

Dalit Movement its Achievements Failures – A Sociological Study with special reference to Bellary district

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Abstract

It is often said that the rise and growth of Dalit Movement in Karnataka is totally different from other parts of India. Some of the recent studies of the well known Dalit writers in Kannada²⁰⁷ show that the social composition of Karnataka itself is largely responsible for this difference in the Dalit Movement among Karnataka and her neighbours.

Though Dalits have always been exploited, placed as they were in the Hindu social order, the immediate enemy in Karnataka were the dominant castes like Vokkaligas and the Lingayats who were primarily landlords and had kept Dalits under exploitation for years. Vokkaligas and Lingayats subscribe to significantly different relations compared to landed dominant castes elsewhere although they share land relations in common. We do not need to belabour the issue that social structures deeply qualified the modes and forms of Dalit exploitation be it in Karnataka or elsewhere. The situation of Dalits is not homogeneous across various states in India. Even prior to British rule issues confronting Dalits varied in different parts of the country. This is one of the reasons why their problems are called region-specific. However, Dalits in Bellary have a different social history when compared to the Dalits living in other parts. Dalits in Karnataka have been using local dialects which themselves keep them away from other Dalit groups who also make use of their language distinctly.

The linguistic difference as the cultural marker has kept the Dalits across the states apart in many respects. There are sub-castes within the Dalit category known for distinctive cultural differences. The two prominent groups among Dalits in Karnataka are the 'Balagai' and the 'Yedagai' meaning the right and left hand, and are officially known as the Adi-Karnataka and the Adi-Dravida respectively. Though they all agree that they have been guarded and guided by the Hindu social practices, they do not directly confront the Brahmins but the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas who are land lords. The situation of the Dalits by and large has remained the same compared to what it was under the name of untouchables. They were untouchables earlier, then they became Harijans, subsequently they were named scheduled castes and now they are called Dalits. The transformation has been largely in name but not in their social conditions. Their social conditions bear heavily on Dalits in Karnataka.

Keywords: Dalit movement, achievements, failures ,bellary district.

Introduction

In the Hyderabad Karnataka region, although the social composition was significantly different, the condition of the untouchables remained not markedly different. The land-lords - Deshmukhs and Deshpandes or Jagirdhars, basically the former Revenue officers, emerged as very big land-lords who kept untouchables almost as their slaves. The social relations derived from the land holding pattern emerging from such social composition gave rise to a huge gap between not only the upper and lower castes but also between the land owners and workers.

With the 12th century the Social Reform Movement in Northern Karnataka took a different shape, especially in establishing an alternative orientation to Hinduism, a religion that took shape within the broader fold of Hinduism with certain distinct beliefs and practices. In the 17th century a follower of Basava called Siddaveera Swamy, the fourth Acharya of Sunya Simhasana, converted twelve thousand people, including untouchables, to the Veerasaiva religion. In the 18th and 19th centuries there were a number of Dalit poets like Chennabasava and Siddaramaiah who fought for their rights in the regions of Bombay-Karnataka. They launched not only an intellectual and spiritual awakening among their brethren but also gave them strength and confidence to step into the temple. The Bombay-Karnataka region of the British Raj initially does not find a mention in the mass movements to uplift Dalits. The existing records say that a few progressive minded Lingayats who were inspired by Gandhian ideology came forward to support the cause of untouchables.

By being influenced by the Gandhian ideology and the national movement the Lingayat leaders took some interest in transforming the condition of the untouchables. As part of such efforts Sardar Veerana Gowda Patil - one of the founders of the Karnataka Lingayat Educational Society, also started a boarding house for Harijan boys in Belgaum in the 1920s and met Gandhi, requesting permission to join the movement.

The Government of India Act, 1935 made many provisions for Dalits as scheduled castes including political representation through the provision of reservation of seats in the state and central legislatures. This also created a separate schedule for untouchables based on the criteria of 'pollution' and 'ban on temple entry'. The untouchables came to form an autonomous socio-political constituency of their own. They were also given reservation in public offices and educational institutions. By this, the task of the uplift of Dalits came to be constitutionally recognized. Here an attempt has been made to review the Dalit Movement following the Government of India Act, 1935. In the post 1935 Act period and before the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti came into existence there were many Dalit and non-Dalit thinkers, nationalists and sympathizers in the state of Karnataka desirous of bringing Dalits into the mainstream of civil society. Along with this, it is necessary to consider the Harijan Movement led by Gandhi after the Poona Pact of 1932-36 on the one hand and the influence of Ambedkar through his Scheduled Castes Federation on the other over the Dalits in various parts of the Nation.

Objective:

This paper aims to dissect achievements and deficiencies within Dalit movements across different regions of India. Our focus is mainly on the Bellary district of the Dalit movement.

Historical context of Dalit movement

Trends in the Mysore province were significant. In the Mysore state, Dalits were invited for the first time by the Maharaja to take part in the Dassara darbar in 1936. In 1938 an order was passed permitting entry to untouchables at the Shravana-Bellagola Jain complex in Belur.

In Mysore, Gandhism did in many ways function to hold Dalits within the statist economic system and within the Hindu religion, primarily by making it almost impossible for a radical Dalit leadership to emerge. But that alienation was there, that considerable bitterness existed even during the 1930s, can be seen in a report by a Maharastrian Mahar who visited Bangalore with a group of engineering students in 1937.

He described impressive educational and employment achievements, including four hostels for untouchable students, two special colonies, two medical clinics, free education for untouchables from primary school to the time of gaining employment, and a good number of Dalits in high-level employment. After seeing this he was reluctant to ask students of the Harijan Sevak Sangh hostels what their views were on Ambedkar, assuming their expressed 'love for the Maharaja' would be carried over to a warmth for the Hindu religion itself. But the militancy of the response surprised him. "When Ambedkar said two years ago that we can't get any rights in Hinduism and got support from all parts of India, what was the reaction of our people and other Hindus in the state? We not only agreed with conversion, but at that time we all decided to become Muslims. Though other Hindus fear untouchables' conversion, still they do not have the strength to prevent it. Mysore officials themselves do not agree that temples should be open to untouchables. Then what need do we have for a religion that has no humanity? Humanity is more important than wealth or authority. So it seems that not only in Maharashtra but in the most progressive Hindu state in India, you can find Ambedkar's followers.²⁴² Dalits, however, . remained aloof from the struggle.

Post independence nature of Dalit movement in Bellary and other regions

Shyam sunder was the first to start a vehement struggle in Karnataka for awakening the Dalits in the later part of the 1960s. Shyam Sunder had some strategic differences with Ambedkar. Sunder was basically an atheist, lacking faith in any religion. To him religion as such had no answer to the problems of exploitation. He opposed the conversion of Scheduled Castes either to Islam, Christianity or even to Buddhism.²⁵⁶ Yet, most of his thinking was based on Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideas. He had studied the works of Ambedkar closely and had high reverence for his life, mission and achievements. Though an all-India organization founded by Ambedkar known as Samata Sainik Dal was already in existence (mostly in Bombay and Hyderabad - Karnataka regions) Shyam Sundar wanted a new and militant form of organization named after Ambedkar himself. He used the first name of Ambedkar, 'Bhimrao', while founding his Bhim Sena in April 1968.

They believed in a democratic agitation against their oppressors and the exploitative system as a whole. The DSS went on to become organizationally the strongest and long-lasting social movement in the country.²⁶⁷ The Basavalingappa episode helped Dalit intellectuals overcome their differences and pursue a common need for a state level organization of the Dalits to secure social, economic, educational and political rights for themselves and to ensure the security of their lives and properties. A decision to merge the varied splintered Dalit groups into one state level organisation was taken.

Bhim Sena began its career in Gulbarga township and later spread its wings to other parts of Karnataka. Apart from the strong motive of self defence, it had a broader ideological perspective. Through his small book 'The Four Immediate Needs', Shyam Sunder had placed before the country four important demands, viz., 'Surrender of twenty five percent of villages in every taluk, a separate electorate, a separate scheduled caste university in each state and a strong political organization for untouchables'.²⁵⁷ These demands were nothing but a distorted version of the perspective plan of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, which he had suggested for the untouchables in his brochure entitled the 'Rights of minorities in a Free India'. Though, Ambedkar had emphasized on the demand for a separate settlement for the untouchables, he had never asked for a separate nation for them. Shyam Sunder went to the extent of demanding a separate land for untouchables namely 'Dalitastan'.²⁵⁸ He also cherished the desire to bring about a strong alliance between the Dalits, the Muslims and the backward classes. However, his Bhim Sena became very popular and it spread to all the cities of India, 'fostering the tradition of militancy'.

It terrified the oppressors within just a short period of its coming into existence. Indeed Shyam Sundar was a great organizer. He was also a writer. His important works included Mool Bharatis; Four Immediate Needs; They Burn; Federation is a must

for India's Minorities; Diksha; etc. Dalit Movement in Karnataka took a new turn with the entry of Shyam Sunder into the public life of the Dalits.

He is hailed as the Father of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka given the militant turn he gave to it.²⁶⁰ However, soon Shyam Sunder's Bhim Sena lost its vigour and importance. In the meanwhile, the emergence of Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, in 1972, attracted the masses of Karnataka. A few of its branches were also established in the bordering districts of Karnataka. But these did not function very effectively. In fact, there were many petty Dalit unions working in almost all the districts of Karnataka such as the Dalit Welfare Association, Dr. Ambedkar Youth Association²⁶¹ etc. They worked for the welfare of the Dalits in a peripheral manner, without the benefit of broad organizational cadres. All of them were self-centred with a limited area of operation. Hence there was a general cessation of the protest wave in Karnataka. Incidents of social injustice or exploitation were not handled successfully. It perpetuated traditional modes of discrimination and exploitation.

The testimony of the Adi-Karnataka Abhivridhi Sangham and the AdiJambava Abhivridhi Sangam of Bangalore (Basically Murugesaram Pillai's organizations) before the Srinivasa Iyengar Committee on Constitutional reforms in 1938 was that: "When responsible government is introduced, it will naturally lead to the predominance of certain communities not sympathetically disposed towards the aspirations of the Adi-Karnatakas, and therefore there is every likelihood of their position not being in any way improved under a scheme of responsible government with power in the hands of communities by whom they had been kept down in the past."²⁴³ Omvedt has argued that this represented a clinging to a beneficent autocracy that contrasted with Ambedkar's militant nationalist opposition to the princely states. It also represented a tendency to accept an alliance with Brahmans and other 'minority' castes out of fear of domination by the large peasant-based non Brahman castes; this was also in contrast to Ambedkar's continuing efforts to build a Dalit-Shudra alliance against Brahmanism.

Role of poverty in shaping Dalit movants in Bellary

Acute poverty, dependent economic status, fear of social boycott and the terrible consequences following thereof made Dalits remain submissive. But the situation underwent a qualitative change with the rise of B. Basavalingappa to prominence.

Basavalingappa, a Dalit leader, emerged as an important spokesperson of Dalits in the 1970s. Being tremendously influenced by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, he inherited all the traits of Ambedkar. 'No discussions over Babasahebs thoughts', he used to tell his followers, 'we must accept him as he is'. He acquired the eminence of becoming one of the high ranking Cabinet Ministers in Devraj Urs' Congress Ministry in Karnataka.

Without fearing the consequences, in one of his public speeches²⁶² on 07-02-1973 in Mysore, he termed Karnataka literature as nothing but cattle feed (Bhusa). This triggered off a bitter controversy in the whole state, ultimately leading to his dismissal from the state cabinet. A stream of violent protests, a series of strikes and public reactions, rocked the public life of Karnataka until Basavalingappa was expelled. During this simmering period many of the followers of Basavalingappa, including Dalit students, were beaten up in Mysore and Bangalore. A host of factors apart from the Bhusa episode were responsible for this furore.²⁶³ Basavalingappa was himself a controversial figure with no respect for Hindu priesthood, Hindu Gods and Goddesses and Hindu practices.

Dalit movement Social Kaleidoscope

The social consciousness/awareness among Dalits in Karnataka at different levels had realized the significance of organizing itself to get what is due to it through democratic assertion. As a result there were a number of Dalit organizations that came to be organized in Karnataka. It is said that the establishment of DSS was a revolutionary beginning. A section of Dalits who had acquired education and made some progress took the events in the context of the Boosa controversy²⁶⁶ seriously and started reacting thoughtfully. A conclave of Dalit writers, poets and artisans was held at Bhadravathi in 1973 to deal with this situation. The same later became the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS), a forum to educate, organize and fight for the cause of Dalits.

Extreme stand had become a bitter pill to swallow for the Hindu vested interest. He even asked Dalits to throw Hindu idols into the gutters. The landed gentry had its own reasons to oppose Basavalingappa's ideas. Dalits, as tillers, were trying to own land with the help of the Land Reforms Act. So all the vested interests including the politicians, the press and the intellectuals joined hands against Basavalingappa in the guise of protecting Kannada language, literature and culture.²⁶⁴ But the event proved to be favourable and valuable for Dalits in Karnataka. It stirred the conscience of the Dalits all over the state. They started getting together, thinking together ^ and moving together. Basavalingappa focused on the young and educated Dalits as the potential force to fight the dominance of the Lingayats as well as the Okkaligas. He believed in immediate social changes through radical action.

He became very popular among Dalit students as he spoke a revolutionary and provocative language. Indeed, the Basavalingappa factor was a vital issue to be reckoned with for the following reasons. The leadership provided by Basavalingappa attracted educated and uneducated youth who liked the way Basavalingappa tackled the literature issue.²⁶⁵ The popularity that he gained from the literature controversy helped him have a central position in the Dalit Movement in general and Dalit Movement in Karnataka in particular. The angry youth who had already joined the Bheem Sena were further helped by the Basavalingappa factor in Karnataka, which helped in radicalizing the movement further. Dalit movement in Karnataka become a factor to reckon with for the first time as it came to believe in its own strength in not only bringing about social change but also in asserting itself against forces opposed to it.

Conclusion

The Dalit Movement in Karnataka was, in a way, distinct. This distinctiveness is not merely on account of the social structure and social relations in which Dalits were situated and which qualified their agency but also the specific cultural traditions and legacies and the trajectory of the Dalit Movement itself.

The dominant castes that Dalits by and large confronted locally and immediately were the two major landed communities - the Vokkaligas and Lingayats. The Brahmanical forces remained remote and elusive except at junctures when they wanted to thwart the assertion of the dominant castes by bringing the numerous groups of Dalits under the wings. Dalits were deprived of land in Karnataka and it made them wholly dependent upon the landed gentry leading to a widespread prevalence of bonded labour in certain parts of Karnataka even today.

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