



NUANCES OF DALIT EMANCIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at studying various approaches in the process of emancipation of Dalits in its real sense, both physical and psychological. Everything that we experience in this world depends on "relevance". Dalits have ages old history of suffering at the behest of influential people or rather non-Dalits in the name of caste, creed, work what not and at the same time contemporary to this never ending anguish there also came a soothing word 'empowerment'. Here the word "relevance" is of importance because it raises a question as to whose empowerment it is! Is it the empowerment of the oppressed or is it the empowerment of the oppressor in the name economic participation, inclusion and the words of that sort?

Complete emancipation would occur only when the yoke of physical, psychological burden is lifted off the necks of Dalits so that they can participate in politics unhindered by any hegemonic power only to realize full empowerment.

This paper deals with as to how far the empowerment in its truest sense has achieved its goals in spite of overwhelming suppression.

Keywords: Emancipation, Empowerment, Marginalized, Oppression, Social participation, Political power, Cultural equality.

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"So long as you do not achieve social liberty whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you."-B. R. Ambedkar

Whether one agrees or not Dalits have been deliberately put down through some vicious intrigues by the influential people. But the reason why this oppression was practiced with such concerted efforts itself explains that the oppressor always wants to survive at the cost of the oppressed. The deprivation of certain privileges such as social, economic, political, administrative and cultural equality to Dalits by the upper castes is apparently to secure their (the oppressor's) position in all these arenas. Empowerment means to have

equality with the rest in all these areas without any hindrance, to have potential to expand assets and improve capacity. The notion of empowerment was introduced by the World Bank in 1990s, which stands for the expansion of assets and capabilities of marginalized sections to participate in, negotiate with, influence control, and hold accountable institutions that affects their lives. The concept of empowerment is essentially a political process, which challenges the prevailing power structure of sub-ordination. As a political process, empowerment involves three crucial elements-Accesses to information, opportunity for participation and

inclusion in political process, and organizing capacity to influence and gain power.

the idea of empowerment may be invoked in virtually any context: in speaking about human rights, about basic needs, about economic security, about capacity building, about skill formation, or about the conditions of a dignified social existence. It is also seen as a way of addressing the problems of rights that remain un-enforced. In economic context it is invoked in capacity building particularly of marginalized, unorganized and other disadvantaged, groups, classes and categories. (Beteille)

Empowerment at the social level means being received and extended equal honour to participate in all social activities. This would remove the inhibition that Dalits have developed because of continuous and persistent degrading exploitation by the influential people. The inherent feeling of demeaning self-image of the Dalits by themselves seems to have become hereditary because day in and day out they have seen oppression as a continuum not as an isolated incident. This has also become self-inflicting because they lack the way to vent their anguish and hence this affliction turns inwards in ways such as ill-treatment of the families, brawling, drunkenness and violence in their families. Only equal dignity in the society would pacify the simmering frustration of Dalits. Though we have enactments to ensure respect and honour in full measure to Dalit men and women equally, manifestation is sporadic.

When the constitution of India came into force on 26th January, 1950 an attempt was made to redress all the wrong done. The constitution enshrines the main purpose and objectives of our national policy. Our society is to be based on twin pillars of social and economic justice. (Rodrigues)

Education brings edification of mind and initiates minds towards broadness and magnanimity. Education is not possible with physical or mental humiliation. In this case Dalits haven't had the opportunity to study in a tense free environment that is to say that the fears of discrimination have at

all times kept surfacing to disintegrate and un-build that which has been gleaned with the some emancipation measures taking shape.

"Institutionally a number of options were made available by the administration. 'Special' government schools ensured 'separate' education for untouchables who would thereby not come into contact with upper caste children. Missionaries also were encouraged to run private (but aided) schools mainly for the lowest castes. Again, where other classes (castes) objected to the association of their children with the untouchables, the former were persuaded to set up their own schools under the government grants-in-aid system. In other words, the rulers made little concerted attempt (despite their legal authority and control over funds) to enforce what was at that time a revolutionary principle of 'education for all' in Common schools." (Nambissan Geetha B 1011-1024)

"According to the commissioner for SCs and STs, "... the little assistance which pupils receive at the primary, middle and secondary level also comes too late" [1988:301].

"The status of communities as 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste system was the most serious impediment to their (Dalit) education. While stringent social taboos conscribed their behaviour, severe strictures were laid down to prevent their access to knowledge. It is said of some communities that they were prohibited from walking on the roads in daylight because even their shadow was considered polluting." (Ghurye 166-671)

Parulekar notes, "the depressed (or untouchable) classes had no access to schooling. They were as a rule not allowed to attend the indigenous schools whatever might be the caste or creed of the teacher. Tradition held them back with an iron hand allowing no exception under any circumstances whatever. In this prohibition, all castes joined hands and, the Brahmin was only one of them" (1945: LVI). Gough observes, "it was seen as improper, even ungodly for Adi Dravidas to read or write, and it was traditionally forbidden for both Adi-Dravida and non-Brahman castes even to hear the recitation of the Vedas." (Gough (1981) in Saberwal 1991:733)

Food supplies and other kinds of support and interaction is held back to discourage a country from war because no war means peace and peace prevails as soon as the country realises the humanitarian values. If a person is denied the basic and critical necessities he would not be able to talk or even think about anything except a few morsels of food. The same principle applies to Dalits and non-Dalits because all are human beings in essence. All human beings have more or less equal levels of intelligence but the usage of this intelligence is different. A person who is starving cannot think beyond finding a loaf of bread. In this situation Dalits have been kept through artificial poverty created as a natural phenomenon by the oppressors.

With a decisive *coup de grace* strategy, only if the situation can be flipped upside down somehow uppercastes would be as silenced as if never existed and become manoeuvrable preferring equality because realisation is possible through stripping off their (the oppressor's) power and exceedingly accumulated wealth. That is to say that the dejection and impoverishment that is meted upon Dalits should be ricocheted towards the oppressors. What we are doing here is evoking internal censors of the oppressor to acknowledge equality.

The second strategy has been economic. Not only are Dalits extremely poor (almost half of them living below the poverty line as compared to less than one-third of the rest of the population) but they are also almost totally dependent upon the dominant castes for their livelihoods as agricultural or urban labour. Thus many Dalits have sought greater economic independence, both as an end in itself and as a means to other ends (e.g., political power, educational opportunity). During the past decade a good number of international development agencies, both religious and secular, have also adopted this strategy by funding a variety of grassroots Dalit organizations engaged in a range of community development activities. These activities focus on such things as small-scale industries, teaching new skills, educating

Dalits on how to take advantage of government development assistance, developing cooperatives. The task is enormous. Over 75% of the Dalit population is still rural and so these activities have to be carried out village by village. They also face opposition within each village from members of the dominant castes who want to keep Dalits as an impoverished and dependent source of cheap labour. (Webster)

Political participation doesn't merely mean voting because it is an initial step of participation and without any power to influence a positive transformation. But the right to vote cannot entitle a Dalit with power to redeem him from the oppression or to free other down-trodden from this disgusting discrimination. In fact Dalits have frequently voted in favour of their oppressors in the face of not having any other option. Had a Dalit been given the opportunity to contest and if the Dalit community in its entirety *believed* in him (the contestant) they would definitely vote for a candidate who is from Dalits and would ensure greater majority for him. The word *belief* in the so called future Dalit leader from their own community is used here because the upper caste people play off against lower caste people by making the contesting Dalit candidate a sycophant and an underdog through coercion, threat or appeasement or at times the upper caste people would engage in even unethical means like spending large amounts of money in order to fake compassion and thereby buy votes. In this psycho-political game a Dalit who wishes to contest would be discouraged and would withdraw out of frustration. Hence Dalits should own an assertive nature to confidently emancipate themselves and their community to stand in line with the so called upper castes.

Both historically and currently Dalits have adopted four strategies, singly or in combination, in order to attain these ends. The first and most dominant has been the political strategy of gaining power either as an end in itself (if you have power, others come to you and you do not have to go begging to them) or as a means to other

ends (e.g., greater economic and educational opportunities). However, Dalits have been divided over whether to pursue political power independently of other castes or in alliance with those members of other castes and communities whose interests and ideals are close to their own. For example, there are at present Dalit members of Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies, as well as Dalit party workers, in virtually all the major political parties, including the Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party, which in its traditionalist Hindu ideology, is quite anti-Dalit. There are also exclusively Dalit political parties at the regional level and two Dalit-led political parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati as well as the Republican Party of India, have members of Parliament as well. The Dalit debate within and between the various parties over whether to get whatever share of power Dalits can through whatever alliances are most expedient or to maintain pressure from outside on those in power by maintaining some ideological and programmatic unity, at least among Dalits themselves if not with other disadvantaged groups (tribal, religious minorities, women, the poor in general) as well, has yet to be resolved. As this brief description suggests, there is little *political unity* among Dalits at the present time and many are wondering out loud whether the political process can deliver what Dalits have every right to expect from it. (Webster).

Religion is an important component of culture because what is a burden otherwise can be made acceptable by giving it a religious colouring or rather supernatural complex. So to a clan, the religion (Hindu) which has granted unquestioned authority and supremacy over other castes by delineating hierarchy, top to bottom depending on the professions is a great fetish not to be forgone easily. Human nature is to associate a person's prestige with the cultural prestige and dominion his clan owns. When it comes to survival and identity

protection religion is not sentimental but a matter of tool to proscribe certain things upon the downtrodden. The implications of freedom have manifold interconnected roots which stimulates action from different realms. Dalits have taken refuge in religions other than Hinduism and this means denying hierarchy of Brahmins and other allied upper castes. Here religion is taken only as a makeshift for peaceful living. Dalits' peace created ripples in the placidity of the upper castes. Hence Dalits' conversion to other religion or other walks of life would send shivers to the bones of the upper castes. New religion for Dalits is merely a tag to protect themselves and they might not even know the sentiments and tenets of that religion.

But this transformation is an arsenal among the upper caste communities not because of upper caste people's religiosity of their religion but this would enable Dalits reinforcement and assertion.

The fourth strategy has been religious in nature. Its moderate form involves reform from within one's own religious tradition. For example, some Hindu sects have renounced caste hierarchy and some Hindu reformers, Gandhi being the best known; have sought to "uplift" the Untouchables. The more radical religious option, however, has been conversion to another, more egalitarian religion. For example, over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today the majority of the Christian population of India is Dalit! Following the induction of their great leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, into the Buddhist Sangha in 1956, several million Dalits have become Buddhists. What a new religion offered to the Dalits was a new identity defined by religion rather than by caste, as well as a more egalitarian religious counterculture. This has been only partially successful. No matter what goes on in Christian or Buddhist circles, most Indians still think in terms of caste and so simply assume that anyone who is a Christian or Buddhist is a Dalit. Moreover, both Christian and Buddhist Dalits were denied the affirmative action benefits and

protections granted to other Dalits; in 1990 the Buddhist Dalits became eligible and Dalit Christians are still ineligible. By denying these to Christian (and Muslim) Dalits the government is in fact providing strong economic disincentives to conversion and strong economic incentives to Christian Dalits to return to the Hindu fold. (Webster)

Every life form on this earth depends for its survival on lower life forms or higher life forms but more importantly on its physical equals. Without biodiversity and conservation of ecological balance humanity would vanish from the earth's surface. If biodiversity is compulsory for the survival of mankind presence of other human beings is more so irrespective of caste, creed, colour.

Unless the entire vacuum is filled with what Dalits have been deprived of in full measure there can't be a level plane or equality. There wouldn't be true emancipation. Everything else is only wiping off tears as a gesture of demagoguery and eternity of oppression and exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Those who wish to free themselves from centuries old fetters should try to look for prospects that are permanent through assertive, unified and collective action without being distracted by an ephemeral emancipation. The action should be synergetic like an ocean which transforms the topography by enveloping and receding when it is steady fastly determined. True empowerment is possible through manifestation of real emancipation be it in social, economical, political and other areas essential in improving standard of life where human beings have common interest with symbiotic benefit.

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