

Dalit Reservation and the Issue of Social Upliftment: An Overview

Anindita Mondal

I. INTRODUCTION

“Dalit” is the name which the people to those castes at the very bottom of India’s caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly they were known as untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections.

The SCs and STs are the only two social groups that are eligible for reservations in legislatures, both at the Central and State levels. Based on the percentage of their population in each state, the Constitution explicitly permits reservations for SCs and STs in Parliament and State assemblies, as also in public employment and educational institutions funded by the State; it also provides for the creation of the body to monitor all these safeguards.

The present study focuses attempts to examine if these privileges, “protective discrimination” as this is called, could change the social status of ‘Dalits’ and facilitate their social upliftment. The first section deals with the meaning of ‘Dalit’. Identity formation of Dalits in different times and by different reformers is the substance of the second section. And the issue of reservation and its impact on Dalits are the essence of the third section.

Dalit: Meaning

The underprivileged sections, especially the “bahujans” and the “dalits” have had a history of struggle in challenging “given” identities and furthermore constructing their own alternative identities and political concepts to fulfil the requirements of contemporary times. In this discourse “dignity of the self” became the outcry for targeting the nature of the existing social control. Dalits, differing from the mainstream political discourse, are demonstrating a new path for social and political transformation. Both the modern Buddhists and the new aggressive dalit political elites reject all “the given” liberal identifications and “cultured” nomenclatures, eventually constructing a social robust political identity in the public domain (Wankhede, 2008).

The word “Dalit” comes from the Marathi language, and means “ground”, “suppressed”, “crushed”, or “broken to pieces”. The term expresses their “weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society” (Geetanjali, 2011). Gandhi coined the term “Harijan”—“Children of God” for them. The harijan nomenclature is considered pejorative by some leaders of the castes. They prefer to be called dalit. Occupying the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system, they are called Avarna, those whose place is outside the chaturvarna system.

They are also known as perial, Panchama, atisudra, Antyaja or Namashudra in different parts of the country. Their touch, and sometimes their shadows and even their voices are believed to pollute caste-Hindus (Shah, 2004: 118). The term “Scheduled Caste” is the official term used in Indian government documents to identify former “untouchables”. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that “Dalit” was used interchangeably with the official term “scheduled castes”, called the term “unconstitutional” and asked state governments to end its use (Geetanjali, 2011: 1-2). The SCs constitute 16 percent of India’s population.

In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupation regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leather work, butchering, or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and wastes. Dalits work as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life (Geetanjali, 2011). For example, they could not enter a temple. Elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other castes. These included obliging them to live in separate hamlets, use separate wells to draw water, imposing prohibition on the wearing of certain items of clothing or ornament which were deemed to convey dignity or status. In some areas, low caste women were forbidden to wear blouse under their Sarees. Similarly, in many areas, untouchable children have found it difficult to attend school because the high castes do not take it positively. The precise degree of social distance between the high castes and these excluded groups varies locally (Sharma, 2002: 48).

Though the visible practice of untouchability has declined—certainly in public spheres—incidents of atrocities against Dalits have not shown a similar downturn and continue unabated in post-independent India in various forms—murder, grievous hurt, arson and rape. Caste prejudice often contribute, but are not solely responsible for the atrocities against Dalits. Conflicts over material interests and political power contribute a great deal to such incidents (Shah, 2001: 20).

Social reformers differ in their view regarding ‘untouchables’. They have always stood against this evil practice. They have tried to make understand people about the irrationality of this custom. Besides, they have given different alternative identities to untouchables. The next section will deal with the different identities ascribed to them (untouchables).

II. IDENTITY FORMATION

Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent champion of removing untouchability within the Hindu Chaturvarna framework, called the untouchable, '*Harijan*'—man of God. Gandhi borrowed the name from a Bhakti Saint of the seventeenth century, Narsingh Mehta (Shah, 2001). He primarily appealed to caste Hindus to use the term Harijan instead of Antyaja. He explained:

The 'untouchable', to me is, as compared to us (caste-Hindus); really a 'Harijan'—a man of God—and we are 'Durjana' (men of evil). For whilst the untouchable has toiled and miled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the short coming and faults that we may lay at the door of these untouchables. It is still open to us to be Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sin against them.
(Gandhi, 1971: 244)

The term Harijan has been widely used by caste Hindus as a substitute for *achchuta*, that is, untouchable. Many SCs also began to call themselves so hoping that the caste Hindus would change their behaviour towards them. But it did not provide a new worldview, symbol or path to attain equal status, which was their demand. In fact, for Gandhi, the new category aimed at persuading caste Hindus to express repentance. By doing so, they were expected to change their heart and behaviour towards untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar and his followers did not find any difference whether they were called *achchuta* or *Harijan*, as the nomenclature did not change their status in the social order (Shah, 2001: 21).

According to Ambedkar, saints (like Narsingh Mehta) never carried on a campaign against caste and untouchability. The saints of the Bhakti sect 'were not concerned with the struggle between man and man. They were concerned with the relation between man and God' (Kumber, 1979). Later, a section of the SC leaders rejected the term Harijan, considering it an insult rather than an honour. Though Dr. Ambedkar did not popularise the word 'Dalit' for untouchables, his philosophy has remained a key source in its emergence and popularity. 'Dalit' means 'ground down', or 'broken to pieces', in both Marathi and Hindi. B.R. Ambedkar first used the term in 1928 or so, in his newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*, but the term gained new potency in Maharashtra during the 1970s, a period of literacy and cultural efflorescence that saw the birth of Dalit Sahitya (literature). Today, the widespread currency of the term is also belated recognition of the Dalit's militant claims upon a history of humiliation and suffering (Rao, 2008). Dalit panthers used the term to assert their identity for rights and self-respect. It includes all the oppressed and exploited sections of society. It does not confine itself nearly to economic exploitation in terms of appropriation of surplus. It also relates to suppression of culture—way of life and value system—and, more importantly, the denial of dignity (Shah, 2001). It has essentially emerged as a political category. According to Gangadhar Patawane: 'Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, faith and heaven because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited man in his country' (Cited in Das and Massey, 1995: iv).

Interestingly, in the academic realm, various terms have been used in understanding of the Dalit category by the scholars, working on Dalit politics. For example, Harrold Issac has used the category of ex-untouchables in his study (Issac, 1965); some other scholars use the term 'untouchables' (Mendelsohn and Vicziana, 2000). Barbara Joshi and Lelah Dushvin use the categories of ex-untouchables and SCs quite interchangeably (Joshi, 1982). In administrative parlance, Dalits are known by various legally constituted terms—SCs, STs or Depressed Classes—originally used by the imperial state.

The category of Dalit was defined by Ambedkar in a most comprehensive way. He says, '.....dalithood is a kind of life conditions which characterise the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes Brahminical ideology' (Omvedt, 1994). Ambedkar, however, did not use this category very often in his writing. In fact, he used a number of categories depending upon the context. For example, when he was dealing with the imperial state, he would use the category of Depressed Classes. If he was addressing high caste Hindu adversaries, he would use the term 'Bahiskrit', that means, one who is an outcaste. In the arena of competitive politics, he would use the term 'Scheduled Caste'. This was evident the establishment of Scheduled Caste Federation by him in 1942. Finally, when addressing his own social constituency, he preferred to use the term 'Pad Dalit', meaning those who are crushed under the feet of the Hindu system (Guru, 2001).

In recent years, some politicians in the country have also discarded the Dalit category as a socially reactionary, negative one and sought to replace it with the 'Bahujan' category. But this rejection by leading Bahujan political leaders is basically followed by empty emotionalism and can never be progressively integrated into the theoretical consciousness of Dalits. The language of the Bahujan political discourse does not accord to the category of Harijan a radical material status and hence this category will continue to differ radically from the Dalit category (ibid.).

Guru has concluded that the category of Dalit cannot be accommodated within the majority- minority divide or the Bahujan- Mahajan dichotomy. It does not perceive people as numerical entities to be manipulated by the Dalit- Bahujan power brokers or poll pundits. Because this category does not exist readymade, either for statistical jugglery or for electoral arithmetic, it has to be discursively constituted and negotiated with other vibrant and sensitive categories across social and ideological spaces. Thus, the deployment of the Dalit category has the logical insight which contains an element of negation and also the conjunction of categories from the same logical class. The Dalit category is historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted (2001: 105-107).

So, from the above discussion it is evident that though many have used different categories to describe 'untouchable', 'Dalit' seems to be the acceptable and mostly used term. Now the next section will deal with the reservation policy and its impact on their social upliftment as it demands serious attention and any discussion on the status of Dalits in general remains incomplete without it.

III. RESERVATION AND THE REALITY OF SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT

India is one of the few countries in the post-colonial world that took up the challenge of building an inclusive democracy in a highly diverse, multicultural, multilingual and multi religious society. The establishment of democracy and universal adult suffrage in a hierarchical society characterized by unprecedented social inequality, deprivation, and oppression was undoubtedly a revolutionary principle, a bold experiment in political affairs, perhaps the most significant in any country (Jayal, 2001). Nearly sixty seven years after independence, India remains a major success story in respect of democracy and social inclusion. This is largely due to the primacy given to equality and social justice as the cardinal principles of contemporary political life. The policy of providing benefits to historically 'disadvantaged' peoples, which was established through special provisions in the Constitution, played an important role in it. For the sake of brevity the term 'disadvantaged' refers collectively to all three groups officially designated as backward: the SCs, the STs and the OBCs. These three groups were targeted for special advantages and protection under Article 46 and the Directive Principles of State Policy (Hasan, 2009). These programmes permits departure from formal equality for the purpose of eliminating social discrimination (Galanter, 1984: 379-80).

The Constitution did not provide for reservation for the SCs and STs because they are poor or economically disadvantaged; it did so because they faced an explicit, structured and systematic exclusion from public life for centuries on grounds of descent. But these measures were also defended for their potential contribution in improving their socio- economic conditions of the disadvantaged. For Ambedkar, 'severe social separation' was the definition of discrimination (Hasan, 2009: 37).

The policy of preferential treatment has a long history. The British put the system of reservations in place over the objections of the Congress and most other political representatives. The early initiatives were deeply influenced by the overall colonial understanding of Indian Society. According to the British, the Indians represented societies of communities, not individuals, and so India was unsuitable for modern political institutions. The reservations of seats in legislatures and other similar political privileges were part of colonial structures since the early decades of twentieth century (Hasan, 2009: 19-20). The postcolonial nation state took the British legacy.

The major credit for the policy of preference put in place by the Constitution makers must go to Ambedkar, who was appointed as Law Minister in the first independent government formed in 1947. As Oliver Mendelsohn and Vicziani suggest that it is difficult to underestimate the significance of Ambedkar's appointment as Law minister, and the fact that he was chosen as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution, in terms of the ultimate decision on reservations for the SCs (Mendelsohn & Vicziani, 2000: 37). He strenuously fought for preferential treatment in their favour in education and government employment. Thus, he built a new political culture for articulating the socio-political rights of SCs, which culminated in the constitutional provisions for substantive equality for the historically disadvantaged groups, in particular the SCs (Zelliot, 1992).

For Ambedkar societal reforms vis-a-vis the Constitution became the prime task and therefore his new political party RPI (Republican Party of India) never constructed any hyperactive political ideology, but revolved round the same principles of social change. Being a spiritual person, he aspired to bring social change through the most non- violent, human and collective mode of cultural resistance. He imagined the Dalits as a modern citizen endowed with basic human rights, dignity and a glorified cultural past with which he/she would be capable of entering the domain of politics.

The social disadvantage suffered by the Dalits in India was taken note of in the Constitution of India, which was drafted under the Chairmanship of Dr. Ambedkar—a person who had spearheaded the most momentous anti-caste movement of the depressed classes. It provided the Dalits with many safeguards, viz.,

- Social, educational, cultural and religious safeguards;
- Economic safeguards;
- Political safeguards;
- Safeguards for employment.

Reservation in the educational institutions and the financial assistance in the form of scholarships and freeships constitute perhaps the most important factor in the development scheme for Dalits. For it is primarily responsible to make the basic input of education available and affordable to them. Without education, all the constitutional safeguards including the reservations in services would be infructuous (Geetanjali, 2011: 230-31).

But over the six decades of the implementations of the reservation policy it refuses to reach even the prescribed levels confirming the casteist notion still prevalent in society that the Dalits are intrinsically an inferior specie. Despite this vile attitude of the establishment the reservations by far has been the sole contributor to advancement of the Dalits. The benefits of the reservation policy to the Dalit community have been more indirect than direct. Directly, it benefited a few but indirectly it has created hope for advancement in the entire Dalit population. Though there is a massive protest against this policy across the country. The opponents of the issue argue:

- Allocating quotas on the basis of caste is a form of racial discrimination, and contrary to the right to equality.
- Most often, only economically sound people from the so-called lower castes will make use of reserved seats, thus counteracting the spirit of reservations. Political parties know reservations are no way to improve the lot of the poor and the backward. They support them because of self-interest of the "creamy layer", who use the reservation to further their own family interests and as a political flag of 'achievement' during election campaigns.
- The qualities of the elite institute may go down, because merit is severely being compromised by the reserving seats for certain caste-based communities.

- The caste system is kept alive through these measures.
- Not everyone from the so-called upper classes are rich, and not all from so-called lower classes are poor.
- Providing quotas on the basis of caste and not on the basis of merit will deter the determination of many educated and deserving students of India.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is a growing disquiet that reservations have become excessive under political pressure and that the pursuit of quality has been hijacked by politics to become the pursuit of votes. Rajeev Dhavan argues that 'India's reservation policy was designed to make "unequals" equal—not to open the door to every demand for preference by all or any community.....Today's politics of reservation follows a quest for electoral victory, nor social justice' (Dhavan, 2003). These numerous controversies suggest that the social consensus underlying these policies is not as watertight as it may seem. But most political parties do not oppose reservations, which testifies to the clout of the lower castes in the polity.

When reservations were introduced by the new state, the idea was to tear down the barriers to social exclusion and promote the participation of historically excluded and disadvantaged groups. Policies of affirmative action were viewed as instruments through which to offset the advantage enjoyed by some and to equalize opportunities for others. The Constituent Assembly debates indicate that these were meant only as a temporary measure and that the backwardness contemplated was extreme backwardness and not the one contemplated now. Moreover, they were seen as complementary to the commitment to an active welfare state that would ameliorate the conditions of the masses by providing an additional boost to the hitherto excluded and poor (Hasan, 2009).

There is doubt that reservation policy has benefited its intended beneficiaries. A sizeable section of India's middle classes consist of OBCs, SCs and STs. Reservation policy had created a small but significant middle class among the lower-caste groups, which have acquired modern education and entered the bureaucracy and other non-traditional occupation. Even with these gains we have not achieved a level of progress where we can afford to jettison affirmative actions as an instrument of integration and inclusion. It is now time to think about how to use different and new means to bridge disparities and deepen social equalities so that the pursuit of equality and justice does not remain anchored in caste and caste alone.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Anindita Mondal