

Dalit movement in India!

Dalit means all those people of different castes and sub-castes among the depressed classes who were traditionally subjected to invidious discriminations on grounds of untouchability, and categorized as the untouchables, downtrodden, exterior classes, depressed classes or Scheduled Castes.

The organizational or institutional efforts made by Dalit leaders for the liberation of the downtrodden masses could be termed as Dalit movement. It is a movement of protest against untouchability, casteism and superstitions. It aims at the uplift of the Dalits to the level of non -Dalits.”

“Negatively speaking, it stands for rejection of the old traditional Hindu social order based on untouchability, socioeconomic inequality casteism, unscientific and irrational religious beliefs and customary servitude.

Positively speaking, it stands for acceptance of a new social order based on equality, liberty, and social justice, scientific and rational religious or moral principles; and social, economic, cultural and political development of the Dalit.” It is the movement to regain self-respect and equal human status in the society.

It is the result of the consciousness of Dalits of their own identity as human beings, equally equipped with physical and mental capacities as other human beings, and equally entitled to enjoy all the human rights “without any infringement, abridgement or limitations.”

Untouchability and its Eradication:

Untouchability, as indicated above, has always been considered as social evil. Since long efforts had been made to eradicate it. Religious and social, reformers like Buddha, Ramanuja, Ramanand, Chitanya, Kabir, Nank, Tukaram and others, made great efforts to eradicate it as far as possible.

The Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj, and other social organizations by propaganda, education, and practical measures, did much to secure the social, religious and cultural equality to them.

The establishment and consolidation of the British Raj gradually but radically changed the political, administrative, economic and social fabric of India. The new set up in theory decried the caste, color and creed prejudices and attempted to re-mould the Indian society on the principles of competition and individualism, liberty and equality. It encouraged the dissemination of the rational, liberal and humane ideas of the West.

The new polity, the new administrative framework, the new judicial system, the new forms of land tenure and taxation, the new patterns of trade, the new education system, and the network of communications stressed the spirit of equality. A new environment emerged in the society where the process of westernization and sanskritization got brewed up; the consciousness for positive rights was created, the general awareness took a new turn culminating in farreaching political and sociological changes.

Among the depressed classes also rose intellectuals, distinguished of whom was Dr. Ambedkar, who struggled to secure for them the social recognition and human rights. The All India Depressed Association and the All India Depressed Classes Federation, the principal organizations of these classes, initiated a movement to improve their conditions.

They aimed at improving their miserable economic conditions, and to spread education among them. They worked to secure for them the rights to draw water from public wells, admission to the schools, and to the use of roads; and enter the public temples. The Mahad Satyagrah for the right of water led by Dr. Ambedkar was one of the outstanding movements of the untouchables to win equal social rights.

All India Harijans Sevak Sangh founded by Gandhi in 1923 started numerous schools for the Harijan including residential vocational schools. The Congress Government after came in power in various States under the Government of India Act, 1935 did useful work for restoring to the depressed classes their rightful place. The Congress Government in Bombay passed, the Bombay Harijan Temple Worship (Removal of Disabilities) Act enabling the trustees to admit the Harijans to the temples.

Free education of the Harijans, from the primary class to the university level was introduced by the C.R and Bihar and Congress Governments in their respective Provinces. The rulers of states like Travancore, Indore, Aundh and Devas, took the initiative in throwing open all state temples by proclamation to the untouchables.

To enforce the provisions of law more strictly, the Untouchability (Offences) Act (1955) was passed to fix penalties for not observing the law. Besides, to enable the Harijans to overcome their backwardness, they were provided with special educational facilities. The Union and the State Governments now spend huge sums of money on their advancement and on projects to remove untouchability. In consequence of these provisions; there has come about a distinct change in the status of Harijans. There are now thousands of Harijans working in the central and State Governments.

They hold high positions in the administration. At selection levels too, special consideration is shown to the Harijan candidates. They now actively take to the profession of Law, Medicine and Engineering.

In politics too they have gained a balancing position. They have the benefit of the reservations of seats in all elected bodies from the village panchayat to Union Parliament. They are now, not only in a position of sway the local balance of power one way or the other but also affect the political developments, at the centre.

Dynamics of Dalit Movement:

The strategies, ideologies, approaches of Dalit movement varied from leader to leader, place to place and time to time. The 'Dalit consciousness' came to the fore in different forms and shades. Thus, some Dalit leaders followed the process of 'Sanskritization' to elevate themselves to the higher position in caste hierarchy.

They adopted Brahman manners, including vegetarianism, putting sandalwood paste on forehead, wearing sacred thread, etc. Thus Dalit leaders like Swami Thykkad (Kerala), Pandi Sunder Lai Sagar (UP), Muldas Vaishya (Gujarat), Moon Vithoba Raoji Pande (Maharashtra) and others tried to adopt established cultural norms and practices of the higher castes.

Imitation of the high caste manners by Dalits was an assertion of their right to equality. Treating Dalits as outside the fourfold Varna system, and describing them as 'outcastes' or 'Panchama' gave rise to a movement called Adi-Hindu movement. Thus, certain section of Dalit leadership believed that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India and they were not Hindus. That Aryans or Brahmins who invaded this country forcibly imposed untouchability on the original inhabitants of this land.

They believed that if Hinduism was discarded, untouchability would automatically come to an end. That Dalits began to call themselves Adi-Andhras in Andhra, Adi- Karnataka in Karnataka, Adi-Dravidas in Tamil Nadu, Adi-Hindus in Uttar Pradesh and Adi-Dharmis in Punjab. Dalits also followed the route of conversion with a purpose of getting rid of untouchability and to develop their moral and financial conditions. A good number of Dalits were converted to Christianity, especially in Kerala. Some of the Dalits, especially in Punjab were converted to Sikhism.

They are known as Mazhabis, Namdharis, Kabir Panthis etc. Dalits also got converted to Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar converted to

Buddhism along with his millions of followers at Nagpur in 1956. As a protest against Hinduism some of the Dalit leaders founded their own sects or religions. Guru Ghasi Das (MP) founded Satnami Sect. Gurtichand Thakur (Bengal) founded Matua Sect. Ayyan Kali (Kerala) founded SJPY (Sadha Jana Paripalan Yogam) and Mangu Ram (Panjab) founded Adi Dharam.

Attempts were also made to organize Dalits politically in order to fight against socioeconomic problems. Dr. Ambedkar formed the independent Labour Party in 1936. He tried to abolish the exploitative Khoti system prevailing in Kokan part of Maharashtra, and Vetti or Maharaki system a wage free hereditary service to the caste Hindus in the local administration. He tried to convince the Government to recruit the Mahars in Military. Ultimately he became successful in 1941 when the first Mahar Regiment was formed.

With the growing process of democratization. Dr. Ambedkar demanded adequate representation for Dalits in the legislatures and in the administration. Government of India Act, 1919, provided for one seat to the depressed classes in the central Legislative Assembly. In 1932, British Government headed by Ramsay MacDonald announced the 'Communal Award'.

The award envisaged separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. Mahatma Gandhi went on a historic fast in protest against Communal Award especially in respect of depressed classes. The issue was settled by famous Poona Pact, September 1932. It provided for reservation of seats for depressed classes out of general electorates sets. The

Constitution of India now provides 'for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes in proportion to their population in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha under Article 330 and 332.

Dalit Movement in India After Death of Ambedkar!

Immediately after Ambedkar's death, certain important developments took place in the Dalit movement. One was the formation of the Republican Party of India and the other was the formation of the Dalit Panther Movement. Many more Dalit associations/political parties/movements originated.

More recently, Dalit Sathya Movement, the Dalit Rangbhoomi, the All India Backward SC, OBC and Minority Communities Employees Federation, and the Bahujan Samaj Party came up. However, the Republican Party of India, The Dalit Panther's Party, and the Bahujan Samaj Party have been more successful than the rest.

Republican Party of India:

The Republican Party of India replaced the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in 1957. Its founder was N. Sivaraj, who remained its President till 1964. The period during 1957-1959 is considered the Golden Age for the Republican Party.

During this period all- its leaders focused their efforts on acceptance of the genuine demands of the Scheduled Castes, and when not successful they often protested. Its leaders such as B.K. Gaikwad, B.C. Kamble, Dighe, G.K. Mane, Hariharrao Sonule, Datta Katti, etc., were elected to the Parliament in 1957 where they raised such issues.

The Republican Party of India worked in many areas such as:

1. To voice their concern against the atrocities committed to Dalits and to make them conscious.
2. Revitalization of the Samata Sainik, founded by Dr Ambedkar in 1928, to maintain discipline in the party.
3. All India/Women's Conference was organized in 1957 at Nagpur.
4. It contributed enormously to the Dalit Sahitya Sangh, the first conference was held in 1958 under the Chairmanship of B.C. Kamble.
5. All India Republic Students Federation was established by the Republican Party of India.
6. The Republican Party of India also spread the message of Lord Buddha.

In 1954 and 1964, two satyagrahas were held with the demand of the distribution of land to the landless under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad. In 1964, yet another massive Satyagraha was launched by the party to force the government to distribute wasteland to the poor.

In this regard, the party leader, including Gaikwad, Khobragade, and Maura presented a charter of demands to the then Prime Minister which included displaying the portrait of Ambedkar in the Central Hall of Parliament, giving the land to the tiller, distribution of wasteland to the poor and the landless, adequate distribution of grain, and control

over rising prices, improvement of the situation of slum dwellers and Dalits, full implementation of the minimum wages of Act 1948, extension of the SC and ST privileges to those who have converted to Buddhism, to stop harassment of Dalits, full justice under the Untouchability Offence Act, and reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in services be completed by 1970.

In 1967, the Republican Party of India formed an alliance with the Congress which led to erosion in its base. The alliance led to the split in the party with Khobragade and Gaikwad leading the two factions. In 1974, they patched up their differences and Khobragade was unanimously elected as its president. This again split the party into two groups: The Khobragade group and the R.S. Gavai group. In 1975, Gavai was elected as the president of the party. This led to the division of the party into three factions led by Gavai, Khobragade, and Kamble, respectively.

The whole history of splits, reunions and renewed splits in RPI has no ideological basis, but they are due to clash of personalities and personal political ambitions. In fact, the Party failed to recognize the real cause of the problem of the Dalits and the leaders made choices as per their political convenience.

The Dalit politicians were as much concerned about privileges and power as any other community leaders. They used their party banner to promote self-interests. This and the general discrimination against Scheduled Caste members led to the birth of the Dalit Panthers Movement in Maharashtra.

Dalit Panther Movement:

The Dalit Panther Movement was formed in 1972, when the Dalit youths came forward and took up the task of bringing all the Dalits on to one single platform and mobilizes them for the struggle for their civil rights and justice. It demonstrated that the lower castes were not willing to accept indignities and their worst conditions without protest.

To Panthers, Dalit meant members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working class, the landless and poor farmer, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, weaker economically, and neglected in the name of religion. The most crucial factor for the rise of the Dalit Panther Movement was the repression and terror under which the oppressed Scheduled Castes continued to live in the rural areas.

The action plan for the Dalit Panthers was incorporated into the manifesto which consisted of 18 demands pertaining to the emancipation of Dalits. The manifesto reflected the enthusiasm of the Dalits to mobilize the poor masses in order to fight against the partisan and exploitative social system in the country.

The Dalit Panther Movement spread to cities such as Bombay, Poona, Nasik, and Aurangabad where a large number of Dalit population is concentrated. Since its inception, the Panther Party was solely based on the ideology of Dr Ambedkar and was quite radical in nature. However, later in other states at least a faction of the Panthers was found inclined to the leftist, especially to the Marxist ideology.

Namdev Dhasal and a few others firmly believed in the Marxist ideology.

For him, the Dalit struggle is for a part of the larger design for the worlds oppressed. In this manner, they tried to create a class consciousness among the Dalits. They purposefully opted for confrontation and total revolution. However, they continued to draw inspiration from Dr Ambedkar also and a part of their ideology is drawn from Marxism as well.

The other prominent figure of the movement. Raj Dhale, was finding some basic differences with the manifesto drafted by Dhasal. He accused Dhasal of receiving, Communist support. He also criticized the Communists of the country for having failed to bring any fundamental changes in the life of the downtrodden. Raj Dhale expelled Dhasal and some of his supporters for alleged disloyalty to the Panthers, majority of the followers remained with Raj Dhale.

After the split in the organization in 1974, some Panthers united and continued the Dalit Panther Movement under the leadership of Prof Arun Kamble, Ramdas Athawale, and Gangadhar Gade. They took the initiative over the problems of reservation and other concessions granted to the Dalits in various parts of the country. In more recent years they revived the party by opening more branches in the northern part of the country.

However, the movement is still confined to urban centers with majority of the Dalits concentrated in rural areas remaining

untouched. Of late, the party has extended its focus outside Maharashtra and is trying to build up an all India Dalit Panthers Organization by opening a number of branches in various states.

Some of the achievements of the Dalit Panthers are as follows:

1. Dalit Panther Party provided courage to fight against the ghastly incidents perpetrated on the Dalits.
2. They shattered the myth that the untouchables are mute and passive.
3. They raised their voice against the unjust caste system.
4. They acted as a bulwark against the power politics and Republican Party leaders.
5. They started a debate on Dr Ambedkar s ideology.
6. They compelled the government to fill the backlog.
7. They contributed immensely towards Dalit literature.
8. They were able to create a counter culture and separate identity.
9. They made popular the term “Dalit”, in preference to terms such as “Harijans” and “Untouchables”.
10. They captured the imagination of the younger generation, projected a militant image through their tactics of confrontation.

Bahujan Samaj Party:

Bahujan Samaj Party was founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984. In 1984, it was formed to chiefly represent the Dalits, and claims to be inspired by the philosophy of Dr Ambedkar. With the demise of Kanshi Ram in 2006, Mayawati is now the undisputed leader of the party. Mayawati swept to power in 2007 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh for the fourth time. She served as the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister thrice earlier.

The party has its main base in Uttar Pradesh. Since its inception, the growth of the party coincided with the growth of Kanshi Ram as the tallest leader of Dalits in India. He gained all-India significance along with Mayawati and started fighting for the rights of the Dalits.

Both Kanshi Ram and Mayawati traveled across the states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Maharashtra, Bihar, and elsewhere. Through their speeches, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati appraised the Dalits of their socioeconomic, political, cultural, and educational rights and the ways and means through which, they could achieve their goals.

They even posted some BSP workers in some areas in Delhi the State Capital, to spread the message of the Party and to help the Dalits fighting for their rights. Through Kanshi Rams efforts, Bahujan Samaj Party emerged as the savior and protector of Dalit rights.

Kanshi Ram organized numerous meetings of Mahars in Maharashtra and fully appraised them of their socioeconomic status. He always

emphasized the role of education for betterment. He argued for imparting technical and medical education to the young boys and girls of Dalits.

He was keen that a substantial majority of them should become engineers and doctors showed a sense of optimism by his assertion that with the kind of opportunities available, anybody can become successful in life. Kanshi Ram had an ideology which is laced with politics, religion, culture, and education meant for the people of his community and for this he argues that once their base is strengthened, their progress would be spontaneous and a continuous phenomenon.

He organized the youth wing of the Bahujan Samaj Party and opined that if the cadre was strong, the party would remain strong. Their responsibility included advising the Dalits about injustice done to them by the higher-caste Hindus for generations and under these conditions they were left with no option but to fight back.

He stressed education for women. He was against the dowry evil. He warned all the people including Dalits not to take dowry. He was an advocate of prohibition. He highlighted the plight of the weaker sections, particularly the Dalits who had destroyed themselves under the influence of alcohol.

He spoke against the migration from rural to urban areas. He described in detail the consequences of such a process. People who migrated found it difficult to find jobs. Even if they found one, they

would find it extremely difficult to cope with the pressures associated with the job.

Very often, they would be forced to do menial works. He had a plan in view to devise ways and means which would greatly facilitate the execution of welfare policy which the Bahujan Samaj Party would like to implement.