

# A Study on DALIT LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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## Abstract

The very first question that comes to our mind while studying Dalit Liberation Movement is Who is a Dalit? The confusion centres on the connotations of the word 'Dalit' which is originally used as a Marathi & Hindi translation of the British term 'Depressed Classes'. There are varieties of nomenclatures such as Untouchables, Harijans, Depressed Classes, Dalits, Servile Classes, Weaker Sections, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avamas, Antyajans and Scheduled Castes. The term 'Depressed Classes' refer to those castes, which belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy and whose touch and proximity is considered polluting by the Caste Hindus. This was a British innovation from an article written by Dr. Annie Besant in the Indian Review, February 1909 with the caption 'The Uplift of the Depressed Classes. Further, the term 'Depressed Classes' was mentioned in the Census Report 1921, but the castes constituting the 'Depressed Classes' were not defined. The term 'Depressed Classes' was used before 1930, but since the enactment of Government of India Act 1935, they are consistently referred to as 'Scheduled Castes.'

**Key Words:** caste, class, country, India, movement, people, report, revolution, religions.

In 1901, Risely, then Census Commissioner of India, attempted to classify the Hindu castes. The term 'Scheduled Castes' appeared for the first time in the Government of India Act 1935. The Simon Commission coined this term in 1928; later on, the British Government issued the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order 1936, specifying certain castes and tribes. This category of the Scheduled Castes was known as *Harijans*, i.e., Children of God- a term coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933. Some leaders of the castes consider *Harijan* nomenclature pejorative and they prefer to be called '*Dalits*' i.e., oppressed.

The word *Dalit* is referred to broken, ground down people who become subject to deliberate act of exploitation by those above them in a hierarchical social system. The *Dalit* Panthers, once a militant organization had used the term in its Manifesto. It says, "Members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, nee-Buddhists, the working people, the landless poor peasants, women and those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion are called *Dalits*"<sup>2</sup>. It further elucidates, "We do not want a little place in *Brahman Alley*. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons by a system. Change of heart, liberal education, etc. will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution"<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, "the Untouchables of India had themselves chosen 'a new identity', 'a revised self image' that of *Dalit* to indicate their lack of belief in being polluting, their sense that their condition was the fault of the caste system, and their inclusion in the Ambedkar movement of all those subordinated by their religions, social and economic status."<sup>4</sup> Through this 'new identity', *Dalit* Movement directed itself "towards status - improvement vis-a-vis social mobility among *Dalits* and shaping their agitational sensitivity and assertion for achieving their rights of equality and equal opportunity, self-respect and a respectful identity."<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Marathi word '*Dalit*' was chosen by the community itself and is used proudly; and even in the English Press, this word has to be used without translation. "None of the normal words Untouchable, Scheduled Castes, Depressed Classes, Gandhi's euphemism, *Harijan* - had the same connotation. *Dalit* implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way.

There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, *Karma*, and justified caste hierarchy."<sup>6</sup> Professor Gangadhar Pantawane, founder-editor of *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of *Dalit* literature, defines the word as follows, "To me *Dalit* is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, and Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism.

*Dalit* is a symbol of change and revolution."<sup>7</sup>

These are the changing perceptions about the community, which was subjected to 'institutionalized deprivation' for centuries and its struggle for Liberation. It started with very reformatory kind of attitudes and passed through several radical and revolutionary phases. There were dynamic changes occurred at definitional level of the movement and today in socio-political system the word '*Dalit*' is widely acceptable and used. But, not much of elucidation is available about the introduction of the term 'Scheduled Castes' either in the Constitution or in any laws or rules. It was in 1901 that the then Census Commissioner of India, Risley tried for the first time to classify the Hindu castes. Then in 1911 an enquiry was made to identify which of the castes and tribes were discriminated against on religious and social grounds. In 1921, these castes and tribe were called the 'Depressed Classes' and J.H. Hutton, the then Census Commissioner, systematically categorized the Depressed Classes.

The expression of the term 'Scheduled Castes' first was coined by the Simon Commission and was placed in the Government of India Act, 1935. Prior to this Act, they were known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes or exterior castes. In April 1936, the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order issued by British Government specified certain castes, races, and tribes as Scheduled Castes in different Provinces of India and the list was continuation of the earlier list of Depressed Classes. Further, the list drawn in the Constitution of India (1950) was a revised version of the above-mentioned Order of 1936. The test applied was the social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the historical customs of Untouchability. Certain specific provisions were made to fulfil the assurance of 'JUSTICE, social, economic and political' that has been held out by the Preamble of the Constitution.

There is no definition of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the Constitution itself But the President is empowered to draw up a list in consultation with the Governor of each States, subject to revision by Parliament (Articles 341-342). Here it is proper to mention the Constitutional provisions with reference to Scheduled Castes. In the Preamble<sup>8</sup> itself we have the pledge to secure to all citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith of worship; EQUALITY of status and opportunity whereby the concept of disabilities arising out of the practice of untouchability in earlier period find no place.

Then, there are various Articles safeguarding the Scheduled Castes, like Articles 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 25, 29, 38, 46, 164, 330, 334, 335, 338, 341, and 366. Further, the Parliament passed the Untouchability Offence Act (UOA) to make the practice of Untouchability a cognizable offence punished under the law. This Act came into operation in December 1956 and amended in September 1976, and is known as 'Protection of Civil Rights Act' (PCRA). Thus Untouchability is no longer existent legally though many still bear stigma of the past in social sphere. We find a long history of struggle for *Dalit* Liberation where they have gone for conscious attempt to redefine their self-image and many dynamic and landmark changes have occurred at the definitional level during the course of the movement. Today the word *Dalit* is widely acceptable and used all over the country; many social scientists have started referring to the *Dalits* and ex-Untouchables or the Scheduled Castes interchangeably. We have also used the term *Dalit*, in this work, for the ex-Untouchables or the Scheduled Castes who by articulating their self-realization and their struggle against the caste oppression and by their "will to act against exploitation, a rise from oppression, from death to life, from darkness to light"<sup>9</sup> are continuing their Movement.

An understanding of the development of term '*Dalit*' itself reflects changing nature of the community and provides meaningful insights to analyse the nature and scope of *Dalit* consciousness. In fact, *Dalit* consciousness is political consciousness that is expressed politically during the course of the *Dalit* movement. Political consciousness is a complex concept as we discussed in the second chapter and it is a very comprehensive concept playing a 'catalyst role' in the articulation of *Dalit* community. It is participative having significant impact on the political system and its actors both subjectively and objectively. It connotes self-image vis-a-vis other individuals and communities, their relationship with socio-political locations and their linkages/connectivity with socio-economic-political and cultural structures of society. Political consciousness characterizes an individual's of community's cognitive comprehensibility of its objective conditions as well as its subjective awareness that, in turn, forms through social experiences, political struggles and cultural traits.

To understand *Dalit* consciousness is a complex process as it incorporates several complexities like political consciousness. It includes the understanding of the *Dalits* politics, processes of political socialization and political culture among *Dalits*, its impact on the construction of political consciousness and its different ways of expressions including literature. An effort has been made to understand *Dalit* movement in India in the following section along with the understanding of *Dalit* aesthetics.

Dalit consciousness is guided by the Ambedkarite ideology, programs, leadership and organization and incorporates both institutionalised and non-institutionalised individual and collective actions initiated and adopted by the community to achieve desired goals. Leadership provided by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had powerful impact on the community and subsequent course of *Dalit* movement draws inspiration and strength from his vision. We would discuss his impact on the *Dalit* movement in the next section.

Political consciousness is informed through the multiple factors: level of political education, articulated political opinion, amount and quantum of suppression, marginalization of a particular community, urge for radical changes and many more. It is to be noted that the greater amount of political consciousness would increase and enlarge the level of political participation. It would be observed, in the course of this study, that the greater amount of articulated political consciousness among the *Dalit* community has increased and broadened the level and scope of political participation, particularly since Dr. Ambedkar throughout the country. In fact, there exists a proliferation of consciousness that is felt politically and expressed politically among the *Dalit* community.

### Conclusion

We can identify a progressive pattern in the expression of political consciousness formed through processes of political socialization, political participation and political culture, thus, making it 'a functional catalyst' providing general participation orientations, community mobilization and identity building processes. We have identified in the last chapter that political consciousness performs the following tasks:

1. Subjective understanding of the self;
2. Transmission knowledge from one generation to another;
3. Objective cognition of the socio-eco-politico-cultural conditions;
4. Critical relationship with other communities and the structures of powers and economic controls; and transforming society consciously with a visionary movement. Accordingly, we find that a new self-image with overall general political participation is being cultivated by *Dalits* through assessment of their rights and continuation of their movement for social change and for the establishment of an egalitarian society.

1. Quoted in Rebati B. Tripathy, *Dalit: A Sub-human Society* (Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994)
2. *Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers*, 1972
3. *Ibid.*
4. Zelliott, Eleanor. *Ibid*
5. Ram, Nandu. *Beyond Ambedkar* (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1995) p. 87
6. Zelliott, Eleanor. *Ibid.*, p. 267
7. Quoted in Eleanor Zelliott, *Ibid.*, p. 268
8. *Constitution of India*, 1950
9. Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sag Publications, 1994) p. 11