

Rethinking Dalit movement and Dalit Politics

Sreepati Ramudu

The crux of Ambedkar's philosophy for the liberation of dalits revolves around the interplay between the social and the political of this country. For him the social caters to the political and the vice-versa. Ambedkar set political power as the primary means through which social balance could be achieved. He envisioned social consolidation at the primary level among dalits which he thought could further lead to their social alliance with other marginalized communities. The social alliance thus formed needs to enter into a political alliance with an existing political party. He assumed that this would enable dalits to share political power in the larger context. Once the political power which he termed as 'the master key' is shared by dalits it could open the spaces of decision making that were hitherto denied for them. Thus in Ambedkar's thought- the social and political are complimentary to each other in the peculiar context of caste and only their systematic interplay could bring about a social equilibrium. It should be noticed here that Ambedkar gave utmost priority to the idea and process of sharing political power. But sadly, the post Ambedkarite dalit movement seem to have missed this logic and lost the strategy of preparing dalits and other marginalized castes for political power. He gave almost equal weightage for both the social and political in the backdrop of sharing. Except Kanshiram, the founder of Bahujan Samaja Party, all other dalit leaders stuck-up with a phenomenon of more social and less political. Though there was an opportunity to consolidate socially and move forward, absence of a strategic political vision with a social balance in its leadership, prevented them from moving forward. It's also a fact that, a lot of critique has been produced against the dalit for they could not emerge into a political entity, regardless of their vulnerable conditions. In view of this an attempt has been made here to analyze as to why dalit movement still lags behind in sharing political power.

I

As far as dalits sharing political power is concerned there are different issues that plague dalits. The first and foremost in this context is the misunderstanding and mis-interpretation of the concept of the master key. The post Ambedkarite Dalit movement seem to have an etymological problem in understanding and interpreting the concept of the Master key.

Ambedkar termed the political power as the master key which could open the other spaces for dalits. Over a period of time Ambedkar's idea of sharing political power with other communities has been misinterpreted as an absolute power capture by dalits. This gave rise to two unintended consequences: one, it has failed to convince dalit masses that they alone, could capture political power. The rhetoric of power capture by dalits has always confused them and hold them back from moving ahead given their social, economic and political backwardness. If the concept of master key was translated as 'power sharing' they would have got convinced for their next leg of journey, which could have been logically possible. The underlying spirit of Ambedkar's Lucknow speech, which was largely ignored, made it clear that the end of Dalit movement should be sharing of political power with other marginalized social groups (Lucknow speech). The phrase 'sharing' could have inspired them given their numerical strength as voters. Some of them have also felt that capturing political power by dalits was also impractical given their absolute exclusion. The second consequence of this argument was that it has frightened the other marginalized communities as

they thought it would strip them off their traditional social dominance, which they were enjoying for centuries. Thirdly, this has alerted the dominant castes to become over vigilant and invent new means to put up far more stringent checks on every bit of the advancement of the dalits. Thus it may be argued that for the success of any movement, it's essential to convince its followers that they could succeed at its end. Failure in translating the spirit of the concept of master key in its true sense has created hurdles in many ways to the dalit movement.

II

The post- Ambedkar, dalit leadership was largely drawn from the leftist background and as such the leftist ideology has always interfered with the dalit approach creating a confusion in the dalit movement. From Dalit Panthars to present day dalit leadership, this observation holds true to a great extent. Though, claims to be Ambedkarite, the dalit leadership often responds in a communist way on different issues. Often, they fail to Curve out a clear Ambedkarite approach devoid of the communist to address their issues. Missing of this clarity may not be a deliberate but often used to be in place due to the leftist influence. The incongruence of left and dalit movements was proved many times ideologically and practically: while Ambedkar looked at the state as a means of a relief for dalits the left would reject it as a means of exploitation. This disturbs the priorities set by Ambedkar for dalits in a parliamentary approach. Even if some left groups work in the parameters of the state it would only remain a part of their strategy. While Ambedkar envisioned a bloodless constitutional revolution in the particular social context of India, the left doesn't subscribe to it wholly. If Ambedkar choses a liberal accommodative approach for dalits, the left comes out with a rejectionist approach. As such the Ambedkarite methods of negotiation and bargaining with rest of the society gets replaced with a continuous fight with the left. This incompatibility has been holding the dalit movement back for long. Rejecting everything under the influence of the communist would be antithetical to Ambedkar's incremental approach. The pragmatic approach of Ambedkar flows from his strong conviction that a Marxist sort of revolution would be impossible in India as the presence of caste would hinder the class polarization. But there seems to be a shift with the new generation dalit intellectuals towards having a pure Ambedkarite ideology and practice towards their goals, but on a slow phase. It is argued that while Ambedkar favored power sharing, Communists favour power capture and both are incompatible. Caught in between dalits are still in confusion as to how they could sailk towards political power sharing.

III

Another major features of the Dalit movement is that it has filled the minds of its followers more with the victimhood related aspects like causes, sources and effects of discrimination, untouchability, exploitation and marginalisation. No doubt, the suffering is true. This naturally make them painful and emotional against their oppressors in the light of regular riots. As such their priorities take the form of reactions and misses a long term perspective. This obliviates necessary strategies for solutions that are unique for the context.

Articulating the concerns of a section of the society by a social movement attributes it an exclusivist nature and isolates it at one level; while it needs an inclusive approach to address its issues. This is because solution for several issues demands the involvement of multiple actors and agencies, which are often at conflict. Ambedkar has given double the weightage to the solution part without compromising on the struggle front. His struggle for separate electorate that resulted in the present system of reservations proves it beyond debate(Nagaraj.D.R2014).While fighting with congress on one hand he always left a space for negotiations. This has paved his entry into the constituent assembly as well as into the interim government. But the post – Amedkarite dalit

leadership suffered from lack of this dual vision and strategic approach to guide the masses with more emphasis on the solution part. It's a fact that for various reasons successive dalit generations have been engaged excessively on struggles, than on solutions. While struggle involve a mass mobilisation and show of strength; solution needs to be more strategic and diplomatic for bargain and negotiation. Though Dalit movement has emerged as one of the oldest and biggest in the world ,it is left with long way to cover. There could be two reasons for this phenomenon : one, generally the post-Ambedkarite dalit leadership was anomic in its origin in the sense that they were sudden born to face an atrocity . As such they are often preoccupied with protecting the lives of their constituency rather than planning for a long cherished goal, political power . Majority of the first generation Dalit leaders do know very little about Ambedkar, let alone his political ideology. This limitation has constrained them from knowing the mission and approach of Ambedkar towards political mobilization.

III

MSA Rao argued that any social movement requires a group of people as a collective to assert for certain rights, benefits and spaces in a society. In other words no mobilization qualifies to be called a movement in the absence of cohesion or solidarity between members who are fighting for some change through mobilization. It's a known fact, here, that despite several ups and downs Dalit movement has kept the people of Scheduled castes together in fighting for their rights. At times the dalit fight used to be so intense that governments used to respond immediately to address their concerns.. But today, despite the rising levels of literacy, education and economic status among dalits their fight seem to be not so much intensive . Over a period of time it has been observed that dalits seem to have been losing that grip for a variety of reasons. Unity, once a hallmark of the dalit society faded fast as the identity concerns have taken priority.

Experience shows that unity could be possible at two levels: at the lower level, when a group of people feel that their existence was under threat and therefore unity is essential for group protection. Secondly unity at the higher level would be possible when a group of people feel that their common interests were affected by certain phenomenon and needs a collective articulation of their interests. Often, while the lower groups organize to resist the dominance and move upward; the higher groups organize to preserve their supremacy in different walks . In the dalit context physical violence unleashed by the forward castes during the 1980s and early 90s demanded a strong unity among dalits for their existence. Dalit massacre in different parts of India generated panic which led dalits to build a strong dalit movement .This unity and solidarity should have been used for political consolidation on the lines of Ambedkar's ideology. But it didn't happen . It could be assumed that the then dalit leadership might not have aware of Ambedkar's idea of political consolidation. By the time they have realized Ambedkar's approach to politics, a steep rifts has engulfed them .The early 1990s has also witnessed sub- identity movements in the scheduled castes further weakening the political mission of Dr.Ambedkar. The inability of dalit castes in resolving the sub-quota matters has further widen the social - gap among different dalit castes. This situation has been cleverly used by the forward castes to add fuel to the fire. This has resulted in transforming the difference into rivalries among different dalit castes. Whatever solidarity achieved among them in the past few decades , now got crashed to its lowest point. Particularly ,the demand of certain dalits castes for proportionate distribution of the benefits of reservations, has brought forth the internal cracks of the dalit unity. This demand for identity based redistribution of resources doesn't seem to fade in the near future. So also the idea of dalit consolidation for political power has lost the attention .

1V

Ideological indoctrination plays a crucial role in mobilising masses towards any social movement. Cadres in different movements are imbued with their respective ideologies in order to achieve its goals. The leftist and rightist movement in India offers best example in this regard. But this did not happen with the dalit movement. Ambedkarism was hardly understood in its right perspective and implemented with a true vigour. Except adoring Ambedkar and worshipping him as a God dalit movement has hardly indoctrinated his ideology to the followers of dalit movement. No doubt it is essential, more than that an ideological conviction among members of a movement would play the role of a driving force. Thus the ideological commitment and connectivity which could bring people together and prepare them for a future movement found to be weak with the dalit movement. For the indoctrination of any ideology a two fold structure is essential: intellectual leadership and organisational. No doubt, Dalit community has produced many intellectuals and leaders but without coordination between the two. The huge amount of literature produced by the dalit scholarship has not gone down to the dalit masses. The regular engagement of the dalit leadership and dalit masses with the routine problems of protection of life and survival takes away the major share of the energies. Therefore, it's found to be difficult on the part of the dalit to focus more on the indoctrination of the ideology of Ambedkarism. Poverty forces dalits to engage with more survival issues than spreading the ideology. A sizable section of intellectual base is essential for such a mission, which is missing among dalits. A continuous recruitment of cadre and its indoctrination could only sustain a movement. But due several social, political and economic reasons this aspect is forced to take the back seat.

Another major aspect of the dalit movement that restrict political mobility of dalits is the voluntary confinement of dalit intellectuals to the social media. With the wide spread presence of the social media, a lot of dalit youth and educated individuals are actively engaged in producing and disseminating dalit literature. They are ventilating the grievances of their community through social media. No doubt, their contribution for their community in this regard is immense. But it's happening at the cost of dalit activism in the field. Dalits intellectuals confining themselves to social media and finding a relief in it as if their duty was finished has emerged to be a new problem. For any social or political movements, guidance of intellectual leadership and field activists are essential. But such a systematic division of functions is gradually disappearing from dalit movement as a result of over confinement to the social media. As a result there are more intellectuals in the social media and less activists in the dalit habitations. In addition, the uncontrolled and pouring in of conflicting views by different individuals on dalit issues is also widening the gap between dalit intellectuals. Often they take the form of personal rivalry and weakening the unity among the suffered lot. Today more of the dalit movement against atrocities and riots is fought in social media than in the field. Social media is expected to play the role of an agent in spreading the ideology and information. But its emergence as the final field of dalit activity restricted the political mobility of the dalit community. This is distancing dalits from the political goals of their movement.

V

For Ambedkar, Dalit movement is a means through which the master key, the political power needs to be shared. And there are two targets (ends) set by Ambedkar for dalit movement: one, sharing political power and attaining an equal social status for dalits. As such dalit movement needs to be understood as only a means for the attainment of the afore said goals. Education, agitation and organisation though play the role of short term goals they were actually, to be considered as part of the means rather than goals. But over a period of time it was observed that the means, i.e. the dalit movement, was converted into an end by different leaders at different levels. It is to say that the

movement has been used. The corrupt practises of the leadership that weaken the dalit movement is evident by the accusations and counter accusations by different dalit leaders on the lines of financial corruption. This shows the shift of the dalit leadership from the dalit collective orientation to individual an orientation. There are hundreds of examples across India where dalit maases accuse their leadership against corruption. After Ambedkar, upto the first generation dalit leadership, there was serious community orientation for dalit rights and development. But the last few decades witnessed more and more dalit leaders tilting towards personal and individual gains. This resulted into a severe crisis as dalit masses at gross roots are fast losing their confidence in their dalit leadership. As Zigmont Bauman rightly argued 'the growth of individualism collapses the collective consciousness' is seen exactly happening with dalit movement resulting into a decline in the emotional bondages. **(Zigmont Bauman).**

It must be understood here that the growth of neo-liberal ideas in different walks of life fragmented the social collectives and brought forth individual concerns across the board. Dalit movement, like all other movements, could not with stand to the onslaught of the individual orientation of the neo-liberal market agenda. That apart the rise of conservative politics brought forth by the market driven politics further weaken the dalit consolidation for political power. The emergence of conservative political parties into power has posed great threat to the egalitarian demands of the dalit movement. The growth of conservative politics stands inversely proportional to the development of dalits in general and dalit politics in particular. Thus

VI

It's a known a fact that no community in the world has emerged to be a ruling class without presence of a sizable section of a middle class in it. Middle class aspirations proves to be a ladder for the growth of any community. But majority of the Dalits are economically marginalised and poverty stricken. Except public employment they do not possess properties like land, industry, business, etc to make them think like a middle class. Any community that struggles for two squares a meal could not look for political power. In the public employment also dalits occupy the menial jobs like sanitation workers and fourth class subordinates. Very few of them who could reach the middle class through reservations need to struggle to protect their jobs as they would be under a constant surveillance by their forward caste bosses. Such middle class is highly inadequate to originate and sustain any political aspirations. That is why even if some movements come up spontaneously as reactions to certain issues and incidents they could not survive for long. The BAMCEF, formed by Kanshiram proves to be an exception for this. If this employee middle class show its strength in politics, the riche economic classes of forward castes check their mobility. The fact that dalits having very small section of a middle class has been a hurdle in the political empowerment of dalits. It's more so in the present context of heightened individualism in the neoliberal setting.

VII

History shows that no caste, however touchable may it be, has become a ruling caste without allying with another ruling caste for some time. The experience of Reddy, Kamma, and Kapu castes in Andhrapradesh(AP) offeres best example to this. After the formation of the state of Andhra pradesh for about 30 years Andhrapradesh was ruled by Reddy individuals as chief ministers in alliance with the Brahmin led Congress party at the Centre. Kammas did the same with the Brahmin led Communist party till they form Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in 1983. The Kapus of AP are found to have been aligned with kammas where they have shared almost half the of power positions during the TDP stint of 2014-19. All these experiences establish an important fact that these castes have aligned with another ruling caste before they could emerge into a political power. Except Kanshiram, Dalits who were aware of the idea of political power (master key) much before other

castes did ,seem to have failed to understand the crux of Ambedkar's modes operandi in politics i.e. coalition strategy.

Conclusion

Dalit political agenda still remains unfinished for several reasons. If Indian social system stood as a hurdle in all walks of dalit life ,dalits too have failed to organize themselves into a political block . A major problem with dalit political mobilization is same group of enlightened intellectuals needs to be everywhere –as leaders and activists. Identity politics which initially projected dalits as a monolithic group, has failed to hold them together in the backdrop of resource crunch. Rather than finding similarities they started searching for differences. The electoral politics has further widen the gap between different dalit castes .Political parties run by the forward castes, in pursuit of have pitched different castes against each other as rivals. All these factors played their role to keep different dalits apart from joining together .

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Dr.Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and Speeches, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, New Delhi, 2014
- [2]. Nagaraj.D.R, The Flaming feet, permanentblack, Hyderabad, 2011
- [3]. Bauman Zygmunt, Liquid Times, Polity Press, 2007
- [4]. Harvey David, Neo Liberalism, Oxford University Press, 2010
- [5]. Desh Pandey Satish, Contemporary India Penguin books, Gurgaon, 2003