

# Tracing the History of Dalit Movements in India

**Lakshmi Kanta Mahato**

Assistant Professor in Political Science, Kashipur M.M.Mahavidyalaya, Purulia (W.B), India.

## Abstract

Traditionally Indian Hindu Society is discriminatory in nature. It is divided into four Varna viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Baishya and Shudra where Brahmins have placed themselves in the top position in social hierarchy system. A vast majority of Indian masses were and are regarded as lower castes and untouchables. They have been subjugated and exploited socially, economically, politically or even in culturally for centuries by the higher castes in order to establish Brahmanic hegemony. When the wave of modernity touched this land, education and rationality spread. People became aware concerning their rights, liberty and equality. They were organized by forming various organizations and agitated for their issues. This paper has tried to trace the history both past & present of dalit movements in India.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Movements, Hindu Society, Brahmanic hegemony, Education, Rationality

## Introduction

The term 'Dalit' derived from a Sanskrit word 'Dalita' which means divided, broken or scattered. In Hindi it means downtrodden or oppressed. Literally it means a section of classes who are oppressed and depressed belonged to lower caste of Hindu Varna system. The term 'Dalit' first used by a nineteenth century great social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Govindarao Phule (11<sup>th</sup> April, 1827-28<sup>th</sup> November, 1890). He was first used it in the context of the oppression and depression of untouchables of Hindu Society. One of our great freedom fighters Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi termed the oppressed classes as 'Harijan'. 'Harijan' means the 'Children of God'.

In our Indian constitution 'Dalit' means those people who belonged to Scheduled Caste category. But the thinkers of dalit discourse did not believe in narrowing down the scope. According to them 'Dalit' is meant by a group of people who have been deprived from all aspects socially, economically and politically since ancient times. In mythical epics like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, we found some stories related to the oppression of lower caste people which are called Shudras of Hindu caste hierarchy. In the Ramayana, Lord Ram beheaded innocent Shambuka for merely performing tapasya (meditation). On the other hand in the Mahabharata, Guru Dronacharya demanded Ekalavya's left thumb as 'Gurudakshina' and as his disciple he did it by cutting his thumb himself off. In almost every Hindu religious scriptures Shudras have been treated badly by humiliating them.

In modern India, as an evil custom of Hindu religion the lower caste people was being exploited, oppressed and deprived. To protest and uproot the discrimination and deprivation many dalit movements had been organized. In the contemporary age, 'Dalit' became a political identity for all the oppressed and untouchable classes.

Dalit Movement in India

Discrimination is the hard reality of Indian society perpetuated to the untouchables and to exploit and deprive them from all aspects i.e. in economically, socially, politically and culturally also. To address the concerns of dalits many thinkers and personalities started movements and established various organizations. As a result, we have observed consciousness among dalits about their identity and power. Those who protested against the exploitation of dalits are Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Sabitribai Phule, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, M.K.Gandhi, E.V.Ramasamy Periyar, Mangu Ram Mugowalia etc.

Dalit Movement before Independence:

In pre-independence India, there were many movements organized for the protection of dalit rights. Dalit movements which were organized in Pre-Independence India are –

i) The Bhakti Movement was one of the important spiritual movement in India which spread love and devotion among all people irrespective of class, caste, religion, creed and sex. It rejected the caste based discrimination. The Bhakti movement was begun in between 7<sup>th</sup> century and 8<sup>th</sup> century in Kerala and Tamilnadu started by Adi Shankaracharya. Later this movement was spread to Karnataka and Maharashtra, then it reached to Northern India including eastern part of India in the 15<sup>th</sup> century turned to be a popular mass movement. The proponents of Bhakti Movements were Alvaras (Followers of Vishnu), Nayanars (Devotees of Shiva), Adi Shankaracharya in Tamilnadu and Kerala, Basavanna, Akkamahadevi and allama Prabhu, in Maharashtra Jnandev, Namdev and Tukaram, in Northern India the prominent proponents were Ramananda, Chaitanya Mahaprabu, Gurunanak, Kabir Das, Ravi Das, Nanak and Meerabai. The principal characteristic of Bhakti Movement was “all men are equal” and criticized the orthodox Hindu religion for its discriminatory character. Though these movements were basically spiritual movements devoted to God, many scheduled caste people were attracted and influenced by. The major backlash of the Bhakti movement was that they had deep faith in Hindu Varna system and social hierarchy.

ii) Neo-Vedantik movement was initiated by various Hindu religious and social reformers. These movements played important role to eliminate the untouchability already rooted in Indian society. The main protagonist of Neo-Vedantik movement was Swami Dayananda Saraswati. The main argument put forwarded by them was that the untouchability had never been a part of Hindu religion vice-versa the caste system also. The founder of Arya Samaj Swami Dayananda Saraswati believed that the caste system was a ‘Political Institution’ which was created by the rulers for the common welfare of the people. He also reiterated that this discrimination was not natural or religious.

iii) Non-Brahmin movements played an important role for organizing anti-caste and anti-Hindu or anti-Brahminism dalit movements in some parts of the country. Notable figures of these movements are Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy who is popularly known as Periyar. Such movements organized in late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu are ‘Satya Sadhak Samaj’ and ‘Self Respect movement’. In Bengal ‘Namasudra Movement’, in Andhrapradesh ‘Adi Andhra movement’, in Uttar Pradesh ‘Adi-Hindu’ movement etc. were some important anti-untouchability movements. The pioneers of these movements thought that the present condition of Hindu Dharma was an attribution of Aryan invasion. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in 1873 established ‘Satyasadhak Samaj’. The main purpose of this organization was to liberate the Non-Brahmins from the clutches Brahmins.

iv) M.N.Srinibas in his book 'Religion and Society' (1955) introduced and explained the concept of "Sanskritization". According to him, 'Sanskritization is a process by which a lower caste or tribe or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a higher or more often twice-born caste'.

It was in the 1920's that the dalit leaders of almost all communities tried to elevate their communities to higher position of caste system i.e. to be a Kshatriya or a Brahmin by adopting higher caste people's rituals, culture, customs, behaviours, habits and leaving their own culture and religion which in course of time placed them in disaster. Consequently, the dalits used to follow the rituals like to be a vegetarian, to put turmeric paste in forehead, to wear sacred thread etc. This was called 'Sanskritization Movement'. Swami Thakkad (Kerala), Pandi Sundarlal (Uttar Pradesh), Muldas Baisya (Gujrat), Mun Bithoda Raoji Pande (Maharashtra), Niranjan Mohanta (Odisha) were few of them who tried to accept the culture rituals, habits established by the higher caste. Not only they followed the higher caste specially Brahmins but also spearheaded movements to influence the others also. Bringing this objective up to the front some dalit leaders were also attracted to 'Brahmo Samaj', 'Arya Samaj' and 'Mahanuvab sect'.

It was in the 1920's dalits independently began to organize largely. Some of the important early dalit movements are Adi-Dharm Movement in Punjab, Movement of Mahar caste mainly led by Babasaheb Ambedkar, Namasudra Movement in Bengal, Adi-Dravid Movement in Tamil Nadu, Adi-Karnataka Movement in Karnataka, Adi-Hindu Movement in Uttar Pradesh and in Kerala the organization of Pulay and Cheruman.

v) When Gandhiji was in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, realized the social discrimination prevailed in Society. He was too much concerned about the issue of nation building and for making possible this into reality. According to him that it is possible only by alleviating the social status of the people belonged to untouchable class. Gandhiji always referred the untouchability as a barbaric and inhuman act. In 1932, when he was in Yervada jail, Maharashtra, he founded 'Harijan Sevak Sangh' for the welfare of the untouchables.

vi) Baba Saheb Ambedkar was a great crusader who fought against the untouchability. He dedicated his entire life in order to uproot the social evils of Hinduism. From 1927 in the month of April Ambedkar started publishing Marathi fortnightly 'Bahiskrit Bharat' and from 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1930 he started publishing a weekly magazine 'Janta'. Ambedkar founded an organization 'Samaj Samta Sangh' in September, 1927 for establishing social equality among higher castes and the untouchables. He supported inter-caste marriage, inter-caste dinner. In March, 1927 he led a Mahad Satyagraha Movement in Raigad district of Maharashtra against the discrimination banning untouchables for fetching water from a public water reservoir by higher caste people. Ambedkar fought against this social discrimination and eventually in 1937 he succeeded by winning the verdict of Bombay high court in his favour. Ambedkar started his second 'Satyagraha' movement in March, 1930 demanding the entry of untouchables into Kolaram Mandir in the district of Nasik, Maharashtra. From 1942 to 1946 he expanded his activities and founded a political party naming 'Scheduled Caste Federation'. From 1942 to 1946 he was a member of governor's executive Council and by taking advantage of the office Ambedkar initiated several steps to the welfare of the Scheduled Caste people.

vii) The writings concerning dalits played an important role for awakening the dalit masses. Some of the prominent literary intellectuals are Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhab, Shankar Rao Kharat, Narayan Surve, Annavaai Sathe etc. The pioneer of Maratha literature was Baburao Bagul (1930-2008). In 1963, his short story 'Jevha Mi jaat Chorali Hoti' (when I had concealed my caste) shook the root of Maratha literature by writing social exploitation and deprivation of dalits. Later the founder of 'Dalit Panthers' Namdeo Dhasal geared the literary movement and united dalits in a more organizing way. Other Maratha dalit writers are Laxman Gaikowad, Trayanbak Sapkale, Arun Dangal, Umakant Randhir, J.V. Power, Tarachandra Khandekar etc.

#### Post-Independence Dalit Movements:

Post-Independence dalit movements which also played a crucial role for the mobilization of dalits. Some of them are-

- i) After India's Independence Ambedkar was the first Union law minister and also the chairman of drafting committee of India's Constituent Assembly. Constituent Assembly also delegated the authority for making Indian Constitution to Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Consequently he had given various safeguards in order to protect the civil-liberty rights like right to religious freedom, abolition of untouchability, eradication of all forms discrimination etc. He struggled for the social and political rights of women also. Ambedkar was the man who took the assent from Constituent Assembly for reservation of SCs and STs in various sectors. Ambedkar studied Buddhist religion for several years found it appropriate for him and the dalits. Buddhist philosophy does not endorse discrimination and untouchability among the followers. He journeyed Ceylon (Srilanka) to attend 'World fellowship of Buddhist Conference' in 1950 when he was a union law minister. In 1955 Ambedkar established 'Buddha Mahasabha' and eventually in 1956 his family and his followers converted to Buddhism. Ambedkar took this path after he was being disturbed by the Hindu caste system and its' culmination of untouchability. About 50,000 dalit people were convinced to take the initiation to Buddhism and in this process Ambedkar was the main actor. He stressed on conversion of the dalits. In Mahar Conference (1936) Ambedkar said that conversion to other religion is the best remedy to castiest Hinduism. Around 4 lakhs dalits were persuaded by Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism. In 1981, due to castiest exploitation 1000 dalits take the initiation to Islam. In 2002, many dalits converted due to the exploitation of higher caste people. In 2014 same incident occurred in Madhyapradesh and converted to Islam and in the same year 180 people converted to Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh.
- ii) Dalit Panthers' movement was a social movement which was triggered by the Ambedkar's philosophy. Dalit panthers was a social organization that fought against the caste discrimination. On 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1972 Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Power founded this organization in Maharashtra. Dalit Panthers was founded on the inspiration of Black Panthers of USA which was also fought against the racial segregation. Dalit Panthers movements was different from the previous movements because it was revolutionary in character believed total transformation of Indian society. Fundamentally the members of the Dalit Panthers were the Neo-Buddhist young people who were determinant to change Hindu society.

- iii) Notable dalit leaders and thinkers who contributed enormously to sensitizing the masses, one of them was Kanshi Ram. In 1984, on the occasion of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar's birth anniversary Kanshi Ram formed a political party, named Bahujan Samaj Party. 'Bahujan' denotes the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class people. The members of the party were influenced and inspired by the philosophy of Goutam Buddha, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Narayan Gura, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy and Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj. The primary role of the Bahujan Samaj Party was to uplift and develop the lives of the lower strata people who have been suffering from long deprivation. In 1973, Kanshi Ram established an organization 'Backward and Minority Communities Employee Federation' (BAMCEF). The morale of this organization was 'Educate, organize and agitate'. In 1981, he established another organization 'Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti'.
- iv) The ex-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and a dalit leader Mayabati Played a crucial role for the SC,ST,Backward and Religious Minorities. She served as chief minister for four separate terms- 1<sup>st</sup> term was from 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1995 to 18<sup>th</sup> October 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> term from 21<sup>st</sup> March 1997 to 20<sup>th</sup> Sept.1997, 3<sup>rd</sup> term was from 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2002 to 26<sup>th</sup> August 2003 and the 4<sup>th</sup> term was from 13<sup>th</sup> May 2007 to 6<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Mayabati did several initiatives for the weaker sections during her rule. Some of the important measures taken by her are-

- 1) 30% reservation in private sector for SCs and STs.
- 2) Distribution of Pattas for weaker sections of the society.
- 3) Special drive in order to fulfill the vacant reserved seats.
- 4) Bringing transparency for delivering SC,ST scholarships and in this regard she proposed the introduction of computer.
- 5) Dr. Ambedkar Gram Vikas Yojana was launched for providing water,electricity and construction of road in a dalit majority villages.
- 6) For the poor urban people she started Manyawar 'Shri Kanshiram ji Shastri Garib Awas Yojna'.
- 7) Mayabati planned 165km six lane Yamuna Express way which connects Delhi to Agra.
- 8) Establishment of Dr. Shakuntala Mishra National Rehabilitation University for physically challenged students.
- 9) Community halls for dalits.
- 10) Establishment of Manyawar Kanshiram Multi-Speciality Hospital in Greater Noida.
- 11) Distribution of over 10 lakhs bi-cycles among Muslims and poor schools girls during 2008 to 2011.

Through these few above mentioned programmes she strived to empower the dalit bahujan masses.

- v) The contribution of woman in dalit movements is also noteworthy.Indian society has always been too much patriarchial, women were and are subjugated since ancient times. In our religious scriptures they are regarded same as Shudra. For the emancipation of women, several great female dalit leaders born and played an important role to empower the women of the lower strata.The first among the dalit woman thinkers was Savitribai Phule, a social reformer and

educationist as well as a poet. She had established first girls' school in Bhidewada, Pune of Maharashtra with her husband Jyotirao Phule. Savitribai not only worked for girl's education but also put a great effort on widow remarriage, campaign against child marriage, Sati Pratha etc. She struggled against untouchability, caste and gender based discrimination. In 1863, Savitribai Phule started 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha' a care centre for pregnant Brahmin widows and rape victims so that they can deliver their children safely and securely. She was also associated with 'Satya Sadhak Samaj' along with his husband Jyotirao Phule. Another important personality in dalit women's movement was Ramabai Ambedkar, the wife of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. From 1982 she started to organize the dalit women and making them conscious. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1942 'All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference was held in Nagpur, Maharashtra. More than 25,000 dalit women participated in this historic conference. In 1993, Ruth Manorama established 'The National Federation of Dalit Women'(NFDW). Mainly the role of these organizations were to prevent violence against women and caste discrimination. In 1995, 'Dalit Mahila Sanghatana' was established in Maharashtra. At the international level, the Hague Conference on Dalit Women's Rights was held in 2006. Dalit women of various countries specially from South Asian countries raised their voices on the issues related to the atrocities and discrimination against women, their rights, participation in administration, employment, education, health etc. The pioneers of Indian women dalit movements are Mrs. Savitri Bai Phule, Ramabai Ambedkar, Mrs. Anjini Bai Deshbratar, Mrs. Gita Bai Gaikwad, Mrs. Kiriti Bai Patil, Sulochana Dongre etc.

## Conclusion

Dalit Movement in India has brought a sea change in India's traditional Hindu society. Different castes and communities became vocal regarding the democratic values of right, liberty, equality, social justice and above all the concerns of human rights which in turn is an important step towards the strengthening of India's democracy.

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