

Identity Formation and Political Awareness among Dalits

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Abstract: The process of identity formation in human history is an eternal process, which is going on in completely different forms and types from ancient times to the present day. In the process of identity formation, the Varna and caste system has played a very important role in the ancient history of India. For the first time in the Vedic period, the process of identity formation through the four Varnas started vigorously, whose impact can be seen in the Hindu society even today. Where on one hand this system created discrimination in the society, on the other hand, the lowest positions of the Hindu society were given to Shudras and untouchables, who were deprived from the very basic human rights. In the history of modern India, the founding of British colonialism led to the establishment of an alternative regime, due to which the vines of Varna system and caste system were, slightly, weakened, as compare to ancient period, in India and Dalits started getting entry in the field of education and literature, by which they used education to write their history. As a result, the process of formation a new identity of Dalits started. During the freedom movement, just as the upper castes were struggling for political freedom, in the same way, the Dalits also started considering it necessary to get political rights for their overall emancipation. With the end of the British Empire in India in 1947, India's political independence began, but this political independence was not equally achieved by the Dalits of the society. They got the right to vote but did not get the rights that the upper castes got. There is an atmosphere of indifference towards them from ministerial post to government services in the government. In this situation, the lack of political awareness among the Dalits was also an important reason for which the Dalit intelligentsia did the work of spreading political consciousness through small booklets which made a huge difference especially in Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Identity Formation, Varna System, Dalit Intelligentsia, Emancipation, Awareness.

I

The idea of the natural law has an immense importance in the history of mankind. This idea has been remained instrumental in formulating and restructuring of the very human existence. Every human has certain natural rights. The French philosopher Rousseau said that “*man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.*” Through this, he was directly invading on those regulations and obligations which had a lack of the “general will”. The advancement of modern period and Indian independence brought some changes in their situation. Education opened new avenues for them. The Dalit intelligentsia utilized education and, further, print medium to spread awareness among their brethren. Dalit intelligentsia started writing their own history and a process of identity formation and reconstruction of history was initiated by them. Swami Achhutanand was the first Dalit ideologue who commenced this task in north India. Small booklets written by Dalit ideologues changed the course of their lives and a new movement for their emancipation was started in the early decades of twentieth century in the United Provinces in particular and in north India in general.

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In this paper, some booklets have been selected in order to bring out a coherent picture of Dalit print culture and also to show which issues and ideas, especially political, dominated their writings. The selection of these booklets is made on the basis of their wide acceptance among the downtrodden people. In writing popular booklets, Dalit intellectuals were deeply concerned about exposing the misdeeds of the Aryan Brahmans and their 'holy' scriptures. Their writings did not dwell on the Muslim rule because their immediate oppressor was Hinduism. There are many references to the lower caste people getting converting to Islam but this conversion was related to their upward social mobility outside the fold of Hinduism. Sometimes, they were forced to convert but despite this Muslims were not as exploitative as caste Hindus. Hinduism directly attacked their existence and

ruled out any possibility of equality in their social status. British rule was considered benevolent for the low castes, as the shackles of the caste system were beginning to weaken. During the colonial period they were provided with a few political, religious, and social rights. At least, some new developments in the mode of communication like print culture allowed them a space of political self-articulation. The Census taught them about their numerical strength as well as about social deprivation. Law courts were supposed to observe equality in the eyes of law and government schools were at least notionally open to all.

II

After independence, Dalits became more conscious about their due place and rights in the new political and social scenario. The 'people's government' used its functionaries for safeguarding the interests of the higher castes of the society. Dalit dissent found expression in the form of popular poetry in the Hindi speaking belt. '*Shoshit Pukar*' (The Cry of the Oppressed) a collection of sixteen poems, was published from Hindu Samaj Sudhar Karyalaya, Lucknow in 1956. These poems were written by poets of the Depressed Classes. The first poem '*Jagjivan-Stavan*' is related to Babu Jagjivan Ram, a prominent untouchable Congress leader, written by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu under the pseudonym of Rashtrakavi "Prakash" Lucknavi.¹ In the 1950s, Dalit intellectuals awarded him the title of Rashtrakavi in various poetry meets in Lucknow and other places in UP because of his true devotion towards the cause of the deprived sections.²

"Prakash" praises Jagjivan as one of the greatest leaders of the Congress, well-wisher of 'Harijans' and remover of troubles of the oppressed people. But he complains that despite his hard work Dalits are still oppressed and victims of injustice. He then asks, "For how long shall this 'dark age' continue?" What about the promises which were made to Dalits on the eve of independence? Artisans and labourers formed the majority (ninety per cent) of the Indian population but it was the capitalists, who constituted only ten percent, who ruled the [Indian] government. Is this real democracy? "Prakash" further asks

¹ Personal interview with Avinash Kumar (age 53) grandson of Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu on 25 February, 2008 at 4.00 pm.

² Personal interview with Guru Prasad Madan (age 65), Allahabad on February 19, 2008 at 9.30 am

Jagjivan as to how many more days the rule of Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Baniyas would continue? When will be the rule of the Bahujan established? “Prakash” challenged Jagjivan to do something useful in favour of Bahujans or resign from the Congress and take the leadership of the Dalit movement for Bahujan community and become a true successor of Ambedkar.³

The poem shows that the Congress and its leadership are still unable to garner the trust of the low castes. Jagjivan was the second great leader of the low castes after Ambedkar. But he could not help Dalits. That is why the poet advised him to leave the Congress and join the real movement for the emancipation of Dalits.

Another of the remarkable poems is ‘*Utho Shoshit*’ (Arise Oppressed) written by Ramswaroop Shastri ‘Amar’. It tries to inculcate a sense of struggle against oppression. He encourages Dalits to stand on their own and not to mourn about their miserable conditions. It is ironical that at one time, they were the kings of India [before the advent of Aryans], but after getting “independence” from the British rule they still continue to be the slaves. Dalits must live with dignity and to achieve this dignity they must come forward.⁴

Ramsharan Vidharthi Kahar wrote another poem ‘*Shoshit-Garjan*’ (The Roar of the Oppressed). Kahar states that the oppressed are brave people and it is their responsibility to remove corruption and ignorance. He exhorts them to spread the light of knowledge. He asks them to remove differences and fear among themselves by uniting in order to raise their consciousness. He asks the Dalits: “Why are you sleeping still when you know that you form the majority (ninety percent) which is ruled by the dominant caste people who constitute only ten percent of the population? Now you have to utilize your ‘freedom’ to the fullest and roar like a lion so that the oppressors begin to tremble.”⁵

³ A collection of poems by Depressed Classes’ poets; *Shoshit Pukar*, Lucknow: Hindu Samaj Sudhar Karyalaya, 1956 (9th revised edition published from Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, Lucknow in 1995), p. 1

⁴ Ibid; p. 3

⁵ Ibid; pp. 15-16

III

The Varna system of Hinduism which is based on discrimination and untouchability is termed as Brahmanism. It is this Brahmanism which has been exploiting the ninety percent of the people by coining such words as 'fate,' 'god,' 'heaven,' 'hell,' and 'the deeds of previous lives.'⁶

These lines are taken from a booklet written by Lalayee Singh Yadav in 1961 titled '*Bamanwadi Rajya me Shoshiton par Rajnaitik Dacoity*' (Political Robbery on Oppressed in the Brahmanical State). In this booklet the author explained that *Sarvahara* people (Dalits and other backward castes) were ignorant and the cunning caste Hindus took advantage of this. They captured all political rights which the Britishers provided to the Hindus. During census enumeration they called untouchables Hindus and then established an absolute control over untouchables. They rendered the representation of the untouchables in the Assemblies inconsequential. They established the Harijan Sevak Sangh and falsely boasted of spending crores of money for the welfare of the Dalits. They not only deprived them of government services but also closed the doors of Small Scale Industries (SSIs) to the Dalits. On the other hand, they spent huge amounts on Khadi Board Commission, Swaraj Ashram, Bharat Sevak Samaj, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Social Welfare Department, etc.⁷

The author pointed out that on the basis of population in 1951, there should be only 92 MLAs from the upper castes but in reality they captured 254 seats. It was a robbery on the seats of Dalits, backward classes and minorities.⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot also points out that "the over-representation of the higher castes among Congress MLAs is very high and continued to rise from 1952-62, from 58 to 61 percent, where the lower castes remained very under-represented with less than one-tenth of the MLAs. The SCs accounted for one-fifth to a quarter of the Congress group at the Assembly in Lucknow. Thus the two extreme poles of the caste system were the most represented here although

⁶ Lalayee Singh Yadav; *Bamanwadi Rajya me Shoshiton par Rajnaitik Dacoity*, (Political Robbery on Oppressed in the Brahmanical State), Jhinhak (Kanpur): Ashok Pustakalya, 1961, p. 1 (translation mine from Hindi)

⁷ Ibid., pp. 3-5

⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7

one should bear in mind that that large number of SC MLAs was due to reservation system. In fact, the Congress hardly bothered to promote this category of the population.”⁹

There were only 194 gazetted officers from Dalits while the number from upper castes was 8500 in 1961. Earlier the British argued that Indians were not capable of becoming officers. Now the upper castes were using the same language for the Dalits. Still, the government did not fulfill the 18 percent reservation in jobs for the SCs while there were thousands of unemployed educated Dalits. This was not something new; it was happening since the attainment of independence. For example, in 1947, only two SCs were recruited in the Indian Administrative and other Allied Services.¹⁰

The author informed that Ramdeen Jatav, M.L.A., asked a question in the UP Assembly regarding the Dalits in police service. On July 29, 1960, the answer revealed that no I.G. and D.I.G. of police belonged to the SCs and Backward Classes but from upper castes the number was 1 and 14 respectively. 1, 2, and 12 SCs filled the posts of Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent whereas the upper castes possessed 77, 30, and 282 respectively. In the judicial department there was no SC on the post of the Civil and Session Judge, Civil Judge, District Session Judge and Additional Session Judge while these posts were filled up by upper castes and their number was 76, 78, 48 and 7 respectively.¹¹

Therefore, it was an open robbery on the rights of Dalits and backward classes. The whole government system was designed on caste basis. On the one hand the State was claiming that they very sincerely tried to remove the untouchability and discrimination, whereas on the other hand, when the time of implementation of this policy came, they discriminated on caste lines.

⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot; India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, pp. 66-67

¹⁰ Ministry of Home Affairs – GS – File No. 147/48-GS, Recommendation for Appointment of SCs- Policy followed by the Federal Public Service Commission, NAI, p. 4

¹¹ Lalayee Singh Yadav; Bamanwadi Rajya me Shoshiton par Rajnaitik Dacoity, (Political Dacoity on Oppressed in the Brahmanical State), Jhinhak (Kanpur): Ashok Pustakalya, 1961, pp. 6-11

Conclusion:

Identity formation is one of the most essential elements of human history. The process of Dalit identity is linked to the rewriting of history. That's why Dalit intellectuals started searching for their reference in history and started giving new structure to an alternative history. In the same sequence, while facing the British Empire, the upper castes insisted on their separate identity from the British, the same work was done by the lower castes to end the discrimination against them and to get freedom from it. After independence, there was a lack of political awareness among Dalits, to remove it, Dalits wrote small books in easy language and the result was also good when Mayawati became the first Dalit Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh in 1995 and the process is still going on.