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Dalit Christian Resistance and Theology: Struggles for Religious and Social Justice

Reju George Mathew

Religious conversion is one means through which the Dalits in India attempt(ed) fighting the caste system. The continuing caste practices within the churches and the society, have, in turn, termed them 'Dalit Christians'. Dalit Christians are neither accepted as normal and Christian enough, nor given the protection and support of reservation and the constitutional protection by the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Caste atrocities and massacres of Dalit Christians continue like the Tsundur massacre in Andhra Pradesh and the many in states like Orissa with Hindutva regimes. SC status has, thus, become a need for the Dalit Christians to fight the neo-caste practices.

On the religious front, Dalit Christian struggles for equal representation in the church and thereby, justice, continues and this has led to the rise of a Dalit Theology, which attempts a hermeneutics different from that of the traditional Indian Christian Theology. The lived experience of the Dalit Christians forms the basis of this theology and attempts to engage with the social, political and cultural struggles of the Dalits, without limiting religion just in the personal and spiritual spaces. The Dalit Christian struggle, informed by Dalit Theology and larger Dalit critiques by Ambedkar, Phule and the Dalit movements itself, aims at consolidating support in their struggle for justice, equality and dignity.

Paper would look at how the religious conversion of the Dalits, especially into Christianity, equips them to acquire better tools to fight the caste oppression in the society. The role of religion in instilling a spirit of equality, respect for human rights

and dignity would be studied from secondary literature as well Dalit Christian literary and non-fiction works. The complex process of identity formation and negotiations in the Dalit Christian experience would be studied.

Dalit Christians within the Indian churches were/are discriminated against and were/are denied powers within the ecclesiastical structure. They have no membership in the decision-making processes of the church. A series of attempts and initiatives began in the 1980s to systematically articulate the faith through a relevant theology, in the context of the newly emerging Dalit aspiration for liberationⁱ. Dalit Theology has not just led to the redefinition of the Christian hermeneutics in India towards a Dalit perspective, but has also emerged as a critique of the understanding of Dalit religions as 'little traditions' as opposed to the 'great tradition' of the upper caste Hindusⁱⁱ.

Who are Dalits and Dalit Christians?

'Dalit' is a term "derived from the root *dal* which means to crack, open, split etc."ⁱⁱⁱ and is used to refer to a person belonging to one of the 'Scheduled Castes', a category introduced by the Government of India Act of 1935. 'Dalit Christians' are those Scheduled Caste people who got converted into Christianity during the colonial and post colonial periods in India. 'Dalit Christian' or 'New Christian' or 'Low caste Christian' are tags that are carried forward by the Dalit converts over generations. The Dalit Christian's identity is always disputed in relation to the questions of conversion, subjectivity and culture etc.

Religious Conversions

Religious Conversion, in simple terms, can be defined as a person's shift of faith from one religion to another. Conversion into Christianity, Islam or Buddhism is generally understood as a weapon against the upper castes, wherever the untouchable

castes have been subjected to severe social discrimination and economic exploitation. It is believed that the Dalit search for liberation, identity, dignity and equality as human beings has led them to religious conversion.

The etymology of the term 'conversion', in Middle English, refers to a sinner turning back to God, which is acceptable. At the same time, conversions across religions lead to active, even violent, oppositions. Rudolf C. Heredia refers to the former type of conversion as 'atmaparivartan' or a change of heart and the latter type as 'dharmaantar' or a change of tradition.^{iv} Thus, a conversion from Hinduism to another religion involves a change of 'sampradaya' and therefore is considered disturbing but, a reconversion is accepted as 'gharvapas' or homecoming.

In the case of mass conversions, the group of people who lost hope in the old religious tradition, owing to the social, cultural and political limitations and discriminations, decide to move into another to attain better conditions. The argument against mass conversions is that it is not the religious but the political that determines these acts of changing a group's tradition. But mass conversions can also be understood as a part of the 'betterment programme' a group wishes to undergo.^v A failed project of conversion can also be responsible for the birth and existence of organisations like Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS).^{vi} But, if betterment of living conditions- social, cultural as well as political- of people are the issues that need to be dealt with, religious conversion becomes justifiable.

Conversions into Christianity in India

The right wing notion that Christianity is a religion introduced in India by the colonial powers stands invalid as Syrian Christians in Kerala were not products of European evangelising. Their traditions point to the endeavours of St. Thomas, who is believed to have arrived on the Malabar Coast of

Kerala in AD 52.^{vii} For many centuries they have enjoyed the status of a high caste community in the Kerala society that was ruled by Hindu kings.^{viii}

The western missionary organisations, both Catholic and Protestant ones that operated in India, tried to bring the indigenous churches under their control, before they shifted attention towards Dalits in the mid to late nineteenth century, which became significant 'mass movements' in the 1920s and 1930s.^{ix} Conversion into Christianity plays and has played a major role in the Dalit search for dignity and liberation. For instance, though moved away from the Christian fold later, Poikayil Yohannan or Kumara Gurudevan, who founded the PRDS in Kerala, used and assimilated a number of Christian ideals and stories to revisit the slave past of the 'untouchable' converts in Kerala and assert their identity. A memorandum submitted by the members of PRDS to Morris Watts, the Diwan of Travancore in 1926 reveals how the untouchable castes incorporated Christianity into their lived experiences, at the same time, refusing to adhere to the casteist propaganda of the upper caste Christians.

We the people numbering 10,000 belonging to Parayar, Pulayar and Kizhakke Pulayar who have been slaves for a long time, and are in the lowest rung of the society in terms of *landed property and education* have *come together in the witness of the holy Bible* and joined together in the nomenclature of Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha. *We the original inhabitants of this land were for a long time steeped in slavery*, and had to depend on others as we did not have our own land to stay and *we lived like animals without education, social reform and such civilizational qualities*. We are poor people who subsist from the little income that we get from daily wage earning. Now in different parts of the state we have 63 parishes and there

we have churches and schools for the worship of God and education of our children.^x

It can be understood that the Dalits in India, instead of merely getting incorporated into Christianity and changing their lives, beliefs and ways of living, have also tried and incorporated Christianity into their experiences. M.E. Prabhakar explains this attribute of Dalit Christianity as an important step in the emergence of a Dalit theology. For him, Dalit theology is

... a people's theology, a particular people's theology i.e. that of the dalits, therefore a theology of the dalits by the dalits and for the dalits. The contexts for theologizing are the authentic life experiences of these marginalized people, their struggles, their failures and successes, their conflicts and contradictions, their dreams and hopes and their comradeship with people of other faiths and ideologies etc. Dalit theology is new theology because it is from below and uses dalit peoples' languages and expressions, their stories and songs of suffering and triumphs, popular wisdom including their values, proverbs, folk-lore, myths and so on to interpret their history and culture, and to articulate a faith to live by and to act on.^{xi}

Thus, the conversion into Christianity has led to the emergence of a powerful 'Dalit God,' who works for the liberation of the oppressed. Christianity has, thus, in many ways enabled and empowered the Dalits in voicing against the oppression of the caste societal practices. 'Christian' has become as important a part of the Dalit Christian's identity as is 'Dalitness'. Christianity was available to the Untouchables from the second half of the Nineteenth century, when various European missions started their evangelising in India and various lower caste groups got converted into Christianity. G. Aloysius talks about these mass conversions:

These mass-scale conversions started only after the 1850s when at least the Protestant missions collectively decided not to give quarter to caste discriminations within churches. Secondly, the masses did change over to Christianity only when egalitarianism was clearly on the agenda and not otherwise. Thirdly, as in cases when actual conversion did not bring about the desired equality, the neophytes challenged the church authorities by setting up their own churches like the 'Brethren Church' in Kerala and the 'Hindu Church' in Tamil Nadu.^{xii}

Thus, it can be understood that conversion into Christianity did not always bring the emancipation for the Dalits. Dilip M. Menon argues that the basic Hindu idea that 'some are more equal' has percolated into the other major religions in the continent like Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Islam. These religions, on the other hand, remain egalitarian at the level of theology and aspiration.^{xiii}

The Dalit Christians find Christianity as a source of redemption and liberation from Hinduism, the way the Israelites were liberated from the Egypt under the leadership of Moses. For the Dalit Christians, Jesus Christ becomes a 'God of the Dalits' as his message was for the liberation of the oppressed, who in Indian context would be the Dalits. The contextualisation of Christianity, Jesus and his gospel has thus led to the constitution of a Dalit theology, in opposition to the traditions of Indian Christian theology. The claims of Indian Christian theology of 'indigenising' and 'Indianizing' Christianity get challenged with the emergence of Dalit theology.

Indian Christian Theology and Its Claims

The various missionary groups in the Nineteenth century adopted many Hindu ways to 'Indianise' Christianity and thus 'Christianise' the Hindu Indian society. Dilip M. Menon explains the issue of caste that arose from such a model:

Through the nineteenth century the activities of Christian missionaries emphasized the fundamental inegalitarianism of the Hindu religion prompting conversions from the untouchable and sudra castes, particularly to Protestant Christianity. Catholicism had always been more ambivalent on issues of caste. Roberto de Nobli, the famed sixteenth-century Jesuit, had adopted Brahmin garb and ideology in his attempt to identify with Hinduism, and through the nineteenth century the Catholic church in south India tried to accommodate caste rather than challenge it.^{xiv}

Another need to Indianize Christianity was to answer the criticisms against Christianity that “it denationalises a man and uproots him from the cultural heritage which is his by right.”^{xv} Boyd argues that like the adoption of Greek philosophy by Western Christianity, Indian Christian theologians have adopted the Indian Hindu philosophical terms that are more or less secularised, to form a legitimate 'Indian Christianity' that would meet the needs in the Indian context^{xvi}. Most of the prominent Indian theologians deal with concepts like 'avatar', 'aatman', 'brahman' etc and try to understand Christianity in those terms. The need to prove the equal or superior status of Christianity when compared to Hinduism, could have led to these kinds of studies in Indian Christian theology. There have been a great flow of Indian/ Hindu categories into the Indian Christian terminology like 'isvara', 'veda', 'jati' etc. It has also led to certain amalgamations like 'Hindu Christianity'. A. P. Nirmal talks about the nature and objectives of Indian Christian theology:

Broadly speaking, Indian Christian theology in the past has tried to work out its theological systems in terms of either Advaita Vedanta or Vishishta Advaita. Most of the contributions to Indian Christian Theology in the past came from caste converts to Christianity. The result has

been that Indian Christian Theology has perpetuated within itself what I prefer to call the “*Brahminic*” tradition.^{xvii}

The excessive use of 'Indian cultural' terms and Hindu philosophy has led to severe criticisms of Indian Christian theology from the Dalit theologians' starting from the 1980s. Theology being the ways in which a church confesses its faith^{xviii}, its relation with the people in the society, Indian Christian theology has failed to constitute a theology that is relevant to the Dalit Christians who form the major section of the Indian churches.

Dalit Theology: Its Emergence and Relevance

Majority of the Indian Christians are formed by the coverts from the “depressed and backward classes”^{xix}. The concern to constitute a Dalit theology emerged within the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement “as it was being organised as a national forum for the association of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin (CSCOs) and other groups and individuals committed to the Dalit cause.”^{xx}

What is the need to constitute a Dalit Theology? Why can't we have a People's theology or a theology of the poor? Or why can't merely employ the Marxist categories to the Indian theological thought? These are certain important questions that are posed against the Dalit theologians. But, they respond to it by pointing out the inadequacy of the Marxist thought to deal with the Indian realities in its totality.

The highly differentiated caste structure and slavery could not be conceptualised as part of the typical primitive society; these could only be relevant to later developments according to Marx's analysis. As a result, the idea and ideology of caste as well as its morphological aspects, the nature of oppression and the inherited inequalities perpetuated by it, and its persistence through the

interaction of social, cultural, religious, and economic factors remained neglected in Marxian analysis.^{xxi}

Also, the attempts of the missionaries to dissociate the Dalits from their past through conversion has led to the alienation of the Dalit Christians in the theological circles. For example, in South India, Dalits were made to break the caste symbol drum before baptism.^{xxii} The upper caste converts into Christianity try to essentialise Indian Christian theology in terms of Hindu philosophy, thereby projecting it as a 'Hindu Upper caste Christian theology'.

The cultural and religious traditions of one dominant group of Christians were gradually elevated to serve as the framework within which to do Christian theology... from the caste communities' point of view, they were given an opportunity to configure a normative master-narrative that combined together the heritage of their Hindu ancestors and the Christian story.^{xxiii}

On the other hand, the Dalit Christian's search for identity, roots and consciousness has led to the formulation of Dalit theology. It is a theology that deals with the suffering, bondage, slavery, the toil and tears of the Dalits. The aims of Dalit theology are not mere material benefits, but it is a search for dignity for the Dalit Christians. James Massey refers to Prof. A. P. Nirmal to explain what Dalit theology attempts to attain:

“For a Christian Dalit theology it cannot be simply the gaining of the rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely, our full dignity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us. To use another biblical metaphor, our goal is the 'glorious liberty of the children of God.'”^{xxiv}

The cultural subjugation, religious bondage, economic deprivation and social insecurities of the Dalit Christians have

led to Dalit theology. M. E. Prabhakar identifies three points for the emergence of Dalit theology^{xxv}:

- The context of struggles against casteism and aspirations for social justice in society and in the Indian churches.
- The fact that it is the religious-philosophical-theological traditions of the upper caste Hindus that legitimises the caste system and the exclusion of Dalits as 'untouchables' requires a critique of it which has to be a theological one.
- The reluctance of the Indian churches and theologies to be sensitive towards the pains and struggles of dalit Christians requires the formulation of a theology of the Dalits' own.

John C.B. Webster argues that Christian theology in India in relation to the Dalits evolved through different stages: first, as theology *about* Dalits, among the Christians on their responsibility to Dalits; secondly, as theology *for* Dalits, as gospel that was addressed to the Dalits, to which they responded; third, as theology *by* Dalits, the theology that the Dalits developed through their practice of Christianity^{xxvi}. Thus, the approaches of the Dalit Theologians have always been deeply rooted in the historical realities of the Dalit communities. They consider the attempts to create a distinctive theology as an important aspect of the way in which Dalits should respond to God, in a meaningful manner. It becomes an act of deliberate participation in the liberative operations of God, a God who engaged with the realities of human lives, first, through the involvement in the life of Israel, an ex-slave community and also through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Dalit Theologians identify these acts as the God's call for and willingness to liberate the Dalits in India.

Dalit Theology, has, thus, emerged as a counter theology, one against the dominant Christian theologies that legitimise the

casteist claims of certain sections of the Christian community in India. It has become the theological voice of the Dalits in India against all sorts of oppressive and patronising attitudes of the Indian Christians who still believe that they should have a mission *for* the Dalits, to empower them. Dalit theology also delegitimizes the arguments against Dalit conversions, that it is aimed at material benefits. The ways in which Dalit Theology has inspired the Dalit Christian aspiration for reservation on par with the other Dalit communities affirm its claims, to be a theology that deals with the lived experience of the Dalit Christians.

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The Emergence of Dalit Entrepreneurship and Debate on Dalit Capitalism

Mr. Chakradhar Baldeo Indurkar

The emergence of dalit entrepreneurs heralded the debate on 'dalit capitalism' in corporate world as well as academics. The extensive survey of literature shows that historically dalits were denied of property rights, they had no hereditary background of entrepreneurship. The experiences of dalit entrepreneurs show that 'caste' is a hurdle in entrepreneurship. These all led to lack of ownership of private enterprises by dalits. The comprehensive Economic Census data shows that their ownership is disproportionate their population share (Economic Census of 1990s, 1998 and 2005). This paper is an attempt to discuss entrepreneurship among dalits from urban area in order to debate on dalit capitalism.

Introduction:

The presence of dalit entrepreneurs through the organizing business export in metro, launching venture capital fund, expansion of associations by launching business chapters in various state, handshake with foreign business firms, negotiation with government and business houses, delegation in planning commission through their associations like Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), Buddhist Business Network (BBN) and Bahujan Udyog Federation of Maharashtra (BUFM). These associations of few handful dalit entrepreneurs made significance presence with an idea of 'be a job giver, instead of job seekers'. It has appeals to society in particular dalit youths where shrinking job opportunities in government sector, though reservation helps but that to low opportunities and stiff competition in government jobs. And entry of dalits in

private sector is meager due to caste notations. On the other hand globalised economy open up new opportunities for entrepreneurship to all irrespective of caste, region, and business background as result few dalits from urban area emerged as a successful entrepreneur. On such every occasion the success stories of dalit entrepreneurs flashed in media that catch the attention of the society and heralded the debate on 'dalit capitalism' in corporate as well as academics.

It has been argued that 'capital' can be used to effectively fight the evils of 'caste'. A section of dalits assume that capitalism would dismantle rural societies and thereby the tyranny of feudalism. The forces of industrialization, urbanization and modernization would help the dalits escape from the clutches of the caste system (Karunakarn, Gooptu, Kumar, 2011). The idea of fighting caste with dalit capitalism is novel one but at the same time it is also quite challenging task. The caste system with its hierarchical social structures and corresponding cultural practices and beliefs poses challenges to the rise of dalit entrepreneurs. There are some social scientists who argue that the de-linking of caste and occupation has gained momentum in Indian secular spaces such as industries and offices and theorize that tenacity of caste has become myth (Beteille, 2012). However, there are some writers who critic this theorization. Caste sentiment is still strong even in the most secular of office spaces and industries (Sutar, 2012). Hence it is relatively easier for a dalit to become a member of parliament or a bureaucrat but quite difficult to become an entrepreneur at the remarkable level.

These entrepreneurs have been welcomed by various social as well as political forums of the society and also honored by the state with prestigious civilian award Padmshree to pioneer dalit entrepreneurs like Mr. Milind Kamble and Mrs Kalpna Saroj for their excellence in entrepreneurship. On the

other hand, critics by some social scientist like Gopal Guru, dalit entrepreneurs as 'spectacular' that to low intensity, as an instrument to create false consciousness and fake association between society and spectacles. These dalit spectacles of the corporate class lack in power to act as self-sufficient ideological category. In fact, corporate strategies still within the framework of caste, ideally dalit millionaires are supposed to project themselves as role models that work out for the cultural consumption of dalit masses. But these low intensity spectacles seems to be just as a lotus requires mud for its growth, logically dalit masses provide the ground for dalit millionaire. These spectacle can be explain as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, 'individual mobility, success and performance are worthy of respect, but most of the time cannot be worthy of imitation; collective success is much superior to individual success. Individual success may have achieved a Himalayan height, and yet is dwarfed in front of the collective success' (Guru, 2012). Thus, he argues that it would be erroneous on our part to accept that dalit capitalism is emancipatory in nature as it is confined to few people in the community.

It is not known to most of the people that Dr. B. R. Ambedkarⁱⁱ after returning from Columbia University in 1917, started career as stock consultant in Mumbai. His business went well in the beginning but once the clientele came to know that he belongs to the lower caste, they stopped approaching him ultimately resulted in the closure of the consultancy firm (Gaikwad, 2007). The same experiences of dalit entrepreneurs reflect that 'caste' as a hurdle in entre-preneurship. The recent stories of few successful dalit entrepreneurs also portrait their hardship while establishing and running their business successfully. For example, they experience difficulty in accessing capital and credit, mobilizing resources without mentioning their caste. (Karunakarn, Nadigm, Kumar, 2011).

An experience of successful dalit millionaire entrepreneurs shows that caste is a hurdle in entrepreneurship. For instant Mr. Ashok Khade, entrepreneur from Mumbai, running engineering firm, writes his name 'K Ashok' on business card in order to avoid caste prejudice associate with name. Similarly case of Mr. Balu, entrepreneur from South India who is manufacturing soldering equipments, he doesn't want to disclose caste identity in order to avoid astray of customers from upper caste. In other experience of dalit entrepreneur from Nagpur Mr. Shushant Meshram, running hospital with team of doctors, show that initially their own community clients approach them but gradually they succeed to reach others. The case of Mr. Pravin Meshram, entrepreneur from Nagpur who wanted to open Indian Oil Corporation petrol pump, in order to get license from corporation he has ignored because of his lower caste status whereas upper caste fellow easily got the license and running his out let successfully. In another example of young entrepreneur Mr. Harsh Bhasker from Agra, running tutorial for top engineering exams, he is the only dalit entrepreneur succeed in knowledgebase business, coming from rural and poor family background, he also undergone through caste hurdles while establishing his Kota tutorials.

Historically dalits were denial of right to property and no hereditary wealth pose the challenge to generate the initial capital for entrepreneurship; experiences of dalit entrepreneur's show that they started their venture with their hard earned savings or helps from relatives. As per Directive Principle of the Constitution almost all states in India set-up the financial corporation in order to promote the entrepreneurship among marginalized section of the society. As per the special plan of the state policies banks and other financial institutions are abide to allocate special corpus for target beneficiaries from marginalized community but banks reluctant to give financial support because of past caste prejudice. An experience of Mr.

Bhagwan Gawai, entrepreneur from Mumbai who is trading of petroleum products, come from poor family background, started his career as construction labour and being clerk in company, no hereditary property or entrepreneurial background pose the challenges and hardship to generate initial capital .

The case of Mr. Ratibhai Makwana, managing director of Ahmadabad base company, Gujrat Pickers Industry related to plastic intermediaries product while building his empire banks were reluctant to finance him because of lower caste status and suspected on his potential to repay the loan. An experience of Mr. Arun Khobragade, entrepreneur from Nagpur, manufacturing food products, he faced the hurdles to get the loan in order to give lateral security. Similarly, an experience of Mr. Swapnil Bhingardeve, entrepreneur from Sangli dealing in chemical industry, he started his business with bank loan but initially he fail to do so. Again he approach to bank for financial support to start new venture, bank asked him to pay interest first but as he paid the banker denial for financial support because of past caste prejudice about particular community. It is unusual practice in banking sector for any entrepreneurs, finally he manage to generate initial capital from co-operative bank because of managing director of the co-operative bank was from dalit community.

Despite economic reforms and unleashing of several incentives, dalits remained largely excluded from the rapidly growing corporate sector because of certain historical and socio-cultural barriers. The reservation policy which basically helped dalits get into government jobs has not been of any help in promoting entrepreneurship among them. The comprehensive data on enterprise ownership from the Economic Census of 1990s, 1998 and 2005 shows substantial caste differences in entrepreneurship across India. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribe (STs) are significantly under- represented in

the ownership of enterprises and the share of workforce employed by them. For instance, SCs owned 9.8% of all enterprises against the 16.4% share of population, and STs owned 3.7% enterprises against the 7.7% share of population. It shows that the relationship between caste and entrepreneurship, in particular lower caste pose the challenges to dalit aspirant in entrepreneurship (Iyer, Khanna and Varshney, 2013).

Caste System and Entrepreneurship:

Indian entrepreneurship is sanctified by the religion, particularly the caste system. According to Max Weber caste system have negative impact on Indian economy. The caste system restricted to emergence of entrepreneurship in general. However, until India was opened to international trade in commodities up to end of nineteenth century, Indian economy was highly agriculture based. On the other hand, cast system does not allow to occupational mobility. According to Bert Hoselitz, entrepreneurship can develop only in a society in which cultural norms permit variability in choice of paths of life. The beginning of twentieth century up to independence period most of the Indian industrial firms were owned and controlled by the Britishers, some Indian communities owned few business firms mainly *Parsi* community followed by *Gujaratis* and *Marwaris*. The caste structure proved more resistant to change, adopting itself only to the minimal extent necessary to the requirement of the industrial system. Therefore, in India, 'modern capitalism' did not develop indigenously before or after the British rule (Medhora, 1965, Akerlof, 1970, Goswami, 1994, Ray, ed., 1994).

Thus, the important features of the caste system that restricted to owning business or agricultural land for production for dalits and allowed them to work on the sector known for impurity such as leather and sanitation. After independence the

constitutional safeguards and affirmative measures for dalits have removed the customary restrictions on the ownership of property and business. However, the consequences of the past denial still continue. The impact of denial of property rights is seen even today in the lack of ownership of private enterprise by the dalits (Thorat, Kundu & Sadana, 2012).

The financial crisis in 1991 brought sea changes in Indian economy led to economic reforms and Indian businesses become truly global. The dynamic of family-run business was turned on its head with reforms. The trend becomes prevalent as more caste groups got into business, moving away from their traditional occupations. It opened gates for new entrepreneurs with knowledge-based economy from variety of background and mindsets. In this environment, kinship and family ties become greatly reduced factor as the keys to market. The improvement in access, an effective regulatory environment creates space for both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds. However, it is noted that the entrepreneur from non-business background from and from dalit community throughout the nation has relatively absence (Nilekani, 2008).

Scheduled Castesⁱⁱⁱ and Entre-preneurial Activities:

The few studies mention the entrepreneurial activities among scheduled castes. The special survey of the industry in Poona district of Maharashtra state was conducted by Mr. Gadgil, in 1937 and 1954 respectively. These surveys show that the most of the scheduled castes were highly engaged in unskilled manual work and traditional occupations in span of two decades (Ghurye, 1961, Dahiwal, 1989). The study of Tezibazar town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, conducted from November 1963 until October 1964 focused on caste community and entrepreneurial engagement in town. This study shows that *Baniyas* (trading caste) were dominantly engaged in entrepreneurial activities

whereas scheduled castes engaged in traditional occupations (Fox, 1967).

In 1985-86 study was conducted by Lachaiier Pierre on Kolhapur leather industrialist from Chambhar community, it shows that their industrialist colleagues from upper caste being somewhat kept at a distance though their income and firm size was same (Lachaiier, ed. al.,Dorin, 2003). In another study, in 1988-89, was conducted by Dahiwale of Kolhapur city, on entrepreneurship among scheduled castes. Findings of the study shows that 87 percentages were engaged in modern occupation like radio-shop, tea-shop etc. and 13 percentages were engaged in caste occupations. Among them Mahar caste was prominently engaged in modern occupation followed by Dhor, Chambhar. The caste, Mang and Bhangi was engaged in traditional occupation as well as in modern occupation (Dahiwale, 1989). Similarly, in 2008 a study has conducted in Panipat and Saharanpur city, entrepreneurship among scheduled casts show that these castes are engaged in petty shopkeeper, dealers, skill-based services providers and other independent works. They mostly come from sub-communities of scheduled castes like *Chamars* traditionally leather worker and *Balmikies* traditionally scavenging workers (Jodhaka, 2010).

In India, about 95 per cent of the enterprises were owned by the private sector in 2005. The 61st National Sample Survey (NSS), 2004-05 and Economic Census, 2005 comprehensive data contrast that the share of social groups disproportionate to their population shares. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) respectively account for about 10 percent, 4.6 percent, and 40 percent of the total rural private enterprise in country. Similarly, pattern observed in urban area in 2005, the share of the SCs in private enterprise was much lower than their share in the total population. While their share in the country's

population is about 21 percent, they account for only 6 percent of the country's private enterprises (Thorat, Kundu & Sadana, 2010).

State Policies and Dalit Entre-preneurship:

Article 46 in Directive Principles of the Constitution directed to the state to promote with special care the education and economic interests of the weaker sections of the peoples, in particular of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. In order to ameliorate the economic conditions the certain programmes for development of local entrepreneurship have been implemented both in rural and urban areas during 1960-80. The programmes of industrial entrepreneurship development range from imparting training, setting up production centers, direct and indirect financial assistance made available through special development corporations and banks. Special sub-plans have been prepared in all states for improving rapidly the socio-economic welfare of the SCs/STs under the Five Year plans. The States like the Gujrat, State Tribal Development Corporation, the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes Co-operative Finance Ltd., the Kerala State Development Corporation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Ltd., the Karnataka government, State Scheduled Caste Development Corporation and in Maharashtra State the Mahatma Phule Backward Class Development Corporation Ltd., these financial institutions were set-up to promote entrepreneurship among SCs/STs (Heggade, 1983).

The financial institutions were established by the various state governments throughout the nation in order to promote the entrepreneurship among marginalized sections. The effectiveness of these financial institutions and entrepreneurship among target group reflects in the pilot study of Xavier Institute of Social Services on entrepreneurship among Scheduled Tribes from urban area reflects upon

entrepreneurship among Scheduled Tribe Entrepreneurs (TEs). The study was published in Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the year 1974-75. This study shows that TEs was lacking resource mobilization, ignorance of government schemes, lack of management competencies, lack of political network and lagging in effective communication through proper channel that expel them from market and failure in entrepreneurial activities. These observations hold equally importance for Scheduled Castes entrepreneurs (Heggade, 1983).

It is observed that these financial corporations and institutions are failed to promote the entrepreneurship among marginalized section of the society in last three decades. The example of Mahatma Phule Backward Class Development Corporation Ltd shows the failure of government institutions that can be observed even today. Maharashtra state government has sanctioned Rs 3, 22, 20,000 in the financial year 2011-12 to allocate the financial support for entrepreneurship to target group of 2550 beneficiaries from backward communities from Nagpur cluster. But only one Crore rupees has disbursed to 933 beneficiaries through Mahatma Phuley corporation in the said year. In fact sanctioned amount was very meager to initiate any entrepreneurial activities like manufacturing or service enterprise. As per state government special schemes policy banks are abide to spare some specific corpus for target beneficiaries, but due lagging in support from financial corporation and stagnant approach of banks towards the beneficiaries the sanctioned amount was idle. Hence the scopes of emergence of new generation entrepreneurs from dalit community remain challenging (Lokmat, 2013).

Conclusion:

Historically dalits were deprived in all spheres of life, no hereditary wealth, absence of business background or no one

from family in business and lack of conducive environment for entrepreneurship that pose the challenge for dalit entrepreneurs. The emergence of few dalit entrepreneurs creates space for several debate and discussions. The debate on 'dalit capitalism' argues that capital can fight with 'caste' that lures the audience. An experience of dalit entrepreneurs, the role of financial corporation and literature shows that dalit entrepreneurs has faced caste hurdles in entrepreneurship because of caste sentiments that are still exhibits in secular space.

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ⁱ ‘Dalit’ literary means ‘*oppressed*’ or ‘*broken*’. It refers to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Neo-Buddhist who are working peoples and landless peasant and historically being deprived and exploited socially, politically as well as economically due to their lower caste status in India (Weber, 2007). According to Census 2011, the population of SCs about 16.6 percent.

ⁱⁱ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (April 14th 1891- December 6th 1956) affectionately known as Babasaheb Ambedkar. He was well known as great social reformist, architect of the Indian constitution, champion of human rights, and revivalist of Buddhist in India. He also has known as great politician, great orator, eminent jurist, scholar, writer, economist, sociologist, philosopher, historian and anthropologist. He was the great leader of Dalits and other backward community, throughout his life he fought for their rights and emancipation. He was the first law minister of independence India and posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian honor in 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ The official term, refer to ‘untouchable’ historically socially disadvantage castes as listed in the Indian Constitution scheduled. Also refer footnote No. 1

Dalit Women: Dalit amongst Dalits

Dr. P. Viswanadha Gupta

Dr. G. Venkata Lakshmi

People have been steadily discriminated against on the basis of their occupation and descent for centuries in India. Untouchables or outcasts are over 200 million people. In their lives they experience violence, discrimination, and social exclusion on a daily basis. In spite of Economic growth over the past decade, the caste disparities are still increasing. Nobody can, with a conscience, accept the atrocities mounded by our society as a whole upon those who carry the night soil on their heads, those who toil in the lands of the rich as bonded labourers for generations, and those who are kept more as inanimate things than as normal human beings. Sadly none can be sure when, if ever, this blotch would be cleansed once for all from the face of Indian society.

The Dalits are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. Even then they are bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the privileged by their spittle. They carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through such 'upper lanes' they can wipe away their footprints.

The great distinctions of caste are to be maintained not only in the earthly life, but also after death. According to *Markandaya Purana*, after death, the virtuous *Brahman* goes to the abode of *Brahma*, the good *Kshatriya* to that of *Indra*, the worthy *Vashya* to that of the *Maruts*, and the dutiful *Sudra* to that of the *Gandharvas*. Apparently, the Untouchable (Dalit) does not deserve any place in any heaven, may be because of his untouchability even by gods themselves.¹

The caste system is to the Hindu religion what the *Vedas* are to *Brahmanism*. In the Hindu caste system, every human is not equal. The caste system discriminates among people by birth. The majority of people (85%) are *Sudra* (servant to 15% upper caste). According to the 2001 Indian Census, the Scheduled Caste (SC) made up 16.2% of the population, while Scheduled Tribe (ST) made up 8.20%, Other Backward Caste (OBC) made up 41.1%, and Upper Caste (i.e., *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, and *Vaishya*) made up 15%. There are no differences in skin color or other physical features among people in these castes.ⁱⁱ

Origin of this caste system in the Indian society dates back to thousands of years. When the fair-skinned Aryans invaded India, about two thousand years before Jesus Christ they defeated the dark-skinned indigenous people, Dravidians, who were the founder of the Indian Civilization. The Aryans subjugated them, learnt many things from them and built up another civilization, which came to be known as the Ganges Valley or Hindu Civilization. To perpetuate the enslavement of the original inhabitants of India, the Aryans created the caste system, and thereby excluded them from their own society with the name of *Sudra* (which means slave). And more than this, another group of people were left as 'outcastes' who were even denied of human status.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to secure their status the Aryans resolved some social and religious rules, which allowed only them to be the priests, warriors and the businessmen of the society. History of the Aryan intrusion into India and their dominance over the original inhabitants, *Dravidians* and the prominence given to the scriptures of the former were the root cause for this caste discrimination. *Vedas*, *smiruthis* and *manushastra*, the scriptures of Aryans became the pillars of Hinduism. Caste system institutionalized by them had been made as *Varnashram* ordained by their gods. *Varnashram*, not only classified the

society into four divisions, left out the fifth category, the untouchables and even unseeables. The fate of this lot had been remaining in the same condition for all these past millennia. The Hindu caste system upholds with religious sanctions a hierarchical society. It does not even recognize this fifth class as human beings at all. The *Brahmanic varna* system (*varnashrama dharma*) is basically a genocidal apartheid system designed to exterminate the 'black varna'.^{iv} Following quotes from their *manushastra* will prove the level of cruelty they showed towards the low caste and outcaste people:

" Having killed a cat, an ichneumon, a blue jay, a frog, a dog, an iguana, an owl, or a crow, he shall perform the penance for the murder of a Sudra." v

" A once-born man (Sudra) who insults a twice-born man (Aryan) with gross invective, shall have his tongue cut out; for he is of low origin." vi

" If he mentions the names and castes (Jati) of the (twice-born) contumely, an iron nail, 10 fingers long, shall be thrust red-hot into his mouth." vii

" If he arrogantly teaches Brahmins their duty, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and into his ears." viii

The downtrodden insist on preserving their identities. Such is the case with the movement called Dalit which started in Western India in the 1960s. Dalit is the term of the Untouchables of Maharashtra, of those who are looked down upon even by other workers. Dalit is Marathi for 'the spurned'. The term was first used for the Untouchables in 1930. It is a comprehensive expression which includes Harijans. Dalit is a protest literature against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. ^{ix}

During the British period the rulers had tried to implement some affirmative measures to the welfare of the outcastes. They were the ones who introduced the terms: scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. British Government provided the outcastes with free lands, known as Ipanchami lands. But by the dominance of the upper castes and the ignorance of the outcastes, all the lands thus given for outcastes are with the upper castes. The term Dalit is a constant reminder of their age-old oppression and deprivation. It does not actually mean poor or outcast but it is a state to which a certain section of the people have been reduced through systemic and systematic religious process and are forced to live continually in that predicament. Dalits all over India are forced to undertake the filthy and the menial work of sweeping, manual scavenging, drum beating and cremating the dead bodies. Dalits are treated as slaves and still they are forced to bear the pains of "social boycotting" an illegal pronouncement by the dominant caste people.

The Indian Government has passed the following various legislations to enforce the abolishment of 'untouchability' and remove the barriers of caste discrimination impeding the socio-economic progress of the Dalits after Independence, to fulfill the Constitution provisions.

The important Constitutional safeguards for SCs & STs

Directive Principles of State Policy:

Article 46: It is a comprehensive article comprising both the developmental and regulatory aspects. It reads as follows:

"The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation".

(b) Social Safeguards:

Article 17: "Untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

To give effect to this Article, Parliament made an enactment viz., **Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955**. To make the provisions of this Act more stringent, the Act was amended in 1976 and was also renamed as the **Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955**. As provided under the Act, Government of India also notified the Rules, viz., the PCR Rules, 1977, to carry out the provisions of this Act. As cases of atrocities on SCs/STs were not covered under the provisions of PCR Act, 1955, Parliament passed another important Act in 1989 for taking measures to prevent the atrocities. This act known as the **Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989**, became effective from 30.1.1990. For carrying out the provisions of this Act, the Govt. of India has notified the SCs and the STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules, 1995 on 31.3.1995.

Article 23: It Prohibits traffic in human beings and begar and other similar forms of forced labour and provides that any contravention of this provision shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law. It does not specifically mention SCs & STs but since the majority of bonded labour belongs to SCs/STs this Article has a special significance for SCs and STs. In pursuance of this article, Parliament has enacted the **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**. For effective implementation of this Act, the Ministry of Labour is running a Centrally Sponsored Scheme for identification, liberation and rehabilitation of bonded labour.

Article 24 provides that no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment. There are Central and State laws

to prevent child labour. This article too is significant for SCs and STs as a substantial portion, if not the majority, of child labour engaged in hazardous employment belong to SCs and STs.

Article 25(2) (b) provides that Hindu religious institutions of a public character shall be thrown open to all classes and sections of Hindus. This provision is relevant as some sects of Hindus used to claim that only members of the concerned sects had a right to enter their temples. This was only a subterfuge to prevent entry of SC persons in such temples. For the purpose of this provision the term Hindu includes Sikh, Jaina and Budhist.

Educational and Cultural Safeguards:

Article 15(4) empowers the State to make any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for SC and ST. This provision has enabled the State to reserve seats for SCs and STs in educational institutions including technical, engineering and medical colleges and in Scientific & Specialised Courses. In this as well as in **Article 16(4)** the term 'backward classes' is used as a generic term and comprises various categories of backward classes, viz., Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Denotified Communities (Vimukta Jatiyan) and Nomadic / Seminomadic communities.

Article 330 provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the Lok Sabha.

Article 332 provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the State Vidhan Sabhas (Legislative Assemblies).

Article 334 originally laid down that the provision relating to the reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the Lok Sabha and the State Vidhan Sabhas (and the representation of the Anglo-Indian community in the Lok Sabha and the State Vidhan Sabhas by nomination) would cease to have effect on the expiration of a

period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution. This article has since been amended four times, extending the said period by ten years on each occasion. This provision was to expire in January 2000.

Service Safeguards

Article 16(4) empowers the State to make "any provision for the reservation in appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State".

Article 16(4A). Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any provision for reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of posts in the services under the State in favour of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes which, in the opinion of the State, are not adequately represented in the services under the State".

Article 335. "The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State".

Article 320(4) provides that nothing in clause (3) shall require a Public Service Commission to be consulted as respects the manner in which any provision under Article 16(4) & 16(4A) may be made or the manner in which effect may be given to the provisions of Article 335.

The central and state governments also established SC/ST Welfare Departments soon after Independence. In the early 1990s, the Central Government passed legislation establishing the National Commission for SC/ST and the National Human Rights Commission.

There is no doubt that none of these would have been possible without the interventions made by Dr. Ambedkar, to ensure that Independent India would be based on a democratic constitution that guaranteed equality, fundamental rights and dignity to all regardless of caste. He succumbed to his contemporary dominant-caste nationalists and settled these matters internally. Other-wise Dalits would have been much worse off than they are today.

The much acclaimed affirmative actions by the Governments, in the form of the Constitutional provisions, powerful Legislations, Judicial Activism and the existence of Human Rights Mechanisms – National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Dalits) Commission, National Commission for Women are not able to protect Dalits from the heinous crime of untouchability.

Any small attempt of Dalits, to “assert their rights or their resistance against the violence” unleashed on Dalits, is viewed as an act of Disobedience and creation of a Law and Order problem. This results in brutal attack on Dalits, by the state machinery, especially the police. The Dalits are at the receiving end, both by the dominant caste and by the state police force, which is also very much dominated by the dominant caste persons. Crimes and atrocities on Dalits have ever been increasing over the past few years.

Either the constitution or the legislations or the judiciary or the other Human Rights mechanisms in the form of Human rights commissions at various levels from the states to the center are not providing effective safeguards and guarantees to ensure Dalits rights. Even the most powerful instrument currently available in defense of Dalits rights, namely SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, hardly provide effective safeguards for protection and promotion of Dalit Human Rights. Article 17 of the Indian constitution proclaims that the practice

of untouchability is abolished. Denial of temple entry, prohibiting access to common water sources, denial of share in the common property of villages, separate burial grounds, prevalence of two separate glass system in tea stall, are some of the inhuman forms of manifestations of untouchability that exist even today.

Caste discrimination cannot end without concrete social, educational and economic changes. The irony is that dalits, comprising 16% of India's population, suffer from a disease, even more pathetic than the practice of untouchability, the ideological dominance of the upper castes who control not only social, economic and political power in the country but even knowledge and opinion. Even the personal experience of being discriminated against does not become an issue unless 'permitted' by the experts and the state. To disbelieve them is a necessary precondition for dalit assertion. The Dalits have been in dark in exercising their political rights viz the denial of rights to contest the village local body election.

Inequity has existed for thousands of years for the SCs/STs and has included educational discrimination, housing segregation, physical harassment and abuse, economic suppression and disenfranchisement, discrimination in medical care, religious discrimination, and violence (e.g., torture, murder, rape). Despite several Indian laws enacted for the protection and empowerment of the SCs/STs, Indian society still treats them as outcasts. The Indian government has passed laws to protect the *Sudras*, but failed to promote democratic principles, secular thinking, and progressive ethos. For instance, despite a constitutional mandate, India has repeatedly failed to fulfill the reservation quota for SCs/STs in faculty positions (saying suitable candidates are not available).^x

Even in the 21st century, students and professionals belonging to *Sudra* communities are victimized by the

bureaucrats, ministers, judges, doctors, and all other professionals. *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, and *Vaishya* castes make up 15% of the population, yet claim about 65% of the upper-level jobs. In the first-ever statistical analysis of its kind, a survey of the social profile of more than 300 senior journalists at 37 Hindi and English language newspapers and TV studios found that "Hindu upper-caste men"— who form 8% of the country's population—hold 71% of the top jobs in the "national media." Hence, the media is biased and does not report the truth of suffering and discrimination by those in the scheduled castes and tribes. When SCs/STs asked members of the media to lodge a formal complaint, they said that "if we do that, our whole career will be finished by these professors who treat us worse than animals. The SC/ST students prefer to swallow these insults and suffer silently."^{xi}

The Status of Dalit Women in India:

Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Dalit women constitute half of the ca. 200 million Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and Dalit women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Dalit women also have less power within the Dalit movement itself. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organisations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men.^{xii}

Naked parading, forcing Dalit women to become maidens to God, a ritualistic prostitution and sexual harassment of Dalit

women by the dominant caste persons, which are still a common sight in some parts of the country. The devastating effects of the caste system on the educational, social, and economical status of Dalit women in modern India are so inhuman till today. Dalit women face the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture every day of their miserable lives. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes, which is legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures. There are many examples of brave Dalit women who being quite aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their suffering.^{xiii} In doing so, they certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come. Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the National Alliance of Women, once stated that in a male dominated society, “Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class and gender” in which she sums up the plight of Dalit women, highlighting the fact that Dalit women are a distinct social group and cannot be masked under the general categories of “Women” or “Dalits”^{xiv}

In Ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent since even the most learned men were good householders and had varied occupations. The women of ancient India were just as superior as men in learning, education, and intellect. The choice for her mate was according to her own wishes and marriage was practiced after the coming of age. She attended parties, competitions, and religious functions as she wished. The remarriage of young widows was also a common practice.^{xv} The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the *Manusmriti*, *Atharva Vedas*, *Vishnu smriti*, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmins (upper priestly hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent.^{xvi} Dr.

B. R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian constitution, also makes it very clear in his article titled "The rise and fall of Hindu woman" that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so called Hindu religious books.^{xvii}

Books like the *Manusmriti*, divide people into a stratified caste system and promotes inequality between men and women.^{xviii} According to the *Manusmriti*, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth. It not only justifies the treatment of dalit women as a sex object and promotes child marriage, but also justifies a number of violent atrocities on women as can be seen in the following verses.^{xix}

"A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him. Or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age. If (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner."^{xx}

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house."^{xxi}

"Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."^{xxii}

"Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their *Sanskaras* are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth."^{xxiii}

"A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya Man can sexually exploit any shudra woman."^{xxiv}

Even the killing of a dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence for the Brahmins: equal to the killing of an animal (*Manusmitri*). If the killing of an untouchable was

justified as a minor offence, you can imagine the treatment they received throughout their lives.

In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the *Manusmriti* and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which Dalit women could be uplifted. The horrendous Laws in the *Manusmriti* were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the Upper castes, which form the majority of India. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Laws of the *Manusmriti* have a devastating effect on the level of education reached by Dalit women.^{xxv}

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the majority of the educated people are of the upper caste, many of which may practice caste-based discrimination. Therefore, Dalit girls feel discouraged to enter education and we see the lowest literacy rate for Dalit girls compared to the Total population of educated upper caste girls. Dalits in general have very low participation rates in higher education.^{xxvi}

The main reasons for the very low literacy rate among Dalit women could be some or all of the following:

1. The Lack of educational resources especially in rural areas.
2. Privatization of schools and colleges.
3. Extreme poverty, because of which they cannot afford the expensive fees for the private schools.
4. The demand for an increase in the Dowry for educated girls.

5. Humiliation and bullying by the high caste students and teachers.

The 1992-93 Annual report from the Ministry of Welfare shows 1,236 reported cases of rape on Dalit women and the National Commission for SC/ST shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalits are reported every month. But what is even more disturbing, is that only one out of ten of the cases are reported annually whilst, nine go unreported. In addition to this, according to the Human Right watch Report, approximately 115 million children are in slavery and 2.6 million children are held as bonded labourers.^{xxvii} After fifty-five years of India's independence and despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, they are still suffering unimaginable atrocities from the high caste Hindus. It is believed that thousands of these cases go unreported and unpublicized because the poor Dalits that live in rural areas, who are the worst victims, have no control on power, wealth, justice, police and the media. The only way these Dalit women can escape the viscous cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression is through education. Through education more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can then raise an even stronger voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes.^{xxviii}

Many Dalit Non-Government Organizations (NGO's), both in India and abroad, have been involved in raising the plight of India's 250 million untouchables. One of the most important tasks of these Dalit NGO's is to bring the plight of Dalit people to the attention of the International community and to document and publicize human right violations. As the poorest of the poor, Dalit women lack the means and the opportunity to defend themselves at home or to make their problems known outside of rural India. Many Dalit women have formed NGO's through which they collectively fight against abuse from the

upper classes. Such Dalit women abandon tears and embrace the shield of confidence in the hope of equality. The courage, struggle, and persistence of today's Dalit women against suppression, exploitation and torture has the power to ensure that the future generations will not have to face the bleak reality Dalits have faced for the past two thousand years. The caste system is truly a crippling disease to approximately 250 million Dalits in India today.^{xxix}

Since its roots are embedded in the Hindu religious scriptures, it seems this disease has no cure, but every voice raised against caste-based discrimination and suppression through Dalit Organizations will turn this from a losing battle to one of victory in which every Dalit will have equal rights, access to education, and a chance to succeed and prosper. Many of the Dalit NGO's are involved in establishing schools, scholarships, and basic supplements to Dalits in the rural parts of India. NGO's such as the Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights are involved in bringing the plight of the Dalit people to the attention of the international community and to document and publicize human rights abuse. The longterm objectives are to enfranchise Dalits as full citizens of their society and eliminate caste-based discriminations.

Human rights of Dalit women:

India is a democracy and is a Party to most of the major human rights treaties. These treaties provide the same rights for men and for women. Because India is also a Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realise their rights. It is generally accepted in international law that governments have to do more than just pass legislation to protect human rights. The Government of India has an obligation to take all measures,

including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfil their rights. It also has an obligation to punish those who engage in caste-based violence and discrimination. The government of India, as a modern country with a growing economy, has the means to fulfil its obligations.^{xxx}

Civil and political rights

India is a Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Based on this treaty, the Government of India has an obligation to make sure that Dalit women can enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from slavery, the right to be equal before the court, the right to recognition as a person before the law, the right to privacy, the right to marry only with free and full consent, and the right to take part in public affairs. The life and dignity of Dalit women depends on the realisation of these human rights. However, they are breached systematically.

An essential precondition for the realisation of civil and political rights of Dalit women is registration. Article 24 (2) of the Covenant provides that every child shall be registered immediately after birth. In India, 46 % of all children are not registered. There is also no system of registration of marriages. This is not only a barrier for the realisation of civil and political rights; it also prevents the protection of Dalit girls from sexual exploitation and trafficking, child labour and forced and early marriages.

Economic, social, and cultural rights:

India is also a Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This treaty not only identifies a range of economic, social and cultural rights, but it also requires that all people have these rights, without discrimination. The treaty also discusses the ways in which

states must work to realise the rights. The rights outlined in the ICESCR include the right to work and to just and favourable conditions of work, and to form trade unions, the right to social security, protection of the family, the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, housing and clothing, and the right to health. Dalit women hardly enjoy any of these human rights.

Millennium Development Goals and Dalit women:

In 2000, 189 countries accepted the Millennium Declaration and agreed to take the necessary action in order to attain eight specific goals: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The realisation of human rights of Dalit women will have a major positive effect on the realisation of the MDGs. Dalit women are extremely poor, and make up 2% of the world's population. In India, 60 million children do not attend primary school; the majority of these children are Dalit girls. India's child mortality rate is one of the highest in the world and with its vast population and a rate of 540 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, India accounts for more than 20 % of all global maternal deaths. A greater availability and accessibility of healthcare for women, including Dalit women, is needed.^{xxxii}

Violence against Dalit women – impunity:

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit women. Dalit women are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. However, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. For Dalit men, the suppression and rape of women could be a way to compensate for their own

lack of power in society. The Devadasi system of temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit girl children are forced to prostitution. The majority of cases of violence against Dalit women are not registered. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Women are often also unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and by the judiciary system. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge's own caste and gender biases, can lead to acquittal.

NCRB statistics show growing violence against dalit women:

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, the city of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh was the second most unsafe city for women in India, after Delhi, in 2007-2008. And, crimes against dalits rose by 5% in Uttar Pradesh despite the state having a dalit chief minister. Gender violence is on the rise in Andhra Pradesh. According to the latest statistics released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Andhra Pradesh had the worst record for crimes against women in 2007-08. The NCRB recorded 24,738 cases of crimes against women, including 1,070 cases of rape, 1,564 cases of kidnapping and abduction, 613 cases of dowry death, and 11,335 cases of domestic violence in Andhra Pradesh. The city of Hyderabad, where 1,931 cases of crimes against women were committed, clocked in as the second most unsafe city in India after Delhi, with 4,331 cases. What made the situation more difficult in Andhra Pradesh was the fact that the Andhra Pradesh Women's Commission (APWC) has been without a chairperson since she was caught on camera, in September 2007, allegedly demanding a bribe of Rs 50,000 to help a woman victim. Uttar Pradesh also witnessed an increase in crimes against women, with the state recording 21,215 cases

of violence, including 2,066 cases of dowry death, 1,532 cases of rape, and 3,819 cases of kidnapping.

The NCRB, which functions under the Ministry of Home Affairs, has highlighted how in many of the rape cases, including the rape of minor girls, the accused have been police personnel. The most poignant case of police rape involved 25-year-old Sarita, a resident of Saini Anandpura, Rohtak district, who committed suicide outside the office of Additional Director General of Police V B Singh after consuming poison on June 9, 2008. Sarita's suicide note claimed that although she had been raped by two police personnel, in April 2008, the police had refused to file an FIR and had instead picked up her husband, on April 9, on charges of theft. She succeeded in filing charges only when Director General of Police Ranjiv Dalal held an 'open durbar' in Panchkula on June 5, 2008. On September 13, 2008, a minor girl was allegedly raped by a member of the Central Industrial Security Force, at Manesar in Haryana; on October 10, 2008, a 10-year-old girl was allegedly gang-raped by three men including a police constable identified as Anil Kumar, at Surbura village, Jind district. Though a small state, Haryana recorded 4,645 instances of crime with as many as 269 cases of dowry death and 488 cases of rape. Instances of physical violence against women, including the case of a widow who was stripped and paraded naked in Dhanbad district on April 3, 2008, for daring to enter a temple, and 60-year-old Badami Devi who was beaten up and forced to eat human excreta because villagers suspected her of practising witchcraft, on June 14, 2008 are also on the rise. Bihar leads in cases of domestic violence, with 59% of married women suffering domestic violence. The NCRB recorded 7,548 cases of crime, with 1,555 rape cases, 1,172 dowry death cases, and 1,260 kidnapping and abduction cases. Madhya Pradesh leads in crimes against tribals, with 27% of all cases emanating from this state. Karnataka recorded 6,569 cases of crimes against women, while Chhattisgarh had 3,775 cases.

Delhi recorded 453 rape cases in 2008 as against 581 cases in 2007. In Delhi too, in some cases, men in khaki were the perpetrators: there is the case of a 12- year-old girl waiting outside a temple who was pulled into a moving car and allegedly raped by a traffic constable in Swaroop Nagar, on April 24, 2008. The northeast states recorded much less crime. Arunachal Pradesh registered 115 cases, Assam 31 cases, and Manipur 188 cases. Meanwhile, NCRB statistics also show that crimes against dalits in Uttar Pradesh are increasing despite the state having a dalit chief minister. The figures reveal that such crimes rose by 5% in 2008. A total of 6,942 cases of murder, rape and other crimes were reported in 2008, in Uttar Pradesh, as against 6,628 cases in 2007. Dalits comprise 21% of the state's total population. Investigations by the state human rights commission show that a large number of these crimes are triggered by land disputes. These are just some of the human right abuses mentioned by the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) in its 'Indian Human Rights Report 2009'. The situation in neighbouring Bihar is no better. Despite Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's best efforts, the crime graph against dalits is showing an upward trend. In 2008, 2,786 cases were registered as against 1,572 in 2005.^{xxxii}

A total of 2,766 cases of atrocities are pending in various courts in Bihar. Vishwanath Rishi, chairman of the Mahadalit Commission, Bihar, believes that the police should not register cases under criminal offences against dalits but under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. "This will allow victims to receive compensation while the accused receive harsher punishment," he said. It's the same story in Delhi and Haryana too. Although the Delhi state government runs several schemes for the welfare of dalits and ST/OBC/minorities, almost 50% of funds allocated for their welfare remains unused. Haryana, with a 19.5% dalit population, recorded 227 cases of violence against dalits. The report highlights the fact that low levels of

documented crime in Haryana do not reflect the reality on the ground. In 2007, Andhra Pradesh had the dubious distinction of being ranked fourth worst with respect to atrocities against dalits. According to the NCRB, 3,383 cases were reported in this state of which 46 were cases of murder and 105 were rape cases. In Rajasthan the NCRB recorded a shocking 4,174 cases in 2007; in Karnataka, the figure was 1,844 incidents in 2007; in Maharashtra, 1,166 cases were reported in 2007. The situation in Orissa, where dalits comprise nearly 17% of the population, is equally dismal. And few states enjoy such a dubious track record as Tamil Nadu, with 1,743 cases registered in 2007. The report quotes findings from a survey done in 2008 by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front which highlighted how dalits face discrimination at all levels -- from being refused permission to collect water at the village tap to not being allowed to draw rations from ration shops. This discrimination extended to 20 districts in the state. The plight of dalit women is much worse. Not only do they face physical violence, they also have limited access to livelihood, food, water, sanitation and other welfare programmes. Suhas Chakma, director of ACHR, says: "Now that the Manmohan Singh government has appointed several dalit ministers, they need to act in unison to ensure that the situation on the ground improves for these vulnerable and marginalized sections of the population."^{xxxiii}

Action by Dalit women:

Dalit women have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recorded. They were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of Indian villages. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land rights. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayati Raj

institutions. However, they are unable to put an end to the structural discrimination and exclusion. Violence and impunity are used to keep them in their place.

“As untouchables and outcastes, dalit women invariably face caste-based discrimination. As women, they face gender discrimination, and as poor, they face class discrimination, affirmed the report prepared by two leading dalit and women’s rights groups. The Centre for Dalit Rights (CDR) and the Programme on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR) conducted field surveys to assess “exclusion and subordination” of dalit women. “Dalit women are restricted to the bottom of the society, impoverished and invisible as citizens,” noted the report.”^{xxxiv}

Getting organised as Dalit women:

Since the late 1980s, therefore, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform – created, developed and controlled by themselves – through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women. Conscious that the call for a separate platform could be interpreted as a divisive move by both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, the proponents of such a special forum emphasise that their initiative must not be mistaken for a separatist movement. Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the Dalit movement, the women’s movement and the Dalit women’s movement if their common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realised. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic

empowerment against growing pauperisation, building self-confidence and leadership.^{xxxv}

Conclusion

The present position is better because of education, literacy rate for boys 31.48%, girls 10.93%. Now they have lot of self respect, aware of their rights, organisations to voice their feelings. The creamy layer is well aware of the Government welfare schemes. Among SC dalits executive positions in associations are occupied only by men, very poor representation by women. Feedback about the welfare programme is very essential.

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Caste Politics in West Bengal: The Inside Story

Amlan Baisya

My present paper entitled “Caste Politics in West Bengal: The Inside Story” aims to decipher the role of caste in West Bengal Politics; to be more precise the role of lower caste organizations and their struggle. My Special emphasis will be on CPI (M) – the largest leftist party in West Bengal and their leadership structure cum modes of political functioning. The End part of my paper will try to negotiate with the causes for the emergence of the Matuah Community and whether or not it can be a serious threat to the upper caste brahminical hegemony in West Bengal politics. Slight light will also be thrown on the stand of Mamata Banerjee on this issue and how (or if at all) the communist party was really different from the right wing political outfits. This paper is strictly not a commentary on caste in Bengal society; it is rather an account of how caste-consciousness has molded political structures in Bengal. At the very onset I would like to express my limitations in discussing such a huge issue spanning almost a century or more in such a limited space; however my basic purpose is to locate the larger national level issues of caste in the context of West Bengal politics which is more of a left dominated area.

The politics of West Bengal, both in the thirty four years of left rule and before that has always been different from that of the other states especially in matters of caste. Issues of ‘state negligence’ and ‘deprivation’ were never associated to the question of caste by the middle class Marxist Bhadraklok. The progressive Left politics of West Bengal has always shied away from issues of caste; rather class has always been a comfort zone for them. However this notion has been recently challenged by the inclusion of Matuah Community into mainstream politics. In a state where the leftist intelligentsia and politicians proudly

claim that caste was never a determining factor in poll results, the sudden emergence of a caste organization namely The Matuah Mahasanga completely whitewashed the Left party from certain parts of the state. Now the question is whether caste politics really exists or ever existed in West Bengal Politics or not. An attempt must be made to look into the historical backdrop of the Caste question in West Bengal to understand the dynamics of the issue:

History of caste-mobilization in Bengal:

The Nationalist/ Bhadrlok myth that Caste is not a relevant category in the electoral process in West Bengal can be nullified if we contextualize the problem in the light of the history of Caste Politics in Pre-Independence Bengal. The present lack of caste consciousness among the politicians of Bengal is substituted by a hyper visibility of caste. The formation of Bangiyo Janasanga (BJS) (Bengal People's Association) in 1922 by Manindranath Mandal, a Poudra- Kshatriya leader can be pointed out as the first spark of caste mobilization in Bengal. BJS was a unified organization that tried to bring all the oppressed castes under one banner and form a counter hegemony to the upper caste Bhadrlok Politics. However its tenure was too short and before it could mark the beginning of Dalit Politics in Bengal taking a different route, the BJS was dismantled. BJS proved to be the greatest threat to Hindu upper caste politics when it decided to "launch agitations along the lines of the Muslim League if its demands were not met" (M Mondol,1922 : 10).

However till date the Dalit movements were mainly confined to claiming higher Varna status for their respective castes. But soon, they started demanding special treatment from the government as they felt their caste oppression was at the root of all their political and social oppressions. The dismantling of the BJS did not stop caste mobilizations in united Bengal,

rather it paved the way for the formation of All Bengal Depressed Classes Association(ABDCA) in 1926. Almost at the same time, in the national scenario, similar organizations led by M C Rajah were functioning in unison with the Hindu Mahasabha to oppose the separate electorate stand; but the ABDCA followed the line of Ambedkar? However, the worst time for Dalit movement in West Bengal came when it started working along the lines of the institutionalized formal politics. The claim to “authentic hinduness” was the worst claim for any Dalit movement in Indian history. Yet at the same time, only at this period, the Dalit voices learnt the legitimate language of organized rebuttal. In the late 30s, caste politics in West Bengal was restricted either to claiming higher Varna status or “Depressed classes” status from the colonial government. Repeated petitions and agitations for provisions for special economic and political treatment and a desperate attempt to prove loyalty to the colonial government, posed a serious, never before threat to the dominance of upper caste Bhadrlok in politics. The Swadeshi movement clearly marked political presence of the Dalits and their growing disinterest for nationalist freedom struggles showed signs of the ever decreasing dominance of Bhadrlok power structure. But since then no history of modern Bengal politics shows any definitive structure for caste mobilization in post partition Bengal. What happened all of a sudden that those who opposed the 1905 partition of Bengal readily agreed for a partition forty years later?

The Politics of Partition:

Caste seemed to abruptly disappear from the political scenario of West Bengal. The dynamics of partition politics in united Bengal is a must to understand the political scenario of the then Bengal. The election scene of colonial Bengal clearly showed that in undivided Bengal Muslims were a majority and a

large section of Dalit population was not dependent on either Congress or Hindu Mahasabha. Resultantly, the upper caste Bhadrolok could never seize power in colonial Bengal. So, partition without population exchange was the only way out of a political death for the upper castes. Amartya Sen calls this partition a “nationalist resolution of the caste question”. Thus partition not only kept a huge Dalit population away from West Bengal, but when they fled East Pakistan and came to West Bengal, the refugees were more concerned with the strategies of survival rather than the pragmatics of politics. Down the ages the number of Dalits has only increased in Bengal but Dalit consciousness could never erupt as a political force because even after 60 years of partition, the refugee issues are yet to be solved. Thus the partition ‘solved’ the question of caste in Bengal politics and subdued caste consciousness deep under the sea.

However, in such a poor state of caste politics, the political partition of Bengal did not take place without active resistance. In 1943, Jogendranath Mondal and some other members of different scheduled castes formed Bengal Provincial Scheduled Caste Federation (BPSCF). He was the pioneer for the demand of an undivided Bengal. He made his intentions clear: to align with those who would protect the interests of the scheduled castes in particular of those who were economically deprived. The 1946 elections, the first one after the Poona Pact, was a litmus test for Jogendranath Mondal and his party. Despite lots of opposition from upper caste organizations, Jogendranath was the only SC candidate to win the election. Moreover he made it a point to get Ambedkar elected to the constituent assembly from Bengal.

Communists and Caste:

West Bengalis Marxists seemed to have failed to properly address the specific questions of caste in Indian society. The general assumption that class consciousness spontaneously

leads to the eradication of caste consciousness does not hold true in the Indian society where the majority are the middle class. Marxian society was devoid of this newly emerging middle class. So, a linear analysis of the caste question is not effective for a Bengali society. As a result the caste question has taken a peculiar form in West Bengal. Political leaders hardly talk about it and there is a general consensus that caste no longer operates in the election machinery of West Bengal. Any reference to the question of caste of a leader or voter is, therefore, considered taboo. The communists are the loudest to claim the irrelevance of caste in Bengal politics. Sarbani Bandopadhyay writes: "for a party whose leaders were Bhadrakalok class was a more relevant, progressive and the only legitimate category. For them the question of caste was one of super structure". In his infamous reply to the Mandal Commission the then chief minister Jyoti Basu stated that there were no backward castes in Bengal; only two castes existed in Bengal: the rich and the poor. It is therefore quite obvious that the lower caste migrants of East Pakistan got the worst treatment from the left front regime and their struggle could never be consolidated. What these casteless communists did was to completely illegitimize the question of caste in Bengal.

It is also to be noted that the classical relationship of caste and power has also changed over the years. Earlier social and political power would rest in the hands of the land-owners mainly the upper caste landowners. But of late, this trend has changed. Increasing number of people from the oppressed castes are becoming the panchayet pradhans.

The emergence of Matuah community:

The 2011 assembly elections in West Bengal is said to be the first occasion on which caste appeared as a determinant factor. The role of 'Baroma' and Matuah Mahsagha to defeat the left front candidates especially in North 24 Parganas and also in

some other parts of the state has already been much discussed. However the long term effect of this organized political action of the oppressed castes can only be estimated if we can delve deep into the history and mode of functioning of the Matuah cult. As we have already mentioned, in pre-partitioned Bengal the Namasudras started various self respect movements. In 19th century, with the establishment of Matuah sect, the Namasudras organized themselves as a religious sect under the leadership of Sri Guruchand Thakur. However in post partitioned Bengal, Namasudras mainly the migrant ones reorganized themselves into Matuah mahasangha at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas. Slowly but steadily their numbers increased as the inflow of migrant lower castes into the country never ceased. What once started as a religious movement has now been grossly politicized and the political identity of the organized Matuah sect has become the second largest poll determinant only after the religious minorities. The same people whose main concern was relief, rehabilitation and resettlement and who received the worst treatment from the left front regime have completely changed the face of West Bengal Politics by whitewashing the communists from their same old 'casteless' Bengal. The Matuah Mahasangha now has definite political identity and that is against these so called communists, along the lines of Trinamool Congress and Mamata Banerjee. Manjul Krishna Thakur the youngest son of Baroma is now a minister in the Trinamool Congress Government. It is not that this Dalit organization is not without opposition from within; infact, the elder son of Baroma is said to be an ardent supporter of CPI(M). Yet unlike the caste mobilizations of pre partitioned Bengal, this time the Matuah Mahasangha is almost united. If Jogendranath Mondal failed because of lack of Dalit unity and contradicting personal interests of his fellow comrades, Manjul Krishna is hardly to fall on the trap. Mamata Banerjee has specifically mentioned that her government will look into the particular issues of negligence

and deprivation towards the lower caste people with due attention and prompt action.

But the question that looms large at the present scenario is whether such sort of a political participation in mainstream politics can really help the cause of Dalit mobilization and form a counter hegemony to the upper caste Bhadrakol dominated party structure. Some Dalit scholars claim that it is the only way that Dalit voices can get necessary legitimate articulation for their modes of dissent. But another section believes that the structures of Bhadrakol dominance are too well fortified for one assembly election to bring about a dent in those structures. Mamata Banerjee's repeated assurance to look into the deprivation issues is only hegemonizing the alternate voices of dissent. The moment Dalit politics enters the arena of stratified populist politics, it loses all scope for independent Dalit resurgence. Moreover the hegemonization of one particular Dalit sect into mainstream politics is creating deep feelings of dissent among other Dalit sects like the Pundarik-Shatriyas. The scope for a unified Dalit movement in Bengal is getting reduced day by day as Mahasangha is bound to fall prey to political manipulation. Whether the different Dalit sects can still come together to form united resistance to upper caste dominance is a question of the future; but the present association of the Matuah sect along with mainstream politics is doing nothing but reducing the immense potential of the united Dalit movement.

After such a detailed discussion, if at all a conclusion has to be drawn out of this, it has to be manifold:

Firstly, The Bengal left namely the CPI(M) has failed to understand the pulse of Indian society in terms of caste hierarchy. Class could no longer be considered as a dissecting agent for social and economic problems and issues. The Left has to understand that the basic difference between a 21st century Indian society and the 19th century Marxian society is the

presence of a newly educated consuming class called the middle class. Indian society is grossly divided along caste lines and, therefore, to work effectively as a political organization and sustain an existence in parliamentary democracy they have to understand the question of caste.

Secondly, it will be really harsh to say that caste never operated in Bengal politics as it has done in the national scenario. Be it Jogendranath Mandal or BPSCF, be it the Swadeshi movement or the partition of India, caste organizations have always made their presence felt to the upper caste Bhodrolok intelligentsia. However various factors like contradicting personal agenda and leadership issues always hindered the growth of caste mobilization into organized national protest. They failed, they could not consolidate but that doesn't mean that they never existed. The proud claim of the communists that caste never existed in Bengal politics is a false one or an aberration from reality.

Thirdly, before and after independence the Left was no different from the right wing parties in terms of dealing with caste issues. Both decried the cause of the Dalits: the right wing outfits had never given them social status and importance whereas the Left never accepted their existence.

Last but not the least, the emergence of the previously religious Matuah Community in the political arena of Bengal is surely to change the dynamics of caste issues in Bengal. It is however really unfortunate on our part that the Left parties which are supposed to champion the cause of the marginalized and the oppressed could not bring in their central leadership either women or the oppressed castes. The 1977 Left front government had only one token SC representative and even after 34 years of rule hardly any influential backward leader could come to their politburo. The matuaha have already entered the cabinet of TMC government; whether they can consolidate

different oppressed voices or not is to be examined in future but, for sure, they have for the first time entered mainstream politics in Bengal. From now onwards no political organization can completely overlook their issues before future elections.

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Atrocities against Dalits in Serialized Caste Clashes in Tamil Nadu

Dr. Devakumar Jacob

'The Caste system prevents common activity and by preventing it, it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and conciseness of its own being. There is only individual share or part in the associated activity.'

----- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Tamil Nadu has a very ancient History of language, culture and civilization, which dates back 6000 years.¹ The peninsular Southern India. The present state of Tamil Nadu was a part of Madras presidency during the period of British rule in India. After independence, during the reorganization of states on linguistic basis in 1956 state of Madras was formed. In 1969, Madras State was renamed as Tamil Nadu, The States Reorganization in 1956 resulted in the emergence of the present state of Madras with an area of 50,154.7 square miles or 130,058 square kilometers. Dalit population comes to 13.82 crores and the ST population to 6.77 crores representing 16.33 and .08 percent of the total population respectively.² In Tamil Nadu the percentage of Dalit population is 19.18 percent.³ On the all India map, Tamil Nadu has the sixth largest population. Protection of Dalit rights from atrocities and humiliation in caste clashes has been the much-admired concern of most of the nationalists and political bigwigs even before India's Independence.

There are seventy-six Dalit sub-groups in Tamil Nadu. Paraiyars, Pallars and Arunthathiyars are considered to be the main three Dalit groups in Tamil Nadu. The Pallars are

concentrated in the Southern districts such as Madurai, Virudunagar, Thirunelveli, and Tuticorin. Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars are concentrated mainly in the north and northeastern-north western districts of Tamil Nadu such as Kanchipuram, Chengalpet, Thiruvannamalai, Dharmapuri, Vellore, Cuddalore and Viluppuram districts. Of these three Dalit groups, the Paraiyars are the highest in population with Nine percent, Pallar or Devendrakulavellalar comes to five percent, and Arunthathiyars constitutes three percent. And all other castes together come to 2.18 percent in Tamil Nadu⁴

The social relations between the Dalits and the caste Hindus has often not cordial. It has been a contesting and conflicting one where the Dalits have always been the marginalized, oppressed and exploited category. They have been the victims of worst forms of violence for centuries, though historical records have remained silent for long over this matter. As far the question, as to why Dalit rights violation continue unabated, it has been well argued that the caste based structure especially the caste based village system, that have been responsible for the prejudiced mindset of most dominant caste resulting in frequent violence against Dalits.

Caste clashes in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu have predominantly involved two communities the Thevars and the Pallars.⁵ As has been the case in other states, Dalits in Tamil Nadu have long suffered from exploitative economic relationships and have frequently been the victims of violence. However, changes since the early 1990's have altered the economic relationship between the Thevars and the Pallars and have changed the contours of the conflict. Having benefited from the state's policy of reservations in education and from the income provided by relatives working abroad, the Pallars have become much less dependent on Thevar employment and have begun to assert themselves in the political arena. The Thevars

have responded to this threat to their hegemony with violence, to which the Dalits too have begun to fight back. Similarly the conflicts in the northern part of Tamil Nadu are between Vanniars and the Parayars.⁶ Very rarely but, the Naidus and the Reddiyars too involve themselves in the conflicts. Tamil Nadu is one of the states that have recorded high incidences of Dalit rights violations in caste clashes. Caste clashes continue to plague the state of Tamil Nadu. Individual clashes lead to group clashes, turned into a serial of clashes and they finally lead to murder, property damage and other forms of violence.

Dalit assertion and caste violence

Caste clashes in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have predominantly involved two communities, the Thevars (a backward caste) and the Pallars (Dalits). As has been the case in other states, Dalits in Tamil Nadu have long suffered from exploitative economic relationships and have frequently been the victims of violence.⁷ However, changes since the early 1990's have altered the economic relationship between the Thevars and the Pallars and have changed the contours of the conflict. Having benefited from the state's policy of reservations in education and from the income provided by relatives working abroad, the Pallars have become much less dependent on Thevar employment and have begun to assert themselves in the political arena.⁸ The Thevars have responded to this threat to their hegemony with violence. Dalits too have begun to fight back.

Several districts of South Tamil Nadu faced a civil war type situation due to the Thevar- Dalit clashes. Villages and towns like Rajapalayam, Madurai, Sivakasi, Mangaapuram, Thuraiyur, Mamasapuram, and Edayankulam in 'Prosperous' districts like Virudhunagar, Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli and Dindugul witnessed intense clashes during 1995, 1997 and 1998. The situation is still grim, even a small spark capable of provoking big outbursts⁹ The first and major atrocity, leaving a

lasting impression on the psyche of Dalits all over Tamil Nadu, was the killing of Immanuel Sekharan at Mudukulathur village in 1957.¹⁰ If it was possible for the oppressor castes to hijack the movement led by Periyar, Immanuel, who was a staunch and dedicated fighter for Dalit rights¹¹ equality and non-discrimination, could only be killed. The Dalits lost a valiant fighter and even now his name evokes tremendous feelings of reverence in their minds. Through his death he became a potent symbol of caste oppression and the fight against it and the desecration of Immanuel's statue or portrait automatically results in militant reactions from them. As late as 1997, a group of oppressor caste people forcefully destroyed the statue of Immanuel in Amichiyarpatti village and this was considered an extreme provocation¹² Dalit resistance resulted in the oppressor castes ransacking the whole village and inflicting serious injuries to many Dalits.

Keelvenmani Massacre

The Keelvenmani massacre on 25 December 1968 was of a different kind, though caste was again an important precipitating factor. In this case, it was a question of the Dalit agricultural workers getting organised into a fighting trade union demanding just compensation for their labour. The agricultural workers threatened to bring the agricultural operations to a stop. The big landowners of Thanjavur, who had witnessed spectacular increase in irrigation and productivity and who had come to depend more and more on hired wage labour, decided to strike before the workers.¹³ In a well planned attack they killed 44 Dalit workers in cold blood. After the massacre in Keelvenmani, atrocities on Dalits were unleashed in at least twenty different parts of the state. All of them were triggered by the resistance of the Dalits against inequality and demand of just compensation for their hard labour.

Ponnur caste clash

Ponnur village is in Vandavasi taluk in Tiruvannamalai district, with the total population of 6000, about 2500 belong to Dalit community and an equal member of people to caste senguntha Mudaliyar.¹⁴ Jains, Vanniars, chetiars, and others make rest of the population. The village had a common ground under s.no.331 there were three and half acres of land to the village and in s.no.332 there were two and half acres of temple land.¹⁵ Dalits used this land for staging dramas, conducting public meetings with prior permission from the high caste people. The Mudaliars used the same ground for preparing the thread for weaving. Both lands are common for all the people in Ponnur. This norm thrust upon them by the Mudaliars, became audible in 1989 they first staged a play in the disputed land without prior permission. The Mudaliars took the matters to the court stating that the Dalits were obstructing their traditional profession of weaving by using the common land. The verdict of court gave equal rights for both parties but nobody should obstruct the Mudaliars from their weaving profession.¹⁶

In 1992, despite stiff resistance from the Mudaliars on October 26 the Dalits conducted a public meeting in the disputed land, Mr Sundaranar as the President of Dalit hoisted Ambedkar's flag but the dominant caste people burnt the flag. As the crisis started simmering, the Sub-Collector arranged peace meeting and ordered both community to use the common land but the dominant caste people walked out from the peace settlement.¹⁷ Very next day, people and the dominant caste people attacked Dalits. The reserve police hit with lathes (bamboo stick to beat). After having finished their barbaric acts, they dragged 48 men and 32 women to a common place: 48 men were taken to the Central Jail with false cases. Dalits became victims for professional pleaders of justice. It cost Rs1500\ - for

the innocent victims of dominant caste-police atrocities to get the conditional bail and that too after forty days .¹⁸

Usurped land and Dalit rights violations

Karanai is a small village located about six km west of Mahabalipuram- Thirukazhukundram road in Chengalpet [now it is Kancheepuram] district. On October 5, 1994 the Dalits of Karanai and adjacent villages installed a life- size statue of B.R.Ambedkar on a piece of land owned by Veerabadran, a Dalit of Karanai village. The land and its surroundings, measuring about 650 acres, were originally assigned to the Dalits of Karanai and seven adjacent villages in 1933, as per the order of the collector of Chengalpattu district.¹⁹ This land defined as 'panchama land' or 'depressed class land'. As per this order, any sale or purchase of the panchama land by anyone other than a Dalit is considered illegal. In due course of time, these 650 acres of panchama lands at Karanai were usurped from poor and ignorant Dalits and transferred to other communities with an active connivance of corrupt revenue officials and dominant castes.²⁰ Prominent among the latter are Goutham Chand of Thirukazhukundram, Perumal Swamy, IG (crime) of Tamil Nadu police, and Sakuntala of Vadapalani.

The Dalits installed a statue of Ambedkar to reassert their legitimate right over the panchama land. But the Chengalpet police officials in collusion with the upper caste usurpers forcibly pulled down and disfigured Ambedkar's statue on the very evening of October 5, 1992.²¹ The news of the desecration of Ambedkar's statue spread like wild fire throughout the district. Thousands of Dalits gathered on October 10 in front of the office of the Sub-Collector, Ramesh Chand Meena, demanding action against the erring police officials and reinstallation of the statue at its previous site.

The Dalits were refused permission to enter the sub collector's room, instead were thrown out, the sub-collector himself catching one of the Dalit leaders. Incensed at the indecent treatment meted out to them, the Dalits left the premise, raising slogans, and squatted on the GST Road, the national highway. Instead of giving a patient hearing, the sub collector lost his temper and ordered to open fire on the innocent Dalits, half of whom were women. He did not even follow the elementary procedure of voicing a warning through loudspeakers, followed by lathi charge, exploding of tear gas shells or buck shots in the air to scare away the crowd.

John Thomas, a Dalit and a Non-Governmental organiser, and Elumalai, another young Dalit, were singled out and shot by the local police.²² They were deliberately made targets say the eye witness. Both had organised many agitations for the welfare and protection of Dalits in Chengalpet. All 14 persons, including women, suffered with gunshot injuries. To justify the unprovoked firing, the police incited their hirelings to set aflame a bus. The police arrested 130 Dalits, including 20 women, and beat them till the lathies were broken. Women were partially stripped and mercilessly beaten. Some clear cases of human rights violation by the revenue and police officials of Chengalpet district in the Karanai incident are: The Dalits of Karanai and seven neighboring villages were deprived of 650 acres of the panchama land assigned to them. These panchama lands were usurped and transferred fraudulently to the dominant caste and other communities with the active connivance of corrupt revenue department officials.

The Dalits were denied the right to install Ambedkar's statue on a private land due to the unlawful and unjustified intervention of the police at the instigation of dominant caste usurpers of the panchama lands. Indiscriminate and unprovoked police firing on the masses is a clear case of human rights abuse no warning was given to the public which included large number

of village women. Fifty two rounds were fired. Two persons were killed and 14 persons, including 14 women, received bullet injuries.²³

Right to information is an important right of a citizen. The local press reporters covering the meeting of Dalit representatives with the sub collector were threatened by the police. The police fired at them despite the fact that the local police knew them well. Reporters from Police Seithi (Police News-a weekly), *Murasoli* (party organ of DMK) and the *Indian Express*, narrowly escaped death. Womenfolk should not be kept in the police station after six pm. But 22 women were detained inside the Chengalpet town police station, a whole night in the presence of the District Superintendent of Police. Torture of an accused person in police custody is a case of human rights abuse. Father Yesumarian, a Jesuit priest and a practicing lawyer was stripped to the waist and given a severe beating on December 11. Anjalaiammal, aged 55, of Kurumbirai village and Susila, aged 27, of Madurantakam were forced to lift their sarees and beaten on their buttocks by lathi wielding women police.²⁴

Even when a hard core criminal dies, due consideration is given to the family and close relatives of the dead. However, in the case of John Thomas funeral, which took place in his native village Pappanallur near Vedanthangal, none except his parents were allowed to attend the funeral. The death of Elumalai who succumbed to bullet injuries on October 15 in the Chengalpet general hospital was concealed from his parents and public for 24 hours. Except his parents, none was allowed to participate in his half an hour funeral.²⁵

Roots of Tension

In Thankikkalampatti, Villupuram district, separate water tanks have been built for the dominant caste and Dalit areas. The Dalits allege that the Gounders do not allow the

water to flow into their tank. There are pits all over the dominant caste area, into which the overflow is let. 'Dalit have a tank and pipes, but no water'.²⁶

'In Mandalakkottai, there are separate ponds for Dalits and kallars. Even cattle, dogs and pigs can bathe in the pond meant for Kallars, but not Dalits. When some Dalits dared to take a bath, a big riot broke out five years ago. Violence again erupted last year'.²⁷ The Dalits of Kodiyankulam village had to seek the intervention of the Madras High Court to get drinking water following an incident on 31 August in which policemen who went to the village for a raid allegedly poisoned their well. The court's interim order to the officials to arrange for the supply of water came in response to a writ petition filed by K. Krishnasamy, president of the Tamil Nadu Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation, asking for an inquiry into charges of police atrocities following a clash between the Dalits and maravars in the village. The petition also alleged that the police and revenue officials, including the collector, were Maravars biased against Dalits.²⁸ The Dalits of this village had initially threatened to convert to Islam, but did not do so.

The Dalits of Thennamanandu are not allowed to enter the Ayyanar pond. They can bathe only in the 'pariyarkkulam' (meaning the 'pariah pond'). But the dominant caste Hindus have leased out even this pond because it is full of fish. Rajendran, a Dalit, complained. They make big money, but they don't maintain the pond. K. Desingu, 26 lives in Sorappur, 25 km from Villupuram near Pondicherry. When the government announced that it would lease out the local tank for fish breeding, the high school educated Desingu also applied. He easily earned between two and three lakh annually. Initially, three of us were given the rights to work in the tank, the other two belonging to Backward Class. They have even paid the deposit. But one person wants to lease the tank alone for two

years simply because he cannot stomach the idea of working alongside a scheduled caste.²⁹

Upward mobility results in vandalism

The economic relationship between Thevars and Pallars (Dalits) has changed notably. Like most Dalits in rural India, the Pallars traditionally were employed as agricultural laborers (on Thevar lands) and were paid less than minimum wage. In early 1990s, Pallars began to enjoy minimal upward economic mobility, which reduced their dependency on Thevars. Pallars able to form their own lands or look elsewhere for employment.³⁰ The first reason is the policy of reservations, which has been more effectively implemented in this state, more than other states. Reservation in education frees Dalits from land-based occupation. The relationship between the landlord and the laborer has given way to urban based occupations. The second reason is that many Dalits have been recruited by Gulf countries. They send their proceeds home, and their families are able to acquire land through this process feudal dependency has been reduced.³¹

Police force descends a Dalit village

Since 1980 the Dalits of Kodyankulum village in Tuticurin district have benefited from the flow of funds from family members employed in Dubai, Kuwait and the United States. On August 31, 1995, a 600 member police force attacked the all Dalit village in the presence of the superintendent of police and the district collector and destroyed property worth hundreds of thousands of rupees.³² In what appeared to be a premeditated attack, police destroyed consumer durables such as TVs, fans, tape recorders, sewing machines, bicycles, agricultural implements, tractors and lorries and also demolished food grains storages. They made a bonfire of clothes and burnt the passports and testimonials of educated Dalit youth. The village post office was

targeted and police allegedly poisoned the only village well.³³ A village elder claimed that all through the operation, the policemen were showering abuse on us and made derogatory references to our caste which only showed their deep rooted prejudice.

The stated purpose of the raid was to capture Dalits allegedly involved in the murder of three Thevars in a nearby village two days earlier. Many suspect that it was the relative affluence of the Dalits that attracted the attention of the uniformed men. The idea it appears was to destroy their economic base, because the police felt that the Kodiyankulam Dalits provide moral and material support to the miscreants in the surrounding areas.³⁴

Wave of violence over VSTC

The cycle of violence began in late April 1997 when the government announced the creation of a new transport corporation in Virudhunagar district in the name of a Pallar community member (the Veeran Sundaralingam Transport Corporation, VSTC).³⁵ The Thevars opposed the proposal and some were heard to remark, 'How do you expect us to travel in a bus named after a Dalit'? It is a personal affront to our manhood. On May 1, 1997, VSTC was inaugurated; Thevars threw stones at the buses and refused to ride them.³⁶

On May 2, Dalit leader Dr. Krishnaswamy was arrested and accused of sparking violence with his 'inflammatory speeches'. Spontaneous protests erupted as news of his arrest spread through the region. Protesters staged several road blocks and for the three days that Dr. Krishnaswamy remained in jail, police resorted to firing, lathi charges and bursting tear gas shells to control agitating Dalits.³⁷ Two Dalits were killed by police at Sivakasi in Virudhunagar district. In protest against police action Thevars at Sivakasi, Thevars in Mansapuram village attempted to introduce coconut shells at tea stalls for Dalits to

keep them from sharing tea tumblers used by dominant caste. When Dalits resisted, Thevars tortured and looted Dalit houses in Amachiyarpatti village.³⁸ In Rengappanaikkanpatti, Thevars vowed to make Dalits “dig pits for the burial of bodies of dominant castes.” The entire Dalit population of the village was later forcibly driven out, as Thevars set fire to their homes and fields.³⁹

In the month following, the remaining of the transport corporation and Dr. Krishnaswamy’s arrest, the districts of Theni, Madurai, Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli, and Tuticurin witnessed periodic eruptions of violence and the forced displacement of thousands of Dalits from their homes. Police and district officials treated the situation as a law and order problem, and under the guise of seeking out Dalit militant activists, conducted search and raid operations exclusively on Dalit villages.⁴⁰ They arrested and assaulted hundreds of men and women and they looted their homes and destroyed material possessions. Dalits were the worst affected in terms of property loss and physical injuries sustained like hand and leg fractures due to violent attack(s) on them, that police had filed many false cases against Dalits and that increased political consciousness amongst the Dalits.⁴¹

Reservation and Aftermath

Since 1996 to 2002 the reserved Panchayat Presidencies of Pappapati in Chellampatti Union, Keeripatti and Nattarmangalam in the Usilampatti Union in the Madurai district and Kottakatchiyenai in the Narikudi Union in the Virudhnagar district have had ten announcements of elections but nine times out of ten no Dalit could even file his/her nomination papers.⁴² The dominant oppressor caste in all these Panchayats are the Piramalai Kallars, a sub sect of the Thevars. They have created a morbid sense of fear among the Dalits, by issuing a decree that

any Dalit who dares to file his/ her nomination paper shall be killed.

The pappapatti Panchayat, with one thousand nine hundred and ninety two votes, has a Dalit population of 40 percent. This village is the birth place of Mookiah Thevar, a leader of a Thevar party called Forward Block. It has become a prestige issue for the Thevar, who question, 'How can a Dalit sit in the chair which Mookiah Thevar occupied'⁴³ They are unable to digest this challenge to statusquo. Further there is a temple here that belongs to Piramalai Kallars and it has been a tradition that the first honours of the temple are bestowed on the Panchayat President. To these caste- ridden oppressors, it becomes an issue, for, if a Dalit becomes the Panchayat President, they would have to honour him/ her in a temple to which he or she has no entry.

The Keeripatti village in the Usilampatti Union has three wards, and a total of 1393 votes. About 25 percent of the inhabitants are Dalits, and it was declared a reserved constituency because of the eighteen Panchayats in the Usilampatti Union, the highest number of Dalits resides here. Keeripatti is the processing and export center for the ganja that is produced in the hilly regions of Varsa Nadu, Mayiladum Paarai and Kadamalai Gundu. Every year, several crores worth of ganja is processed and exported, this 'business' is the major employment for the 'upper castes.' It is this gang which deals in ganja (drug) that prohibits the Dalits from contesting the elections in this reserved constituency.⁴⁴

The third reserved constituency in Madurai district which has gone without a Dalit elected representative is Nattarmangalam in the Usilampatti Union. It has a total vote list of 1930 people, of which about 500 are Dalit votes. The State Government and various authorities maintained their false

propagandas that 'there was no threat from any force, and that only the Dalits didn't want to contest.'⁴⁵

They took up this issue with the President, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Consequently, Mr.Subban in Pappapatti and Poonkodiyan in Keeripatti filed their nomination papers on 27 March 2002, the last day allotted for the filing of nomination papers for the elections to be held on 8 April 2002. This caused the Kallars to break the prohibition they had imposed. To prevent the candidates from winning the elections, they put up two dummy candidates in each of these constituencies. They threatened Mr.Poonkodiyan's brother and did not even allow the election posters to be put up in these villages. During the election campaign in Keeripatti Panchayat constituency, slippers were thrown on the candidates, when the government and the police officials who accompanied them. The Dalits of these two villages fled, wishing not to cast their votes in the election. Within an hour of swearing -in, both dummy candidates Ms.Thanikodi in Papapatti and Mr.Karutha Kannan in Keeripatti resigned their posts.⁴⁶ Now, Mr.Subban and Mr.Poonkodiyan face death threats; they can't go back to their villages.

Melvalavu murder

In September 1996, the village of Melavalavu, in Madurai district was declared a reserved constituency under Article 243 of the Indian constitution. The declaration signaled that the Melavalavu panchayat (village council), which covers eight villages with approximately 1000 Dalit families, would have seats reserved for scheduled caste candidates.⁴⁷ In June 1997, a group murder of elected Dalits by neighbouring Thevars signaled that constitutionally mandated shifts in legal power to Scheduled Castes would not be tolerated by dominant caste displace from their once secured elected positions.

The murders of the Dalits leaders of Melavalavu Panchayat were clearly because 'untouchability' was still ingrained in the social system. The economic conditions in the village were abysmal, but the power was concentrated in the hands of a privileged.⁴⁸ Few of these people had hitherto enjoyed a hold over the common properties such as fish ponds, temple lands and forest produce and did not want to relinquish these privileges to the Panchayat Raj system run by the downtrodden. The violence was basically a result of shift in the power equations from the haves to the have-nots. The elections scheduled for October 1996 were subsequently cancelled as all three Dalit nominees withdrew their candidacy for fear of sanctions against the entire Dalit electorate.⁴⁹

When polling finally did take place in February 1997, the election was suspended after several incidents of booth capturing. Murugesan, 35 years old, won the presidency in the third round of polling, which took place under heavy police protection and was boycotted by the dominant castes.⁵⁰ He was however unable to perform his tasks as president, neighbouring Thevars physically prevented him from entering his office space at the panchayat building. With police protection the election was held but at the end of the day, dominant caste people entered into the booth and threatened and stabbed both men and women and took away the ballot boxes and threw them into the well. Then again declared re-elections after one week.⁵¹ In that election, they elected Mr. Murugesan. There was heavy police protection still the Amblakars (Thevars) boycotted the elections. Mr. Murugesan was not able to go to office. Only during the swearing in ceremony did he go to the office with help of police escort.⁵² On the day of the attack, June 30, 1997, Mr. Murugesan was returning from a visit to the Collector's Office to inquire about compensation for houses burnt in an earlier incident. Mr. Kumar an eye witness, who barely survived the attack himself, boarded the bus and sat next to Mr. Murugesan.

The assault led by a Thevar named Mr.Ramar. Mr.Ramar and Mr.Alagarsamy, the former Panchayat president gave explicit instructions to their gang of Thevars to 'Kill all the Pariahs (Dalits)'. Five Thevars joined together put Murugesan on the ground outside the bus and chopped off his head, then threw it in a well half a kilometer away.⁵³ Some grabbed his hands others grabbed his head and one cut his head with a bill hook. They deliberately took the head and poured the blood on other dead bodies.

Statues and festivals- Caste tensions

Dominant caste groups and a diffident administration deprive Dalits in Kandadevi of their right to participate in a temple festival in 15th August 2003. More than six decades after untouchability was declared punishable under Article 17 of the Constitution, which ensures equality to all before law, Dalits who form one-fifth of the population, continue to suffer caste-based discrimination and disablement in many parts of the country. They are left with no choice but to fight for their constitutional rights, in courts or on the streets. Dalit assertion in most places is met with stiff resistance from dominant caste forces. The resistance is often severing; it even takes violent forms when the matter of dispute over rights relates to temples, festivals and rituals. Enforcing court orders in favour of Dalits is a daunting task for the administration.⁵⁴

Clash to pull the Temple Car

Tamil Nadu has been witness to incidents of temple-related confrontation between Dalits and sections of dominant caste in 1990s. At Koothirambakkam village in the northeastern district of Kanchipuram, the Dalits are locked in a prolonged legal battle to of assert their rights relating to the local temple. The Kandadevi temple car festival, which takes place in the Tamil month of Aani (June-July), attracts devotees including a

larger number of Dalits from about two hundred villages around Devakottai. Although, traditionally, the heads of the four nadus were specially honoured in the temple, and they led the pulling of the temple car, the Dalits and people from other communities also had specific roles to play in the ritual. This, the Dalits say, had been the practice 'from time immemorial'. However, in 1979, after an incident at Chinna Unjani (which comes under Unjanai Nadu, one of the four nadus) in which five Dalits were killed following a dispute over a temple festival, the Dalits stopped participating in the Kandadevi temple car festival.⁵⁵

The Dalits of Kandadevi village in Devakottai taluk in the southern district of Sivaganga has been asserting, for over five years, their right to pull the temple car of Sri Swarnamoorthi Easwarar temple during the annual festival along with the nattars, who belong to the dominant caste Kallar community. The leaders of the nattars, ambalams, are the self styled heads of the people in four nadus (regions) in Sivaganga and adjacent districts.⁵⁶ The attractive temple car that is at the centre of the controversy belongs to the Sri Swarnamoorthi Easwarar temple at Kandadevi, 4km from Devakottai. The village was part of Ramnad district until 1985, when the district was bifurcated. The district itself was earlier part of larger Madurai district in the entry on 'Kallan'. 'Portions of the Madurai and Tanjore districts are divided into areas especially applicable to Kallan tracts'.⁵⁷ Kallan or kallar denote a caste group that is part of the mukulathor, now a dominant caste group in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. Maravar and Agamudaiyar are the other components of the mukkulathor communities.⁵⁸

The entire Kandadevi region and also adjacent places in the old East Ramanad district have been known for atrocities against Dalits for over a century. Dalits have been victims of deep-rooted prejudice and untouchability, which still manifest themselves in several forms. Their resistance against oppression

is also nearly a century old. The first conference of Dalits was held at Paramakudi in the district as early as in 1810.⁵⁹ Struggles have been waged against untouchability since in 1850s. Mahatma Gandhi visited Devakottai in 1934 to offer his condolences for the death of Poochi, a Dalit, in the movement against untouchability, and held discussions with the Dalits and the nattars, who were opposed to Dalits wearing shirts. From the Mudukulathur riots of 1957 to the multiple murders at Unjanai in 1979, the region has seen scores of incidents in which Dalits have been the victims.⁶⁰

In fact, in 1997, the sole Dalit participant in the car festival was allegedly beaten by as section of dominant caste people. Following this incident, Puthiya Tamizhagam president and a member of the State Assembly, K.Krishnasamy, who toured the area, demanded at a press conference that the Dalits be given equal rights along with other communities in the temple car festival. The Dalits right to equality had been enshrined in the Constitution and they could not be deprived of it in the name of protecting 'traditions'. The nattars' objection to the Dalits' participation in the pulling of the temple car rested on the claim of the heads of the nadus that their right regarding the pulling of the temple car was part of the 'customary rights and traditions' they had been enjoying. They had been handed these 'rights' under the zamindari system and these rights had gone out with the abolition of the system and these rights had gone out with the abolition of the system and these rights had gone out with the abolition of the system under the Estates Abolition Act, 1929, Bakthavatasalam argued. 'When Dalits are denied their rights in the name of tradition,' he said, 'that becomes an offence by itself.'⁶¹

Caste divided the street

The local bund road divides the Dalit locality from the rest of the village comprising dominant castes such as Konars, Kallars,

Udaiyars Vellalars, Chettiars and Pillais, though some of them also live in the Dalit area. At the other end of the road, a red and grey flag has been hoisted, a symbol of the militant leader John Pandian of the *All India Devendra Kula Vellalar Munnetra Sangham*, an organization of the Dalit Pallar community. Dalits are not allowed into the temple and in a riot broke out over the temple festival in 1980; thirty six Dalit homes were set on fire. But the Dalits managed to summon the courage to cycle through the dominant caste locality after this incident.⁶² The latest problem arose when the Dalits demanded that their streets be included in the procession route of the deities in the Muthumariamman and Kaliammn shrines during the temple festival.

In Athipattu, near Villupuram, the Dalit church has been closed for five years following the intervention of priests and others of a neighbouring church, which belongs to another denomination. Dalit Christians there have no place to worship either. Near Tirukoilur in Villupuram district, there is no place to worship because the Draupadiamman temple is in the dominant caste area. Dalits became more organized and were no longer ready to take things lying down like they did before. Since 1990 the dominant caste intolerance of the growing Dalit assertion has manifested itself in increased oppression.

Summary and Conclusion

Since Independence, various developmental programmes have laid special emphasis on raising the level of this underprivileged and poor section of the society. Because of years of exploitation, they have been exposed to vulnerabilities of all sorts. They are not only subjected to social but also economic exploitation. They, therefore, remained extremely poor and backward for centuries. Hence, besides constitutional provisions, various economic programmes are implemented by the government for the socio economic advancement of poor people especially for the Dalits. It is understood that the rights of

the Dalits have been incessantly subjected to injustice, inequality, humiliation, caste based discrimination and degradation by the dominant castes. Leaders like Gandhiji, Nehru and Ambedkar were also significant in protecting and securing the interests of the Dalits. Gandhiji's words, for removing the practice of Untouchability from the Hindu society, are noteworthy. He said, 'Swaraj is unattainable from the Hindu religion'. Gandhiji also stressed that; the Untouchables would also enjoy their civil rights like access to roads, wells, public institutions, public employment. In the first round table conference many constitutional proposals were made to safeguard the interests of the depressed classes including the Dalits. Ambedkar who was the champion of the depressed classes insisted for a separate electorate for the untouchables, which enables them to protect themselves from the dominance of the caste Hindus and to empower themselves from various disabilities.

Even though the Constitution of India has guaranteed equality of status to all scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, yet in many places, unequal treatment, discrimination and atrocities are being done to them only on the ground of caste. Even today in many villages, the Dalits are not allowed to enjoy equal status with the other caste. They are not allowed to enter Hindu temples and churches for worshipping gods, wells and bathing ghats. This shows that social discrimination is still in practice. Therefore, constitutional provisions are good enough to secure social justice to Dalits, but their implementation by the public is at fault. Besides, the constitution-makers have also imposed some social obligations on the State to perform for the attainment of social and economic justice. Merely achieving social justice will not bring equality of status and opportunity, unless it is followed by economic justice. State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular, the Dalits and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. The primary object of incorporating Directive Principles of State Policies to the

Constitution of India is to secure social and economic justice to all people including Dalits.

It is clear that, majority of the Dalits are agricultural labourers, who are depending on their Landlords for their livelihood, they work from morning till evening in the field for money. If their landlords or dominant castes do any atrocities to them they cannot protest against them as they depend on the dominant caste for their livelihood. It is also evident that, only few Dalits are allowed to enjoy their equal status with the other castes, but the remaining are prevented from enjoying equal status in worshipping gods in temples, taking coffee and tea in village ceremonies. These facts clearly show that, even after 66 years of independence and the constitutional protections conferred, the condition of the Dalits is still deplorable and they are subjected to discrimination, humiliation and injustice by the dominant castes.

So far as their political participation is concerned only 5 to 10% of the Dalits are able to contest for general elections, as they are economically strong to face elections. But the remaining 90% of the Dalits are unable to contest for election due to their economic disabilities. Even though members from Dalit community contest for election, they are not supported by the other castes. Because of these facts, the majority of Dalits are reluctant to contest for general elections. Consequently, they cannot revolt against the injustice, inequality, and humiliation done to them by the dominant castes. Therefore, the government should provide as many benefits as possible to the Dalits to overcome from their socio-economic disabilities and to improve their economic standard to face the challenges in their lives.

At every turn Dalits are told or made to feel that the village in which they lived for generations is not theirs. They are often reminded that dominant castes regard them as worthless; their contribution to the collective economic and social life of the

village is either ignored or appraised negatively. Dominant castes reiterate that Dalits have no claims to public space in the form of village common lands and resources, or to its cultural life- festivals and public events. If they are now allowed access to common property resources it is because of the 'broadmindedness' and benevolence of the dominant strata and not by right. The most widespread and blatant practice of untouchability in the public sphere relates to water and cremation or burial grounds the bare necessities of life and death. Despite being common amenities that are managed and maintained by the local government access to both drinking water sources and cremation / burial grounds continues to be governed by the notion of caste based pollution and atrocities. In almost half the villages Dalits have no access to the village burial/cremation ground maintained from public funds. A separate place is generally designated for the Dalits of one or several villages. In other words segregation is maintained in life as well as in death.

The conflict as presently being played out is not directly between Brahmins and Dalits; it is between the other Backward Communities (OBC) and Dalits. The emergence of a section of people whose status was improving as a result of opportunities provided for them could not be accepted by some people in the dominant castes and this is one of the major causes of the clashes. The National Commission for SC and ST instructed the concern State governments to look into the factors responsible for such caste clashes and it advised States to take serious action to prevent such clashes in future. SC ST Commission instructed the government to set up special monitoring committee consisted police officials and IAS officers to look into the issue very seriously. After a series of caste clashes in Tamil Nadu in 1990s the PCR and PoA acts are being implemented effectively. These legal initiatives have been taken special care and attention for speedy trial and reasonable compensation for the victims. All

those enquiry commissions appointed from 1957 to 2005 were observed that these caste clashes took place due to the economic and social mobility of the Dalits. Those enquiry commissions indicated that caste clashes could be prevented if the government identified the areas which are highly atrocities prone areas. Enquiry commission opined that the Dalits are started retaliating the oppressive nature of dominating caste.

<i>Year</i>	Atrocity Prone Villages	Dormant Atrocity Prone Villages	Highly Sensitive Among The Atrocity Prone Villages	Total
2000	194	233	138	565
2005	202	260	125	587
2010	256	300	225	781

Number of Atrocity /Dormant Atrocity Prone Villages in Tamil Nadu

Proposals and suggestions

The PCR Office throughout Tamil Nadu may be strengthened in such a way that all the PCR and PoA Act cases are investigated, charge sheeted and prosecuted exclusively but its own police personnel, instead of depending on the local police. It should function similar to the way in which the CID (central intelligence department) functions both at the State and local levels. It should be strengthened particularly at the regional level by appointing an SP above the existing position of DSP in all the three supervisory squads and by creating Divisional level PCR offices below the level of supervisory squads each covering 2 to 3 districts with DSP as its head.

The ADGP/ IGP (PCR) may report directly to the Home department rather than to the DGP of the state and accordingly his

confidential report be written by the Home Department rather than the DGP. This would ensure greater freedom for ADGP/ IGP (PCR) to do justice to the responsibilities assigned to him. To some extent this would also help the DGP to devote maximum time for the 'law and order' problems in the State. The DGP instead of directly getting involved on issues pertaining to PCR/ PoA Act cases may extend necessary support to the ADGP/ IGP (PCR) to ensure the safety and security of the Dalits in the State. An effective administration mechanism be evolved at the Central Government level, so as to consistently facilitate and remind every DGP of the State that his/her concern for maintaining law and order in the State cannot be at the cost of the lives, properties and dignity of the SCs and STs living over there, and to make them accountable either to the Home Ministry or to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment or to the National Commission for the SCs and STs or a new Committee may be constituted from these three bodies to protect the interests of the SCs and STs.

Presently the concerned SP of the district does the streamlining of the investigation process of the PCR/ PoA Act cases registered in the district. In view of the enormous amount of other cases that the SP at the district level needs to look into the above responsibility may be left exclusively to the office of the ADGP/ IGP (PCR). District level PCR police stations may be adequately equipped with necessary infrastructure facilities such as proper office, vehicles, and other necessary facilities exclusively under its control. The Dalit people should refrain from performing defiling, unpaid or underpaid occupations such as sweeping, scavenging, disposing of the dead cattle etc. They should be accommodated in more dignified employment. The Government should actively take up such initiatives. In the longer run, this would help prevent the Dalits becoming the victims of caste discrimination and untouchability.

Most of the Dalits are unaware of the PoA Act and most of those who are aware of the PoA Act, are unaware of the manner in which this could be used to ensure justice to the victim of caste atrocities and discriminations. It is therefore recommended that the PCR office may undertake special programmes at various levels making people aware of the PCR and PoA Acts, the spirit behind these laws and their usefulness to protect the Dalits. The police departments may carry out such responsibilities in collaboration with the academic/research institutions, and civil society organizations or NGOs. In view of the fact that the victim in most cases could not get the TA and DA as per the provisions of the PoA Act and they had also been subjected to harassment of running from Police station to Collector's office and to the Special Court, it recommended that the due TA/DA be given to the victims and their witness in the court itself. The Special Public Prosecutor should be given the due recognition by meeting at least his/her basic requirements such as proper office, clerical assistance and the due remuneration so that he/she is able to perform the due task effectively.

All the above recommendations shall be of definite help in implementing the PCR, PoA Acts effectively. However the following recommendations shall be of much value for the purpose of bringing down the acquittal rate in the PCR and PoA Act cases and to protect the Dalits from all forms of exploitations on a permanent basis. In view of the fact that most of the police officials dealing with the PCR and PoA Act cases belong to the upper castes and they have not been able to win the confidence of the Dalits particularly of those in rural areas it is recommended that out of the total number of police officials directly dealing with the PCR/ PoA Act cases at least 50 per cent of them may be from the Dalits communities. More importantly as suggested by the ADGP (PCR) and most others of the two top PCR police officials, ADGP and IGP who presently manage the PCR /HR office of the

State, one should always be represented by either a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe officer to ensure just and fair treatment to the cases processed.

The police may be sensitized and the Dalits may be made aware of Section 12 of the PCR Act and Section 8 of the PoA Act which make the accused responsible for proving his/her innocence. Treating the close relatives and friends of the victim as interested witness has been one of the reasons for many cases ending in acquittal, as it had happened in more than one case of those examined in this study. Given the economic power and political and bureaucratic connections of the dominant castes (potential accused) it is obvious that none other than the close relatives and friends of the victims would dare antagonizing the accused dominant caste and coming forward to be witness for the victims. It is therefore recommended that the Honourable Court may recognize the close relatives and friends of the victims as their eligible witnesses.

There were instances in which the provisions of the PoA Act were violated within the Court by the Court staff themselves. It is therefore recommended that at least all the criminal offences reported under the PoA Act be tried in front of a qualified and committed two member Bench in which one member should be from either Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe preferably a Scheduled Caste woman. Despite the fact that the police had been found guilty of not producing the required witness in the Court by none other than the Magistrate and due to which many cases end in acquittal, there has hardly been any judgments punishing such police officials. Therefore it is hoped that the judiciary plays a proactive role pronouncing punishment against such police officials as per Section 4 of the PoA Act. As long as the Dalits live in villages in small numbers they will not be able to protect themselves from the atrocities and exploitations by the dominant castes, who are not only large in

number and politically well connected but also enjoy the support of fellow caste policemen who are in majority in the police force. It is therefore recommended that all the Dalit families living in those villages predominantly inhabited by the dominant caste may be shifted to other villages where their fellow caste members are in large numbers and where there is no or very limited scope for the dominant caste to discriminate and exploit them. The Government may help such families by buying whatever quantum of land they own and providing the same, if not more and better quality of land at newly settled place. Such an arrangement would permanently put an end to this otherwise perennial problem.

The proposed suggestion for separate settlement for the Dalits/ SCs is not something new. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made such a suggestion and also demanded the same through his Scheduled Caste Federation in resolution dated September 23, 1944. The conclusion of the present study merely reiterates the relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's demand. As far as possible, state should provide benefits, directly to the targeted people without permitting the middlemen to intervene in this regards. The government should relax the procedures for obtaining loan from various financial institutions so that, the Dalits beneficiaries would get the entire loan amount without the intervention of the middlemen or brokers. The state should make the officers liable when the amount reserved for Dalit development is not fully utilized by them for the development of Dalits. Because, in many departments, officers who are in-charge of these reserved funds are not utilizing it for the development of the Dalits rather the same money is being misused or returned to the government.

The government shall constitute a vigilance committee, which shall supervise and scrutinize various welfare programmes undertaken by different departments. This vigilance commission should be empowered to investigate the actual implementation of the governmental welfare programmes

and their actual utilization of the government welfare programmes and their actual utilization by the beneficiaries. It is also to be empowered with some quasi-judicial power to penalize those officers and beneficiaries who misuse these benefits and privileges conferred by the state consistent with the constitutional mandates. The government shall conduct periodic peace-meetings and other cultural programmes in various villages, allowing all sections of the society to participate in these programmes so that, it enables all people cutting across the caste barriers, to assemble and enjoy together the various cultural programmes, thereby a good atmosphere and environment can be created and unity and oneness can be brought among them.

In order to eradicate caste system from the society, the government shall punish those individuals who practice untouchability and instigate others to perpetuate caste prejudices not only in public places but also in private places. Then only we can establish an egalitarian society as contemplated in the preamble to the constitution of India. The state shall provide free and compulsory education for children belonging to Dalits up to matriculation as contemplated in the constitution. For this purpose, residential schools shall be established and all facilities are to be provided to them so that, when they complete their matriculation they will be in a position to compete with the other children more effectively and efficiently not only in education but also in government services. In due course, many of them do not require any governmental benefits given under the reservation policy.

The government shall keep a vigil over the actual utilization of benefits by the beneficiaries provided under various social welfare programmes. Once the beneficiaries misuses the benefits conferred to him, and then the government shall not provide him again any benefits under the reservation policy. This compels the beneficiaries to utilize the given

benefits. This compels the beneficiaries to utilize the given benefits properly for the purpose for which it is provided. Thereby he can improve his economic condition and overcome from his social disabilities. The above proposals are strictly to be followed by the state over a period of time, the ideals of the preamble to the constitutions of India can be achieved, *i.e.* equality of status and opportunity, social, economic and political justice. Therefore, there is an immediate need for the government to follow these proposals and suggestions to establish a casteless and classless society as required by the constitution of India.

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Caste Marginalization and Resistance: Case of Rajbanshis

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Abstract: Literally the term 'Rajbanshi' means the lineage of the king. But, in reality, the Rajbanshis have been placed in the bottom of the caste hierarchy and have often been victims of discrimination. In Bengal, the social status of the Rajbanshis was challenged, with adverse effects, after the influx of a large number of caste Hindu immigrants from other parts of India. Gradually, the immigrants emerged as the dominant group in the local society, both economically and politically. They successfully manned the local administration and, by virtue of their closeness to the administrative powers and their shrewdness, they also emerged as the dominant landholding class. As caste Hindus, they were guided by traditional Brahminical cultural values, and hence the Rajbanshis – who had a tradition and culture of their own – failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of the migrant newcomers. There were sharp dissimilarities between the cultural practice of these two groups, and the upper caste gentry treated the Rajbanshis as backward, uncultured and even *antyaj* (untouchable). In spite of having a numerical majority in several geographical settings, the Rajbanshis are now a largely impoverished ethnic community in the spheres of education, employment, and income and over-all development. Their despair and disappointment has found expression through popular agitations. Starting with a movement for regaining the lost social status of the Rajbanshi community in Hindu society, their movement gradually developed into a more hard-core or confrontational political movement aiming at separate statehood. This attempt at empowerment through political mobilisation, and the degree to which it has so far succeeded, is the main topic of this paper. In addition, the paper discusses in

detail how the demands raised, and the modes of agitation, changed over time.

Introduction

Recently a debate started amongst intelligentsia on the importance of caste in electoral process of West Bengal. Praskanva Sinharay (2012: 26) has argued that caste has never been influential category in the electoral politics in West Bengal and that the situation has now changed with the dramatic entry of the lower caste Matuas as a major vote conglomerate. Their success has surfaced the fact that West Bengal is not devoid of politics of caste. From colonial period, we see active participation of casteist groups in democratic politics. Various 'Namasudra' or lower caste groups had unified on caste lines and started politics for power. Other than, Matuas, for example, one can refer to political grouping of Rajbanshis on casteist line. But, before Matuas, the hegemonic domination of the urban-educate upper-caste gentry over the public life of Bengal never succumbed to the lower caste struggle. Now, the success of Matuas is no doubt working as impetus to other caste groupings and we can speculate about more politicization of caste in the democratic arena of West Bengal.

Democracy always gives space for divisional discontents. Cleavages got created on the basis on different parameters and different political parties formed to pursue problems of public. As caste remains one of the main reasons behind many kinds of difficulties, we see politicization of castes in many pockets of India. Caste domination and differentiation was present in Bengal also but got back-footed by the eruption of class politics instead of caste. However, some caste groups remained active in maintaining their separate identity in political space. Amongst them, one of the groups is Rajbanshi.

Rajbanshis are the indigenous people residing in the entire region of the erstwhile *Kamrup*, i.e. all the districts of North Bengal, the districts of Western Assam and the northern districts of Bangladesh. Researchers have debates on the origin of the Rajbanshis. Porter (1933: 473) says, "*Rajbanshis are the Hinduized Koches of Rangpur and Goalpara.*" According to G. A. Grierson (1969: 95), "*Those Koches, who are now Hindus, are principally known under the name of Rajbanshi. The Rajbansi dialect bears many close points of resemblance to the dialect of East Bengal.*" Gait (1901: xxxviii) describes the Rajbanshis of North Bengal, "*as a synonym of Koch, this represents a real caste and in this sense only it may be entered in the schedule.*" S. K. Chatterjee (1998: 60) argues, "*The masses of North Bengal areas are very largely of Bodo origin, or mixed Austric Dravidian-Mongoloid...or semi-Hinduized Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the northern dialect of Bengali. They are proud to call themselves as Rajbanshis and to claim to be called Kshatriyas.*" So, it is generally regarded that, the Rajbanshis were a purified group of the Koch (a semi-aboriginal tribe) who had undergone *Sanskritisation* and adopted Hindu manners and customs by abandoning some of their traditional cultural practices. But, after enduring neglect of being lower caste, Rajbanshis started movement for social upliftment and identity formation (Bhattacharyya, Moumita Ghosh 2009: 243).

Obviously identity formation is not a one day event. Often it got 'imagined' (Anderson: 1983) or 'invented' (Leslie and McGee: 2000) highlighting some identity marker. In the case of Rajbanshis, 'caste' became an identity marker. Here catalyst was modern political and social developments under British colonialism (Susan Bayly: 2004; Nicholas B. Dirks: 2003). The British Indian State has been twisted and mutilated caste in innumerable ways and it has also recognized significance of the caste system by way of accepting caste as the basis of socio-

cultural and economic standing of people as higher and lower. Gradually the existence of disjunction between status (ritual rank) and power became the hall-mark of caste (Louis Dumont: 1970). Thus caste as a system has been endangered as well as shaped and perpetuated by the colonial rulers.

Previously, caste was a dynamic, diverse and multidimensional reality of Indian society (K. L. Sharma: 1974). The origin of caste is hidden at the *Varna* system of Hindu religion. *Chatur Varna* – consisting *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra* – is a neat logical construct and the position of each *Varna* is fixed for all time. Every caste is liable to fit into this *Varna* model, but in which strata it should be fitted is not always rigid. Therefore, every caste tries to fit into this model in a way that can improve its ritual ranking, thereby making it its frame of reference for upward social mobility. But with the breakdown of the closed village economy and the rise of democratic politics, the competitive element embedded in caste has come to the fore. This has resulted in the collapse of the caste system but also in the rise of caste identities (Dipankar Gupta: 2005).

‘Identity’ always tries to segregate ‘I’ from ‘other’. Formation of caste identities followed the same path. System of caste enrollment in administrative set up was started by the Census. In the 1881 Census, profiles of over 400 ‘races’, ‘tribes’ and ‘stereotypes’ were presented in the context of caste. The 1901 Census ranked all castes in terms of specific Varna context. ‘Ritual distance’ was the main criterion of caste ranking in 1901 Census, and the “functions” performed by the caste system was accorded primacy in the 1931 Census (Census of India: 1881, Vol. I; Census of India: 1901, Vol. I, Part I; Census of India: 1931, Vol. I, Part III). Rajbanshis were included in the ‘*Tribal*’ or low-caste strata in the first Census report of 1872, 1891, 1901 and 1911. This downgraded their status officially. Therefore Rajbanshis had started *Kshatriyaisation movement* to elevate

their caste rankings by enrolling themselves into the *Kshatriya* or higher strata of the Census.

Initiation of Caste Conglomeration Due to Social Marginalization

Apparently this movement can be called as an effect of the social marginalization of the Rajbanshis both by Bengalis and British. Became conscious of their low position in the local caste hierarchy in the changing social milieu of this region, a section of the affluent and educated Rajbanshi intelligentsia including Haramahan Khajanchi and Harikishore Barma had started *Kshatriyaisation movement* in the beginning of the twentieth century. Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma (or 'Thakur Panchanan') institutionalized this movement by establishing *Kshatriya Samiti* at Rangpur (Bangladesh) in 1910. Very soon it acquired the status of a Central Association of the whole Rajbanshi community and *Kshatriyaisation movement* eventually acted as the base of the various ethno-political movements in North Bengal (Barma, Sukhbilas 2007: xii).

Here one can ask about the silence of the real *raja* (King) of Rajbanshis and reason for leadership by Panchanan Barma. According to local historians, with the marriage of King Nripendra Narayan with Suniti Devi (the daughter of *Brahma Samaj*-founder Keshab Chandra Sen), the Koch royal family drifted gradually away from the caste rigidity and caste-based identity. Moreover, they felt pride in introducing themselves as Koch (Debnath, Sailen 2007: 44). On the other hand, highly educated Panchanan Barma failed to secure any suitable job in his homeland, Cooch Behar, for the dominance of non-Rajbanshi people. So, being treated ignominiously, he jumped into the *Kshatriyaisation movement* already begun by predecessors, like Haramahan Khajanchi and Harikishore Barma.

To achieve their declared objectives, *Kshatriya Samiti* took three-fold activities. With the help of the relevant clues from the *Vedic Shastras* and support of *Brahmin Pandits* from Kashi, Nabadwip, Methila, Kamrup etc., Thakur Panchanan cited different code of laws which reinforced their *Kshatriya* origin and legitimized the elevation of their ritual status into *Kshatriyas* (Barman, Upendranath: 1979). With the help of local histories, he showed that after establishing *Koch* kingdom, the Koch ruler Biswa Sinha with his people had 'apostatized to Hinduism took the title 'Rajbanshi' (Debnath, Sailen 2008: 42). Astute Brahmins christened him as 'Biswas Singha' and ascribed to him the *Kshatriya* status (Dalton, Edward Tuite 1960: 89). In fact, before the British rule, the warrior-ruler model of the *Kshatriya* remained the most popular and practicable model for social mobility and cultural assimilation for ambitious people of lower castes and tribal. So *Kshatriyaisation* was initiated in the tribal areas in order to strengthen their legitimization as Hindu rajas in their own society and to broaden the basis of their economic and political power. In other words, it was a calculated move on the part of the tribal mobility to further their material interests strong *Kshatriyaisation*. However, in this process, affluent sections of the Koches later on, particularly in the late sixteenth century, started abandoning their impure tribal practices radically and adopted the manners and customs of the Hindus and assumed the name 'Rajbanshi' to distinguish themselves from their more plebeian brethren. They, thus, wanted to be regarded as a separate caste and socially superior to the Koches. While in 1891, through '*Rangpur Vratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Vidhayani Sabha*', the Rajbanshis described themselves as '*Vratya Kshatriya*', from 1911 they began to claim pure *Kshatriya* status.

To intensively their demand, *Kshatriya Samiti* incorporated Brahmanical values and practices for a purified social image, which was legitimized by priests, genealogists and

pundits (Ghosh Bhattacharyya, Moumita 2009: 246). Moreover, in order to gratify their ritual rank aspiration, they began to imitate the values, practices and cultural styles of “twice born” castes that formed a part of Hindu great tradition. Since 1912, a number of *Milan Kshetras* (mass thread wearing ceremonies) were organized in different Rajbanshi-dominated districts.

They also brought out a monthly journal called ‘*Kshatriya*’, in which many provocative writings were published against the Bengali upper-caste hegemony and advised the community members to sever all socio-political ties with these castes. Even the intellectual sections henceforth discontinued their association with the literary organizations of Bengalis.

Thus, according to I. Sarkar (2006) such social uplift movement organized by the *Kshatriya Samiti* not only consolidated caste solidarity among the common Rajbanshis but also created consciousness of a separate identity among the educated youth of the community in particular. But, Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay (2009: 484) thinks that, the movement got confined into a particular section of the Rajbanshis, who were mainly land-owners, jotedars and autochthonic population. The leaders of the *Kshatriya* movement were equal to other caste Hindu Bhadrals in matters of education, profession, dress and manners. So, the rural poor, who constituted the bulk of the Rajbanshi peasantry, were unable to identify themselves fully with those people of their community who belong to the high strata of the society. Thus the class solidarity of the *Samiti* got fractured under the weight of class contradictions, and ultimately the *Samiti* failed to crystallize a distinct ‘social identity’ for the Rajbanshis.

The leaders of the *Samiti*, however, later realized that just adoption of the sacred thread and upper-caste practices could not help in raising the social status of the Rajbanshi masses whose economic condition was extremely bad. Then they

started looking for being accommodated in the government-approved institutional arrangement of 'protective discrimination', especially in matters of education and employment. To avail this, they were ultimately granted '*Scheduled Caste*' status in Bengal. Therefore, the social movement of the Rajbanshis, which initially began for achieving a superior status in the caste hierarchy, was ultimately reduced to a mere real politic.

Politicization of Caste

In the meantime, with the initiation of the representative democratic politics in India, local leaders turned politicians started to mobilize caste groupings in order to organize their power (Rajni Kothari: 1970). In making politics their sphere of activity, caste groups on the other hand get a chance to assert their identity and to strive for positions. So, since the 1920, castes have organized themselves to obtain representation in the provincial legislatures and this had resulted in '*horizontal stretch*' of caste (M. N. Srinivas: 2003).

Rajbanshi intelligentsia also did not delay. Though the *Kshatriya Samiti* started its way mainly as a social organization, but from the second decade of the twentieth century, it began to partake in national politics. The *Samiti* gave candidates in all the four elections held in Bengal Legislative Council from 1920 to 1929 under 1919 Act and achieved striking electoral success. The elected candidates formed the '*Independent Scheduled Caste Party*' in 1938 along with Scheduled Caste representatives of East Bengal. The *Samiti* placed their candidates against the all-India party candidates because they considered the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) as associations of the upper-caste Hindus. The candidates of the *Kshatriya Samiti* won in the Assembly election of 1937 and 1946 against the candidates of the Congress and Communists. From the election results, it got proved that *Kshatriyaisation movement*

had considerable influence on the political life of Jalpaiguri and its neighbouring districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. But, against the background of the constitutional negotiations continuing since the appointment of the Simon Commission, the *Kshatriyaisation movement* became involved in the issue of political and economic reforms and improvement of ritual and social status was given the back seat. Later on this movement dried up with the death of Panchanan Barma in 1935 and merger of its leaders with Congress and mainstream politics.

With changing scenario of politics, Rajbanshi King of Cooch Behar also forced to make a people-representative party to assemble 'his' people in 'his' favour. In 1942, Cooch Behar Legislative Council was formed in response to the persistent clamour for responsible government in the princely states throughout the country. According to local historians, King's administration was so long run by the educated, non-Rajbanshi, upper-caste Hindus and there was no Rajbanshis although the king himself was belonged to their caste (Dakua, Dinesh Chandra in Sukhbilas Barma 2007: 54). But, after contesting election primarily on the issue of awareness and rights of the Rajbanshi people and winning all the seats, aspirations of the Rajbanshi elected members got a big fillip. The participation in administration through this democratic medium raised hope amongst the commoners that *deshi* (indigenous) people can be able to capture the power of administration at last and they can achieve the ultimate goal of being administered by themselves. So they started movement against the *Bhatias* (outsiders) under the banner of *Hitasadhani Sabha*.

According to some historians, *Hitasadhani Sabha* was established in 1918 for the *Hita* (welfare) of the *deshi* (indigenous) people of Cooch Behar (Varman, Lalit Chandra 2008: 85). But this student-oriented party was banned by Prince Nityendra Narayan in 1921. Again its presence was felt in a

historic meeting of 19th May 1946 in Cooch Behar. According to local historians, in a princely state of around five lakh people, this meeting was attended by around two lakh public (Barman, Prasenjit in Sukhbilas Barma 2007: 73). The communications were not so developed at that period. Still the people came by bullock's carts or on buffaloes, by bicycles and on foot. Rajbanshi Hindu and Muslim elites and jotedars - like Satish Chandra Singha Roy, Khan Chaudhury Amanatulla, Gajendra Narayan Basunia narrated the aim of the party as the *Hita* (welfare) of *deshi* (indigenous) people. However, in 26th July, 1948, Radhakanta Sarkar wrote about *Hitasadhani Sabha* that - '*...a most reactionary group has been formed, formulated and patronized by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, to serve his own personal purpose of dominating and ruling the people for his own exploitation to the detriment of the interest*'. So, how much '*Hita*' was done - cannot be determined. But, this *Sabha* was carried on their demand for democratic representation by local representatives and all-round development of Cooch Behar.

Without going to the debate on the 'real' purpose of these groups like *Kshatriya Samiti* or *Hitasadhani Sabha*, it can be clearly say that Rajbanshis got identity-conscious to some extent by socio-political marginalization of the upper-caste Hindus and forced to unify themselves on casteist lines and this 'mass' get politicized soon. Starting from a pure social demand of upliftment in caste strata, the Rajbanshis ultimately demanded a separate state for themselves in post colonial period.

Politics for Separate State

At the dawn of independence when all were in dilemma about the political future of Cooch Behar kingdom, *Hitasadhani Sabha* along with *Independent Scheduled Caste Party* raised the first demand of a separate homeland for Rajbanshi community, '*Rajar-sthan*' (abode of king), comprised of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur districts of Bengal, Purnia district of Bihar,

Goalpara district of Assam, certain portions of Rangpur and Darjeeling, and Cooch Behar kingdom (Ghosh, Ananda Gopal). This demand was popularized by the-then Central Minister Jogendra Nath Mandal in the mass meeting in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur in 4th, 6th and 7th May, 1947. After India's independence in 15th August 1947, *Hitasadhani Sabha* took the name of *Cooch Behar State Praja Congress* and demanded for the proclamation of '*Cooch Behar*' as a separate state or keeping it under the Central Government of Indian Dominion. But neglecting all this public demands, ultimately Government of India decided to merge Cooch Behar with West Bengal as a mere 'district'. Other Rajbanshi-dominated areas assimilated with Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and Indian states like West Bengal and Assam.

In immediate protest of this assimilation, the representatives of *Cooch Behar State Praja Congress* - along with *Jalpaiguri Gorkha League*, *Darjeeling Gorkha League*, and *Sikkim Praja Sammelon* - assembled at Darjeeling on 30th October 1949 and called for a separate state, *Uttarakhand Pradesh Sangha*. But their demand was again looked down by both Centre and State Government and the movement gradually dried up.

Under Bengali-hegemonic rule of West Bengal Government, marginalization of the Rajbanshis continues. Social status of the Rajbanshi's was challenged with the influx of a large number of caste-Hindu immigrants with a strong awareness to casteism. In spite of all efforts, Rajbanshi's failed to alleviate in caste strata. They faced humiliation and objectionable identification by the caste Hindus, who started interacting with the indigenous Rajbanshis in differential terms. For example, Nagendranath Basu mentioned 'Rajbanshis' as *Mlechha* (barbarians) in '*Vishwakosh*' (World Encyclopedia) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in *Bongo Darshan* moots that the Koch identity cannot be synonymous with Bengali Hindu identity.

Rajbanshis were even denied entry into the temple of *Jagannath Puri* by a Government Act in 1911 and separate student hostels were established to board and lodge the Rajbanshi students.

Partition of India in 1947 and Pakistan in 1971 led more population influx in Rajbanshi-dominated areas. Actually the population of this area became double within a very short period. Out of total population of 10, 19, 806 of Cooch Behar in 1961 Census, 2, 98, 000 were born outside the district, of which 2, 52, 000 born in East Pakistan. Similarly, out of population of 13, 59, 292 of Jalpaiguri in 1961 Census, 4, 54, 177 were born outside the district of which 2, 18, 341 were born in East Pakistan (Das, Naren in Sukhbilas Barma 2007: 138). According to official statistical data, in 1971, total 1, 159, 000 migrants settled in North Bengal. Except this official statistics, there remains innumerable number of Bangladeshis, who crossed the border and permanently settled in these areas. After 1971, a fresh wave of displaced persons came to North Bengal due to the turmoil in new-born Bangladesh. According to the Census of 1981, 14.4 lakh displaced persons came in between 1971 – 1981 and 6, 75, 195 permanently settled in West Bengal (See Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Migrant Population in North Bengal by District

District	Number of Migrants from East Bengal
1. Darjeeling	48, 000
2. Jalpaiguri	2, 49, 000
3. Cooch Behar	4, 42, 000
4. West Dinajpur	2, 92, 500
5. Malda	1, 27, 500
Total in North Bengal	1, 159, 000

Source: *Census of India 1971*

In colonial period, Rajbanshis were majority in the area. This help in strengthening their power in democratic politics. During 1951 - 1981, in spite of the steady decline in their proportion of the total population, they remained dominant group in North Bengal. In 1951, out of total 3, 689, 109 persons of North Bengal, Rajbanshis constituted 14.32 percent (total 5, 28, 456 persons). In 1981, although the ratio of Rajbanshis to the total population increased from 14.32 percent to 18.46 percent, their proportion to total Scheduled Caste population was decreased from 67 percent in 1951 to 62 percent. From 1951 - 1981, the largest concentration of Rajbanshis found in two districts of North Bengal, i. e. Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. In 1981, these two districts share 70.45 percent of the total Rajbanshi population of North Bengal. About 21 percent of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal were the inhabitants of West Dinajpur district. In the remaining two districts, viz. Malda and Darjeeling, the corresponding share was 4 - 5 percent. In spite of the lesser increase of the number of the Rajbanshis, the colossal increase of the total population the North Bengal clearly proves the overflow of migration. This ushers marginality of the Rajbanshis, and ultimately paves way for collective mobilization (See Table 2).

The greatest threat of migration on the Rajbanshis is land alienation. Since the Rajbanshis were early settler in the region, it is this community that actually owned and tilled the land. A good number of them were *jotedars* (landowners) or some other form of sub tenants, and the remaining were *adhiars*. Studies show that till the end of the nineteenth century, Rajbanshi families controlled about 53 percent of *jotes* (land), and thereby remained a powerful force among the rural elites. But inability of proper understanding of the *Izaradari* system in British rule and due to their failure to pay revenue, many medium and small *jotedars* lost their *jotes* to the state after 1932. In 1932, *Regency Council* identified 5000 to 6000 *jotes* of Cooch

Behar in the list of revenue defaulters, and later declared their land as *khas land* (ownership vested in the government). This led to the pauperization of many old *jotedars*.

Table 2: Distribution of Rajbangshi (R) Population in North Bengal

Area	1951				1981			
	Total Population	Total Rajbangshis (R)	% of the R to the Total Population	% of the R to the Total R	Total Population	Total Rajbangshis	% of the R to the Total Population	% of the R to the Total R
1. Cooch Behar	671158	252069	40.15	47.70	1771643	714221	40.31	40.96
2. Jalpaiguri	914538	172710	25.71	2.68	2214871	514177	23.21	29.49
3. West Dinajpur	720573	67489	9.37	12.78	2404947	369015	15.34	21.16
4. Malda	937580	20294	2.16	3.84	201871	83462	4.10	4.79
5. Darjeeling	445260	15894	3.57	3.00	1024269	62770	6.12	3.60
North Bengal	3689109	528456	14.32	100.00	9447601	1743645	18.46	100.00

Source: Mukhopadhyay, Rajatubhra (1997), *The Rajbangshis of North Bengal: A Demographic Profile, 1951-81*, North Bengal University Review (Humanities and Social Sciences), p. 26

In post-independence period, due to population influx, the pressure on land increased. In the absence of 'alternative' avenues of work, the immigrants had swollen the ranks of share croppers. Gradually, land passed from the Rajbangshis into the hands of merchants and moneylenders like the Marwaris, up-countrymen, Kabulis and many middle-class Bengali migrants. According to one source, land was acquired cheap, at the rate of Rs. 80 or Rs. 100 a *bigha* (a unit of land). This is one of the major sources of resentment among the landed Rajbangshis. But,

successive governments of West Bengal paid more attention to the settlement of the refugees rather to the question of land alienation of Rajbanshis. Implementation of *Ceiling Act* rigorously, growth of the urban centers and projects like the Teesta Barrage (which is still under construction) had left a large chunk of the Rajbanshis landless and transformed them from land owning peasants to wage labour proletariats

Along with land alienation, Rajbanshis faced cultural hegemony of Bengalis. Most importantly, indigenous language of Rajbanshis, *Kamtapuri* got neglected with the gradual *Bengalisation* of the area. So, in every manifesto of Rajbanshi groups, we find demand for recognition of their language. In fact, language is not only an ingredient of cultural identity, but also a gate pass in the commercial career. As *Bengali* is the official language of West Bengal, it is compulsory in educational and governmental institutions. So, the mother tongue of Rajbanshis, *Kamtapuri* got neglected even in the land of its people. The West Bengal Government and the majority of the Bengali linguistics are not even ready to accept this language as a separate language. But, *Kamtapuri* is not definitely a dialect of *Bengali*; rather, it historically preceded the Bengali language. *Kamtapuri* is a dialect of *Kamrup* and *Kamata* kingdom. It was referred in different ancient literatures in different names - like *Rajbanshi*, *Kamrupi*, *Kamtabihari* and *Kamtapuri*. We can find its reference in the '*Linguistic Survey of India*' (1967: 153), "*When we cross the river (Brahmaputra) coming from Dacca, we meet a well marked form of speech in Rangpur and the districts to its north and east. It is called Rajbanshi, and while undoubtedly belonging to the eastern branch has still points of difference which lead us to class it as a separate dialect.*" We can found different kinds of literature on *Kamtapuri* language - like '*Kamteswar Kulkarika*', written by Rup Narayan Shrutidhar; '*Uttor Banglar Lok Sahitya O Bhasa*', written by Dharmanarayan Sarkar; and '*Kamta Jana Jiban Katha*', written by Arun Maitra. As a distinct language, *Kamtapuri*

developed on independent line with own alphabets and grammar. But, in spite of that it is always neglected as a separate language. So, for its preservation and popularization, one of the most important demands of the Rajbanshi activists is the recognition of *Kamtapuri* language as a medium at educational and governmental institutions and inclusion of this language in the *Eighth Schedule* of Indian Constitution.

The socio-economic and cultural marginalization of the Rajbanshis aggravates with the relative deprivation of their region, North Bengal. Although there we can see extreme variation in terms of economic as well as human development, everybody - including existing government - acknowledge basic backwardness of North Bengal (K Singh Roy, Debal 2004: 227). In the first Human Development Report (Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal 2004: 198), it was clearly written that - a major aspect of lack of development of this area is inadequate infrastructure development - which includes transport, communications, energy, and buildings for health and educational institutions.

The marginalization and pauperization of the indigenous Rajbanshis coupled with the indifferent attitude of the State Government in over-all development of their area had phoenix-rise of *Uttar Khand* movement. According to some sources, on 31st May 1969, a group of educated youth members of the then *Kshatriya Samiti* proposed first to build *Uttar Khand Dal* to deal with the overall development of North Bengal (Ray, Haripada in Sukhbilas Barma 2007: 112). So, on 5th July 1969, the successors of the *Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti* - viz. Panchanan Mallick, Harimohan Barman, Kalidranath Barman, Wazuddin Ahmed, Soma Oraon, Sitanath Roy and Jogendranath Bhattacharya - formed this *Dal* (Party) to convince the government in taking proper steps for the socio-economic and infrastructural development of North Bengal and maintenance of the linguistic

and cultural solidarity of the Scheduled Caste and Tribes (The Charter of Demands of the Uttar Khand Dal: 1969). To pursue their demands in democratic way, *Uttar Khand Dal* contested elections in different legislative seats of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. But, in spite of assiduous efforts, they got defeated in electoral politics mainly due to lack of funds and steady dwindling in number.

Finding no relief for the grievances of the people of the North Bengal given by Kolkata-based state leadership, the *Uttar Khand Dal* ultimately gave a general call on 22nd June 1980 for a separate state, *Kamtapur*, comprising five districts of West Bengal – viz. Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. This time their demands aimed at socio-economic upliftment and cultural solidarity of the ‘sons of the soil’ (The Charter of Demands of the Uttar Khand Dal: 1989).

But state government termed all burgeoning demands for separate statehood as ‘secessionist’ activity and took repressive measures instead of dialogue or development. While commenting on the repressive attitude of the state government, Atul Roy (President of *Kamtapur Progressive Party*) remarked –

‘Atrocity is the weapon of Left Front... CPI (M) opposed most of the mobilizations organized by KPP... Even their placards, posters, microphones etc. are forcefully snatched away by the police and CPI (M) workers... The police had launched a terror campaign against the Kamtapuris and more than two thousands of KPP supporters had faced police harassment since 1996... The police were wrongly identifying them as terrorists... The KPP workers and even innocent Rajbanshis were being humiliated and tortured by the police... The armed forces had shot dead many of its leaders in fake encounters ... the state government would be committing a mistake if it would try to tackle the movement as law and order problem... Their

coercive measures cannot stop the movement....' (Excerpt of an interview with the author)

But according to *Kamtapuris*, '*Kamtapur*', with an area of 8, 384 square kilometers would be much greater than many Union Territories of India from the point of view of area, population and natural resources. In justification of their movement, they exemplified the creation of several states – like Maharashtra, Gujrat, Nagaland, Haryana, Meghalaya and Andhra Pradesh – according to language and culture. Moreover, demand of a new state in democratic way is legal and legitimate as a new state can be created constitutionally under Article 3 of the Indian Constitution.

But, never Rajbanshi candidates of Rajbanshi-led groups succeed to get victory in assembly or parliamentary elections. That's why they seldom comes in the news headlines of the mainstream media or succeed to pressurize the democratic government. Internal cleavages amongst Rajbanshis also weakened their movement. For example, On 21st Oct 1986, *Uttar Khand Dal* renamed as *Kamtapur Gana Parishad* under the leadership of Panchanan Mallick. Again on 7th January 1996, two members of *Kamtapur Gana Parishad*, Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy, formed *Kamtapur People's Party* '*to agitate peacefully in democratic way for the creation of the Kamtapur state*' (Halder, Ipsita 2000). Again in 2003 *Kamtapur People's Party* got bifurcate by Atul Roy to form another party, *Kamtapur Progressive Party*. Many Frontal organizations formed - like *All Kamtapur Students Union* (formed in August 1994), *Kamtapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad* (formed in 1997) and *Kamtapur Women's Rights Forum* (formed in 1998). Armed group, *Kamtapur Liberation Organisation* was set up in 1993 (K Jana, Arun 2011: 117). On 9th September 1998, *Greater Cooch Behar People's Association* (GCPA) formed and, in 26th December 2000, it spearheaded demand of a separate state, *Greater Cooch Behar*,

comprising areas of preset 'Cooch Behar' along with the parts of South and North Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Assam (As shown in the Map of *Greater Cooch Behar* at their party spokesman, *Taroyal*).

Thus politicization of caste ended with politics for separatism. Intension of social upliftment turned into economic and cultural claims. Economic upliftment and cultural solidarity prevails in the minds of the party leaders of the Rajbanshi communities and the caste question itself got marginalized. However, we can call it a social movement as it had three distinct features - collective mobilization, ideology, and orientation to change. It is difficult to ascertain how far it appealed to the people whom they sought to mobilize, and how successful the movement was, but the defeat of different Rajbanshi-led party candidates in the democratic elections by a great margin indicates that the movement failed to evoke a strong response from the so-called '*sons of the soil*' in the region. Language and culture did not appeal to all the member of the Rajbanshi communities. It is now known that in their prime, the activities of the movement were fluid, and were restricted to mobilization through rallies and a large number of group meetings in villages and towns of North Bengal.

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Role of Social Reformers for the Empowerment of Dalits

Dr. Madhuri Mandlik

Role of Social Reformers for the Empowerment of Dalits

As impact of western knowledge and the introduction of the new principle as those of democracy, individual liberty, equality before law, human rights etc, the 19th Century became a century of enlightenment. The English education made them aware of their abilities and equally made them critical about their evil socio-religious system. At the same time the Christian missionaries not only established the English schools but also criticized their irrational socio-religious practices. The reformers were influenced by the principle of the missionaries that in the eyes of God everyone is equal. And therefore the doors of their religion were open to all irrespective of any caste or creed. The missionaries were always eager to accept any person from any caste, whether Brahman or Untouchable into the fold of Christianity. Rosalind O'hanlon author of "Caste, Conflict and Ideology, Mahatma Jotirao Phule and low caste protest in nineteenth-Century India" writes that missionary model was accepted by all the reformers, "In almost all of the public exchanges between missionaries, reformers and, and the orthodox, the criteria for religious rectitude that were applied to the relationship between religious texts, and current practices and beliefs, were drawn from an essentially Christian model".¹ The members of the first society of social reform were educated from the missionary schools and most of the reformers including Mahatma Phule were too educated from mission schools. Even at the early of 20th Century Sayajirao Maharaj accepts their great services for the emancipation of the depressed classes. In his words, "The missionaries have done great service in their care of

the depressed and in teaching the value of manual, in which most of the people are engaged”²

The Social Reformers in 19th Century particularly in Maharashtra began to criticize caste system. As a result of English Education there arose a series of Social Reformers in Maharashtra. These reformers were English educated. Blind religious faith and evil socio religious customs were their first concern. But in later part they also realize the evils of caste system. Most of them were Brahmans and beyond criticism through their writings they were unable to do anything to end the caste system. Removal of the evils of untouchability was not their first concern.

Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1814-1882): He was teacher in the Elphinstone Institute and later in the English School at Surat. He was among the early reformers of Maharashtra. With the cooperation of other intellectuals he established ‘Manavdharm Sabha’ on 22nd June, 1844 at Surat. The members of the Sabha were against idol worship. They had also strongly opposed the caste system prevailing in the Hindu religion. But it could not gain support of society and this institution was dissolved.

Early in the 19th Century it was not possible to criticize socio-religious customs and traditions. Therefore the first attempt to eradicate the evil social traditions in Maharashtra was the foundation of a secret society. A secret society ‘Paramhansa Mandli’ was founded by Dadoba Pandurang and the Reformers in Bombay in about 1840. One of the aims of the founders of the society was to end caste bias. A friend of Baba Padmji writes in a letter about the objectives of the ‘Paramhansa Mandli’, “The objects were the introduction of remarriages of widows amongst those classes of the Hindus who were not allowed to remarry, the abolition of the system of caste and the worship of the one God, the supreme Governor and Ruler of the

Universe. The meeting always commence with prayers".³ But this attempt to reach to their goal could not be fulfilled at that time. The society broke up within few years. Thus 'Paramhansa Mandli' was the first society which launched secret movement to eradicate social evils, including caste system of the Hindus.

Lokhitwadi (1823-1892): The first social reformer Gopal Hari Deshmukh, who vehemently attacked on the proud status of the Brahmans and the caste system, had to cover his identity by nick name Lokhitwadi. For many years he was not known to the society, because his aim was reform the society for their better life. During the initial years of his writings if his name would have exposed to the orthodox leaders he would have been severely punished for his thoughts. In the mid of 19th Century he had began to criticize the caste system and wrote thought storming references of ancient times. He tried to show that caste system was not so rigid and there were opportunities for the Shudras to reach to the status of high class. His writings were directly appeal to the Brahmins.

Lokhitwadi had his own research in the Hindu Dharmshtras. He published thought provoking articles, "Shatpatre" in the periodical 'Prabhakar' during the years of 1848-1850. 'According to him the Smruti Dharmshtra recommends the rule for the caste or Varnas, should be based on the birth of a person. But such rule must have not existed before and even discarded in the subsequent years, because there are number of examples that shows that the Varana or caste were changeable. As sage Valmiki in his early life was belongs to Koli (caste/Shudra) but later became a sage. King Gadhi was a Khsatriya but later he became a Brahman. Parashar married to a Shudra woman. King Harishchandra had accepted to work as a Mahar (untouchable). There are several examples in the Puranas of the Brahmans later who became Kshatriyas. Thus it was the

custom of ancient India. So the best path is that the thought of caste or Varna should be based on Karma (profession).⁴

Lokhitwadi had firm belief that ‘the Brahman, whose thoughts and deeds are more degraded than the Shudras, he is not a Brahman. If this principle not followed then many those who are not liable to call as Brahmans and many those who are practically Brahmans by their deeds would be covered under the name Shudras.’⁵ He also shows the example of Ravana that Ravana was a son of Brahman but he was cruel and therefore was a demon. He writes ‘at present age no one is a Brahman. All are like beggars. They are lazy no one wants to work. They are not useful for the society. They exploit the people in the name of religion. In ancient times the Brahmans were holy and always worked for the religious reform and therefore even the kings did not dared to disobey their orders’.⁶

In the article, ‘Varnavichar’, he writes that ‘the Brahmans are very proud of their caste....But no one should be proud of their higher caste. Caste meant profession. He refers to saint Tukaram in this regard. Those who believes in caste prejudices are fool’.⁷

In 1877 Lokhitwadi published a book on caste discrimination, entitled, “Jatibhed”. Thus a writing and publication of a separate book on caste issues indicates that he had special regards for the removal of caste prejudices.

His thoughts were brain storming to all sections of the Hindu society in Maharashtra.

Mahatma Phule Most of the Hindu reformers and scholars of the days were Brahmans but Mahatma Phule was exception to them. He had experiences of being an untouchable. He was aware of the fact that human rights or the natural rights, were denied to them. He was deeply influenced by the humanitarian works of the Christian missionaries. He saw that in the eyes of

the missionaries and their religion, there was no discrimination based on caste. At the same time he saw that the Vedic Hindu religion was the monopoly of the Brahmans only. The Shudras and the (ati Shudras, the Mahars and Mangs) untouchables were the slaves of the Hindu social and religious system. He realized that knowledge was the only key to lose the bondage of the slavery. To relieve them from the Slavery and to enlighten them about their condition and for their empowerment in 1852, he founded a school in Pune. He informs about it to the Hunter commission, "A year after the institution of the female schools, I also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Two more schools for these classes were subsequently added."⁸

In 1873 he founded 'Satyashodhak Samaj' (Truth Seeking Society), to impart the religious knowledge to the Shudras to relieve them from the burden of Brahmanical selfish religious customs. "The principal objective of the foundation of Satyashodhak Samaj was the liberation of Shudras and Atishudras from the religious slavery of the Brahmanical religious system."⁹ Mahatma Phule, in about 1873, had become confident, that the Shudras will overthrow the burden of the social slavery. In 'Gulamgiri' he writes, "This is even true at the present time. While the Sudra on the other hand is so far reconciled to the Brahman yoke, that like the American slave he would resist any attempt that may be made for his deliverance and fight even against his benefactor".¹⁰ During the last phase of his life Mahatma also wrote a text of religion for the Dalits "Sarvajanic Satya Dharm Pustak". He had sacrificed his life for the sake of the downtrodden. He made every effort throughout his life for the enlightenment and empowerment of the Dalits. Therefore he is the first Mahatma of Modern India and Father of Dalit Movement.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) Swamiji had revolted against the traditional, Brahmanical orthodox Hindu religious and social system. He had explained that the Vedas did not recommend caste system based on birth but on professions. The caste system was based on birth and not on the profession of a person or community. He opposed such social system because it was not recommended by the Vedas. To him the Vedas were 'Apaarushey' meant not composed by human being but a creation of God. 'He explains in his 'Satyarth Prakash', that God is not in idol, God is formless and therefore discard the theory of creation of Brahmans from the God's mouth and Shudras from his legs.'¹¹ 'Those who born in the Shudra family but whose behavior and profession is noble he should be counted as Brahman or Kshatriya or Vaishya according to his quality of profession. Those who born as Brahman and work degraded him become Shudra. Thus social divisions of Brahaman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra are based on quality/*gun*'¹² Mahatma Phule, the Martin Luther of India, though did not agreed that the Vedas are the only source of true knowledge, was impressed by Swamiji's religious reform ideas. Vishnushatri's 'Nibandhmala' in his topic 'Vakrutva' informs us that he attended his sermons at Pune and had accompanied Justice Ranade, and other reformers and provided security to him against the orthodox Pandits of Pune in 1875. Thus Swamiji was a Brahman by birth and moreover a monk, his rebellious thoughts surly gave new thoughts on the basis of the Vedas. The orthodox had no courage to challenge his ideas.

Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde (1873-1944) He had completed his law degree from Mumbai and here he came into contact with Prathana Samaj and impressed by its ideas and reform mission. With help of the Samaj he went to England for higher studies. After returning from England he rejected all the offers of honours and undertook the work for the upliftment of untouchables.

For the spread of education among them he on 18th October, 1906, founded 'Depressed Classes Mission' at Mumbai. The main aims and objectives of the organization were: 1) To spread education in the untouchable society 2) To create and make available job opportunities to the untouchables 3) To give them proper instruction about true religion. Accordingly Maharshi Shinde opened boarding houses and schools for the education of the Dalit students. In 1918 he organized the All India Untouchability removal Conference at Bombay and tried to attract the attention of the national leaders to the problems of the Dalits. The Conference was attended by national leaders like those of Lokmanya Tilak, Sayaji rao Gaikwad and other. Thus Maharshi sacrificed his whole life in valuable social service.

Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur (1874-1922) After the incident of Vedokta controversy of 1899 Maharaja of Kolhapur Shahu was deeply impressed by Mahatma Phule's thinking and literature. He realized the problems of the untouchables. The servant priests of the Maharaja refused to recognize him as Khastriya. The orthodox Pandits of the time believed that in the Kali Age there were only two castes one was Brahman and second was Shudra. In their eyes even king of the time was a Shudra, if he was not a Brahman. This insult set him thinking about the caste system and about the status of the Untouchables.

He was king of Kolhapur state and therefore he could implement the reform regulation expected by Mahatma Phule for the empowerment of the Shudras.

In 1902, the Maharaj, requested to the British Government for the reservation of 50 percent offices in his state for the backward classes. In his own palace he had appointed non Brahmans for the administrative responsibilities. Then he started to remove the meddling of the Brahman priests in religious functions. He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj at Karveer to popularize his ideas. In 1912, the Samaj issued a

booklet entitled 'Gharcha Purohit' (House priest) and few Pamphlets to remove the influences of the Brahman priests. And about two hundred marriages were celebrated without Brahman priest. He also founded a school for the religious instructions for the non-Brahmins. His most important achievement was the foundation of number of schools and hostels for education of the students of untouchables. He also provided financial assistance of educational institutions like those of Fergusson College of Pune. Like Sayajirao Maharaja he also awarded scholarship to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for higher Education in England. His achievement was also appreciated by Sayajirao Maharaja. Sayajirao in his speech says, "By what signs shall we know that a ruler has deserved well of his people and of his country? Surely by his efforts for the improvement of the people committed to his care and guidance, by his deeds. Assuredly the Chhatrapati has given of his best for his people. To refer to but one side of his activities, most important as that is - for the education, and consequent elevation of his subjects, he has provided schools, and is contemplating the introduction of a system of free and compulsory education; while for the Antyajas whose condition presents a fundamentally urgent problem for the solution of which no effort should be neglected, he is opening hostels and importing teachers. In these, as in very many other directions, His highness has shown a statesman-like attitude, full of promise, and deserving of the highest praise."¹³ Thus Chhatrapati's major contribution was his ceaseless efforts towards the abolition of slavery in his state. He continued the mission commenced by Mahatma Phule. His thoughts and mission inspired the intellectual and social reformers of Maharashtra.

Lokmanya Tilak: (1856-1920) the leader of orthodox Pandits, did not believe there would be end of caste system. In 1893 he had written an article entitled, "Jatibhed" (caste discrimination), in which he has described the details of origin of the caste

system. According to him, all the ancient civilizations, of Greece, Yahudis, Egyptian Persian have been destroyed and in place of it there was rise of new countries of Europe and therefore no remains of caste system. If compares with these countries, India is the most ancient and therefore the caste system is a part of social system. He believed in theory of Aryan invasion of India and introduction of caste system.

He believed that it was not possible to bring the end of caste system. Therefore he recommended that instead of waiting for the end of caste system, that caste wise professions and industries should be improved. 'Though it is not possible to end caste stratification but it is possible to end the hate rate against the lower caste'.¹⁴

Lok. Tilak had no optimistic views about the end of caste system. On the issue of superiority of the Brahmans in religious matters he came into conflict with Shahu Maharaj of Kolahapur. On this issue he explained the Hindu Dharmshatras to the Maharaja.¹⁵

When he realized that the Hindu social reform movement was divided into Brahman and non Brahman category, and it was dangerous for the Swarajya, he changed his views little. He said, "After the years passed there would be end of differences regarding the education between the Brahmans and the non Brahmans. But till then no one should hate each other based on caste but should make difference between educated and uneducated."¹⁶ His opposition to the social reform and orthodox ideas provoked social reformers like Shahu Maharaj to work more actively for the empowerment of the Dalits.

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda (1863-1939)
Sayajirao Gaikwad the Maharaja of Baroda state was a social reformer and in his capacity he had introduced several reform

regulations regarding removal of untouchability, remarriages of the widows, inter caste marriages etc. He was also eager to work for the emancipation of the untouchables and aware of the need for the work. "The problem of ameliorating the social status and standard of living among the Atishudras or "Untouchables" of India is one that indeed calls for rare courage, breadth and freshness of mind."¹⁷ For his appreciation and support for the movement he was chosen as President of the All India Conference on the abolition of Untouchability at Bombay on the 23rd of March 1918, by the social reformers of Maharashtra. In this conference he explained his aspect about the empowerment of the Dalits in all over India. He thought that mere enactment for the abolition of untouchability by an Imperial Edict was not possible but spread of education among the Shudras would help their emancipation. "Now it is not possible in India for a handful of far-seeing literati to frame and promulgate an Imperial Edict removing the disabilities of the untouchables and abolishing the concept Atishudra once for all. We can only appeal to the slow processes of education and public enlightenment. He, like the other Brahman reformers tried to explain that the rigid caste system was not the part of ancient Vedic Hinduism. "There is, I believe, no ground for the current notion that the caste system with its concomitant outcastes was a part of Hinduism in the old Vedic times."¹⁸ He refers on this subject Bhagwat Gita, "I exhort you to seek inspiration from the noble teaching of the Bhagavad Gita: "To me all creation is equal; there is no like or dislike"¹⁹ He had hope that as slavery was abolished throughout the world, it would also bring changes in the status of the untouchables and would restore their natural rights. He also appreciated the mission undertaken by Chhatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur for the empowerment of the untouchables in his state. It is also well known that he was not only speaker on the issue but also provided scholarships for the Dslit student scholars. After graduation he invited Bhimraro Ambedkar for job in his office. In

1913 he awarded scholarship to Bhimrao. Bhimrao went to America for his higher studies. He devoted his research work to the Maharaja. After completion of his studies in America he joined the service of Baroda state. Thus Maharaja Sayajirao contributed in his capacity a great help to the future Architect of the Constitution of India. His appreciation to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar inspired him for the spread of education among the Shudras in Modern India.

The 19th Century Social Reformers of Maharashtra were not belonged to the untouchable caste. Most of them were Brahmans except Mahtma Phule. They were belonged to the orthodox families but they saw and learnt from the sacrifice of Christian Missionaries for the humanity and English Education they learnt liberal ideas, the principles of democracy, equality before the law, individual liberty etc. They tried to give new thoughts for the removal of untouchability. The 20th Century Dalit Movement led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was the direct or indirect impact of the 19th Century social reform movement led by the Social and religious reformers of Maharashtra.

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