

Dalit Movements in Hyderabad Karnataka Region – A Sociological Study

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Abstract

Dalits in Karnataka were not only poor and landless but they remained relatively uneducated. One of the earliest ways that was invented by the landlords to subjugate the Dalits was to make them landless. As a result of this Dalits began to depend upon their labouring capacity. Many of them became bonded labourers in Karnataka and that became a family occupation. In the hands of the land lords, Dalits were ill-treated not only as untouchables but also as bonded labourers. In some regions Dalits enjoyed a space, however minimal, distinctive to themselves and in some regions which came under colonial influences such a space gradually emerged for them. Dalits in Karnataka were not fortunate in this regard. Culturally Dalits in Karnataka share all the features which make their status low as elsewhere. Food habits like consuming left-over food, eating the meat of dead cow, and dress habits mark the Dalits of Karnataka as different from others. Besides, all the changes that have taken place in the conditions of the Dalits have not altered these conditions significantly. Their presence in the world of literature is relatively a late arrival as compared to Maharashtra. The advent of the British has had a different impact with regard to Dalits in Karnataka. As the K.K. Kalvekar report says the Brahmans, even though they were small in number, had dominated all the sectors opened by the British to Indians. Making use of English education, Brahmans became much more dominant by getting hold of powerful administrative posts. It was in this background that the non-Brahman movement came up in India which began to challenge the domination of the Brahmans. However, such a development in Karnataka did not open up any considerable space for Dalits. The Dalit agenda was sadly missing in the non-Brahman Movement of Karnataka. It began to dawn on Dalits early in Karnataka that there were two sources of exploitation that they confronted: the Brahmans and the so-called backward castes. The non-Brahman movement in Tamilnadu and Maharashtra began to raise fundamental questions against the social practices and urged for drastic social reformation. This did not happen in Karnataka for the simple reason that the non-Brahman movement was not only led but also dominated by the land lords who felt that the opportunities created by the British have been enjoyed by the Brahmans alone. This situation along with their being landless, powerless and divided across identities made the Dalit constituency in Karnataka much different from the other states. Prof. Krishnappa has argued that the Dalit Movement in Karnataka was to come under the sway of Gandhism keeping a low profile compared to other states where the Gandhian perspective came to be challenged early on.

Keywords: Dalit movement, Hyderabad Karnataka, sociology, regional imbalance, Dalit advocacy.

Introduction

The plurality of the Indian social set-up and its implications are much more telling in terms of Dalits. Every region is so different from the other that bringing them on to a common platform of analysis becomes difficult. It is more so with people who are not settled anywhere, and had not been so at any point of time.

Although the untouchables have remained largely unaffected in their socioeconomic conditions, they are different from one place to another leading to high degrees of regional variations. A brief sketch of this regional variation helps us to bring

home the variations in the Dalit Movement itself. The situation of the Dalits in Karnataka can be traced by focusing on the following regions (a) Mysore princely state (Shimoga, Chitradurga, Chikmagalore, Hasan, Tumkur, Mandya, Kolar, Bangalore and Mysore), (b) Madras Karnataka (Former South Kanara), (c) Hyderabad Karnataka (Bidar, Gulbarga and Bellary), and (d) Bombay Karnataka (Bijapur, Belgaum and Dharwad). After the British victory over Tipu Sultan, the State had been restored to its earlier Hindu rulers, the Wodeyars, who had originated from a small low caste which claimed Yadava descent. In 1830, there was a revolt in the northern part of the state by its turbulent feudatories, the poligars.

In suppressing it the British took over the direct administration of the state. After 1861, a reformist governor used state funds for restoring irrigation works, repair of tanks, incentives to coffee production and the introduction of a railway system. Even so, the exploitation of the peasantry through commercial agriculture and high revenue demands in cash resulted in one million dead in a famine during 1876-78.210 Shortly after this, in 1881, the state was restored to the Wodeyars. They ruled the Mysore province till 1894. Prince Chamaraj Wodeyar, an important disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, invited Swami Vivekananda to Mysore in 1894. As a result of this, Vivekananda wrote to the Maharaja on 23 June 1894 stating that he wanted the Maharaja to form a policy for the uplift of the Antyajas. The Maharaja initially opened separate schools for the untouchables in Hosur of Anekal Taluk and Narasapur and Malavalli of Malur Taluk in Mysore in 1890. Later, these schools were named 'Panchama Schools', and helped the educational development of the Antyajas.

The Maharaja requested Vivekananda to attend the World Religious Conference that was scheduled to be held at Chicago in 1890. The Prince assured him that the expenditure would be borne by fund raising for which Vivekananda did not agree. Ultimately, the collected fund was distributed to the Panchamas as suggested by Vivekananda. He toured every cluster area of the Panchamas in the province and persuaded Maharaja Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar and other reformists like Venkata Krishnaiah, Balasubramanyam Iyer, Maridandaiah and others to conduct a massive programme for the uplift of panchamas.

Objective:

This paper seeks to explore the Dalit movement in Hyderabad Karnataka region. Study aimed at Dalit movements within that context

Political contours of Dalit movement in Hyderabad Karnataka

Arya Samaj took on political importance and qualified the Congress movement to give it a 'Hindu Nationalist' tenor. A few local Muslims and Hindus formulated an ideology of a multi-religious pluralistic Deccan Hyderabad culture, but this came under the attack of both Hindus and those Muslims who sought to promote a more orthodox Hindu and Islamic identity respectively. Thus, even as the Dalit Movement developed, it did so within a dangerously polarizing Hindu-Muslim cleavage.

Dalits faced pressures on both sides to identify themselves as Hindus or to go along with the Muslims. In some ways, there was closeness in Dalit-Muslim relations in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, especially in Gulbarga, Bidar and Raichur districts. Under the Devadasi custom prevalent among the Malas and Madigas, the Basavis or Matangis very often formed relations with affluent Muslims in the area. When Dalit reforms moved to stop the custom in the 1920s, it led to an increase in Muslim antagonism. The 'closeness' of the Muslims with Dalits had a clear element of sexual exploitation in it, though Muslims did not observe untouchability. Under the influence of the movement the exploited sections identified both Hindus

and Muslims as oppressors, while others were led into the Hindu fold by the reformist activities of the Arya Samaj inspite of the impact of Muslim culture on some sections of Dalits in Hyderabad Karnataka. The anti-Nizam Movement in Kannada and Marathi speaking areas of the Hyderabad state is less well-documented. It was the Arya Samaj under Swami Ramanand Tirth which came into the leadership of the Anti-Nizam Movement and brought the untouchables into the Hindu fold. Most of the followers of the Arya Samaj joined the Congress by 1946-47. The leaders of the Arya Samaj gave a communal colouring to the struggle.

Social leadership of Dalit movement

Similarly, in 1928 Harijan Balikashram and Harijan Vachanalayas came into existence to provide education to the untouchables in Dharwad.²³⁰ In August 1930, the Veerasaiva Parishat was held at Haveri. Hardekar Manjappa presided over the Parishat. He urged the Veerasaivas to join the Congress and work for the uplift of Harijans. Veerasaiva leaders like Hosamani Siddappa of Haveri, K.S. Patil and M.P. Patil of Hukeri joined the Congress and actively propagated its ideals by conducting Harijan Seva tours.²³¹ When Gandhi undertook fast for the cause of the Harijans, while he was in Yerawada jail in protest against the Communal Award in 1932, a Movement against untouchability was also launched by the Congress in Belgaum with great enthusiasm and fervour.

A team of Lingayat community members along with Annu Guruji and Jayadevrao Kulkarni conducted a Padayathra with five volunteers in the District, and in nearly 100 places arranged for temple entry and opening of wells and tanks for Harijans to draw water. They cleaned the public latrines in Belgaum town for one month to impress that scavenging is not a low profession.²³³ During his all-India 'Harijan Seva Tour' Gandhi came to Bombay Karnataka - Belgaum, Bijapur and Dharwad - in January 1934 and stayed for two days in Belgaum and addressed many meetings. In Bombay-Karnataka he could collect Rs. 50,000 for the Harijan Fund. Temples and wells were opened to Harijans at Hire Ulligeri, Bail hangal, Yamakanamardi, Hukeri, Shedbad and Athani during his visit. He also spoke at Chikodi. At Nippani, he urged the people to support Brahmachari Ramateertha who was running an Ashram and hostel for Harijans.²³⁴ Thus in the name of Harijan Sevak Sangh Lingayats and caste-Hindus tried to uplift the untouchables, as an agenda of the National Congress, in Bombay - Karnataka. Depressed classes from various parts of Southern Division presented a joint address to Ambedkar and Dewan Bahadur Latthe in Belgaum on 24th May 1932. Dewan Bahadur Latthe presided over the function and presented Rs. 500 to Ambedkar. In his reply Ambedkar said political reform must proceed along with social reform and without political power to the depressed classes their status would not improve.

Outcome of Dalit movements

The Dalit position taken here was an outcome of a situation in which sections of Brahman elite had worked for over a decade to build up some base in a 'Harijan' constituency, while non-Brahmans had mainly focused on reservation-oriented interest-groups politics. Dalits were partly rewarded for their loyalty when the Government of Mysore Act of 1940 reserved 67 of 310 seats for minorities and of these, 30 for the Depressed classes; the position was thus set for the post-independence situation in which Dalits would be constitutionally and legally guaranteed a share as 'scheduled castes'.

Marxism and Ambedkarism, as we have seen, never had much force in Karnataka before the recent decades. During the 1950s, though, we see the entry of another ideological trend, that of Lohiaite socialism, which in crucial ways was a break

both with Gandhian reformism, and the mechanical Marxist focus on 'class' which until then had affected all sections of socialists in India.

After independence Lohia broke with the Congress to form the Socialist Party (SP). In 1952 the Socialist Party formed an alliance with the Kisan Mazdur Praja Paksh (a Party with its biggest base in Andhra, drawing on the Ranga non-communist rural organizing tradition, though Acharya Kripalani was its nationally known leader). It led to the formation the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and in 1955 Lohia and other 'Left leaning militants' broke from the PSP to revive the Socialist Party, which had its greatest national base in the South.²⁴⁴ In the 'Marxist-Lohiaite' debates that were to take place in the context of Karnataka's Dalit Movement, Marxists accused the Lohiaites of ignoring the immediate exploiters of Dalit agricultural labourers in their policy of trying to have a 'Dalit-Sudra alliance' that included in it the dominant castes. It was also argued that the Lohiaites tended to fall into reformist illusions regarding electoral politics when those close to them came to power in Karnataka.

To a large degree, Lohia's intervention sought to rectify the Marxist neglect of caste by attempting to give a specific programme on caste issues, and by seeing the caste system as a specific structure of oppression in Indian society. Lohia saw caste as a crucial aspect of domination and exploitation in India, and projected an alliance of 'Shudras, Harijans, Muslims, Adivasis and women' as central to a revolutionary movement. He also stressed the need to build up the leadership of these sections. Lohia himself was perfectly aware that sections of 'Shudras' were often the most brutal direct oppressors of the Dalits in Karnataka and other parts of the nation. At times he argued that such castes as the Nairs, Mudaiars (vellalas), Reddis, Marathas, Lingayats and Vokkaligas were not actually 'Shudras' but 'for all practical purposes equal to the Kshatriya-Vaishya of the North'.

He also stressed the need to deal with local exploitation even when they were part of a broader alliance of the oppressed.²⁴⁶ At certain parts Lohia urged that the anti-caste cause be taken up through 'class organizations', with the Kisan Panchayat in particular playing a major role with the argument that the subordination of the peasant mass organizations to the upper-caste party leadership blocked such a churning.²⁴⁷ In fact the major entry of 'Lohiaism' into Karnataka's socio-political life seems to have taken place in the context of what some have called one of the few real peasant movements in recent decades, the 'Kagodu Satyagraha' in 1950-51, in Shimoga District.²⁴⁸ Lohia actively participated in it. The movement won no dramatic victories because it neglected the scheduled castes and agricultural wage issues. But the provision of vethbegar by backward caste tenants was halted and landlord - tenant relations were formalized. Lohiaism did not come to Karnataka as an ideology of full-scale Dalit liberation but rather as a reformist trend which was in some ways compatible with the liberal co-operation patterns that had been established during the 1950s. The Hindu temples were totally denied to the untouchables in the past in Karnataka. This traditional religious sanction was implicitly obeyed by them. No attempt was made either by them to enter temples or by the caste Hindus to allow them inside the temple, barring a few cases as reported by Hardgrave and Galanter. From 1930, there have been, however, attempts by the government as well as enlightened Hindus to allow Dalits to enter the temple.²⁵¹ In Mysore, the temple at Melkote was thrown (in 1930s) open to the Scheduled Castes by the temple authorities who were influenced by the religious leaders. However, this did not spread to other places.

Role of DSS other organizations in mobilizing Dalits

In order to work out the modalities of the movement a meeting was called at Siddharth Hostel, Mysore in October 1975. Activists of different Dalit organizations from Kolar, Bangalore, Bhadravathi, and Mysore attended the meeting. The

meeting decided to appoint a committee to draft a manifesto for the proposed Dalit organisation. A conference of the Dalit Lekhakara Mattu Kalavidara Sangha (An association of Dalit writers and artists) was organised at Bhadravathi in 1976 to discuss the future Dalit Organisation. In June 1977 at a meeting the different Dalit associations of the state were merged to form one united organisation.

The new organisation was named Karnataka Dalit Sangharsha Samiti. A state level DSS meeting was held in December 1978 in Bhadravathi and Prof. B. Krishnappa was unanimously elected the State Convener. Till 1984, however, DSS had no constitution of its own. It was adopted on 18-11-1984 at Bheem Nagar, Dharwad. DSS organisation is modelled on the pattern common among the many organizations functioning in the Indian parliamentary democratic system. It has a decentralized structure. Usually the assembly conducts the open discussion. The members are elected through elections. The resolutions in the meeting are passed on the basis of majority vote. It has its own hierarchical structure through which its affairs are conducted according to the descending and ascending manner. Scope for communalism, groupism and autocracy is attempted to be kept at bay and free and fair discussion is the rule of the game. According to the constitution of the DSS, elections are held once in two years. Representation is confined to Dalits, backward castes, minorities, sweepers, leather workers and unorganized labourers. To become the member of the DSS he must be an active member having a year's service. Disciplinary actions are initiated on the basis of consensus.²⁷⁰ DSS spread to every village in the state wherever even a small branch of the Ambedkar Yuvak Mandal was functioning. Hundreds of such branches were brought together under the single banner of DSS.²⁷¹ Within half a decade of its existence, the DSS was able to muster sufficient strength to fight any atrocity against Dalits at all levels of the state, the district, taluk and village. The branches of DSS at all these levels organized their own determined, devoted and morally committed cadres. This is the only mass-based, state level organization of the Dalits in Karnataka which has over a million members constituting its social base. The DSS primarily organised its action according to the foundation laid down by Ambedkar who strongly subscribed to the three fundamentals - education, organisation and struggle.

Keeping Ambedkar as the ideologue of the DSS, it began to concentrate on the need to bring the different sections of the Dalits under one banner and thereby strengthen their social base. Though it succeeded at the initial stages it did not continue to pose a threat to the dominant values that kept them low and despised as there was a split in DSS over the issue of leadership. However during its emergence, and later when it was being spread to different parts of the state, the DSS had raised the following fundamental issues: Defending the interests of the Dalits against any lapse; keeping a watch over the implementation of the constitutional provisions; organizing protest marches against the unconstitutional and anti-social behaviour of the upper castes, protesting against public policies detrimental to Dalit interests; taking up issues related to land and property and organising cultural meets of Dalits regularly as an integral part of the mobilization attempt. However, it is said that given the complex nature of problems of the Dalits, the DSS began to operate as different organizations that successfully reached different categories of Dalit masses. Dalit Students Federation (DSF): It has its own constitution, which clearly defines the aims and objectives, rights and responsibilities of the DSF. This constitution was published in 1983.

It arranges symposia, organizes discussion and debates and tries to deal with the problems of students. It struggles for better hostel facilities and increase in scholarship and it fights against unemployment and atrocities committed on Dalit students. Almost every District head quarters has a branch of DSF and they came together once a year to show their solidarity under the banner of the DSS. It has organised 3 state level conferences. The first one was at Kolar on 13th and 14th February,

1983.273 Its manifesto was released on the occasion. It focused on the discrimination between clans and castes, social atrocities, casteist nature of Hinduism, educational discrimination between higher and lower castes, spreading the ideology of Ambedkar and freedom from hunger, untouchability and other problems besetting the poor in general and Dalits in particular. The second conference was held at Bangalore in February 1987. The problems of Dalit students, their exploitation and atrocities were discussed, resolutions were passed and remedies to these concerns were suggested. The third conference was held in Gulbarga district on 8th and 9th February, 1992.

Discussions were held on various issues like compulsory education, residential schools, scholarship facilities, hostel facilities for educated youth etc. The conference also demanded that the government provide the facilities at the earliest. Dalit Women's Federation (DWF): It came into existence in 1982- 83. It also pressurized the government to extend protection to Dalit women subject to various forms of discrimination and atrocities. It conducted a training programme in 1983 and a second one in 1989 at Bangalore. It also fought for equal pay for equal work for women and support to cottage industry. It conducted workshops jointly with the co-operation of DSS. This organization of Dalit women in Karnataka took up issues of women both employed and unemployed. It called for punishment to all perpetrators of heinous acts on Dalit women. It also struggled against superstitions and demeaning practices. In 1984, members of DWF at Chandragutti (of Shimoga district) opposed nude worship annually held at the festival of the village deity and demanded a total ban on such worship.

Conclusion

Veerashaivism with its stress on equality left a deep mark on Dalits although over the years this socio-religious protest itself began to spawn a caste system distinctive to it. Karnataka did not witness the strong anti-caste protests that were to mark the social landscape of Tamil-speaking parts of Mahar Province in the early part of the 20th century.

In fact, Dalits came under the specific spell of state paternalism under the Mysore Rulers; the influence of Aryasamaj in the regions ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad and of social reformers in other parts of the present state. The influence exerted by Swami Vivekananda on Mysore rulers brought Dalits of the former Mysore State into their concern. Gandhi's stance on untouchability, his campaign for its abolition and his closeness to Mysore rulers further reinforced such paternalism.

Comparatively, the influence of Ambedkar on Mysore prior to Independence was feeble. Social reform was to be an important feature of response to untouchability in those parts of the state which were directly under the British Rule. To thwart the Islamizing influence of Nizam's regime on the untouchables, Arya Samaj in the northern and north-eastern part of the state attempted to bring the untouchables ritually within the fold of Hinduism by resorting to such programmes as "shuddhi".

After Independence, there was a gradual percolation of the influence of Ambedkar clubs in the Dalit pockets of urban and rural Karnataka but Dalits continued to look at the state as the primary agency of their emancipation. In the 1960's Lohiaism was to become quite significant in several parts of Karnataka and its ideological impact was to become an important component of the making of the Dalit consciousness in the state.

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