

Career of Dalit Movement in Karnataka

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Abstract

The paper analyses the various stages of the Dalit movement in Karnataka to its present state. According to the author, though the Dalit movement in Karnataka is as old as the Veerashaiva movement the Dalit concern received very little attention in the context of the non-Brahmin movement in the princely state of Mysore. The real Dalit movement in Karnataka started with the **Bhusa Uproar** of B. Basavalingappa. In the process, the rise of the **Dalit Sangharsh Samiti** proved to be a non-parallel event in the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. But this movement suffered from too many lacunas. The movement in Karnataka did not base its activities on a definite ideological stance. The lack of ideological commitment in turn did not allow it to emerge as a 'self-help movement'. As the Dalits continued to fight for cursory benefits, they locked themselves into the captivity of concessions like reservations. Besides, they took their 'dalit world' too much for granted, which ultimately kept them bound by chains of submission to exploitative Hinduism. Strangely, in the process, the Dalits succumbed to the same evils against which they had been fighting. Also, the lack of social cohesion and unity left the various Dalit organisations politically distorted.

Historical Overview

The Dalit movement in Karnataka is characterised by a long and systaltic type of social progression. Apart from modern historical processes a few medieval upheavals were also reasonably responsible for bringing about a change in the sublime and sensitive attitude of the Dalits in the state. Even though they continued to be silent sufferers they were confident that all,

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including them, were equal in the eyes of God. The impetus for this belief was mostly drawn from what is greatly known as **Kalyan Kranti** or **Kalyan Revolution** led by Basaveshwar in the twelfth century A.D. in Karnataka, against what he considered as the wicked traits of Hinduism. It was, of course, a second trenchant attack after Buddha and Mahaveera. Basaveshwar, himself a Brahmin by caste, but not possessed by even a morsel of Brahminism, was a highly motivated soul. After a long thought out enlightenment he declared a vehement spiritual war against every aspect of Hinduism that was oppressive in nature. Naturally, he ridiculed discrimination based on caste and untouchability. The main objective of his movement was to establish a right relationship between man and man, and, God and religion, such that universal values of love, compassion and brotherhood became the fundamentals of life. This, he wanted to achieve through a new moral order of his own, which later on came to be known as the **Veerashaiva Dharma**. He drew his disciples from every stratum of society. His close untouchable followers like Samagar Haralayya, Dhor Kakkayya, Madar Channayya had a unique role and place in this movement. His movement was truly great with its simple virtues of secular humanism. Indeed, it was the bedrock for subsequent social reform movements in Karnataka. In due course, many minor creeds emerged out of the Veerashaiva movement. But most of them became narrow parochial monasteries without any open door practices. As a result, Veerashaivism as a revolutionary movement lost fire. In the process, it not only left the untouchables out of its pale and periphery but itself took on the colours of Hinduism.

The onslaughts of saint poets like Purandaradas and Kanakadas were also not sufficient to shake the formidable foundations of a caste based society. 'Equality before God did not seem to translate itself into social equality or equality of all men' (Gokhale 1993: 41). Most often the saint poets were persecuted by the orthodox political will of the time. Thus the *Bhakti* movement did not bring about any change in the real sense of the term. The Muslims could have effected some changes in the life of the Dalits but they had their own weaknesses such as class divisions within them. Thus, it is only with the advent of the British rule that hope for a new India beamed. The impact of the West forced the Indians to realise the need for radical social reform in India. 'Indeed it may be said that 19th century saw in India, a reformation, comparable in its essence, though not in its violence, to the

reformation in Europe in the 16th century' (Menon 1963: 18). The work of organisations like Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission was especially commendable in this respect. These organisations had extended their branches to Karnataka also. The Brahmo Samaj with its branch at Mangalore came to Karnataka in the year 1870 (Shastri 1991: 37). The Arya Samaj came a little later and established itself in Hyderabad-Karnataka. But the reformative framework of these organisations was too narrow to cover the issues afflicting society at large. They could spearhead the attack against evil practices like *suttee*, child marriage, etc., but questions concerning caste and untouchability or such other cardinal aspects of Hindu society remained untouched. They were oriental in content and opposed to the total rejection of vedic heritage. Hence, they favoured revivalism to revolution. As such these organisations proved to be practically useless for the lower classes. The British also maintained a strict status quo in respect of such issues. 'In the main, their attitude as administrators was one of "neutralism" which they believed was justly expected of them, if they had to dispense equity amongst the various cultural ethnic groups that made the Indian pluralistic society' (Rajashekharaiah 1971: 20). Thus even during the British period the wrongs perpetrated upon the depressed continued, as in the past.

Non-Brahminism, Brahminism and Dalits

Brought under the broader scope of the term 'modernisation', Karnataka did not escape the revolutionary changes sweeping across the country during the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. But the process of modernisation was very slow and sluggish in Karnataka. It was even slower and less relevant in respect of the castes below the Brahmins. However, without resorting to a direct attack against the Brahmins, each non-Brahmin caste in its own way was trying to mobilise itself towards achieving a higher stature in socio-cultural life. The non-Brahmin castes like the Lingayats, rejected the Hindu framework and attempted to attain social prestige and status within the Lingayat framework. It was not Sanskritization, but a secessionist process through which they were trying to mobilise respect for themselves and prove that they were smart, superior and distinct. The non-manifest, yet continuing trends, related to Basaveshwara and the subsequent *Bhakti* traditions were the major source of inspiration for this kind of cultural transformation. But in practice this

strategic movement proved meaningless in so far as it did not bring the real benefits, such as those available in the political and administrative domains, to the caste in question. On the other hand, the Brahmins by taking to English education were already dominating the administration of the princely state of Mysore. They had not only entered the higher echelons of the power structure but also had a hold over many of the minor official positions. This monopoly of power by the numerically small number of Brahmins gradually created ripples of discontent amongst the non-Brahmins. 'Realising that their interests were not being properly served and that they stood to lose in the long run they began to seek avenues leading to the places of position and power' (Shastry 1991: 37). Around the beginning of the twentieth century, they had mustered enough strength to influence the princely authorities of Mysore. Some of the family members of the Maharaja of Mysore came forward to support persons like M. Basavaiah, K. H. Ramaiah, and Yajaman Vecrabasappa, to organise the non-Brahmin movement. But when C. R. Reddy, an ardent follower of Phule, came to Mysore and joined the Maharaja's College, Mysore, the movement got a real momentum. Reddy attempted to bring various non-Brahmin interests under a single banner and founded the **Praja Mitra Mandali**, in the year 1917. But conflicts over minor issues arose among them. And though the movement began with the genuine objective of developing the backward castes, it hardly worked for that goal. On the contrary, in practice its goals were opportunistic and directed towards acquiring positions in the princely state of Mysore. 'One could describe it as a rat race to join the ranks of clerkdom' (Nagaraj 1993: 5). It kept the *Panchama* problem out of its concern. But the princely state acted upon it very sincerely. It provided for *Panchama* education by starting separate schools for them. There were as many as 65 *Panchama* schools in 1901 (Shastry 1991: 39). The liberal Dewans like Seshadri Iyer helped the King to take up such schemes for the *Panchamas*. But when the princely state took the initiative to integrate these schools with the general schools a storm of protest arose. 'Not only the orthodox Hindus but the Muslims also agitated and withdrew their children from the schools. The redoubtable C. R. Reddy, the then Inspector General of Education, did not budge and stood by the legitimate rights of *Panchamas*' (Shastry 1991: 39). The helpless *Panchamas* were also trying to organise themselves. As early as 1906 they had established the **Adidravid Abhivrudhi Sangh** to represent their problems to the princely state. But it was led by a Bangalore-based Tamil non-Brahmin called Murgesh

Pillai, 'who was active as a Dalit Spokesman for over three decades' (Omvedt 1994: 129).

However, Maharashtra was experiencing more powerful currents of Dalit upsurge. By 1920 Ambedkar had already earned a name as a young untouchable leader capable of taking his community to the path of liberation. His name had reached every headquarter of India by then. Through some of the villages and towns of the bordering districts of northern Karnataka, Ambedkar was making his way into Karnataka as well. He held important meetings in Nippani, Chikkodi, Bedkihal, Bagalkot, Bidar and Gulbarga. People like Ingale, Varale, Karale and Suryavanshi were in the forefront to render him support and organise meetings for him to address. He had also inaugurated the **Machagar Mahasang** at Dharwad in the year 1923. Naturally his activities were known even to the princely authorities of Mysore state. When a Tamil Brahmin reformer, Gopalaswamy Iyer (most prominent of early Brahmin patrons of Dalit causes) organised a political conference of *Panchamas* in 1920, he invited Ambedkar. But Ambedkar could not attend the conference due to a state ban on his entry' (Omvedt 1994: 130). The non-awakened Dalits of Mysore did not know who Ambedkar was. However, as Ambedkar began playing a crucial role in the political and social spheres of India, and as he gave expression to the aspirations of the Dalits as their main national spokesman before the British Commissions, Round Table Conferences and Constituent Assembly, he earned a lot of respect from even these remote corners of Dalit Karnataka. No doubt, the Dalits accepted him as their saviour. But this realisation occurred to them only after Independence. Before this, they never spoke on their own. They depended on their leaders, whose sentiments vanished in the bosom of Gandhism, which upheld Hinduism and its greatness.

The Brahmin leadership of the Dalits was not spontaneous. It was sponsored as a strategic reaction to the threat of non-Brahmin political domination. Naturally, the 'Harijan' leadership of the princely state, primarily offered by Brahmins, was acting in accordance with the Congress formula of 'upgradation' without any long-term aim for 'upliftment'. As such, economic exploitation and social oppression were not dealt with seriously. It was like leading the sheep towards an ablong hole. Even the task of Harijan upgradation was not attended to sincerely. The **Harijan Sevak Sangh** which

was working for the welfare of the Harijans of Mysore during 1935, did not ask for the stoppage of traditional occupations involving the menial services such as carrying filth, dead animals, etc. Nor did it challenge the non-Brahmins harassing the Dalits for refusing to work for them. Instead, it helped to raise *Bhajan Mandals* in Dalit colonies. 'Without an industrial base or a vigorous political life, Dalits had no access to an independent political organisation. Dalits remained powerless and relatively voiceless' (Omvedt 1994: 132). But strangely 'on his way over a nationwide Harijan Tour' in 1933, Gandhi had described Mysore state as a model of 'Ram Raj'. But the 'Ram Raj that Mysore was, finally meant, stilling Dalit advance—perhaps a symbolic killing of Shambuk. The Mysore Maharaja's ban on Ambedkar's entry into the state, in contrast to the honoured guest treatment given to Gandhi, shows the nature of reformism and constraints on politics in the state. Dalits were unable in the entire period before Independence, to break through this to achieve autonomy' (Omvedt 1994: 133).

Awakened Appraisal after Independence

In Independent India it was not easy for a Dalit to try and assert himself in the public sphere in respect of what was guaranteed to him by the new Constitution. Whatever he had was not gained through his own efforts. He knew not too, what he had. It was the sheer effort of Baba Saheb Ambedkar that had brought the Dalit mass of India the right of equality of treatment and opportunity. But he did not live long after Independence to guide his people in the way they should go about to get their rights fully realised. Hence, in his absence things became difficult for the bewildered Dalits. While a Dalit had equal share in power, he had to be submissive to acquire it. He had equal access to prestige, but to claim it on par with others was considered a sacrilege. The doors of public wells, hotels, saloons, temples and parks were open to him constitutionally, but he did not exercise this right for fear of becoming a subject of the wrath of the castiest and deadly Hindus. The new rights and liberties, therefore, did not make him any different in so far as he saw the old Hindu forms operating in his life with the same terrible strength and vigour even in post-Independence India. This was particularly true of the Dalits in Karnataka. They were the last to show concern for themselves. Neither did they feel remorse for their subjugation

nor did they get remission. For a long time, even in free India, they remained as they were in pre-Independence India.

After all, rights cannot be realised automatically or mechanically. They have to be fought for. An organised struggle is a must for their realisation. Especially in a complex context like India no lower caste can gain what is due to it without any organised effort on its part. This enlightenment led souls like Shyam Sunder to take up the cause of Dalits.

Shyam Sunder and his Bheem Sena

Shyam Sunder was the first to start a vehement struggle in Karnataka for awakening the Dalits. Shyam Sunder had some strategic differences with Babasaheb Ambedkar. Sunder was basically an atheist, lacking faith in any religion. 'To him religion as such had no answer to the problems of exploitation. He opposed the conversion of Scheduled Castes either to Islam or Christianity or even to Buddhism' (Rajashekhar 1978: 9). Yet, most of his thinking was based on Babasaheb Ambedkar's philosophy. He had not only thoroughly analysed the works of Ambedkar but also had high reverence for his life, mission and achievements. Though an all-India organisation founded by Ambedkar known as **Samata Sainik Dal** was already in existence, Shyam Sunder wanted a new and militant form of organisation named after Ambedkar himself. He used the first name of Ambedkar—'Bhimrao'—while founding his **Bheem Sena** in April 1968.

Bheem Sena began its career in Gulbarga township and later spread its wings to all parts of Karnataka. Apart from its strong motive of self-defence, it had a broader ideological perspective. Through his small book *The Four Immediate Needs*, Shyam Sunder had placed before the country four important demands, viz., 'surrender of twenty five per cent of villages in every taluk, a separate electorate, a separate scheduled caste university in each state and a strong political organisation for untouchables' (Shyam Sunder 1987: 13-14). These demands were nothing but a distorted version of the perspective plan of Babasaheb Ambedkar, which he had built for the untouchables in his brochure entitled the 'Rights of Minorities in a Free India'. Though, Babasaheb had emphasised the demand for a separate settlement for the untouchables because of his own unique reasons, he had

never asked for a separate nation for them. Shyam Sunder went to the extent of designing a separate land for untouchables namely 'Dalitastan', something improbable and far ahead of Ambedkar's demands (Shyam Sunder 1987: 13-15). He also cherished the desire to bring about a strong alliance between the Dalits, the Muslims and the backward classes. For this reason his **Bheem Sena** became so popular that it spread to all the cities of India, 'fostering the tradition of militancy' (Omvedt 1994: 336). No wonder, it could terrify the oppressors within just a short period of its coming into existence. Indeed Shyam Sunder was a great organiser. He was also a writer. His important works include: *Mool Bharatis; Four Immediate Needs; They Burn; Federation is a must for India's Minorities; Diksha*; etc. Thus the Dalit movement in Karnataka truly began with the entry of Shyam Sunder into the public life of the Dalits. As such he can be rightly hailed as the Father of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka; though he himself owed this to Babasaheb Ambedkar.

However, after Shyam Sunder **Bheem Sena** lost its vigour and importance. In the meanwhile, the emergence of **Dalit Panthers** in Maharashtra, in 1972, attracted the masses of Karnataka. A few of its branches were also established in the bordering districts of Karnataka. But these did not function very effectively. In fact, there were many petty Dalit Unions working in almost all the districts of Karnataka state. All of them were self-centred with a limited area of operation. Hence there was a general cessation of the protest wave in Karnataka. Incidents of social injustice or exploitation were not handled successfully. Naturally, this prompted the oppressors to resume their activities. Meanwhile the non-Brahmin forward castes like the Lingayats and Vokkaligas having had considerable control over agricultural land, had also consolidated themselves politically. They were calling the shots in Karnataka's politics, economy and society. The worst victims of their lordship were the poor and the landless agricultural labourers belonging to the lower castes. Meanwhile the non-Brahmin forward castes were acting as feudal rulers at the village level. While at the city level, they emerged as merchants, besides dominating the state administration as politicians and officials. Naturally, at all levels the degraded castes were subjected to humiliation at their hands. Whenever the lower castes in a compelling context dared to exercise their constitutional rights, the dominant and orthodox castes threatened them with dire consequences. If the method

of open violence did not succeed in curbing the Dalits, the orthodox classes then resorted to such means as would involve a social boycott of Dalits, leading to stoppage of all the necessities of life such as work, wages, sale of food grains, etc. to them. Their acute poverty, dependent economic status, fear of social boycott or terrible consequences thereof forced the Dalits to remain submissive. But once again, there came a person who gave rise to a storm of trends in Karnataka on behalf of the Dalits. It was no less a person than B. Basavalingappa.

Basavalingappa and the Bhusa Uproar

Basavalingappa was a dare devil, a person who would go to any extent if it came to the question of protecting the interests of the Dalits. Having had tremendous influence of Babasaheb Ambedkar he inherited all the traits of Ambedkar. 'No discussion over Babasaheb's thoughts,' he used to tell his followers, 'we must accept him as he is.' He acquired the eminence of becoming one of the high ranking Cabinet Ministers in Devaraj Urs' Congress Ministry in Karnataka. Without fearing the consequences, in one of his public speeches he had dared to speak against the pro-Hindu literature in the State and termed it as nothing but cattle feed (*Bhusa*). This triggered off a bitter controversy against him in the whole state, ultimately leading to his dismissal from the state cabinet. A stream of violent events, a series of strikes and actions, reactions rocked the public life of Karnataka until Basavalingappa was expelled. During this simmering period many of the followers of Basavalingappa, including Dalit students were beaten up. A host of factors apart from the *Bhusa* theory were responsible for this furore. Basavalingappa was himself a controversial figure with no respect for Hindu priesthood, Hindu gods and goddesses and their practices. His extreme stand had become a bitter pill to swallow for the Hindu vested interests. He even asked the Dalits to throw Hindu idols into the gutters. The landed gentry had its own reasons to oppose Basavalingappa's ideas. Dalits, as tillers, were trying to own land with the help of the Land Reforms Act. So all the vested interests including the politicians, the press and the intellectuals joined hands against Basavalingappa in the guise of protecting Kannada language, literature and culture. But the event proved to be favourable and valuable for the Dalits. It stirred the conscience of the Dalits all over the state. They started getting together, thinking together and moving together.

Dalit Sangharsha Samiti: A Revolutionary Beginning

A section of the Dalits who had acquired education and gone a little ahead of their brethren took the events in the context of the *Bhusa* controversy seriously and started reacting thoughtfully. A conclave of Dalit writers, poets and artisans was held at Bhadravathi in 1973 to deal with the situation. The same later became the **Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS)**, a forum to educate, organise and lead the Dalits in their agitation against their oppressors and the exploitative system as a whole. The DSS 'went on to become organisationally the strongest and long lasting Dalit movement in the country' (Omvedt 1994: 337).

DSS was taken to every village in the state where a small branch of the Ambedkar Yuvak Mandal was already functioning. Hundreds of such branches were brought together under the single banner of DSS. Within half a decade of its existence, the DSS was able to muster sufficient strength to fight any atrocity against the Dalits at all levels of the state—the village, the taluk and the district. The branches of DSS at all these levels organised their own determined, devoted and morally committed cadre. The founding fathers of DSS like B.Krishnappa, Devanoor Mahadev, Siddalingaiah, Devayya Harave, Chandra Prasad Thyagi, M.D. Gangaiah, Kolar Venkatesh, Muni Yellappa, Mangalore Vijay, Munivenkataswamy and a host of others were working in the state guiding the district and taluka branches in the process of organisation and agitation. It was a rare combination of writers, scholars, poets, dramatists and singers that came forward to give the Dalits the voice, vigour and strength. If B.Krishnappa was the commander-in-chief in the organisation, Siddalingaiah was its poet and Devanoor Mahadev its thinker. Each one contributed in his own unique way to the growth and development of DSS. Following in the footsteps of Devanoor Mahadev and Siddalingaiah, several other Dalit writers emerged in the state giving rise to what is known as new Dalit literature, a new knowledge and a new form of protest in Karnataka.

The source of inspiration for the aggressive Dalit literary form that emerged in Karnataka after the seventies is drawn directly from the Maharashtrian Dalit literary spirit. While expressing the painful flood of anguish against their enemies, the Dalit writers in Maharashtra not only

used a new rhetoric with wild idioms, phrases and verbs, but also created a new rhythm of hope, courage and confidence among the Dalits in their state. 'It is indeed a *sui generis* phenomenon in the socio-cultural field of post-independent India' (Waghmore 1988: 1) that had blown to Karnataka. Siddalingaiah took clue from it. Hence, the tune and substance of his poetry was almost in line with that of Namadeo Dhasal of Maharashtra. In every piece of his poetry, Dhasal stripped the words of their sanctity and used them in their nakedness. That is why his poems reached every Dalit heart and every Dalit enemy. Naturally, Siddalingaiah's poems became a bridge that joined the Dalit activists and the Dalit masses, as well as the road leading them to the path of struggle, progress and freedom.

'Dalit literature is not merely a cry in the wilderness' (Waghmore 1988: 1). It is not just a cruel exercise of the words roughly knit to attack an enemy in scathing terms. Nor is the enemy himself its target. What it aims to strike at is the cruelty in the enemy's heart, thoughts and actions. As such though it is superficially wild, kindness is its true spirit; though its approach is direct, openness is its secret; and, though its method is ridiculous, its interest is genuine. It is a spontaneous outburst of feelings with a concern for oneself, society and its system. Therefore, in its final and decisive battle what it wants to do is to deliver both the enemies and the victims together from their age long, sluggish and sloppy system, smashing it once and for all. It is with this revolutionary zeal that Dalit literature in Karnataka grew and spread as far as the village streets. Siddalingaiah's poems produced strange vibrations in the veins of Dalit activists. Whether a conference or a symposium, a conclave or a protest movement, they all began and concluded with Siddalingaiah's songs. So also were Devanoor Mahadev's novels which served as food for thought. The fictions he narrated depicted every piece of Dalit life. They were sharply outspoken and penetrating. Most of them were dramatised and were successfully played in all the important cities of the state. Indeed the works of these literary figures gave the much needed energy to the activists in the movement in Karnataka.

In the process of its growth, DSS not only attempted to organise the Dalits but also gave them militant moral support in a variety of dreadful circumstances. Any confrontation which arose out of land, religion and caste concerns, ultimately resulted in loots, rapes and massacres of Dalits. Such

incidents were attended to with a vigorous challenge. Often the boon of rights became a bane when one confrontation developed into another. A Dalit could not exercise his right without creating a controversy. But controversy itself became food for further controversy. This kept the village or the town tense for a long time.

The procession of five thousand Dalit bonded labourers in Kanakapura was a milestone in Dalit history. Many such events subsequently took place all over the state as hundreds of protests were held every year. Any town or village burning with a communal issue invited special attention. The strategies of protest comprised road picketing, traffic blocking, gheraoing of ministers and officials, marching and drumbeating etc. A few examples of the large number of protests have been cited below:

- In the year 1975 when the Dalits of Taladdimmanahalli, Shidlaghatta Taluk, attempted to cultivate the land granted to them by the government, caste Hindus viewed it as an insult to them. Quickly and cruelly they retaliated. They pelted stones at him, ransacked Dalit colonies and set ablaze their huts. They also stopped all transactions with Dalits. DSS went to the rescue of these Dalits, led the protest marches and forced the politicians as well as officials to intervene and redress the wrongs (DSS Souvenir 1989: 52).
- On 6 September 1979 Anusuyamma was mass raped. Sanjeevamma was victimised similarly on 24 October 1979. Muniyappa was murdered on 20 October 1983 for having shown the courage to ask for compensation from the landlord whose cattle had destroyed his crops. Venkatamuniyappa of Jhannaghatti village was killed on 20 May 1983, the reason being his active participation in the DSS movement and the village politics. All these victims belonged to the Kolar district of Karnataka state (DSS Souvenir 1989: 49).

Similar incidents occurred in other districts as well. The Bendigeri and Bidaroli incidents stand apart as incomparable cruel patterns of punishment not seen even in Manu's model of prescriptions.¹ DSS acted upon these incidents valiantly and succeeded in punishing the culprits. Strikes, *dharnas* and awakening programmes in the cause of the Dalit society

at large were organised every now and then by DSS, both at the state and the local levels.

Rallies were held demanding regularisation of unauthorised land cultivated by Dalits. At Bidrekaval in Hassan district nearly 400 acres of government land which had not been distributed among the landless was acquired and distributed during 1982-83 (Rudraswamy 1991: 54). Rallies were also held demanding the filling up of the reservation quota, maintenance of roster system and proper delivery of schemes and programmes of the government that were meant for the Dalits. Often seminars, symposia, training camps, writers' conferences were also organised. Mass awareness programmes like street shows and plays were arranged. Attempts were made to remove superstitious beliefs. In 1987, DSS was successful in pressurising the government to enact the law banning the practice of nude worship by Dalit women in the name of Goddess Yellamma at Chandragutti, Shimoga district (Rudraswamy 1991: 54). Indeed DSS provided an effective front for the Dalits and to that extent its achievements are excellent.

DSS retained its mutual links with other movements as well. But it did this with a clear perspective of its allies and enemies (Rudraswamy 1991: 54). It regarded the farmers, peasants, landless labourers, factory workers and the left parties as its allies, whereas, capitalistic, feudalistic and communal forces were treated as enemies. But the glaring disparities between the Dalits and their allies always kept them poles apart. Nadkarni sums up this situation: 'It is not surprising if Sharad Joshi, Naidu or Najundaswamy are not able to sell their ruralist ideology to Dalits, especially when urban employment opportunities act as an outlet for dalits to escape the socio-economic oppression in the villages' (Nadkarni, 1987: 149). Naturally the alliance between farmers' and Dalit movements became superficial and useless. The Dalits are yet to break their chains at the lower level to join the midstream society.

Dalit Liberation : Ambedkar's Dreams and Confronting Realities.

Ambedkar had developed a crisp and coherent theory of Dalit liberation. First of all, Ambedkar wanted the Dalits to be delivered from the socio-cultural exploitation of Hinduism. Secondly, he wanted the Dalits to

be economically self-reliant and politically powerful. To Ambedkar the socio-cultural domain of Hinduism was nothing but a veritable chamber of horrors. 'The sanctity and infallibility of the *Vedas*, *Smritis* and *Shastras*, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of *karma* and the senseless law of status by birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the untouchables' (Ambedkar 1946: 308). Hence to overcome the socio-cultural exploitation by Hinduism, Ambedkar gave a clarion call to the Dalits to abandon Hinduism *ad-infinitum* and seek solace in some other religion which can provide for common respect, brotherhood and compassion that one man owes to another. But abandoning Hinduism was not the only reason why Ambedkar embraced Buddhism. He had his own rational reasons for adopting such a course of historic significance.

Firstly, Ambedkar saw religion as a social force (Gore 1993: 234) as it sets the ideal for a society to follow (Rao 1993: 71). To quote his own words: 'those who deny the importance of religion . . . fail to understand how great is the potency and sanction that lies behind a religious ideal as compared with that of a secular ideal . . . to ignore religion is to ignore live wire' (Ambedkar 1987: 23-24).

Thus, Ambedkar regarded religion as an important part of the process of human life only because owing to its vital force men get together and live together with a fellow feeling. But at the same time, he did not consider all religions to be equally good. He abhorred a religious system which converted the human mind into a static state because that which is static is easily prone to exploitation, by propagating the illogical tenets. 'He rejected Hinduism on the ground that it encouraged anti-humanistic values and promoted unscientific and irrational behaviour' (Rao 1993: 63). According to Ambedkar's analysis of Hindu philosophy 'on the criterion of "justice" Hinduism was found wanting, in so far as it was inimical to equality, antagonistic to liberty and opposed to fraternity' (Gore 1993: 235). Hence 'it is a misnomer to call it a religion. Its philosophy is opposed to the very thing for which religion stands' (Ambedkar 1987: 78).

To Ambedkar religion was good only if its doctrinal basis was in consonance with the democratic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity — in a word 'justice'. He took religion as a matter of right living, 'a

framework for a moral way of life' (Rao 1993: 66). In fact, his decision to convert himself to Buddhism was guided by the spirit of scientific moralism which meant 'Godless, rational, humanistic and ethically saturated' religion. According to K. Raghavendra Rao, 'Ambedkar had set his heart on a scientific religion of the type the Victorians were trying to seek desperately as a way out of the personally agonising conflict between their Christian beliefs and their scientific knowledge. Ambedkar thought that Buddhism answered to this need' (Rao 1993: 67). By converting his people to such a religion, Ambedkar wanted to deliver them from exploitation in the Hindu socio-cultural domain.

Indeed the reason for Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was genuine as it was motivated by the spirit of leading the Dalits towards a new way of life with new feelings, thoughts and perceptions about themselves and their society. Given a new fellow feeling and conjoint experience, he expected the Dalits to acquire a new cultural identity that would make them an altogether new community, free from fears of deprivation or discrimination. But no Dalit organisation in Karnataka which viewed Ambedkar as its guiding force, took this part of his theory of Dalit emancipation so seriously. Excepting Basavlingappa, no Dalit leader could think of it as a step towards the liberation of Dalits. Shyam Sunder was a staunch follower of Babasaheb Ambedkar. But he failed to understand the core contents of Ambedkar's religious philosophy. Claiming that he was an atheist, Shyam Sunder did not understand how Ambedkar was himself an atheist with a scientific tint of religion or a moralism par excellence. It is the non-acceptance of religious conversion as a method of bringing about Dalit liberation that gave a first blow to the religious movement launched by Ambedkar, blocking its growth to that extent. Though DSS provided a powerful front to the Dalits of Karnataka, it did not commit itself to a definite ideological stance such as to lead the Dalits on to a path of liberation. Naturally, Ambedkar's conversion strategy remained far from its consideration.

Instead, DSS, attempted to derive solace within the framework of Hinduism itself. In fact, it succumbed to the same evils with which it was crossing swords. The DSS just used Ambedkar's photo and not Ambedkar as a guiding force. That is why, neither did it fully reject the Hindu caste

system nor did it cling to it. Knowingly or unknowingly it could only try its strategies only within the given social system of Hinduism. In the year 1987, when for the first time Devanoor Mahadev, a Dalit novelist, became the State convenor of DSS, he planned a strange strategy to test the degree of the practice of untouchability in the state. Accordingly, a state-wide programme was organised in the streets of Karnataka such that Dalit youth with a water pot in their hands were to request the caste Hindu passer-by to drink their water.² If a caste Hindu drank the Dalit water from a Dalit's hand then it was understood that his level of untouchability was no more a practice and vice-versa. But the irony was that, Devanoor Mahadev himself had a fair number of caste Hindu friends who were always ready to share with him not only water but all other things. Yet Mahadev never ceased to be an untouchable. The symbol of DSS also indicated a form of traditional slavery: a pick-axe with a sweeping broom was chosen as its symbol of self respect in contrast to the *Dhamma Chakra* or blue flag of Maharashtra Dalit Panthers. Dancing, drumbeating etc., were represented as Dalit arts. In fact, DSS promoted all the Dalit traits which finally led the Dalits back into their own sort. Naturally, the idea of cultural emancipation of Dalits remained out of the scope of DSS.

The laxity on the part of Dalit movements to consider the question of reorganising the Dalits into an alternative mode of living always kept the Dalits bound to their old cultural patterns which ultimately meant nothing but the Hindu caste system, untouchability and everything that is associated with them. This had its own effect on the political career of Dalits.

Lack of homogeneity, unity and integrity among the various Dalit communities, which was to emerge out of the cultural liberation visualised by Ambedkar, prevented them from forming a political force of their own in the state. Their cultural slavery was automatically converted into political slavery. Empowering, after all, means enabling. But this enabling process did not take place at all. There was no corresponding link between the Dalit politicians and the self-styled non-political Dalit organisations. Neither did these organisations strengthen the hands of the Dalit politicians nor did they identify with the Republican Party of India, designed by Ambedkar himself. At least in principle, DSS kept itself aloof from politics, though the forerunners in it could have a clandestine deal with the politicians of their

like. This apparently neutral political stance of DSS left the entire Dalit mass in a politically bewildered state of affairs, and at the mercy of political parties dominated by their usurpers. Because of their political dependence the Dalits were politically split into as many political parties as they came across in the process of political participation in the state. As the years rolled by, even the petty DSS activists started developing connections with political parties of their choice and became imbibed with corrupt traits. Most of them being unemployed, thrived only on what they could extract from the innocent Dalits. They acted as middlemen between the police and the Dalits or between the oppressor himself and the Dalits and got as much as was possible out of the deal. In fact, in a fair number of cases DSS activists themselves became Dalit oppressors. They even indulged in nefarious activities such as setting the Dalits against a caste Hindu oppressor and vice versa, so that they could gain something out of the flame thus lit. Today, this scene prevails in almost every village of the state.

Presently some of the top grade DSS activists have joined main - stream politics in the state. A few of them have become MLCs and MLAs. As such, as of now, DSS is leaderless and that is why, directionless. If it has a leadership at all, it is blind. If it is moving, it does not know in what direction. So, it has become lightless with no spark of hope for the Dalits. Further, it is split into many fractions, each one claiming to be the real DSS. The sub-caste factions of right and left have also emerged with a lot of contempt and hatred against one another. Indeed, DSS is now a dying flame. As far as Dalit politicians are concerned they have not only failed to present the Dalit mass with leadership but have even shut their doors against them. They have already joined the mainstream society by compromising with the larger oppressive system. In fact, they have become one with it. Those who have entered the higher echelons of the power structure like IAS/IPS, have also formed a class of their own. They have married amongst themselves and share their power, prestige and wealth amongst themselves. They have readily set an unequal competition amongst Dalits, always being at the gainful end in such an unequal competition. The larger Dalit society as such has remained as it is.

Thus Ambedkar's dream to unite the Dalits under a single political banner namely the Republican Party of India, and thereby make them a

powerful political force remains a far cry. Consequently, the Dalits in Karnataka automatically remain politically powerless, dependent and unorganised.

Coming to the economic problem of Dalits, it can be safely said that they have shown the same apathy as in case of cultural and political formation. Of course, Ambedkar linked the economic problem of the Dalits to the general problem of the economically exploited. But, even then Ambedkar wanted this problem to be tackled by Dalit leadership. Being the worst sufferers the need to organise towards this end was more urgent for the Dalits than for anybody else. Ambedkar wanted the Dalits to achieve their economic liberation through the method of 'constitutional state socialism with parliamentary democracy'—a scientific mixture of theories evolved by Ambedkar as an alternative approach to marxism, to usher-in a proper economic order without destroying democracy altogether. But no Dalit organisation insisted upon the economic structure of a society designed by Ambedkar. A few of them joined the self-styled marxist camps, which always played double games—Hinduism in one context and pseudo-marxism in another. All the Dalit organisations in Karnataka as elsewhere, attempted to do their best only within the framework of the Constitutional provisions like reservations etc. They could at the most strive to ask for such policy measures of the government which brought about just or cursory benefits to Dalit communities and not benefits in the real sense of the term. In sporadic instances, though, DSS struggled to get some piece of government land for the Dalits. Yet such land was also often useless and uncultivable.

However, independent of the Constitution, Ambedkar, had favoured a 'self reliant' parallel economy of Dalits where the Dalits could have their own organised banking system, co-operative societies, agricultural colonies, industrial units etc. This was to come through a sheer self-help movement emerging out of the spirit of self-respect and self-reliance. But nothing has been achieved so far in this end as well. All the Dalit organisations in Karnataka, like Dalits elsewhere in India, concentrated only on three words of Ambedkar, 'educate, organise and agitate', totally forgetting the other themes like 'self-respect, self-help and self-reliance' which contained the real philosophy of Ambedkar. The Dalits' firm belief in their practice of what they considered as Dalit culture or way of life or their pride in what

they claimed as 'Dalit is dignified' always kept them bound by chains of submission to Hinduism or its exploitative hegemony. They never built their own world—secure and independent, which they could have done. No organisation provided a curriculum which could inspire a Dalit to look within himself and discover his weaknesses or strengths. They could have come into their own had they destroyed their Dalit world with the help of proper steps and planned actions. But, pragmatic Ambedkar with a firm concern for his authentic self, having cultivated a habit of creative living, had destroyed his Dalit world without the help of constitutional props like reservation. With sheer self-help, he had 'carved out for himself a unique position in society' (Harijan 1936) and had fully brought into practice Sartre's belief that 'not only is man what he conceives himself to be but he is also what he wills himself to be. Man is nothing other than what he makes himself. He himself will have made what he will be' (Sartre 1947: 18).

Ambedkar had set an outstanding example of how a man can make his life bright, blissful and prosperous just through the method of self chosen responsibility to conduct one's self properly. The terrible loss of individual self ultimately led to the loss of the community self. 'Because of a lack of real concern for themselves, the Dalits have not been able to interact meaningfully with their (hostile) environment and create a value system which can guide them in the process of making their life more dignified and prosperous. Dalit organisations could have attempted to create a social milieu to enlighten and encourage individual Dalits to build their lives. But, unwisely they totally excused individual Dalits and concentrated only on Dalit collectivity as the sole victim of social illness. Naturally even for personal gains and security, the Dalit as an individual retained his complete dependence on group life. So far, what an individual has been able to derive in the name of the community has not been derived by the community in the name of the individual. This wrong contributive correspondence between the individual Dalit and his community has made the Dalit community still more weak and meek. Dalits should know the difference between the prop and the leg and learn to forego the prop whether it is reservation, a government scheme or any such provisional guarantee. Because it will only strengthen and increase the dependency syndrome amongst them, and lead to a feeling of helplessness from which there is no escape. But so far no Dalit has dared to do this. Today, even a matriculate Dalit looks at the government 'for a job' as if his

birth was caused by an act of the government. He is reluctant to realise the fact that formal education alone has nothing to do with his practical life. So far there is no combined effort to look at life from a pragmatic point of view. As such Dalit liberation has become a riddlesome issue. However, at least henceforth let us hope that a Dalit would learn to use values like self-respect, self-help and self-reliance to make more meaningful the other words of Babasaheb Ambedkar: educate, organise and agitate.

Notes

1. In Bendigeri village of Belgaum district a few Dalits were forced to eat human waste on the charge that they had stolen the crops from the land of the caste Hindu gentry. For no fault of her own, a Dalit woman was made to parade naked in the streets of Bidaroli village in the same district.
2. Water also turns to be Dalit water when it is in the hands of Dalits as per the caste notions of purity and pollution that prevails among the high and low.

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