

A STUDY ON DALIT WOMEN MOVEMENT IN TAMILNADU

M. VAISHNAVI* & Dr S. XAVIER**
UGC-RGNF Fellow / FT PhD Research Scholar
PG and Research Department of History,
Periyar EVR College (Autonomous),
Tiruchirappalli – 620023

ABSTRACT

Since long ago, Dalit women in India have been living in silence through the centuries. They have remained and acted as mute spectators to their exploitation, oppression, and barbarity done to them. They do not have control over their own bodies, earnings, and lives. Instead, somebody else controls them. The extreme expression of violence, exploitation, and oppression against them is visible in forms of hunger, malnutrition, diseases, physical and mental torture, rape, illiteracy, ill-health, unemployment, insecurity and inhuman treatment. The collective forces and the effect of Feudalism, casteism, and patriarchy have made their lives a living hell. The Dalit Movement also began as a protest movement in India. The Dalits, also called as Atisudra, Panchama or Outcasts, at present constitute one of the most depressed and marginalized sections of Indian society. Socio-cultural exclusion, economic deprivation and political exploitation of centuries made them to break out of such kinds of age-old prejudices. Hence, they began to protest with the help of literatures, or forming organization like the Dalit Panthers, which came to be recognized as the Dalit Movement. This paper is an attempt to bring forth the various aspects of Dalit's lives that led to the movement, in the radiance of four Dalit literatures.

Keywords: Cleavages, Dalits, Depressed, Equality, Exploitation, Protest, Marginalization, Movement.

History testifies the presence of social cleavages in Indian society, in terms of caste, class, gender and the like. Such cleavages has changed the entire social fabric of Indian society, whereby the exploited section, be it the Dalits, adivasis or women, have been systematically pushed to the periphery by the traditional Brahmanical structure of oppression. Dalits are the people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries. Unable to live in the society of human beings, they have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation, and lived as —untouchable. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in the Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of Dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected them to a life of poverty and humiliation. The Dalits(ex-untouchables), who have been brutally exploited by the so-called upper castes, lag outside the Varnasrama theory and were referred to as outcasts in pre-independent India. India attained independence, but the Dalits were not allowed to live a life with dignity and equality. It is this idea of _equality, which sparked the beginning of the Dalit Movement in India, as a protest to the age-old atrocities committed against them. Dalit movement is a struggle that tries to counter attack the socio – cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is a movement of the masses that craves for justice through the speeches, literary works, dramas, songs, cultural organisations and all the other possible measurers. So it can be called as a movement which has been led by Dalits to seek equality with all other castes of the Hindu society. The main objective of the Dalit Movement was to establish a society in India based on social equality. The constitutional identity, however, fails to capture the true picture. The real picture is something different which will be reflected in this paper, in the light of the four books including Debrahmanising History, Poisoned Bread, The Prisons We Broke and Dalit Visions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN

In general, Indian society today is totally male-dominated and biased against the female gender. This results in all sorts of exploitation and discriminatory practices. Obviously, the treatment of Indian women is unjust and inhuman. For instance, female feticide and female infanticide are widespread and the practice of Sati has also not disappeared completely. Women are frequently tortured in the broad daylight because of insufficient dowry.

Hundreds of women commit suicide either due to humiliating sexual atrocities on them or because of unbearable tortures from the husband or in-laws an account of dowry. Women on their part have been struggling through various organizations and movements to liberate themselves from the clutches of the male-dominated social order.

Dalit Movement: An overview

The Scheduled Castes are known as harijnas i.e children of God “ a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933. There are many studies on the Dalit or SC socio-political condition but there are only a few systematic empirically sound studies on their movements. The Mahar movement of Maharashtra has been seen as all India movement. Dr Ambedkar was an all India leader. While bargaining with the British and the caste “ Hindus he represented all the dalit of the country but his role in mobilizing the SCs outside Maharashtra is not documented.

There is no full fledged study or even an anthology giving information about various SC movements in different parts of the country in colonial and post colonial period. Two papers “ one by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar and the other by Ghanshyam Shah give an overview of the dalit liberation in India. The former deals with the colonial period whereas the latter looks at both the colonial and the post colonial periods. The study by Verba, Ahmad and Bhatt (1972) on the Blacks and the harijnas gives a comparative picture of the movements of these communities in the USA and India. The main issues around which most of the Dalit movements have been centered in the colonial and post colonial periods are confined to the problem of untouchability. They launched movements for maintaining or increasing reservations in political offices, government jobs and welfare programmes.

Ghanshyam Shah classifies the Dalit movements into reformatory and alternative movements. The former tries to reform the caste system to solve the problem of untouchability. The alternative movement attempts to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by conversion to some other religion or by acquiring education, economic status and political power. Both types of movements use political means to attain their objectives.

The reformative movements are further divided into Bhakti movements, neo-Vedantik movements and Sanskritisation movements. The alternative movements are divided into the conversion movement and the religious or secular movement. The latter includes the movement related to economic issues. In the context of dalit identity and ideology Shah has classified dalit movements into movements within cultural consensus, competing ideology and non Hindu identity, Buddhist dalits and counter ideology and dalit identity. The first three are based around religious ideologies whereas the last is based on class. Patankar and Omvedt classify the dalit movement into caste based and class based movements.

In the 1990s with the increased political participation in elections and success of Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh some scholars consider their mobilization as a new political movement of the dalits. Bhakti movement in 15th century developed two traditions of saguna and nirguna. The former believes in the form of God mostly Vishnu or Shiv relating to the Vaishnavite or Shaivaite traditions. It preaches equality among all the castes though it subscribes to the varnashram dharma and the caste social order. The devotees of Nirguna believe in formless universal God. Ravidas and Kabir are the major figures of this tradition. It became more popular among the dalits in urban areas in the early 20th century as it provided the possibility of salvation for all. It promised social equality. Through these movements Fuller argues devotionalist ethic come to be widely reinterpreted as a charter of egalitarianism.

Neo-vedantik movement was initiated by Hindu religious and social reformers. These movements attempted to remove untouchability by taking them into the fold of the caste system. Dayanand Sarawati the founder of Arya Samaj believed that the caste system was a political institution created by the rulers for the common good of society and not a natural or religious distinction. Satish Kumar Sharma's book Social Movements and Social Change is the only full-fledged study which examines the relationship between the Arya Samaj and the untouchables. The study is confined to Punjab only but some of the observations are relevant for other part of the country as well. Arya Samaj was against the political movements of the untouchables. It went against any move initiated by the untouchables for their solidarity and integration.

The neo-Vedantic movements and non-Brahmin movements played an important catalytic role in developing anti-caste or anti Hinduism dalit movements in some parts of the country. The Satyashodhak Samaj and the self-respect movements in Maharashtra and the Tamil Nadu, the Adhi Dharma and Adi Andhra movement in Bengal and Adi-Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh are important anti-untouchability movements which were launched in the last quarter of the 19th and the early part of 20th century. There are scattered references to the Adi-Andhra, the Adi-Hindu and the Namashudra movements. Mark Juergensmeyer's book Religion as Social Vision deals with the Adi Dharma movement against untouchability in 20th century Punjab. The main plea of the movement was that the untouchables constituted a quam a distinct religious community similar to those of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslim communities. Nandini Gooptu in her study on UP in the early 20th century briefly analyses the emergence of the Adi-Hindu movement in the urban areas of the region. Like Adi-Dharma, the leaders of the Adi-Hindu movement believed that the present form of Hinduism was imposed on them by the Aryan invaders. The movement did not pose a direct threat to the caste system. It was in essence, conceived as and remained a protest against the attribution of low roles and functions to the untouchable by means of a claim not to be Aryan Hindus; it was not developed into a full blown, direct attack on the caste system.

A section of untouchables who could improve their economic condition either by abandoning or continuing their traditional occupations launched struggles for higher status in the caste hierarchy. They followed Sanskrit norms and rituals. They tried to justify their claim to a higher social status in the caste hierarchy by inventing suitable mythologies.

The Shanars or Nadars of Tamil Nadu however have crossed the boundary of untouchability. The Iravas of Kerala have also blurred if not completely destroyed, the line of untouchability. The Nadars organized movements in the late 19th century against the civic disabilities they suffered. They formed their caste organization in 1903 called SNDP Yogam.

According to it the low social status of the Iravas is due to their low social and religious practices. The association launched activities for Sanskritising the norms and customs of the Iravas. They launched a Satyagraha for temple entry in the 1920s. They bargained with a government for economic opportunities and political positions. A major anti-touchability

movement was launched by Dr Ambedkar in the 1920s in Maharashtra. He saw the opportunity and possibility of a advancement for the untouchables through the use of political means to achieve social and economic equality with the highest classes in modern society. He organized the independent labour party on secular lines for protecting the interests of the laboring classes. It was dominated by Mahars.

The Dalits demanded a separate electorate in the 1930s which led to a conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi. In the early 1930s Ambedkar concluded that the only way of improving the status of the untouchables was to renounce the Hindu religion. He found that Buddhism was appropriate as an alternative religion for the untouchables. He preferred Buddhism because it was an indigenous Indian religion of equality; a religion which was anti-caste and Anti Brahmin. Ambedkar and his followers were converted to Buddhism in 1956. The movement for conversion to Buddhism has spread dalit consciousness irrespective of whether dalits became Buddhist or not. The Dalits of Maharashtra launched the Dalit Panther Movement in the early 1970s. Initially it was confined to the urban areas of Maharashtra not it spread to Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and other states.

Assertion for dalit identity has almost become a central issue of dalit movement. This involves local level collective action against discrimination and atrocities. Statues of Dr Ambedkar are found not only in urban dalit localities but also in many villages where their number is fairly large. Dalits contribute to installing Ambedkar statues in their neighbourhood. They struggle to get a piece of land from local authorities to install the statue. The statues and photos of Dr Ambedkar are an expression of dalit consciousness and their assertion for identity.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule formed the Sayta Shodak Mandal in 1873 with the aim of liberating non-Brahmins from the clutches of Brahminism. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur started Satya Shodak Mandal in 1912 and carried forward the movement started by Phule. In the pre-independence period, the Dalit movements comprised of a strong non-Brahman movement against Brahmanism in Maharashtra.

The Adi Dravidas movement in Tamil Nadu, Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalan movement in Kerala, Adi Andhras, movement in Coastal Andhra and the like. Phule tried to formulate a new theistic religion. The religious reformers of the 19th century were influenced by the work of Christian missionaries in India. The Brahma Samaj (1828), the Prarthana Samaj (1867), the

Ramkrishna Mission, and the Arya Samaj (1875) are the examples of such institutions founded with a view to fight against social evils practiced by the caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar, on his part turned to Buddhism. In Tamil Nadu, non- Brahmin movement tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion although both Ayyapan proclaimed no religion, no caste and no god for mankind. All the above movements led to, some extent, the social upliftment of Dalits.

DALIT PROBLEMS

Dalit Problems are scattered in 27,024 villages of Karnataka. They are landless laborers and houseless living in a cluster huts or in slums. Their poor economy and illiteracy have forced them to live in misery. Untouchability is an age old practice which is inhuman in the name of religion. Most of the bonded laborers are dalits.

The reasons for the bonded labour system are inequality, illiteracy and unemployment existing in the society which has resulted in poverty. Loans borrowed to celebrate marriage, festivals and to avoid starvation are some of the reasons for this system. Bonded laborers are landless and houseless. They live in the place provided by landlords totally under their control. Dalit Problems are harassed, threatened to withdraw their complaints in favor of landlords. Even judicial liberation of bonded labour is eyewash. Due to involvement of political and feudal persons in the implementation of abolition and rehabilitation of bonded laborers Act the object of the said act has failed in its task.

Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu

Institutionalized efforts made by Dalit community leaders for the liberation of the downtrodden masses can be termed as Dalit movement. These movements are protests against untouchability, casteism, injustice and inequality in all sectors and for exterior classes, depressed classes or Scheduled Castes. It aims to uplift the Dalits to the level of non-Dalits and to regain self-respect and equal human status for them in the society, as well as to establish a new social order based on equality, fraternity, liberty, social justice, and social, economic, cultural and political development of Dalits. All this is the result of the consciousness of Dalits of their own identity as human beings, equally equipped with physical and mental capacities as other human beings, and

equally entitled to enjoy all the human rights “without any infringement, abridgment or limitations.

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About the Author: Dr S. Sivakumar, Sr.Lecturer in Political Science & Public Administration, Thiruvalluvar Govt. Arts College, RASIPURAM. TK Namakkal DT 637401 TAMIL NADU e-mail- rrshiva70@yahoo.co.in