

## POST AMBEDKAR DALIT ASSERTION IN INDIAN POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

*The term 'Dalit' in India is mostly used to describe the peoples or communities that are subjected to untouchables. These peoples were excluded from the Indian four-fold varna system and thought of themselves as forming a fifth varna, describing them as panchama. India's National Commissions for Scheduled Caste (NCSC), coined the term Scheduled Caste for Dalit and it is the official term. Gandhi ji refers to Dalits as 'Harijan', the people of God. They were engaged in menial polluting tasks like animal slaughter, leatherworking, scavenging, etc. They have had the lowest social status in the traditional Hindu caste system. Their economic conditions were very poor. They were suffered very badly from illness, malnutrition, and menace. Even today also the condition almost remains the same. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who himself was belongs to Dalit started several Dalit movements for improvement of their socio-economic conditions. He thought that political power is the key factor for social progress and their Salvation. So he founded the Republican Party of India. This party had the aim to eradicate the socio-economic backwardness of Dalits and poorer classes and make them able to capture political power. Besides the RPI, another organisation namely Dalit Panthers organised literary activities, debates, and discussion in homes, offices, public places and attacked the traditional Hindu Caste System. They wanted to remove caste discrimination in India. The most successful political party in India regarding Dalits, is the Bahujan Samaj Party. The BSP aim to empower the majority sections of society or bahujan samaj - Dalit, Tribal, OBCs, and minorities. They organised several movements, rallies and programmes for the sake of power. They also form Government in Uttar Pradesh of their own. In this paper we discuss the condition of Dalits and their assertions for their freedom. In these way Dalit assertions through RPI, Dalit Panthers and BSP also discussed here.*

**KEYWORDS :** Dalits, Harijan, Backwardness, Discrimination, Movements, Assertion.

### INTRODUCTION

In India, Dalits are the oppressed class, broken and crushed who losing their original identity. Dalits are also referred to as Harijans, untouchables etc. In legal or constitutional terms, they are popularly known as scheduled castes. There are approximately 240 million Dalits are present right now in India. It is nearly 25 percent of the total Indian population. This means that one out of five people is neglected to be untouchable. The origin of the Dalit oppression had been observed in the root of the caste system in Hindu religion. Dalits were then forbidden to join in any social and religious gatherings in our society and they were forced to engage themselves in menial polluting tasks like animal slaughter, leatherworking, scavenging etc. During the struggle of India's Independence two different approaches were emerged to change the current situations of the Dalits. One was led by Mahatma Gandhi and others was by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhiji believed in raising the status of Dalit people with keeping elements of the traditional caste system. Ambedkar believed that only by destroying the caste system could untouchability be destroyed. Later Ambedkar became the chief Spokesperson of Dalits who demanded separate legal and constitutional recognition for the untouchables. After independence, the constitution of India abolished the untouchability by enacting the 'The Untouchability Offence Act'. Now Dalit politics largely centre on the just dispensation

of the affirmative action benefit in terms of employment, education and electoral representation granted to them under the constitution. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar who himself was a dalit started the Dalit Buddhist Movement in 1956 which was a religious as well as socio-political movements among Dalits. It created a new School of Buddhism namely Navayana. This school rejected Hinduism and also rejected the traditional teaching of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana of Buddhism, and took an oath to pursue the new form of Buddhism which is taught by Dr. Ambedkar. Ambedkar launched the Movement when almost half million Dalits who are formerly untouchables associated with him. They were converted to Navayana Buddhism. It challenged the existing caste system in India to promote the rights and interests of the Dalit community.

The term 'Dalit' in India is mostly used to describe the peoples or communities that are subjected to untouchables. These peoples were excluded from the Indian four-fold varna system and thought of themselves as forming a fifth varna, describing them as panchama. India's National Commissions for Scheduled Caste (NCSC), coined the term Scheduled Caste for Dalit and it is the official term. Gandhi ji refers to Dalits as 'Harijan', the people of God. They were engaged in menial polluting tasks like animal slaughter, leatherworking, scavenging, etc. They have had the lowest social status in the traditional Hindu caste system. Their economic conditions were very poor. They were suf-

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#### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF DALITS**

Dalits in India were the untouchable castes, who were later identified as the scheduled caste. They form a large number in Indian caste system and most of them were engaged in leatherwork, scavenging and agricultural labourers. They were unable to get benefit through land reform measures. Though a large number of welfare schemes have been started for them in different parts of the country which affect a lot. As a result, there has been some improvement observed in their conditions. Reservation in educational institutions and in other institutions has been provided to them. Many of them take these benefits quite well and became an articulate group among them. But this happens only in some part of the country and is restricted to some Dalit families. In largely in rural areas, Dalits are still facing underdevelopment, indignities and humiliations. Despite several provisions for them guaranteed by the constitution of India, the fight against Dalit discrimination is yet to be won. They are continued to suffer from poverty, illness, malnutrition and menace till date. Even though many provisions have been enacted by the constitution for the protection of Dalits, but private sectors is under no obligations to comply that. So, they demanded reservation in private sectors which faces hard opposition from several powerful and articulated groups.

#### **POLITICAL POWER-CAPTURE IS THE KEY TO PROGRESS**

Ambedkar realised that political power capture is the prime factor for all-round development of Dalit people in India. So he inspired the untouchables to occupy political power because only political power can unlock all doors of society and Government. Ambedkar warned Dalits to be cautious from the fake promises of the upper caste leaders and advised them to

follow their Dalit leaders. He said that the political power is the key to all social progress and the scheduled caste or Dalits can attain their Salvation if they capture political power by uniting themselves and establish themselves as an alternative political force between the Congress and the Socialist. By associating with Congress, Dalits could not capture political power in this country. Dr. Ambedkar also pointed out that political reform can bring social reforms and without attaining political power for the untouchables their status would not be changed. Ambedkar viewed that true democracy in India can only be safe if political power would be in the hands of Non-Brahmin political party. He said it is necessary not only for the members of the Dalits but also for the interest of the democracy in India.

#### **POST AMBEDKAR DALIT ASSERTION**

After Ambedkar's death, significant important development took place in different parts of India in relation to Dalit assertion. One was the formation of Republican Party of India in 1956 and the other was the formation of Dalit Panther Movement. Apart from these there are many more developments occurred at the same period of time in relation to Dalit movements. Dalit Sathya Movement, the Dalit Rangbhoomi, the all India Backward SC, OBC and Minority Communities Employees Federation, and Bahujan Samaj Party came up for the development of Dalits. Among all these parties or movements or associations, the Republican Party of India, the Dalit Panther's Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party gained success than the rest. I elaborate all these three parties and their movements one by one as under.

#### **REPUBLICAN PARTY OF INDIA**

B. R. Ambedkar, a few years before his death founded the Republican Party of India (RPI) in place of All India Scheduled Caste Federation. To save Dalits from their underprivileged situation, Ambedkar initiated to form the RPI that would serve as a potential opposition in the democratic politics of this country. But he could not declare the party because of his unfortunate death on 6th December 1956. After his death, his followers formed the Republican Party of India (RPI) in September 1957. This party had the aim to eradicate the socio-economic backwardness of Dalits and poorer classes and make them able to capture political power. After Dr. Ambedkar's death the RPI was strengthened by educated Dalit middle class. The RPI gained its popular base in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in the 1950s and 1960s. In Uttar Pradesh the RPI contested elections in 1960 and gained political success. In UP the party formed an alliance with Muslims and OBCs but party lost its popularity as some of its prominent leaders joined hands with the Congress. Even in Maharashtra the party was split into several groups, for their ideological and personal differences among leaders. The RPI worked on several areas. They were:

1. The party was committed to raise their voice against the outrages faced by Dalits and create awareness among them.

2. To maintain discipline in the party they revitalised the Samata Sainik that was founded by Ambedkar.
3. It helds all India Women's Conference in 1957 at Nagpur.
4. It contributed enormously to the Dalit Sahitya Sangh which was the first conference held in 1958 under the chairmanship of B. C. Kamble.
5. The RPI established a student federation named All India Republic Students Federation for the benefit of Dalit students.
6. The party also spreaded the message of Lord Buddha to all over the country.

Two different Satyagraha were held in 1954 and 1964 under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad, who was one of the followers of B. R. Ambedkar, demanded for distribution of land to the landless. Another movement was launched in 1964 by the RPI to compel the Government for distribution of wastelands for the poor people. The party leaders like Gaikdaw, Khobragade, and Maura decided to continue their movements on the footprints of Ambedkar and presented a charter of demands to the then Prime Minister. These demands were raised by Ambedkar in the Central Hall of Parliament. These are like giving the land to the tiller, distribution of food grains and control over rising prices, improvement in the situation of Dalits, reservation for the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes in the services etc. They gave the government a deadline of 1970 for fulfillments of their demands. But later the party faced its split. In 1964, the party formed an alliance with the Congress which led to erosion in its support base. Because of this alliance the party was divided into two different factions, one was leading by Khobragade and other was by Gaikwad. In 1974, they resolved their differences and elected Gaikwad as the president of the party. But it did not last long, as the party split again between Khobragade camp and R. S. Gavai camp. In 1975, Gavai was elected as the party president and this led to another division among the party into three groups by Gavai, Khobragade, and Kamble respectively.

As owing of these split of the party in several times, the Republican Party of India had lost its ideological basis. The members of the party were more engaged in their personal clashes and political ambitions. They were diverted from their core issue of the development of the Dalit and poor peoples. They failed to recognise the real problem of the Dalits and the leaders of the party made their own choice that suited for them. It was found that the RPI functioned for Dalits on two fronts, one is political and other is cultural. On the political front they wanted to mobilise the Dalits to participate in elections, though the party did not get any considerable success in electoral politics. But the party spread its impact on the cultural field. After getting influenced by Ambedkar and Buddha the members of the party played a significant role in spreading

Ambedkarism and Budhhism among the Dalits. Actually, conversion to Ambedkarism started at that time. It played a significant role in Dalit Assertion in India in the following decades.

### **DALIT PANTHAR**

Dalit Panthars was a social organisation which wanted to remove caste discrimination in India. The organisation was formed by Namdeo Desai, J. V. Power, Raja Dhale, Arun Kamble on 29 May 1972 in Maharashtra. It was basically a movement launched by Dalit intellectuals who always tried to build up consciousness among Dalits to a significant extent. They organised literary activities, debates, and discussion in homes, offices, public places and attacked the traditional Hindu Caste System. The Dalit Panthars was inspired by the Black Panthers Party, which was an American party. They conducted their movements in a radical way because they emphasised on radical militancy and revolutionary attitude as the black panthers did. Most of the members of Dalit Panthars were young men with high qualification. Another reason for setting up of Dalit Panthars was rooted in an incident. The incident was related to a controversy over publishing of a magazine namely 'Sadhna'. Raja Dhale, who was one of the founder member of Dalit Panthar wrote an article entitled as 'Kala Swatantra Din' that means 'Black Independence Day' in 1972 which was published in Sadhna magazine. It created a sensation for the Dalit Panthars.

According to Panthars, Dalits are those people who are politically exploited, economically weaker and religiously neglected. They may be Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes or working classes or landless or Neo-Buddhists or poor farmers or women. The prime factor behind the emergence of Dalit Panthars was the exploitation faced by the Scheduled Caste or Tribe specially who lived in rural areas by the upper caste population of our society. Dalit Panthar Movement spreaded in different parts of Maharashtra, like in Bombay, Puna, Nasik, and Aurangabad cities where large number of Dalit people were concentrated. In other parts of the country also Dalit Panthar Movement were found in the leftist manner. Because many members of Dalit Panthars, like Namdeo Desai and others, believed in Marxist ideology.

On the issue of adopting of Marxist ideology, a faction emerged in the party. Raj Dhale, prominent figure of the movement, had some basic differences with Dhasal (who drafted the manifesto of the party). Dhale accused Dhasal for taking Communist support. Dhale was against the Communist of the country because he thought that the Communist had failed to bring any fundamental change in this country for the underdeveloped or Dalit peoples. As a result of this faction, Raj Dhale, with his majority followers, expelled Dhasal and many of his supporters with allegation of disloyalties to the Dalit Panthars. After the split in the Party in 1974, some members of

the organisation tried to revive the party and continued the Dalit Panthar Movement under the leadership of Arun Kamble, Ramdas Athawle, and Gangadhar Gade. They continued their movements in various parts of the country for getting reservations and other concessions granted to the Dalits. Later on they opened many branches in various parts of the country, especially in northern Area. But the party had realised that the movement of the Dalit Panthers were still restricted in the urban areas and majority of the rural Dalits were still untouched. So to reach more Dalit peoples, the organisation had extended their focus outside Maharashtra, more importantly to the rural areas of the country.

#### **Achievement of Dalit Panthar**

When Republican Party of India faced split into factions, The Dalit Panthar emerged to fill the vacuum of Dalit politics. They had brought a kind of renaissance in Marathi literature and arts. They organised radical movement focusing on the ideology of Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Karl Marx. They achieved success in their movements. Some of their achievements were :

1. The Dalit Panthers Party developed courage among the minds of the Dalits against their exploitations happened on them.
2. They changed the view that the untouchables are mute, passive and can not raise their voice against exploitation.
3. They also raised their voice against the exploitative traditional Hindu caste system.
4. They contested the power politics
5. They built up pressures on Government to fill its backlog.
6. Their contribution was immense on Maratha arts and literatures.
7. As most of the members of Dalit Panthers were qualified, they started debates on Ambedkar's ideology.
8. Dalit Panthers created an alternate counter culture and established their own identity firmly.
9. At that time who belongs to Dalits, were termed as 'Harijans', 'untouchables' etc., but Dalit Panthers were able to popularise the term 'Dalit' in place of untouchables or Harijans.

#### **BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY**

Bahujan Samaj Party or Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) was founded in 1984 by Kanshi Ram. Kanshi Ram was born in 1932 in a Sikh (Chamar) Ramdasia family which was situated in Punjab. He was a brilliant student, after completing his B.Sc. from Punjab he came to Pune, Maharashtra and joined as a 'scientist' with the Exploitative Research Development Laboratory. During this time he came to know about Dr. Ambedkar and was influenced by Jyotiba Phule, Chhatrapati Shahaji Maharaj, Narayan Guru and Ambedkar. After getting

influenced by these 'Mahatmas', Kanshi Ram determined to carry forward the work left behind by Ambedkar for the well being of Dalit -Bahujans. He viewed Phule-Ambedkar movement as a mission of achieving a noble objective of emancipation for the suppressed, exploited, and deprived bahujans from the upper castes. When he started the Dalit movement, the post-ambedkar dalit assertion was on decimal situation. In 1971, Kanshi Ram launched the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes and Minority Communities Employees' Association to unite all castes and tribes who were victims of exploitation by upper castes. In 1973 Kanshi Ram with other leaders formed All India Backward and Minority Employees Federation (BAMCEF) and working office was established in Delhi in 1978. In 1984, finally Kanshi Ram launched his party 'Bahujan Samaj Party' on 14th April on B. R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary. With the origin of the party a new chapter arose in the history of Dalit movement or Bahujan movement. Kanshi Ram chose his party flag as 'Blue Flag' and symbol as 'Elephant'. By the origin of this party, Dalits or oppressed classes got a platform of their own. They thought they could raise their voice through this platform. The party's Elephant symbol signifies the large and gaunt population of the 'Bahujan Samaj' and blue flag signifies the shooting blue sky. It means that sky never discriminates anyone on the basis of caste, creed, race, religion, sex, rich -poor etc. The BSP was represented itself as the party of Dalit, exploited, and neglected, poor and backward people of the country.

The BSP entered in electoral Politics in 1985 when Parliamentary By-election of Bijnour constituency in Uttar Pradesh was declared. Kanshi Ram asked Mayawati to contest the election from Bijnour. Mayawati was a school teacher in Delhi associated with BAMCEF. During her teaching career Mayawati came in contact with Kanshi Ram. In that by-election, Mayawati surprisingly got 65,000 of votes and when analysed that who voted for her it was found that Chamars, Muslims and OBCs have voted for the BSP. By taking inspiration from this result, the BSP field more than 500 candidates in Assembly elections in six states in that year and Kanshi Ram had been building pro-reservation front. For him reservation was the matter of participation in the policy making of the country and by reservation Dalits could get social justice in Indian society. In 1986, the BSP fought Haryana assembly election by contesting in all seats and Mayawati got the chance to manage that election. In 1988, the BSP took another assertion for the slum dwellers in the metropolitan cities of India. The party has its own base in Uttar Pradesh but it established its presence in various states of India, namely Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Bihar etc. BSP was able to capture power and formed Government in Uttar Pradesh for four times. First time they formed Government in 1995 with support of Bharatiya Janata party for 137 days, then they capture political power of Utter Pradesh in 1997 only for 184 days, third time

BSP form Government in 2002 and it lasted for 1 year and 118 days and later the BSP got full majority in the fifteenth Assembly Election which was held in 2007, with 206 seats and 30.43% vote shares and formed Government for full five-year term. Alwayes Mayawati became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

Though the party's main functional area is Uttar Pradesh but from its origin the BSP considled with the growth of Kanshi Ram the highest leader of Dalit in India. Kanshi Ram along with Mayawati gained all-India acceptance and they started continued fighting for Dalits against their oppression. They travelled across the country and delivered speeches on the socio-economic, political, cultural, educational rights of Dalits. They planted many workers in different parts of the country to spread messages of the party and to help the Dalits against their fighting for their rights. Kanshi Ram soon made the Bahujan Samaj Party as the savior or protector of the Dalits for their rights. He had created the youth wing of BSP with the view that if the cadre was strong, the party would remain strong automatically. The responsibility of the cadre was to aware Dalits about injustice happened to them by upper caste long before. Kanshi Ram advocated education for Dalit women, he was against the dowry system. He was also against labour migration from rural to urban.

After Kanshi Ram's demise in 2006, Mayawati took party command in her own hand. She then tried to creat her party image from 'Bahujan' to 'Sarvajan'. In this way she tried to bring the higher caste people to BSP fold and formed Dalit-Brahmin Brotherhood Committee across the state. It worked favourable for BSP in 2007 Uttar Pradesh state Assembly election when the party got absolute majority on its own. After becoming Chief Minister in 2007, She had made it clear that the main focus of her Government would be the development of the Sarva Samaj, not only the welfare of the Dalits. Mayawati did a social engineering in UP and she formed a rainbow cabinet by in culcating the OBCs, the Brahmins, the Banias and the Muslims. With these efforts Mayawati projected her party as a party of all or Sarvajan. The election result of BSP in 2007 was the best performance of the party in terms of vote share and seats. In 2012 UP Assembly election the party got 80 assembly seats and obtained 25.95 percent of vote shares. In 2017 Assembly election, when the BJP sweep the election by getting 325 seats with its alliance out of 403 seats, the BSP got only 19 seats with 22.2 percent of vote shares. The 2014 parliamentary election showed that the BSP, though became the third largest national party of India, got just 4.2 percent of votes and it did not gained any seat. In 2019 general election thay did pre-poll alliance with Samajwadi Party and other parties and formed 'Mahagathbandhan'(grand alliance) which was a anti-BJP and anti-Congress front. But the result was not satisfactory fot the 'mahagathbandhan' because they only won 15 seats out of 80 in Uttar Pradesh. It was observed that such Dalit votes were

shifted from the alliance or we can say from the BSP to the BJP. It was a wake up call for the BSP to find out the reasons behind loosing of their support base specifically in Uttar Pradesh.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we can say that the socio-economic and political assertion of Dalits operates at various level. At the village level, it find expression in everyday form of resistance through informal means, politically it finds search for an alternative political platform. Sometimes the assertion results in caste clashes. Dalit assertion, sometimes picked up by Dalit organisations, individuals and political parties at district level also. Upto 1960s the Dalit assertion were mainly mobilised by the non congress political parties. At that time Dalits asserted on issues relating to their broad agendas for the rural poor sections. Dalit issue did not form a separate agenda. Even the RPI also combined the social underdevelopment of Dalit with economic issues. But in recent years Dalit social issues and their identity related issues gained importance. The political parties like BSP raised Dalit issues quite firmly. But the party gave overemphasis on capturing political powers rather than on cultural movements or land reforms or economic issues. As a result, for the sake of power capture they compromised with their political ideologies and started loossing their support base gradually.

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**GHOSH : POST AMBEDKAR DALIT ASSERTION IN INDIAN POLITICS**

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