

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES ON DALIT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Comprehensive history presents that saga of Dalit people has been suffering from social, economic, religious, political, and various forms of discrimination and atrocities from times immemorial. Such socially implanted caste-based discrimination resulted in number of Dalit movements in India. The paper examines the various forms of the Dalit movement, traces Dalit problems, and their mobilization for the Dalit movement. The paper also brings forth the studies made on such movements. Thus, the paper examines the importance of the Dalit movement in India.

Keywords: *Scheduled castes, Dalits, Dalit movement, atrocities, mobilization, conversion, migration.*

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Introduction

The caste system has its roots in ancient India and was transformed by various ruling elites in the post-Vedic period and continuing till modern times. It originated from four *Varnas*, a system of social stratification based on occupation and virtues mentioned in *Rig Veda* :

“Why they divided Purusa, has many ways did they apportion him? His (God’s) mouth was Brahmin, his arms were the Rajanya (Kshatriya), his thighs the Vaishya, from his feet the Shudra was born.”

Those who fall out of this system because of their grievous sins are ostracised as outcasts (untouchables) and considered outside the Varna system. This fifth Varna or Panchama formed by *Dalits*, as the word suggests scattered or broken in Sanskrit. Also known as *atishudra*, *antyaja*, *avarna*, or *namashudra*. Constitutional term for them has *scheduled castes* (SC).

From time immemorial, they were and being subjected to untouchability and with various social, cultural, political, economic, educational, and religious disabilities. Dalit consciousness about these issues of their degradation, deprivation, and poverty resulted in various movements called as Dalit Movements. According to **T.K. Oommen** (1990), Dalit movements are primordial Dalit collectivities that have similar histories of oppression simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system, although in different regional-linguistic areas and inspired by varying visions of their own and society’s future. **L.S.S. O’Malley** (1968) portrays the Dalit movement as a movement for upliftment of the untouchables initiated and sustained by others.

The saga of Dalit sufferings, issues, and Dalit movements have been studied by various scholars like S.K. Gupta, J.R. Kamble, Juergensmeyer, Zelliot, A.C. Pradhan, Trilok Nath, John Webster, G. Omvedt, Jayshree Gokhale, Jogdand, T.K. Oommen, Ghanshyam Shah, Neera Burra, Nandu Ram, V.T. Rajshekar Shetty and so on. Amidst all the plethora of Dalit studies, **Barbara Joshi** (1982) reveals from her study that Dalit leaders advocated four alternative paths to equality i.e. political power, economic independence, religious reforms, and social reforms. While **Nandu Ram** (1995) describes three types of Dalit activism : Movement against socio-economic exploitation; Movement for better access to the opportunities and for the realization of goals of liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity; and movements for gaining self-respect. **Ghanshyam Shah** (1990) in his book *Social Movements in India (1990)* classified Dalit movements into two categories –

(1) *Reformative Movements* – They were executed to the reform caste system

which was discriminatory, exploitative, and oppressive. They can be divided into three heads (a) Bhakti Movement (b) Non-Vedantic or Non-Brahmanic Movement (c) Sanskritic or Sanskritization movements.

- (2) *Alternative Movements* – They were executed to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by conversion, education, economic status, political power, and reservation. Under this category, there come all the religious and secular movements. Both the categories used politics as a means of dalit change and emancipation.

So, the Dalit movement in India can be divided into two parts, addressing their own causes of inception, types of deprivation and oppression, and factors of mobilization. In reformative movements, degrading ritual status as the main cause and untouchability is the resultant oppression. Various socio-cultural reform movements were the mobilizing force. Similarly in alternative movements, powerlessness, poverty, religion and other disabilities of Dalits are the causes. The resultant oppression of these causes is political dis entrenchment, economic and religious exploitation. Thoughts of political participation, reservation in jobs, bargaining for economic betterment, religious conversion, and Dalit identity mobilized Dalits for alternative movements.

Reformative Movements

I Bhakti Movement – After the 15th century A.D., two religious traditions emerged in India.

- (i) *Sagun Tradition* – Followers of this tradition worshiped and followed Vishnu
- (ii) and Shiv. They preached equality of all caste but subscribed castes social
- (iii) order or varnashrama.
- (ii) *Nirguna Tradition* – In this followers preached formless god, resisted brahminical hierarchical order, promised social equality and salvation. Examples of followers of this tradition are Kabir, Ravidas, etc. **Nandini Goptu** (2001) revealed that this tradition became popular among urban Dalits in the 20th century. Other studies by **Jayant Lele** (1998) and **D.N. Lorenzen** (1987) describe that followers of this trend defied and challenged the Brahmanical hierarchical social order.

II Neo-Vedantik or Non-Brahmanic Movement

These movements were initiated by Hindu religious and social reformers. They were against Brahmanic superiority and untouchability.

- (i) *Arya Samaj* – Dayanand Saraswati founded Arya Samaj in 1876. He worked for the upliftment of SCs and started various educational and welfare schemes

for the cause.

Satish Kumar Sharma (1985) did a full-fledged study on the relationship between Arya Samaj and untouchables in Punjab. Other studies on Arya Samaj studies were done by Shah, Jordens Sharma, Pimpley, and Sharma.

(ii) **Other Neo-Vedantik Movements**

a. *Self Respect Movement in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu.* In Tamil Nadu, the self-respect movement was founded by *E.V. Rama Swami Naiker*, also known as *Periyar*. It was against the dominance of Brahmin priests. It was for forcible temple entry, burning of Manusmriti, and propagation of weddings without Brahmin priests.

b. *Adi dharma, Adi Andhra Movements – Bengal*

c. *Adi Hindu Movement – U.P.*

d. *Adi dharma Movement – U.P.* – **Nandini Gooptu** (2001) in her study in Meerut found that these movements were not against the caste system but against assigning low roles to untouchables by Aryan Hindu.

e. *Adi dharma Movement in Punjab* – A full-fledged study was made by **Mark Juergensmeyer** (1982) on Adi Dharma in Punjab. He talked about Adi Dharma Movement from the 1920s to 1946 and its revival in 1970. His remarkable study is a proof of how religion played important role in the low caste struggle for social change.

It was an anti untouchability movement initiated by leader *Mangoo Ram*. Its headquarter was in Jalandhar (Punjab). This movement had broader regional development. The main idea underlying the movement was that the untouchables form a distinct religious community (a quam) like Hindu, Sikhs, Muslims, etc.

(iii) *Satnami Community Movement* – This movement took place in Chhattisgarh. An ethnographic study on this was made by **Saurabh Dube** (2001). It was a religious-social reform movement led by *Ghasidas*. He threw Hindu Gods and Goddesses. In the next 100 years, the sects have undergone organizational structure changes especially between 1925-50.

(iv) *Nair Movement* – This movement was led by Nairs of Travancore under the leadership of *C.V. Raman Pillai*. This movement was against the dominance of Namboodri Brahmin and non-Malayali brahmins.

III. **Sanskritic Movement or Sanskritization Movement** – Under this movement, untouchables followed Sanskritic norms, beliefs, and rituals;

struggled for higher status; abandoning traditional occupation, and started improving their economic conditions. Studies made by **Shyamlal** (1981) and **Gurbir Brar** (1985) show that even following Sanskritic norms, they are still treated as untouchable in their place of residence.

(i) *Ezavah / Iravas Movement* – This is also known as SINDP Yogan. Ezavah an untouchable caste, formed a caste organization in Kerala in 1903 under the leadership of *Shri Narayan*. They initiated some customs of higher caste, quitting low social and religious practices. They opened Ezahava temples, sought to create self-esteem by building economic strength (**Dilip Menon**, 1993).

Aiyappan (1965) says that they bagained from the government economic and political opportunities, did satyagraha for temple entry, and adopted Sanskritic norms.

(ii) *Nadar or Shanars Movement, Tamil Nadu* – Nadars, the untouchable caste of toddy trappers organized movement in the late 19th century due to civic disabilities. They entered politics by supporting Justice Party in the 1930s and later congress. *C.N. Mudaliar, T.M. Nair, and Chetti* were the leaders. **Robert Hardgrave** (1969) says that they moved from lower rungs of ritual hierarchy to a position of status and power. Nadar Mahajan Sangam, a voluntary organization played important role in their political mobilization, community integration, raising funds for welfare and educational work.

(iii) *Mahar Movement* – It was an anti-untouchability movement started in the 1920s by *Bhim Rao Ambedkar*, who launched unsuccessful satyagraha against untouchability. To him, through political means, only social and economic equality of Dalits can be achieved. **Eleanor Elliot** studied Mahar Movement from 1890-1956 (till the death of Ambedkar). She limits the movement to caste only. She found that in 1935 Ambedkar gave up temple entry and renounced Hinduism. In the early 1950s, he found Buddhism as appropriate religion. He used modern methods (petitions, newspapers, conferences, depressed class institutes, political parties). He concentrated on using political power, political parties for Dalit upliftment. On Ambedkar, she said, “He is the Dalit of Dalits. He has no identity as a Mahar. He is for all India.”

(iv) *Palli Movement* – A lower caste in north Tamil Nadu called Palli claimed Kshatriya status in 1871. They started imitating upper caste customs, and called themselves Vanniya Kula Kshatriya.

Alternative Movements

I **Political** According to **J.R. Kamble** (1979), the aim of dalits' effort was to gain political representation in legislatures between 1917 and 1932. He considered Dalit emancipation as the ongoing work of Dalits and all liberal and fair-minded people.

(i) *Justice Movement* – It was organized by Nadars, against Brahmanic predominance in service, politics, and education. *C.N. Mudaliar, T.M. Nair, and P. Tyagaraya Chetti* founded the justice party showing loyalty to Britishers for their betterment and upliftment in government jobs and legislature.

(ii) *Mahar Movement* – *Ambedkar* wanted political power for scheduled castes so to change their socio-economic state. He formed Independent Labour Party (ILP), Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF), Republic Party (1956), and other associations for their political mobilization. In the 1930s, Dalits demanded a separate electorate for scheduled castes under Poona Pact. Large-scale satyagraha (1946) was launched by scheduled castes before the state assembly election in Poona, Nagpur, and Lucknow for a separate electorate (**Zelliot**, 1969).

As per **Trilok Nath** (1987), in the 1930s he demanded a separate electorate in Poona Pact (1932) but due to its failure, scheduled castes felt cheated. Independent Labour Party (ILP) was organized by Ambedkar for protecting the interest of laborers, dominated by the Mahar caste. According to **Eleanor Zelliot** (1969), this party took caste association form. Dalits have grassroots organizations and under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar having common demand for political recognition, own political representation, and for dignity. In 1954, the Scheduled Caste Federation was formed for the reservation of scheduled castes in jobs and politics. (Verba and Nath) In 1956, Republican Party was formed by broadening the SCF base by including SC, ST, OBC, in it.

According to **Jayshree Gokhle** (1993) “after 1930 Mahar Movement became class movement.”

II **Economic**

(i) *Harijan Agricultural Movement* – In the 1960s, the land grab movement was executed by agricultural scheduled caste laborers of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, UP, Bihar, Maharashtra. They demanded higher wages. Various organizations were formed by agricultural laborers in the 1970s and 1980s to organize and mobilize themselves for

their issues like Harijan Labourers Association and Rural Community Development Association (TN), Association of Rural Poor (West Bengal), Rural Harijan Agricultural Development Association (Andhra Pradesh). These organizations launched several struggles for economic (increasing wages) and social (eradicating untouchability) issues (**Von der Weid and Poitevin**, 1981).

According to **Ghanshyam Shah** (1988), “during 1974 & 1978 several struggles in Tamil Nadu united the Harijan and Non-Harijan agricultural laborers.”

(ii) *Mass Migration* – In the 1980s, five such incidents of mass migration took place as a result of the atrocities and oppression of Dalits. **Harshad Desai** and **Chandu Maheria** (2002) studied an incident in 1989 at Sambarda Village (Gujarat). This micro-level movement was for self-esteem and which resulted in their shift from Sambarda to Swamannagar. Desai and Maheria found that villagers undertook ‘Gujarat’s (mass Migration) to protest against torture and atrocities and camped in open in front of collector’s office for 131 days. They wanted alternative settlement and wanted their self-respect and dignity. Villagers’ said, “We become slaves the moment we enter the village ... we want our self-respect not mercy.” So, they were given Swamannagar village settlement. This movement mobilized Dalits of different parts of Gujarat.

III Religious

(i) *Vaikom Satyagraha* – It was the first temple entry movement in 1924-25. It was organized for the rights of lower castes and untouchables like Ezavah to use roads by them near the Travancore temple. It was mobilized by Ezavah leaders like *T.K. Madhavan* with the support of Nair leaders like *K.P.K. Menon* and *K. Kellappan* (**Manvandra Pratap Singh**, 2000).

(ii) *Mass Conversion* – In the 1930s, *Ambedkar* concluded that renouncing their religion is the only way to improve the status of untouchables. He appealed to them “You have nothing to lose, except your religion” (**Keer**, 1954). In 1935, Ambedkar gave up temple entry and renounced Hinduism. In 1952, Ambedkar and his followers went for mass conversion (**Zelliot**, 1969).

In the early 1950s, he found Buddhism as an appropriate religion as it is an equality prone, anti-caste or anti-Brahmin Religion (**Owen Lynch**, 1969). As per **Jayshree Gokhale** (1993) also, Mahars went for mass conversion in 1952

in search of a 'New Identity'. This conversion spread Dalit consciousness (Wilkinson and Thomas, 1972).

IV Assertion of Dalit Identity

Local-level collective action against discrimination was made by Dalits for their self-identity. For realizing the Dalit identity, statues of Ambedkar were erected and demand for a piece of land was made from local authorities to install statues of Ambedkar. **Zelliot** (1969) says, "the that statue of Ambedkar has symbolic value." It gives the message of courage, equality education, success, and empowerment through political participation.

(i) *Dalit Panther Movement* – In the early 1970s, it started in urban areas of Maharashtra later spread to Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and other states. (**Gokhale** 1979, **Jogdand** 1991, **Yagati**, 2003). The urban middle class was a participant in this movement. Dalit panthers discarded dominant culture and tried to build alternative socio-cultural identities. They organized demonstrations against scheduled caste oppression and published literature in the original language. They protested Hindu intellectual traditions. This literature got popular in the 1990s. As per **Gopal Guru** (2001), cultural and literary activists derived their inspiration from Ambedkar and from similar emancipatory traditions of Kabir and Bhakti (Warkari tradition). Though **Sharmila Rege** (1998) advocated that this movement ignored the oppression of Dalit women.

(ii) *Jatav Movement* – **Owen Lynch** (1969) studied Jatavs of Agra. They easily accepted Ambedkar as their 'culture hero'. He found a place in their folk ballads, as an untouchable leader or a saint, who abjured and defied the caste system. **Lynch** says that he was real source of help and leadership; a leader who is an untouchable and a revolutionary, who can better understand them than Gandhi. He provided a focus of identification and a sense of vicarious satisfaction for many data longings.

(iii) *Kaivatas Movement in Madinapur* – Kaivatas were low caste people in Madinapur in Bengal but being economically well off they started calling each other Mahishyas. In 1901, they formed Mahishya Samiti which later participated in the nationalist movement.

Conclusion

Thus, the Dalit movement, under the torchbearers like Ambedkar, Mangoo Ram mobilized both middle-class untouchables for the issues of Dalit identity, conversion, reservation, political power, and as well as local-level untouchables against

Brahmanic dominance, the grim practice of untouchability, disabilities, and discrimination.

J.R. Kamble (1979) says that British rule (provided conditions) and social reformers (changed the attitudes of scheduled castes) became the cause of Dalit rise and awakening.

Gail Omvedt (1994) calls the Dalit movement as part of a broader revolutionary democratic movement like nationalist, communist, socialist, and peasant movements. She describes it as an anti-systemic rather reformist movement.

While **Kancha Illaiah** (2001) advocates “in academic circles the movements have forced a section of intellectuals to critically review not only Indian traditions and culture but also the paradigms of modernity and Marxism.” Hence, it can be concluded that the Dalit movement in India surfaces the mobilization of downtrodden Dalits under the iconic leadership of various Dalit leaders, their assertion for Dalit identity, their craving for political, economic, social, and religious rights. Dalit movements and agitations reflect how Dalits lived in abject poverty and vicious circle of numerous atrocities and inhumanity. Dalit leaders have succeeded in building pressure on the ruling class to make appropriate reforms for dalit for their dignified living and emancipation. They brought the agenda of Dalit on Indian mainstream politics. They have also explored a large number of myths created by Brahmanical ideology. Dalit movements have inspired many dalit studies in India and enriched the sociological arena. In the last, it can be rightly concluded by saying of **Eleanor Zelliot** (1996).

“These movements integrated untouchables into Indian society in modern ways, from a state of slavery and dehumanization into equality through the use of modern methods based on education and the exercise of legal and political rights.”

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