

A DISCUSSION ON THE DALIT MOVEMENT DURING BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA

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Introduction

The second stage of Dalit movement they adopted a confrontationist approach which was demonstrated in Chowdar tank movement, the Kala Ram temple movement, the burning of Manusmriti in which “Dalits were directly in confrontation with the British government and the Hindu society”. However, the author has glossed over the role of judiciary in restoring some human rights to Dalits during the British rule in India. Moreover, the intervention which Dr. Ambedkar sought from courts in addressing the issues of disability and social exclusion of Dalits is of considerable relevance. The author mentions that the third and significant stage of Dalit movement heralded with the commencement of Indian Constitution which provided a vast space for democratic assertion and recognition. The democratic paradigm has heightened the Dalit aspirations to a level where “Dalit politicians are thinking of occupying the chair of Prime Minister”.

The Rise of Dalit Movements

Though attempts were begun by the dalit castes from the late 19th century to organise themselves, the various sections of the dalit liberation movement really began to take off from the 1920s, in the context of the strong social reform and anti-caste movements which were penetrating the middle-caste peasantry and the national movement which was beginning to develop a genuine mass base.

The most important of the early dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab (organised 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra mainly based among Mahars which had its organisational beginnings in 1924; the Nama-shudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu; the Adi-Andhra movement in Andhra which had its first conference in 1917; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in UP; and the organising of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.[10]

In most of the cases the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms provided a spark for the organization of dalits but the crucial background was the massive economic and political upheavals of the post-war period. The movements had a linguistic-national organisational base and

varied according to the specific social characteristics in different areas, but there was considerable all-India exchange of ideas and, by the 1930s, this was beginning to take the shape of all-India conferences with Ambedkar emerging as the clear national leader of the movement.

The founding of the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942, and its later conversion into the Republican Party, gave dalits a genuine all-India political organisation though this remained weak except in certain specific localities and did not by any means constitute the entire dalit movement. The social reform and anti-caste movements played an important nurturing and facilitating though often an ambivalent role in relation to the dalits. Thus the movements in Maharashtra and Madras to a significant extent came out of, and were influenced by the non-Brahmin movements in those areas, especially their radical sections the Satyashodhak Samaj and Self-Respect movements.

The Punjabi Ad-Dharm leaders had nearly all been previously in the Arya Samaj. Brahmo Samaj upper-caste reformers helped to instigate and aid the Nama-shudra movement and the Adi-Andhras. Dalits in Kerala were influenced and helped by the Ezhava-based movement under Sri Narayana Guru.

In nearly all these cases, the ambivalence in the relationship and the reason why dalits in the end found it necessary to organise on their own, came from the fact that the caste-Hindu-based movements failed to create a really radical anti-caste unity among dalits and lower-middle caste Hindus. The Arya Samaj and non-Brahmin movements in particular aspired to create such a unity and did succeed to an extent in establishing a basis for radical action among sections of the middle caste peasants. But this, proved insufficient.

Even here, there was an important difference: the northern-based Arya Samaj never really challenged the 'Aryan' notion or 'chaturvarnya' as such; rather, it sought to 'purify' the lower castes, whereas the non-Brahmin movements mounted a thorough-going ideological challenge to the whole notion of caste hierarchy as such and sought to create a mass unity on the basis not only of modern secularism and scientific thinking

but also in terms of being once-united original inhabitants of the country (the 'Aryan theory' turned upside down).

Thus, whereas the Punjabi Ad-Dharm movement broke with the Arya Samaj both organisationally and ideologically (though the Arya Samaj itself continued to foster some anti-untouchability activities), the dalit movements of the south and west accepted and even carried forward the general ideology of the broader non-Brahmin movements but criticised the middle-caste non-Brahmins for betraying this ideology and falling prey to Brahmanic culture as well as to pure self-interest in gaining government jobs and posts.

And this criticism was not wrong. For, the middle position of the non-Brahmins in particular those whose claims to land and access to higher education gave them the potential of becoming the privileged classes in the developing capitalist society made their opposition to feudalism an ambivalent one. Thus they became 'anti-Brahmin' more than 'anti-caste'. And, in the important case of Maharashtra, by the time the non-Brahmin peasant movement joined the national movement it did so by almost surrendering to the upper-caste and bourgeois leadership of the National Congress, not by maintaining its own social radicalism or any separate peasant organisation. The isolation and 'separatism' of the dalit movements was thus forced on them.

Thus, in Maharashtra, Ambedkar's movement developed with support from leaders such as Shahu Maharaj and with many activists coming from the Satyashodhak movement and out of schools founded by non-Brahmin leaders. Ambedkar frequently referred to himself as a 'non-Brahmin' (not simply an 'untouchable') scholar, and became a spokesman in the legislative assembly for all the non-Brahmin ('backward' and 'depressed classes' in British terminology) groups. His Marathi speeches often used the *shetji-bhatji* terminology of the Satyashodhak movement. Yet he consistently criticised the opportunism of non-Brahmin leaders and, in the end, after the non-Brahmin movement was absorbed into the Congress party under Gandhi's leadership and its radical elements forgotten, the separatism in Ambedkar's movement came to dominate.

The key point of the caste system and the reform movements in question is the Dalits or untouchables who had virtually no right under the caste system. The Dalit movement was like the inner circle of the Indian reformation and modernization.

As we are bound to the story of Dalit movement; from now on we will focus on the Dalits more than other upper caste reformers and talk. The custom of burning the widows alive with the body of their dead husband

about them restricts their stories within their relations and effects over Dalit movement.

The rise of the Dalit Movement

Phule was something more than being a mentor or philosopher. He was also a man of action, organizing the people and establishing a new movement. We have talked about the school he founded before, which are not his only efforts to build a new Dalit society. He also became the pioneer of Dalit political movement with the establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873.

The breakdown of Indian intelligentsia under orthodox pressure, which saw the caste system as Baburao Bagul a Dalit writer criticized the very heart of religion: The intelligentsia, that is the Indian national leadership, divided the national liberation movement into two warring factions: a political movement and a social movement. They also declared those who organized social movements, those who theorized on agriculture and industry, to be stooges of the British and traitors.

The national movement was turned into a form of mythological movement and ancestor worship... Those who propounded inequality and did not wish society to be democratic, started eulogizing and sublimating history, mythology and ages gone by because, in those mythological and historical ages, they were the supreme victors and leaders... The Indian intelligentsias do not wish to accept the present with its revolutionary potential.

The revival of Vedic Hinduism within the minds of upper castes regarding a modern ideology, which is nationalism, concluded with a political movement that was nationalist, religious and of course anti-Dalit. It should be thought differently at the beginning of the reform movements that India should be a nation where equality between races, sexes and of course social classes was established. But in time it turned out to be totally different.

The emergence of autonomous Dalit movement could not therefore be taken kindly by the communist movement, as it saw the Dalit movement to be dividing the workers, diffusing the focus of the anti-imperialist struggle and being non-scientific. On its part, the Dalit movement not only did not find any answer to their specific caste exploitation but on the contrary total apathy about it in the communist movement. In their strategic formulation, the open anti-State stance of the communists moreover did not found favour with the Dalits.

As Gail Omvedt perceptibly observes, the autonomous Dalit movement had to engage with three forces in colonial society:

1. It developed in opposition to the socially and culturally pervasive and historically deep-rooted hegemony of Brahminical Hinduism.
2. It had to contend with the hegemony of the nationalist movement, which under the leadership of the Congress, strove to take over the agendas of several subaltern movements while restraining their democratic and egalitarian potential.
3. It had to face a difficult relationship with the communist movement which otherwise should have been its natural ally.

Conclusion

As we are bound to the story of Dalit movement; from now on we will focus on the Dalits more than other upper caste reformers and talk. The custom of burning the widows alive with the body of their dead husband about them restricts their stories within their relations and effects over Dalit movement.

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