognises the liberating presence of God. Against all odds, the *dalits* cling to life; against all obstacles they forge ahead to declare their freedom and establish their just rights; against all opposition they steadily move forward to destroy the oppressive structures thereby creating a new humanity and new history; their hope is invincible; their strength is never dying and their efforts are untiring. The suffering masses are irrupting into history because of God's irruption through them. Therefore, *antyodaya* is a passionate appeal to all those who have the courage to join God in this historical task of humanising the universe — where the needs of the suffering take priority over the luxuries of the rich; where their freedom take priority over the liberty of the powerful; and where their wholesome participation in society take priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them<sup>8</sup>).

Thus, for *dalits*, religion is the very basis of their existence. A religion which does not recognise the individuality of a person, a faith in which his/her importance is ignored, and a *dharma* in which only a few have the rights and privileges is not sacred to them. A spirituality that would teach, promote and nurture the principles and values of liberty, equality and fraternity is their breath of life. And they do not desire the tenets of such a religious tradition to be couched in classical or dogmatic or metaphysical language but in simple and plain language which is intelligible, affective and effective — a language that does not go after the cultivated refinement and artificial embellishment.

In conclusion, in their determination to realise their mission the *dalits* are ready to take any risk, pay any price, even if it might mean losing their lives because they have found a reason to live with which is meritorious enough even to die for. The *Dalit* movement nurtured out of centuries of oppression and exploitation is moving forward though slowly, but steadily in the hope of realising its aspirations in a wholesome

way. What they are looking from you is a resonance with their hopes and aspirations as they press on to realise the dream of becoming a people.

*Turning their backs to the sun, they journeyed through centuries,  
Now, now, we must refuse to be pilgrims of darkness,  
That one, our father, carrying, carrying the darkness is now bent;  
Now, now we must lift that burden from his back.  
Our blood was spilled for this glorious city,  
And what we got was the right to eat stones.  
Now, now, we must explode that building which kisses the sky!  
After a thousand years we were blessed with a sunflower giving fakir;  
Now, now we must, like sunflowers, turn our faces to the sun.*

Namdev Dhasal<sup>9)</sup>

## Notes

- 1) “When they divided *Purusa*, how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The *Brahman* was his mouth, of both his arms was the *Rajanya* made, His thighs became the *Vaisya*, from his feet the *Sudra* was produced.” *Rigveda* X.90.12
- 2) For further discussion, see Prabhati Mukherjee, *Beyond The Four Varnas: The Untouchables of India*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988.
- 3) Antonyraj, “The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamilnadu” in *Jeevadharma*, vol. Xxii, No, 128 (March 1992). p. 96
- 4) V. Devasahayam, (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*. Madras: ISPCK, 1990. pp. 13–14
- 5) P. G. Patil (trans.), *Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Volume II: Selections*. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1991. p. 26
- 6) Kewal Motwan (ed.), *Sociology of Knowledge*. Bombay: Somaya Publications, 1976. p. 16
- 7) S. Arokiasamy, “Sarvodaya through Antyodaya: The Liberation of the Poor in the Contextualisation of Morals” in *Vidyajyoti*, No. 51 (1987). pp. 545–46
- 8) Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition*. New York, Paulist Press, 1979. p. 204
- 9) Mulkraj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (eds.), *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992. p. 53