

CONTEMPORARY DALIT MOVEMENTS IN ANDHRAPRADESH (1985 TO 2015)

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ABSTRACT

There have been many studies on social movements in India during the last three decades, though compared to many other areas and the incidence of movements, their number is very small. A majority of the studies are recent, published after the mid-1960s. Most of them are by historians, sociologists, political activists or journalists. Political scientists have, by and large, ignored this area till recently. Historians have for long concentrated on political history, which is mainly the history of rulers and of the elite. British historians, in whose footsteps Indian historians, for good or for bad, followed, focused their studies on the activities of the British as the actors on the stage of history with India as a shadowy background. Social history came onto the scene very late. And for a long time, it limited its scope to the 'history of people with the politics left out'. It has been largely confined to social policies of the government, educational and cultural history, social reform movements, the growth of the middle class, etc. Recently, social historians have produced very stimulating studies on social movements in general and peasant movements in particular. Sociology is a relatively-new discipline. Although the first generation of sociologists maintained a broader horizon, the second generation has confined its focus to the tradition-modernity paradigm¹. A majority of their studies are related to kinship, caste and village society.

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Introduction

There have been many studies on social movements in India during the last three decades, though compared to many other areas and the incidence of movements, their number is very small. A majority of the studies are recent, published after the mid-1960s. Most of them are by historians, sociologists, political activists or journalists. Political scientists have, by and large, ignored this area till recently. Historians have for long concentrated on political history, which is mainly the history of rulers and of the elite. British historians, in whose footsteps Indian historians, for good or for bad, followed, focused their studies on the activities of the British as the actors on the stage of history with India as a shadowy background. Social history came onto the scene very late. And for a long time, it limited its scope to the 'history of people with the politics left out'. It has been largely confined to social policies of the government, educational and cultural history, social reform movements, the growth of the middle class, etc. Recently, social historians have produced very stimulating studies on social movements in general and peasant movements in particular. Sociology is a relatively-new discipline. Although the first generation of sociologists maintained a broader horizon, the second generation has confined its focus to the tradition-modernity paradigm. A majority of their studies are related to kinship, caste and village society. Their interest in social movements was largely focused on Sanskritisation and socio-religious reform movements, excluding the political dimension as beyond their scope, until political sociology or the sociology of politics began to take shape in the late 1960s. Political science is still lagging behind².

History of Dalit Struggles from the Perspective of 'MOVEMENT'

The writings of Dalits cannot be considered as a mere social analysis, or a mere discursive study of social structure. More importantly, there is a compelling necessity to discover and reclaim the hidden and buried history of the Dalits. In this way, I do not take this essay to be a mere analysis but an effort at situating Dalit movements in history³. Buddhism remains the root for the research regarding the history of liberation and cultural identity. Similarly Buddhism is the beginning of the tradition of struggles against the suppression of Dalit movements and for the

². Federation for Dalit Action for Liberation (FeDAL). On behalf of FeDAL a conference was held in Madurai, Tiruparrankundram on 25TH and 26 of Nov.1995. The above is part of a speech by Thol. Thirumavalavan. See also A magazine of Maatram. Jan.2000, p.21.

³. Guna,, "Mannurimai" Part – 1 (Tamil): Tamilaga Ayyaren Publ, Bangalore, March – 2000, p.153.

identity-based politics. The first revolution of the oppressed people against dominance started in Buddha. “In the days of the Vedas, Buddha with his followers started a social struggle for the liberation of the oppressed in society. This movement was given the name Sangam. This movement was started on a full moon day, in Vaikasi, in 589 BC on the banks of the Ganges at Isiyadhanam in the city of Kasi. This was the first movement for the liberation of the oppressed people against the orthodox Brahminic religion that shaped into a dominant institution through its four Varnas based on caste injustice. The Buddha was the first to oppose this. The Sangam emerged as the opposing force against the Aryan Brahminic principle of born capitalism; and Buddhism emerged as the camp for humanist social liberation⁴.” “In the 2400 years, starting from Kosar invasion to the British invasion or rule, all the 104 dominant characters who came to power through invasion carried out only the principles of modern Brahmanism.” Iii Only from there, the Dalits learnt the lesson and the tradition of struggle to oppose the tradition of dominance. Inspire of this the Vedas, Puranas, the Law of Manu, and the Hindu Varnashrama dharma, continued, retained and maintained their supremacy even today. On the contrary, throughout history, only the Dalits in the mould of oppressed Buddhists, Chakyas and Nagas continue to fight for a humane society. This struggle is personified in Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who said: “For, it is important that everyone who was able to understand the history of India must know that it is nothing but the history of the struggle for supremacy between Brahmanism and Buddhism⁵”. The umbilical relationship and the struggling tradition among the Dalit movements were born out of this understanding. The struggles of the Dalit movements should be understood only from this history⁶.

Dalit Movements in India

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) are known as harijans, i.e., children of God a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933. The harijan nomenclature is considered pejorative by some leaders of the castes. They prefer to be called dalit, i.e., the oppressed (Guru 2001a). Occupying the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system, they are called avarna, those whose place is outside the

⁴. A.P. Vallinayagam, “Buddham Oer Arimugam” (Tamil) Jeevasahapthan Padhippagam, Madurai: May – 2003, pp.1-3.

⁵. Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, “Writings and Speeches”, Vol. 3, p.267.

⁶. H.Kotani (Ed), Caste system, untouchability and the depressed, p.1.

chaturvarna system⁷. They are also known as perial, panchama, atishudra, antyaja or namashudra in different parts of the country. Their touch, and sometimes their shadows and even their voices are believed to pollute caste Hindus. Legally they are no longer untouchables, though in practice many of them still bear that stigma. The SCs constitute 16 percent of India's population. They numbered around 1,680 lakh in 2001. Thirty-six percent of them are workers. Among the workers, 48 per cent are agricultural labourers. Many of them are engaged in traditional occupations, such as, flaying, scavenging. The SCs are scattered all over the country, though their number is insignificant in the predominantly tribal states of the northeast frontier⁸. They are not concentrated in very large numbers in particular districts or talukas either. On the whole, the studies on the dalit or SC socio-political condition are many but there are only a few systematic empirically sound studies on their movements. The Mahar movement of Maharashtra has been projected, more often than not, as an all-India movement. Of course, Dr. Ambedkar, Mahar by caste, was an all-India leader. While bargaining with the British and the caste-Hindus he represented all the dalit of the country (Burra 1986). But his role in mobilising the SCs outside Maharashtra is not so far well-documented. There is no full-fledged study or even an anthology giving information about various SC movements in different parts of the country of the colonial and postcolonial period. Two papers, one by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar (1979), and the other by Ghanshyam Shah (1980), give an overview of the dalit liberation or antiuntouchability movements in India⁹. The former deals with the colonial period, whereas the latter looks at both the colonial and the post-colonial periods. Many books dealing with the SCs do give a chapter on harijan movements in a particular region or in the country as historical antecedents. As they are not studies on the movements per se, the data given therein is sketchy, though useful. A few of them are worth mentioning. The study by Verba, Ahmed and Bhatt (1972), on the Blacks and the harijans, gives a comparative picture of the movements of these communities in the USA and India. As far as the harijan movement is concerned, the study is confined mainly to Dr. Ambedkar's movement in Maharashtra. Ghanshyam Shah (1975) writes a chapter in his study, entitled Politics of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, on comparative harijan movements

⁷. Dr. Ambedkar, the Untouchability, pp.62-63.

⁸. Shakuntala Devi, caste system in India, Jipur, pp. 210-211.

⁹. Y. Vaikunatham, Education and social change in south India, Andhra, 1880-1920, Madras, p.180.

in Maharashtra and Gujarat, to show why the harijan movement in Gujarat was less militant than that of Maharashtra¹⁰.

The Contemporary Dalit Movements

The Dalit movements that took off from Buddha and Ambedkar, took deep roots in the Tamil soil due to the efforts of many leaders like Pandit Ayodhidasar, Rettamalai Srinivasan, Thiyagi Emmanuel Sekaran, Thekkampatti Balasundararasu, N. Sivaraj, Aannai Meenambal, L.C.Guruswamy and many others¹¹. Towards the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century when the Bhakti movements, Renaissance movements and Congress organizations were propagating aloud their fraudulent social changes, the spirited rise of these leaders completely changed the history of the state. There are two ways of understanding their struggle. According to M S S Pandian the discourse of caste movements are: 1) the language of the upward mobility of the caste Hindus and 2) the language of the Dalits. For instance M N Srinivas the famous Indian (Sanskrit) / western sociologist says that Gandhi, Tilak, R M N Roy and Ranade are modern India torchbearers¹². But, he is silent about Ambedkar and Periyar. Therefore, for us the leaders of Dalit movements are the symbols of dignity and struggle for a just space in modernity. We cannot but acknowledge Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra that greatly awakened the contemporary thundering atmosphere in the Cheries of Tamil Nadu. Thus, the history of the disappointed and duped Dalits who trusted the Congress and Dravidian parties for half a century was sidelined. Particularly, the representative of the Dalits L.Ilayaperumal who trusted the Congress had to meet a series of disrespect and was treated like curry leaf. Vai. Balasundaram who trusted the Dravidian parties had the same bitter experience. After emergency period both left their respective parties and realized their own autonomous space in the struggle of Dalit community¹³. Then only they came to be known as contemporary Dalit leaders and had the sense of shame and self-respect. L. Ilayaperumal who came out of Congress formed the 'All India Human Rights Party' and Vai. Balasundaram who came out of Dravidian party formed 'Ambedkar Maakkal Iyyaakkam' in 1977. It was in this atmosphere that

¹⁰. Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches", Vol. 3, p.267.

¹¹. A fact-finding report of Integrated Dalit Liberation Movement (IDLm) and of Dalit Resource Centre. See also a Report in EPW: Dec.2.1989, pp.2640-2642.

¹². Lata Murugkar "Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra" Popular Pragashan limited, Bombay 1991, P.98

¹³. Dr. Mohan Larbeer "Dalit liberation movements and the problems faced by them." TTS integration Seminar Paper read on 16.10.2002 in Madurai.

L.Ilayaperuman, Saakthidasan (RPI), Puyal Ponnaiah, Devakottai Dr. M.Subramaniam, Vai. Palanivelu, Kodikkal Chellappa and Dalit Gnanasekaran joined together in 1988, and started the Scheduled Caste Liberation Movement (SCALM). In the heat of starting it, they organised a very successful first state conference at Chennai on 21.8.1988. Bahujan Samaj Party leader Kanshi Ram addressed a rally of more than one lakh Dalits assembled there¹⁴.

Dalit Movements in Andhra Pradesh

There is a rich corpus of ethnographical literature on Indian Tribes. Few field studies of the untouchable communities are also available. However, scholars writing on the subject have mostly depended for their interpretation on literary sources, written for the members of the upper castes only¹⁵. Further, historians working on the history of ancient India have been more concerned with the study of the varna system as a whole and with the problem of dominant groups such as Brahmins referring only lightly to the existence of neglected castes mentioned in the in the Buddhist sources. R.S.Sharma is of the view that lack of interest on the part of scholars in the fortunes of lower communities was due to their vision being limited by their dominant class outlook¹⁶. Nevertheless, the idea and practice of untouchability in Hindu society was striking enough to have given rise to a number of theories regarding its origin. According to one theory, the sudras of the four Varna systems were Aryans and that the untouchables were a part of the Sudra Varna and therefore they were Aryans. R.S. Sharma is of the view that the untouchables were inferior sudras¹⁷ and they were the earliest Aryans suppressed into slavery by a later wave of Aryan invaders. According to him, the sudras were not pure Aryans. They consisted of the defeated and dispossessed section of the Aryans and non Aryan Tribes.¹⁸ It implies that the untouchables also consisted of Aryan and non Aryan tribes. It is probable that the conquered indigenous tribes were segregated at first as untouchables and later the strength increased due to excommunication owing to certain crimes and transgression of caste rules by the Aryans. Ambedkar considers the untouchables as belonging to the Dravidian or Naga tribes who by constant warfare among themselves were reduced to the status of broken men and

¹⁴. Lata Murugkar "Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra" Popular Pragashan limited, Bombay 1991, P.98

¹⁵. Ibid, p.208.

¹⁶. R.S.Sharma, Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1958, p.4.

¹⁷. Ibid, p.35.

¹⁸. Ibid, p.280.

therefore were forced to leave outside the settled villages.¹⁹ The only difference between them and the settled villages was that they belonged to difference between tribes. They were living outside the village from the beginning but it had nothing to do with untouchability.²⁰

Conclusion

Today we have much to say about the subaltern studies and the history from below and of people's movement. When there is depression in the bay, storm arises: likewise there is depression in the society reformers and reform movements appear. The Dalits were socially depressed, economically suppressed and politically oppressed in the Indian society from time immemorial. There were hence, movements in India especially in the southern part to place their grievances and to safeguard their civil rights, which were denied to them. In many respects the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) were pioneers in forming the movements and establishing the organisations even before the formulation of Indian National Congress to fight for their rights. The Dalit movements in Andhra Pradesh had a promising beginning in the early 20th century and were beset by factionalism and division that development among its leaders. This my study draws on an exceptional and event filled record of those times provided by one of the movement's protagonists. Dalit leader, Dr.Kathi Padma Rao, Sri. Manyasri Manda Krishna Madiga, Sri. R.Krishanaya, and others made an attempt to explore the local situation during those decades, the leadership of the time and predicaments they face.

References

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3. Guna,, "Mannurimai" Part – 1 (Tamil): Tamilaga Ayyaren Publ, Bangalore, March – 2000, p.153.

¹⁹. Dr.Ambedkar, who were the Sudras? P. 238

²⁰. Dr. Ambedkar, The untouchables, P.27.

4. Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches", Vol. 3, p.267. The first state conference of SCALM headquarters released on 21.8.1988 and the press release on that day.
5. A fact-finding report of Integrated Dalit Liberation Movement (IDLm) and of Dalit Resource Centre. See also a report in EPW: Dec.2.1989, pp.2640-2642.
6. Gabriele Dietrich, "A New Thing on Earth" Delhi: ISPCK for TTS Madurai, 2001. p.205.
7. A release issued by SCALM leaders at 3 p.m. on 19.9.1989 after a joint meeting at Madurai.
8. On 7.11.1989 on behalf of DMK. M.Karunanidhi, election committee secretary S. Kuppusamy, Sadiq Basha, Nanjil Manoharan sent this letter to the leaders of SCALM.
9. An interview with Dalit Gnanasekaran, "Thamukku" Newsletter of Dalit Resource Centre, Madurai, Vol.5, No-18, Jan-June 2004.
10. Ibid.
11. Thirumaavalavan, "Talisman" (Kolkatta: Samya Publication, Dec, 2003) p.xxv.
12. Dr. Anand Teltumpte, "Dalit Movements after Ambedkar" (Chennai: Alaigal Veliyeettagam, Nov. 1999) p.14.
13. Federation for Dalit Action for Liberation (FeDAL). On behalf of FeDAL a conference was held in Madurai, Tiruparrankundram on 25th and 26 of Nov. 1995. The above is part of a speech by Thol. Thirumavalavan. See also A magazine of Maatram. Jan.2000, p.21.