



Emergence of Dalit Collective Consciousness: A Study of Arya Samaj and Dalits in United Provinces

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with emergence of Dalit as a concept and traces the history of Dalits collective consciousness in India in general and United Provinces in particular. Attempt has been made to explore the relationship between Dalits and Arya Samaj that was originated in colonial India. Attempt has also been made to trace the emergence of political consciousness that inspired Dalits to come in the mainstream of the society. Arya Samaj articulated the demands of Dalits with collective voice and started the big initiatives like to their inclusion.

Introduction

Much of academic and activist writings on Dalit history mainly focused on manifested form of Dalit assertion in the form of Dalit movement. The process of formation of Dalit consciousness is relatively less explored domain. However some recent studies attempted address this issue¹. This article tried to explore the factors that created anti-oppressive consciousness among Dalits which inspired them to look at collective action as a means to progress. Before we explore the emergence of Dalit consciousness it is useful to trace the origin of the concept Dalit to understand the dynamics of Dalit society.

The word Dalit acquired prominence as a nomenclature to refer to lower caste or former untouchable communities of India. It is useful to trace the emergence of this concept in detail to trace the assertive degree of Dalits. Now *Dalit* is a term to refer to the former untouchables, who have been underdeveloped due to the caste based discrimination. Traditionally Dalits were referred with different nomenclatures like- *Chandals*, *Avarnas*, *Achhuts*, *Adi-dravidia*, Depressed Classes, Lower Caste, oppressed Hindu, *Harijan*, Scheduled Castes etc. at different points of time.² However, after the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement, the expression Dalit acquired prominence. The word Dalit, normally refer to all oppressed classes including not only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but also the extremely backward among other backward castes. However there is a general agreement about the fact that the Scheduled Castes form the hard core of Dalits, who face more oppression and social indignities than the OBCs. Our main concern in this work, therefore, is with Scheduled Castes.

DEFINITION OF DALIT AS A CATEGORY

The term Dalit is derived from the Sanskrit root *Dal* which means burst split, broken, and down trodden. Dalit as a concept has become a part of the discourse that articulates the considerations of untouchable communities in India. Particularly this term acquired prominence in vocabulary of north-Indian languages. For example, in Punjabi the well-known Punjabi dictionary 'The Mahan Kosh' by Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha defines Dalit as one who belongs to the lowest caste (*Hinjati*) and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper castes (*Uchi jati*).³ The most appropriate definition is given by Gangadhar Pantawane, founder editor of journal *Amitadarsh* (Mirror of identity) which is as follows: 'Dalit is not a caste, he is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of his country'.

This term Dalit gained wider currency in the discourse of new Buddhist activists, the followers of B.R. Ambedkar in the early 1970s.⁴ In the discourse of new Buddhists the term Dalit refers to those who have been broken, grounded down by those above them in a deliberate way.⁵ It was seemingly first used in the context of caste oppression by the great nineteenth century reformer Jyotiba Phule.⁶ It is interesting that the category of Dalit was used by Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly *Bahiskruit Bharat*. He defines it comprehensively: 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the Social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order'.⁷ He, however, did not use this category often, preferring to deploy different terms depending upon changing context. For example, when dealing with colonial state he used the category of depressed classes and when addressing high caste Hindus he used the category '*Bahiskruit*' meaning total out-caste.⁸ If one takes this view, all the exploited, and the downtrodden producers, who have been deprived from the ownership of the means of production, denied basic rights of a dignified social life and livelihood, discriminated through biased socio-economic and political decisions

taken in favor of non-producers and privileged classes and kept deliberately away from the mainstream advantages of progress are to be considered Dalits.⁹ It is to be noted that economically, a poor person is different from a Dalit. A poor person may be deprived in the economic sphere, especially of income necessary to participate in the economy. However, he/she may not be necessarily deprived in social and cultural spheres, that is, he/she may not face the same type of exclusion in the social and cultural life of his neighborhood as a Dalit faces.¹⁰

The recent use of the term Dalit has been developed in the manifesto of Dalit Panther movement in 1973: "Who is Dalit?" in this regard, this manifesto says members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited socially, politically, economically and in the name of religion.¹¹ So Dalits are socially and economically marginalized people of India.

The term Dalit, in Gail Omvedt's opinion provides a militant alternative to the Gandhian term Harijan.¹² All those who have been converted to Buddhism use the term Buddhist and rejected all other nomenclature, including their original caste names. In the mid 1970s, again, the Dalit leaders coined a new identity in the name of 'Bahujan' with the emergence of Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF).¹³ Kanshi Ram used the term Bahujan to encompass Dalits, Adivasees, OBCs, and minorities together for a greater alliance. In recent years the term Dalit has been discarded as a social reactionary category by a section of the community who prefer Bahujan with both the Buddhist as well as Dalit categories.¹⁴ Kancha Ilaiah in his book 'why I am not a Hindu' (1996) used the term 'Dalit-Bahujan' to maintain the special identity of Dalits while expressing a broader alliance. What is most important to emphasize at this point is that Dalit is the term which down trodden people have given to them. This helps to account for the popularity of the term among Dalit people of different protest movement in India. Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for recovery of their past identity.¹⁵

Lata Muregkar believes that, in the decades of 1970 maximum Dalit word acquired due to Dalit panther movement. The definition offered by Dalit panthers to the word includes the following categories: SC/ST, Navbaudh, labour, candles and poor farmers, high class, sacked with economic and religious matter and harassed people are included in this category.¹⁶ According to Om Prakash Balmiki—"The meaning of Dalit word is, who have been depressed, destroy fragmented and pertained from the society."¹⁷ Nanduram refuges definitions given by Dalit Panthers and said "In the opposite of definition given by Dalit panthers, right now the caste that are depressed and untouchable are regarded as Dalit in this country. In modern time the students of social science are using Dalit, untouchable and ST caste as the synonyms of each other."¹⁸

The fact is that from 1970s the concept Dalit acquired prominence in academic and activist circles. Now the concept Dalit denotes marginalized sections based upon the caste based discriminating. Hence this concept largely denotes the former untouchable communities of India. It would be relevant here to mention the changes come about on account of British colonial rule and their impact upon Dalit castes.

COLONIAL RULE AND DALITS

Impact of British colonial rule on social fabric of India has been a debated issue. Nationalist leaders like Gandhi opined that British rule has destroyed the organic Indian society.¹⁹ Socialist historian such as A.R. Desai, was of the opinion that colonial rule unleashed the process of exploitation of Indians which destroyed the harmonious social relations.²⁰ In the independent India, histories of Dalits continued to be treated as sectarian struggles without genuine motto of nationalism.²¹ At the same time, scholars from the Cambridge School used the caste system and untouchability to attack on the credibility Indian nationalism.²² These two approaches tried to understand the history of modern Indian from the prescriptive of nationalism and anti-nationalism proscriptive. Having this as an agenda, struggle and role of marginalized people did not receive serious attention. This led what a famous subaltern historian terms neglect of 'politics of people in nation building' remained marginalized.²³ Emergence of subaltern studies is a response to these lacunae in the existing historical knowledge in India.

The subaltern approach in writing history gave a way to new challenges by transcending the traditional method of history writing. From Indian point of view, subaltern history is similar to the trend of writing in England, which became famous as 'History from Below.' Ranjit Guha played a vital role in development of subaltern project. In 1982, a collection of articles edited by Guha "Subaltern Studies" was published. There has been a debate on the question of to what extent subaltern studies approach enables to capture historical dynamics of Dalit society. It is generally accepted that the approach itself has initiated a shift in focal theme of history writing from elite to subaltern. As a result of that the marginalized sections including Dalits receive the attention of historians.²⁴ Indeed subaltern studies project in spite of many problems initiated a departure in writing history of India from elite centric to peoples centric. This trend can be seen in gradual increase of books and articles on various aspects of Dalit society in India.

Historians focused on Dalit history propose that the economic activities of the British necessitated requirement of vast mass of labour. It was this requirement that generated new opportunities to Dalits and other marginalized sections of Indian society to escape from traditional exploitative structure. Gradually Dalits were employed in army particularly for non-combative works and domestic works in the cantonments wherein British officers live. Large numbers of Dalits were employed in the emerging new profession in urban areas such as sweepers, scavengers, and other menial jobs which upper caste people refused to perform. Dalits were also gained work mobility on account of commercialization of agriculture which required massive labor. The industrialization process initiated by colonial economy in the form of establishment of cotton textile industries, Iron and steel industries, railways, jute industries and others certainly created massive demand for hard working labor which was supplied by Dalit communities.²⁵ In case of United Provinces, Dalit acquired work and professional mobility on account of thriving trade in leather related articles. Particularly Agra, Kanpur and Meret areas emerged as centers for Dalit assertion on account relative economic better position of Dalits which engaged in leather trade.²⁶ This context resulted in two processes: firstly, Dalit entered in the colonial economic process and became a strong base for British rule and secondly having escaped from traditional oppressive structure, Dalits particularly live in urban areas tried to create new culture, history and value system which reflects their quest for emancipation from oppressive and march towards better life.

In the discourse of anglicizes, colonial administrators and Christian missionaries the caste based impression has been highlighted to

document the degenerative state of Indian society which required the civilizing touch of the British. Consequently, socio-religious reforms and nationalists concentrated upon the upliftment of Dalits as a means to reform Indian society. At the same time, on account of work mobility and increasing urbanization, many Dalits contemplated to convert religion either Islam or Christianity. It was this context that generated discourse on evil effect of caste system on Dalits.

ARYA SAMAJ AND DALITS

In 19th century several reformist movement originated in India. Among them Arya samaj is one of the important organizations that exercised significant impact upon revival of Hind society. It was founded by Dayanad Swarswati (1824-1883) in the year 1875. His vision of Hindu religion is radically different from the orthodox Hinduism. He evolved a strong critique of caste system by calming that shastras do not endorse caste system. He tried to prove on the basis of Vedas that birth is not the bases of caste but it is based on Karma, and said that learning of Vedas for Shudras was not forbidden. The establishment of Aryan Samaj by Swami Dayanand Sarswati created a strong movement to cure the social disorder and evils of Hindu society. The main objective of this organization was to provide the actual human rights to Shudras and women.

The Arya Samaj rejected everything that is not in conformity with the Vedas. While founding the first Arya Samaj at Bombay in 1875, Swami Dayanand laid down the following ten principles, which all the members of the Samaj are required to subscribe to and act upon:

- 1) God is the primary cause of all true knowledge, and of everything known by its means.
- 2) God is all truth, all knowledge, all beatitude, incorporeal, almighty, just, merciful, infinite, unchangeable, without a beginning, incomparable, the Support and the Lord of all, all-pervading, omniscient, imperishable, immortal, exempt from fear, eternal, holy and the cause of the universe. To him alone worship is due.
- 3) The Vedas are the books of true knowledge, and it is the paramount duty of every Arya to read and hear them, to teach and preach them to others.
- 4) One should always be ready to accept truth and renounce untruth.
- 5) All actions should be done conformably to virtue, i.e. after a through consideration of right and wrong.
- 6) The primary object of the Samaj is to do well to the world by improving the physical, spiritual and social condition of mankind.
- 7) All should be treated with love, justice and due regard to their merits.
- 8) Ignorance should be dispelled and knowledge diffused.
- 9) None should be content with his own good alone; but everyone should regard his prosperity as included in that of others.
- 10) In matters which affect the general social well-being of the Samaj one should discard all differences and not allow his individuality to interfere; but in strictly personal matters every one may act with freedom.²⁷

At the level of activism the Samaj undertook several activities to attract the attention of Dalits. These activities as follows: purification (shuddhi) to make them equal with upper caste Hindus: establishment separate associations for development of Dalits and provision educational facilities by establishment of schools and colleges. Pandit Ganga Ram, an activist of Aryan Samaj provided more space to Dalits with the help of Arya Samaj for their social development. He restored the many Dalits group by purification and wore them Yaghnopaveet. Arya Samaj undertook several purification (Shuddhi) measures to brought Dalits back to Hindu fold. In fact several times opposition took place to Shuddhi ceremony. There was an event of purification Dalits organized in Gawar village located in Badain District in 1888. In this occasion conflicts took place between Aryan samajists and orthodox Hindus over the issue of Shuddhi.²⁸ Another instance happened on 14 March 1903 when the internal committee of Syalkot Arya Samaj decided to pure the Meghs on 28 March at their annual festival. But here not only Hindus but also Muslims and Christians opposed this event of purification. In 28 March purification event only 200 Maghs were participated. This purification was strongly opposed by Rajput caste. Purified Meghs were beaten, prohibited from accessing water from wells and filed a false case to punish them. Ultimately Meghs were compelled to leave.

The idea of *Shuddhi* proposed by Dayanand grew and became powerful in Punjab initially and gradually acquired prominence in entire northern India. In Jammu-Kashmir the whole strength of one of these castes in one Paragana, about 10,000 was admitted into Arya Samaj. In Sialkot 3,600 persons of another caste were similarly raised. The *Bharat Suddhi Sabha* under the leadership of Pandit Ram Bhag Dutta reclaimed several thousand of people. In Lahore grand work was done among Hindu Sweepers and Chamars.²⁹

However, Aryan Samaj continued to work with Meghas. The Arya Meghoddhar Sabha was established in 1912 and this Sabha propounded the work of purification in systematic manner. Along with mental and religious education, different schools were started for them. In the hand-craft school of Arya Samaj, they started learning the work of carpenter, tailor etc. Megh, child started learning at Gurukul, Gujrawala and Gurukul Kangri without any fee. In 1918, the settlement of Arya Nager took place in which they build Arya Bhawan, Kanya Pathasala (girl school), and medical centre. In the course of time it was transformed as *Adarsh Unddharak Basti*. In 1912, for facilitating this work, they legally established *Dalitoddhar Sabha* in Delhi. This is a significant shift in politicization of Dalits. This association created a separate domain in which the problems of Dalits could be addressed within the framework of Arya Samaj. The objective of this Shaba was as following-

1. Expansion of moral values in Dalits castes in India.
2. To save them from religious attacks.
3. Abolition of the practices of myths of hatred.
4. To provide lost human rights to Dalits.
5. Expansion of education among Dalit.

Gradually Dalitoddhar Sabha expanded in several parts of north India. This Sabha performed different works like eradication of Begar Pratha, access to water in village wells, entry of untouchable in to temple, and expansion of education. Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, states Dalit Caste's like Chamar, Kurmis, and Dom's Passi's. Gola, Mushhar, Kacchi, Kawat etc. get influenced by the work of Arya Samaj's Dalitoddhar programme.³⁰

Sister associations of Arya Samaj such as Arya Biradari Sammelan and Jati-Pati Torak Mandal in Punjab had done tremendous work, to break the caste boundreis within the framework of Arya Samaj. In the end of year 1917 at third session of Arya Biradari sammelan, several measures were proposed to eradicate caste system and untouchability.

Gradually the importance of Dalits increased in Arya Samaj and its activities. Chiranjivi Bhardwaj founded the Arya Shiromani Sabha in the year 1890. This Sabha proposed several measures for eradication of caste discrimination and eradicated of caste system. Inspiring by this example, another association namely the Arya Biradari Samiti which dedicated for development of Dalits was established in 1907. Another notable association for advancement of Dalit was established in 1922 namely Jati-Pati Torak Mandal at the residence of Bhai Paramanand, which main work was to abolish untouchability and reforming Dalit society. Bhai Bhumanand and Sant Ram were the prominent leaders of this association.³¹This association actively engaged in addressing the problems of Dalits.

Along with welfare measures, Arya Samaj also articulated for civil rights of Dalits. On 15 February 1911, The Tribune writer mentions that Arya Samaj demanded separate law to ensure the rights of Mahars and other Dalit groups in education and government employment in Bombay. In Bengal Legislative Assembly a petition was filed for similar provisions. In Uttar Pradesh by the efforts of Thakur Marhsal Singh, the state legislation passes the Nayak Balika Samrakshan bill in the year 1929. Besides this political activism, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha in United Provinces had opened a separate *Jara Mayapesha Vibhag* which conducted many work of resettlement, health and education. Arya Nagar colony of Lucknow is the best example of their residential settlement.³² In Uttar Pradesh thousand of Domis were reformed by Arya Samaj and several schools were opened for the Chamars. In the year 1917, at Calcutta session, G.N. Nateshan proposed a memorandum toward Dalits development and by accepting this B.G. Desai said that 'by establishing social justice we can reach at the aim of self government'.³³

Lala Lajpat Rai, prominent nationalist leader and active members of Arya Samaj emphasized on social equality as an essential factor for political strength. He delivered many speeches for the upliftment of downtrodden mass in general and Dalit in particular at Kashi, Moradabad, Barielly, Prayag etc. He denoted Rs. 4,000 for the education of untouchable children and opened the Tilak School for untouchable's students. He advertised and expanded the consciousness among mass with his news paper *Vande Matram*. In December 1912, at presidential speech at Karachi purity Association, he said that: "In my thought there can be no any other discrimination except knowledge".³⁴ In May, 1910, in *Indian Review* he wrote that: "Education is the necessary need for these castes. There is a need of leader's and social reforms from these castes. These leader and social reformer will allocate their position and contrition in society. There is a special need for educating of lower castes. Provide education to them with great efforts. Education of untouchables is helpful to solve our social problems".³⁵

Dayanand and his Arya Samaj indeed worked hard to represent the demands of Dalits in social reform and political spheres. Particularly in case of United Provinces Arya Samaj has done tremendous work. The first and second generations of activists belonging to the Jatav community were educated in schools run by the Arya Samaj. The early advocates belong to Chamar caste such as *Pandit Sunderlal Sagar* and *Ramnarayan Yadvendu* were both educated in Arya Samaj schools, and both of their families were members of the Arya Samaj.³⁶*Ramnarayan Yadvendu* was a devote member of Arya Samaj and strictly observed all the rules and rites of the Samaj. He tried to root out bad habits of the people, like meat-eating, drinking, child marriage, etc.³⁷*Munkiram Choudhary* (1910-1954) protested against orthodox Hinduism. He accepted the teaching of Arya Samaj and observed almost all the practices of the Samaj very strictly. He was a staunch nationalist.³⁸*Dharam Prakash* (1900-1972) was an Arya Samaji. He joined Arya Samaj in 1920 and strictly observed all the principles of Arya Samaj throughout his life. He was strictly vegetarian and teetotaler. From 1926 to 1927 he was supervisor of schools. He played an important role in Kumar Ashram established at Meerut in 1928 by Lala Lajpet Rai. He was member of the District board, Meerut during 1930-32.³⁹*Manikchand Jatavaveer* (1897-1956) was born in 1897 at Rajamandi, Agra in Uttar Pradesh. Manikchand had an innate urge for social work. Hence he decided to wage a war against the practices of untouchability. He started his social life as a member of the Arya Mitra Sabha in 1914. He was appointed as a teacher in a school run by the Arya Samaj, where the untouchable students were allowed admission.⁴⁰ *Puranchand* (1900-1970) was born in August 1900 at Agra and belongs to Jatav community. Shri Swami Shradhdhanandji successfully convinced him to accept Arya Samaj. After joining the Samaj he became a strict vegetarian, and observed all the rules. He used to preach the tenets of the Arya Samaj to his untouchable brothers. He taught them to observe the rules of sanitation, vegetarianism and temperance. He taught them to live a life of high moral standard.⁴¹

Conclusion

The factors that compelled Arya Samaj to take up the reform of Dalits as follows: Arya Samaj attempted to liberate Hinduism from the clutches of Brahman hegemony hence it tried to create a new social base for Hindu religion consisting of lower sections, it worried about the fact that many Dalit may convert to Islam or Christianity. These factors motivated Aryan Samaj to take up the cause of Dalits actively. At the same time Dalits were attracted toward it as they were offered spiritual space which was denied by traditional Hindu religion.

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