

Adivasis and Dalits Issue of India -- Shraddhanand Rai

The Dalit movement in India began around the mid-19th century. It was Jyotirao Phule, a middle caste, social revolutionary from Maharashtra, who questioned the caste system itself and its evil practices. By the end of the 19th century, there were a number of anti-caste movements in various parts of India. This includes Phule's Satyashodhak movement, Namashudra movement, the Adi-Hindu movement, the Adi Dharma movement, the Ezahava movement of Sree Narayan Dharma Paripalana [SNDP] Yogam, the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Samajam [SJPS] and the Pulaya Mahasabha.

However, these movements were largely socio-religious in nature. Later, Dalit movements got politicized in the early decades of the 20th century, and especially, When the Britishers introduced the system of a separate electorate in the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909. By 1917, Dalit movements got separated from non-Brahmin movements and they got a further fillip after a resolution was passed in the Indian National Congress in the same year. The resolution stressed on bringing the attention towards the socio-economic conditions and with the presidency of Gandhi in 1920, this process gathered momentum.

Ambedkar and Dalit issue

By the 1930s, Gandhi and Ambedkar had emerged as competing spokesmen and leaders of the depressed classes in India. Gandhi thought that untouchability was a moral issue, which is internal to the Hindu religion and that there should be a peaceful and gradual abolition of untouchability. To Gandhi, there was nothing wrong in the *varna* system and that 'ati-shudras' should be included in it too as they also constitute the part of the Hindu religion. On the contrary, Ambedkar found untouchability to be a political and economic issue. He felt that abolition of the caste system was essential for abolishing untouchability. Ambedkar favored the issue of a separate electorate of MacDonald's proposal of 1928. But, Gandhi was vehemently against it and went on a fast unto-death. At last, Ambedkar had to give in and signed the Poona Pact that gave reservations to Dalits within the Hindu community.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was one of the greatest leaders that India has ever produced. Ambedkar and his ideas provide inspiration, dignity, and a practical way forward for millions of oppressed people in India. Coming from an Army background, young Bhim got a rare opportunity to acquire a modern education. He was one of the first untouchables to go through college. He was much influenced by the thoughts of John Dewey. Dewey's ideas were very much in the Enlightenment tradition. Ambedkar, like Dewey, held that reason and scientific temper had the potential to challenge unexamined tradition and prejudices by cultivating a collective, democratic "will to inquire, to examine, to discriminate, to draw conclusions only on the basis of evidence after taking pains to gather all available evidence".

He attended the dalit issue as an immediate concern and demanded affirmative action. To him dalit emancipation is not a matter that can be set aside, but needs more pragmatic approaches and fruitful policies. For this purpose political organization is a must for the down trodden. A true dalit consolidation is possible with the awakening of dalit consciousness in India. It is in this

context he attempted to establish political organization for the dalits. This started with the Indian labour party and later Republican Party of India.

Republican Party of India

Ambedkar formed the Indian Labor Party [ILP] in 1936 bringing in all the depressed sections of the society- Dalits, non-Brahmins, peasants and workers. However, unable to consolidate and resolve differences between Dalits and non-Brahmins, he dissolved it and formed the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) in 1942. Later, as some of AISCF non-Brahmin members got disillusioned with the party and joined the Congress. Finally, Ambedkar had a plan to establish the Republican Party of India (RPI), which got established posthumously in 1956. But, eventually, it too met the same fate as the earlier ones, with most of its members disintegrating and joining the Congress.

The republican party is now divided into various groups. A major group is The Republican Party of India (Athavale) . After 2004 election, it has a small representation in the Lok Sabha and was a constituent of the ruling United Progressive Alliance. Its presence is limited to Maharashtra. Recently, all factions of RPI except Prakash Ambedkar's Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangha reunited to form a united Republican Party of India. RPI (Athavale) is also merged in this united RPI. In 2011 the party has aligned itself with the BJP-led NDA.

The Emergence of Dalit Panthers (1970s):

The first wave of the new anti-caste movement began with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in 1972. It mainly comprised ex-untouchable youth of Maharashtra. The formation of the Dalit panthers took place against the background of continued atrocities by the upper-caste elites and 'such oppressive developments-namely, the repeated failure of the Republican party to fulfill any of the hopes of the Dalits, rising of tensions on the countryside and of the revolutionary inspiration provided by the Naxalbari insurrection, which was crushed by the State.

The movement was largely concentrated in cities like Bombay and Poona, which began with the publication of creative literature (in socialist magazines such as *sadhna*). It was militant and aimed at power in its manifesto, yet it did not really carry any political strategy. However, the Dalit Panthers fought their battle on two fronts: at the symbolic level against Hindu peasants and artisans who were directly responsible for numerous atrocities committed against 'ati-shudrs'. But like many earlier Dalit movements, it too got engulfed in party politics. There was a split in the organization when Raja Dhale and Namdev Dhasal (two prominent leaders of Dalit Panthers) developed differences of opinion. Differences arose over whether Dalits Panthers should be a caste-based movement of Scheduled Castes or a class-based movement including the poor people of all classes. Here Dhale was representing the 'Ambedkarite' position and Dhasal a 'Marxist'. The Communist Party of India (CPI) wanted to bring Dalits in its fold. But, in the end, it was the 'Ambedkarite' position that easily won this battle, when in 1974; the Dhale group took control and expelled Dhasal. This was largely due to the very real fear of the Panthers 'of control by Brahmin leftists of supportive organizations, platforms, money for campaigns, even the media. Their deep-seated suspicion was that they were now given only hypocritical support by communists.

As far as the Dalit panthers were concerned, it was more symbolic and cultural in focus.

Though militancy continued against the atrocities inflicted on Dalits, but at the broad political level, 'Panthers like earlier Dalit leadership continually fell victim to Congress blandishments and Congress progressive rhetoric: both Dhasal and Dhale supported Indira Gandhi during Emergency and even the recognized Panthers gradually came to be a kind of political reserve army of the Congress'.

Dalit consolidation in 1980s:

The 1980s can be seen as a period of Dalit and OBC unity. It was prominently marked by the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) as the party of Dalits, backwards and minorities. BSP emerged as a political wing of the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), launched by Kanshi Ram in 1978. It made its appearance particularly in the northern states of India, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP), Rajasthan, Bihar, Delhi, Punjab, and Madhya Pradesh (MP). The primary agenda of the party was to acquire power through the electoral process, which it did achieve considerably. But it lacks a wider social, economic or political programme of action beyond uniting the SCs, STs OBCs, and minorities. Later, by the end of the 1990s, it also became a part of coalition politics and even went on to join the BJP.

The issue of reservation for OBCs led to riots in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985 (after the Baxi and Rane Commission's Report, respectively), but unlike Marathwada, here Dalits were targeted by the upper castes who blamed them for the extension of reservation. In the first riots, the OBCs remained passive but in the second one, they attacked the upper castes. And then this Dalit/OBC conflict got transformed into communal riots.

By the early 1990s, the debate about reservation for OBCs became more vehement with the submission of the Mandal Commission report and its strong opposition by the upper castes. Here the Dalit movement has narrowed down to pressure groups. The state has, besides providing an institutional framework of incorporating identity politics, played a very critical role in bringing about any substantial change as far as the Dalits are concerned. Yet, 'within the Dalit politics, the new generation of Dalit leadership has taken into transnational alliances and networks to further the Dalit cause.

THE ADIVASI MOVEMENT

The *adivasi* or tribal movements have a long history. Numerous uprising of the tribals have taken place beginning with the one in Bihar in 1772, followed by many revolts in Andhra Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland. Tribal movements in early India had their origins in religious upheavals like Buddhism and Vaishnavism, for example, Meitei in Manipur, Bhumij in West Bengal, Nokte Naga in Assam, Bathudi in Orissa, and Kols and Bhils in Rajasthan. Then in the 19th and 20th century, the British also faced tribal movements when they stopped head hunting human sacrifice or slavery in north-eastern India. There were movements against oppressive landlords, moneylenders and harassment by police and forests officials in Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and the central Indian states.

The *adivasis* and their areas largely remained out of the purview of the administration in the pre-independence period. But the 1930s saw the emergence of a new discourse on tribal development. Sections 52 and 92 of the Government of India Act, 1935 provided for tribal majority areas to be demarcated into the excluded areas. This meant that these tracts were to be administered by the Governor outside the framework of the constitution, and norms and procedures of governance in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule areas were to be different from the rest of the country. The assumption of this policy was that tribals have suffered a great deal during the colonial rule and that their cultural and economic rights should now be protected. The Nehruvian view essentially was that the economic life of the tribals had to be upgraded and modernized even as their culture needed protection.

The left, had in general, support the Nehruvian position on both modern tribal development and the need for protection of tribal from the market forces. The tribal activists have also backed the idea of Nehruvian protectionism for tribal but only to the extent that it should help in the revival of traditional tribal institutions. But their ideal is significantly different from the Nehruvian dream of slowly drawing the tribals into the mainstream of bourgeois democracy. The Left position also recognizes the importance of democratization of the tribal society, but wanted to develop a different type of democracy was thus dependent not only on political freedom and self-governing institutions but also on correcting the inequities between the tribal region and the dominant political economy.

Nehru's ideas formed the basis of the tribal policy in Independent India and he argued that modern ideas should be allowed to permeate the institutions of everyday life through the education and employment of tribal. The bulk of allocations for STs were as grants for educations and social services.

Among the works on tribal in India, one that stands out is by Verrier Elwin. He was an English anthropologist who had spent almost his entire life in the association and intimacy with the tribal in India. He was a symbol and slandered bearer of the movement for the recognition of tribal rights. In defending tribal people, he clashed often eloquently with those Hindu puritans who were trying to reform the tribal society in their ascetic mode. Elwin found through experiences with tribes of Gonds and Baigas that they did not require a new religion but were desperately in need of

moral and political support against the oppression and exploitation of the advanced communities. Elwin had also proposed a policy of 'development in isolation' to the British government in 1939 and its influence could be seen in the five principle of Nehru's Panchasheel, namely to allow people to develop along their own cultural lines, to respect land rights, to train tribal for the administration of the schemes, to work through tribal social institutions, and to judge results not by statistics and expenditure, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

Classification of tribal movements

The tribal movements may be classified into three groups

(1) Movements due to exploitation of outsiders (like those of Santhals and the Mundas, (2) movements due to economic deprivation (like those of Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and the Mahars in Andhra Pradesh), and

(3) Movements due to separatist tendencies (like those of Nagas and Mizos).

The tribal movements may also be classified on the basis of their orientation into four types:

(1) movements seeking political autonomy and formation of a state (Nagas, Mizos, Jharkhand)

, (2) agrarian movements,

(3) forest-based movements, and

(4) socio-religious or socio-cultural movements (the Bhagat movement among the Bhils of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, movement among the tribals of south Gujarat or Raghunath Murmu's movement among Santhals).

Surajit Sinha referred to five types of tribal movements in India:

(a) Ethnic (tribal) rebellions during the early days of the British rule in the 18th and 19th centuries: Sardar Larai (1885) and Birsa movement (1895-1900) among the Munda; Ganganarain Hangama (1857-58); Rebellion of the Kacha Nagas (1880s) and so on.

(b) Reform movements emulating the cultural pattern of the higher Hindu castes: Bhagat movement among the Oraon; Vaishnavite reform movements emulating the cultural pattern of higher Hindu castes: Bhagat movement among the Oraon; Vaishnavite reform movement among the Bhumij; social mobility movement Bhumij for Rajput recognition; Kherwar movement among the Santal and so on.

(c) Emergence of inter-tribal political associations and movements for recognition as 'tribal' states within the Indian Union in the post-Independence period: the

Jharkhand movement among the tribes of Chhota Nagpur and Orissa; hills states movement in the Assam hills; Adisthan movement among the Bhil and so on. Violent secessionist movements among tribes located near the international frontier: the Nagaland movement; Mizo National Front movement and so on.

- (d) Pockets of violent political movements in the tribal belt linked with the general problem of agrarian unrest and communist movement: Hajng unrest (1944); Naxalbari movement (1967); Girijan rebellion at Srikakulum (1968-69); Birsa dal movement in Ranchi (1968-69).

All the above mentioned tribal movements in India were mainly launched for liberation from (1) oppression and discrimination, (2) neglect and backwardness, and (3) a government which was callous to the tribals poverty, hunger, unemployment and exploitation. Here, it is also important to mention that the withdrawal of the State from the social sector and its increasing tendency to privatize common and natural resources have further jeopardized the future of displaced people who are mainly adivasis.

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