



The Rise And Disarray Of Dalit Movement In Karnataka

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In 1997, a flock of sheep belonging to both Vokkaligas and Dalits was stolen from Kambalapalli village in Karnataka's Kolar district. The upper castes unilaterally decided that Venkataramanappa, Anjanappa, and Ravanappa—all Dalits— had stolen the sheep. Though they denied the allegation, a police complaint was filed. The Dalits fled their village along with their families out of fear. But it turned out that the whole thing was orchestrated as a conspiracy to falsely implicate the Dalits.

One of them, Venkataramanappa returned to the village a few days later. Upon his arrival, more than 40 persons from the upper caste community chased him to his house and stoned him to death, in front of his wife, and other family members. He was buried but under the stones. All the culprits were released on bail.

Such “inhuman behaviours of high caste people in the society” triggered the Dalit movement in Karnataka, activists say.

Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), the mother organisation, was formed in 1974. In all these years, it was a formidable force in launching protests against any incident of caste discrimination in Karnataka. However, decades later, it is in disarray amid continuing crimes against Dalits in the state, say experts.

The Rise of the DSS

Your dominance and violence can never halt our liberation

This was the slogan of the DSS in the 1980s, across Karnataka. Dalit leaders, who were a part of the organisation when it first convened, recall one specific incident—'the boosa (fodder) incident'—that helped unite Dalits.

On November 15 in 1973, Basavalingappa, a Dalit ex-minister of the Karnataka government, was invited to a function in Mysuru. In his speech, he said, "There is a great deal of boosa in Kannada literature." He was directly questioning the absence of Dalit representation in Kannada literature, which was dominated by upper-caste writers, and this had gone unchallenged for decades.

But his statement was misinterpreted by the media as an attack on 'Kannada pride'. Despite being the cynosure of the movement and a victim of caste-based politics, he lost his ministerial position due to 'yellow journalism', recalls Kotiganahalli Ramaiah, a Dalit poet, playwright, philosopher and an instrumental figure in the Dalit movement from Karnataka.

But the boosa incident is remembered as a trigger for the unification of Dalit writers in the state. In fact, Dalit agitation and literature were considered two sides of the same coin. In the words of eminent writer and poet Devanoor Mahadeva: "If a handful of depictions of Dalit world in my stories could change the direction of Kannada literature, it is unimaginable to think what change may happen if every man of this dark continent speaks."

The Dalit writers, however, believed that there was an urgent need for *bandaya* (rebellion) and were of the view that it demanded more than academically technical language. Thus, emerged the Bandaya Literary Movement in the 1970s wherein writers brought out the very contradiction that led to their unification—the question of caste exclusion in the Kannada cultural sphere. The writers chose to write in colloquial language, departing from the lyrical poetry of former writers.

How the DSS Fought Caste

The unity showcase in literature, awareness, protest rallies, and gatherings of Dalits were able to send a shudder to the perpetrators of atrocities, says Dr Aravind Malagatti, a professor of Kannada at the Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, Mysore University.

Malagatti, an acclaimed and much-awarded writer in Kannada, is also the author of the first Dalit autobiography in the language. His book *Karya* draws heavily from his own life. Using irony, sarcasm and humour, Malagatti reveals the politics and power deeply embedded within the Dalit community.

He recalls one such trigger that helped mobilise Dalits to fight the oppressors. In 1979, Sheshagiriappa, a person belonging to Kumbara (potter) community, coming under the most backward castes, was murdered by Vokkaligas after he opposed them when they tried to snatch away his piece of land. His daughter was gangraped at Hunasi Kote, Malur Taluk, Kolar district.

The police were not able to arrest all the accused owing to the political clout of the Vokkaliga community. Even though Sheshagiriappa did not belong to the Scheduled Caste, the DSS organised mass processions. They marched with a *mashaal* to the Vidhana Soudha, which was in session at that time. The *mashaal* symbolised his spirit marching towards Karnataka Legislature, asking the leaders why the culprits were not brought into law and why he was not protected by his state.

While the accused were acquitted of all their charges years later, the mobilisation resulted in a wide awakening, particularly among Dalit masses, and in the emergence of the DSS as a strong force in Karnataka. Writings of Dalit leaders never fail to mention Sheshagiriappa while chronicling the rise of the DSS.

“They gave nightmares to those who perpetrated atrocities on Dalits and to the politicians who denied working for the betterment of Dalits. Issues like casteism, untouchability, atrocities against women, genocides, land disputes and fake caste certificates were taken up and addressed. There were fewer cases of the struggle for wages and the consequent murders. Cases of social boycott were less frequent,” Malagatti recalls.

While the early period of the Dalit movement was restricted to agitating against such caste atrocities, it entered the foray of politics in 1983 and succumbed to its forces.

Factionalism and Politics

Dalit leaders and proponents of this movement soon found themselves entangled in an existential predicament regarding the future trajectory of the DSS. Some leaders believed that the Congress party, which ruled the nation since independence, failed to help the Dalits; so they supported a non-Congress party. Others canvassed against Dalit politicians from reserved constituencies who were largely absent from their role. Such ideological shifts led to multiple splits.

The turning point came in 1991 when globalisation and new economic norms fractured the unit, says Kotiganahalli Ramaiah, who quit college before completing his degree and joined the DSS. “Every unit has to be broken. The group has now split into many splinter groups and we can’t expect it to return to the vigour it was once known for,” Ramaiah says. He recalls how many members of the DSS were also co-opted by mainstream political parties of the then Janata Party under Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde—the group was in power from 1983-89. Even Siddalingaiah, the popular Kannada Dalit icon, who co-founded the DSS, became a Member of the Legislative Council in 1988 with Hegde’s backing.

Recently, in 2019, when his opinion was sought on the state of the DSS, Siddalingaiah said: “There are too many factions within the group now. It is no longer a pressure group that can make the establishment take note of it. It lacks mature leadership. I wish that all the splinter groups would come together and fight for a common cause. Sadly, there is very low ideological awareness. But that is the state of all progressive movements; be it the farmers, the labourers, the Left... all of them.” He passed away in 2021, due to Covid-19-related complications.

What was left behind was an organisation that now depended on the support of the bureaucracy to fight for the untouchables. As a result, various factions emerged to negotiate for individual gains at the cost of the people in the villages.

“Dalit organisations are working as the sub-offices of political parties. There is a dire need to come out of this attitude. Though societal, literary and cultural organisations are complementary to each other, they should be built as strong powers on their own. Dalit politicians must come out of compromise politics. Political organisations should emerge strongly with their own identity,” Malagatti says.

Future of Unity

When asked if the DSS will ever unite with the same vigour again, Ramaiah says: “Back then, the atrocities seemed to have a reason. But now, the forms of atrocities have changed. Today, if a Dalit wears a watch, he could be murdered. If a Dalit goes to a marriage procession, he could be murdered,” he says. But, he sees hope in the younger generation, who he believes are more intellectual owing to greater access to educational opportunities, to take forward the movement.

One such small ray of hope of unity was seen on December 6, 2022, on the death anniversary of Dr BR Ambedkar. In the grounds of National College in Bengaluru, which was closer to mainstream media unlike districts of North Karnataka, which have witnessed many cases of caste atrocities in the last few decades, Dalit organisations, cutting across factions, passed a resolution demanding that the Karnataka government provides for internal reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in accordance with their population.

It was due to the pressure of organisations like the DSS that the Justice Sadashiva Commission was set up in 2005 to look into the issue of internal reservation. In 2012, the Commission submitted the report and concluded that reservations should be made based on population figures. But the report’s observations, along with the latest government’s election promises, are yet to be enforced.

Even as the demands for a Dalit chief minister, publishing caste census results and internal reservations have marred recent Dalit discourses, caste atrocities continue unabated in the state.

According to reports quoting the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2017, Karnataka topped the cases of atrocities against Dalits in India with 12.8 cases per

one lakh population. Activists are careful to point out that these were the cases that have been reported.

Decades after the Kambalapalli incident in Kolar, caste-based segregation and untouchability have gone unchallenged in the district since its constitutional abolition in 1950. In some recent cases, a young boy's family was fined Rs 60,000 for merely having touched a part of the religious apparatus on the itinerant deity. Another young man died by suicide when he was tied to a tree and beaten up by upper-caste people. In some villages, the Madiga Dalits are not allowed to visit the same temple as the upper caste Vokkaligas and Reddys.

Chandrakant Yatanoor, an academic, wrote in a 2010 article in the Voice of Dalit—“If the DSS in Karnataka managed to shed all its inherent weaknesses and internal divisions, one day it would set a good example to the Dalit movement all over the country. The lakhs of Dalit people of Karnataka would be ever grateful to the DSS if they become united and forget their rivalries and differences.”

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