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## HISTORY OF DALIT MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

History testifies the presence of social cleavages in Indian society, in terms of caste, class, gender and the like. Such cleavages has changed the entire social fabric of Indian society, whereby the exploited section, be it the Dalits, adivasis or women, have been systematically pushed to the periphery by the traditional Brahmanical structure of oppression. Dalits are the people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries. Unable to live in the society of human beings, they have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation, and lived as —untouchable|. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in the Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of Dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected them to a life of poverty and humiliation. The Dalits(ex-untouchables), who have been brutally exploited by the so-called upper castes, lag outside the Varnasrama theory and were referred to as outcasts in pre-independent India. India attained independence, but the Dalits were not allowed to live a life with dignity and equality.

**Key words :** Dalits, socially, society

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### INTRODUCTION

*Dalit* movement is often misunderstood as a movement against the non-*Dalits* in general and Brahmins in particular. It is not against any caste or community but against the untouchability in every caste and community in India. The essence of *Dalit* movement is indeed rooted in the ideals: liberty, equality and fraternity. The central purpose of the *Dalit* Movement is to establish a society based on social equality. The *Dalit* movement rejects the sub-human status imposed on *Dalit* by the Hindu social order. *Dalit* movement essentially aims at securing these inseparable ideals to every individual- including *Dalits*. *Dalit* movement, therefore, has a larger vision of infusing a sense of oneness or we feeling in short, fraternity, in everyone's mind.

The History of *Dalit* Movement goes back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The first *Dalit* writer was Madara Chennaiah, eleventh century cobbler-saint, who lived in the reign of Western *Chalukyas*. He was regarded as the father of Vachana poetry, who spread equality and fraternity through his poetry. *Dalit* saint Kalavve, in 12th century, challenged the higher castes system and given the new theory and philosophy of equality for society. He said:

**Those who eat goats, foul and tiny fish:**

**Such, they call caste people. Those who eat Sacred Cow**

**That showers frothing milk for Shiva:**

**Such, they call out-castes.**

He means to say that those who are eat goats and flesh; they have considered *Dalit*. But what about the people, those who have eat milks like God Shiva, in the form of *Abhishek*, they called out castes.

### Contribution of *Bhakti* movement to *Dalit* Movement

Twelfth century was most important in the history of Indian culture and caste ridden society. It was the time of reformation, everywhere *Brahmins* seeds the crop of God and Goddess. However, in Punjab Gurunanak, Kabir in north India, Changdev Raval in Gujarat, Chakrdhar Swami in Maharashtra and

Basveshwar in Karnataka were struggling against caste ridden society and endeavored to eradicate the caste differences and gender discrimination. They were fought for equality and revolts against the practice of untouchability.

Before twentieth century, Muslim regiment was conquering on India via *Khaibar khind*. Finally, Muslim empire ruled over the north India but they failed to rule on Maharashtra and Karnataka, due to reformers like Basveshwar and Chakrdhar Swami as well as orthodox Hindu *Brahmin* and their religion. On the other hand, Buddhist and Jains were also tried to conquer on Maharashtra and Karnataka but they were also failed. Because of these both of religions were non-vaedic religion. So, they don't agree the system of *Varna* in Hindu society. At that time everyone becomes great doesn't on his quality but on his birth. Though, it was spread the philosophy of orthodox culture but the society was based on system of *Varna*. There was a variety of cults, in an ancient time, emerged with their own ideology in order to bring about reformation in Hindu Society. The saint like figures Basveshar, Chakradhar Swami, Kabir, Dnayneshwar, and Tukaram were fought for egalitarianism in society. The tradition of equality and fraternity was a seeds of *Dalit* consciousness which was found in the writings of Saints (Poets) like Namdev, Eknath and Chokha Mela in the middle age.

In Karnataka, Basveshwar established new religion named *Virshaiv Lingayat* and was tried to make to liberalize and equality in society. Contemporary, Chakrdhar Swami founded *Mahanubhava Sampradaya*. These both cults were intended at liberalizing Hinduism from its rigidity. Other great saints like Gurunanak, Kabir and Bassava other parts of India detested the practice of untouchability. In Panjab, Gurunanak was the founder of Shikh religion and who revolted against system of *Varna* and established new religion which gives the importance of work. He said:

**I am not Hindu, I am not a Muslim, I am a Shikh, a new religion which full of virtues and qualities derived from Hindu and Muslim religion.**

Like other saints he has taught importance of work. In the part of north India, contemporary Saint Kabir has done the same work. He was the first person in India to convince the Islamic culture and the traditions of Hindu society, as well as reveals the bad deeds of both religions simultaneously. Saint Namdev from Maharashtra goes to Panjab for scattering equality and liberty via Gujarat and Rajasthan, was lived there near about twenty years. During the span of spreading Varkari cult in Panjab, he was come in contact with saint Gurunanak and saint Kabir. Finally, they had given a new religion of humanity to the nation. There were many saints can be found in the middle ages who taught the equality, love and *Bhakti*.

Saint Dnayneshwar, who was excommunicated into *Dalit* status in 13<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote an annotation titled as *Dnuaneshwari* in 1290. He established the *Varkari Sampradaya*- religious order of regular pilgrimage, in Maharashtra and provided this tradition with firm and strong spiritual philosophy of humanity among the ordinary people and the untouchables. He has spread his *Varkari Sampradaya* and equality among the society. He, therefore, said: '**This universe is my home.**' Such humanitarian philosophy spread all over India by Dyaneswar. Saint Eknath, another excommunicated Brahmin, who fought for the rights of the untouchables and ordinary people during *Bhakti* period. *Bharud* (a folk song) invented by Eknath during *Bhakti* period for the purpose of social reformation and for the entertainment. Allegorically, it attacks on the instances of traditional professions such as barber, beggars, fortune tellers, farmers, bhagats, cobblers etc. The *Bharud*, Which Saint Eknath had composed to express his firm belief and social outlook of strong opposition for castism and communalism are really thought provoking.

According to the *Brahmanical* hierarchy, '**...all non-Brahmans were called Shudras.** Saint Tukaram calls himself,

***Shudra Kunbi* (agriculturist) a *Shudra* poet, an outcaste, who continued to speak about the evils of the caste system and against its rigidity in the name God's most pious follower still, infuriated his enemies as patriarchal society and orthodox society.**

Saint Tukaram has clearly clarified the attributes and characteristics of true and *Dalit* saints in following *Abhanga* (A hymn, lyrical poem):

***Je ka ranjale ganjale! Tyasi mhane jo apule!!***

***Tochi sadhu olakhava! Dev tethechi janava!!***

He had sought this divine state about the worldly matters. Therefore, he has earned the highest esteem, adoration and devotion in the hearts of common people in the whole Maharashtra. He strongly opposed all kinds of social injustice and discrimination. He rejected Castism and Class discrimination between *Dalit* (Untouchables) and Upper Class Society. However, *Bhakti* cult of *Varkari Samaj* was people oriented. A contemporary Saint Janabai (Woman Slave) and Saint Kanhopatra (*The Prostitute*) were fought for the rights of untouchables during the middle age. Saint Dnayneshwar had laid the firm foundation of *Bhagavat Dharma* and Saint Tukaram becomes the dazzling apex of it.

Saint *Chokha Mela*, being as a *Dalit* poet, gave the first expression to his conscious feelings in his *Abhangas* (Songs in devotion to God). He, therefore, deserves to be called the precursor of *Dalit* poetry. In his famous *Abhanga*, he asks appropriately why the people get lured by the outward appearance of man:

**Hard is sugarcane,  
But that its juice better doesn't make  
Why you are lured away by appearance fake?**

Most of these saints subscribed to the *Bhakti* movements in Hinduism during the medieval period that rejected castism. However, it is wrong to view the *Varkari* movement as a religious movement only, because the major concerns of its leaders were to uproot the spreading social evils. However, post-failure of *Bhakti* movement in India, social reformers were emerged and tried to work for *Dalit* and untouchability in India.

### **Contribution of Social Reformers to *Dalit* Movement**

India has a rich history of thinkers and social reformers who have helped to set up the foundations of modern India. Social reformers were doesn't the part of *Dalit* movement but has been done the same as *Dalit* movement required in society. Therefore, it is an essential to touch the social reformers when *Dalit* movement in India is studied or remembered. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the Nineteenth century. He was a social reformer who took initials to introduce education to women and downtrodden people in India. He revolted against the unjust caste system under which million of people had suffered for centuries. In particular, he courageously upheld the cause of the untouchables and took up the cudgels for the poorer peasants. However, he has pays attention on Indian *Shetji* and *Bhatji*. On one hand, he was fighting with the upper caste people and on the other hand he was sensitizing untouchables by his teaching and speeches against slavery and on their great history of being the rulers of this land. As a result, untouchables realized of their metal slavery got organized to fight against the slavery and stood with Mahatma Phule for constructing an equal society where no human being will suffer the pain of inequality and injustice.

### **Contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to *Dalit* Movement**

Babasaheb Ambedkar is remembered for his revolutionary contributions to the mission of eradication of caste in India. Throughout his life, he battled social discrimination while upholding the rights of the *Dalits* and other socially backward classes. He was not only a great national leader but also a distinguished scholar of international repute. He not only led various social movements for the

upliftment of the depressed sections of society but also contributed to the understanding of the socio-economic and political problems of India through his scholarly works on caste, religion, culture, constitutional law and economic development. He played a seminal role in the framing of the Indian Constitution. He, thus, was a fierce advocate of emancipation of *Dalit* in India.

When Babasaheb Ambedkar was learning at Satara School, he decided to offer Sanskrit as one of his school subjects. But the teacher of Sanskrit insulted and humiliated by saying: **‘I’ll not teach of Sanskrit to the pupil belonging to Mahar caste.’**

Today, we can imagine what extreme agonies have experienced by Babasaheb’s sensitive mind at the childhood. From this incident, he thought of tackling the problem himself and began his fight against untouchability. There were several ways by which he was trying to do this. He spent his whole life fighting against social discrimination, the system of *Chaturvarna* (the categorization of Hindu society into four *Varna*’s) and the Hindu caste system. Untouchability and caste system were the two social evils that had haunted by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar since his childhood days.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar started publishing a weekly journal called *Mooknayak*, where he criticized the orthodox system that prevailed in the society. He spoke openly about the discriminations that were made to the lower castes in the society and the humiliations that they had to undergo and endure. He had also voted for creating separate electorates for the backward classes in society. Reservations for *Dalits* and other religious communities were also demanded by Babasaheb Ambedkar. He also formed the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* so that the deprived and backward classes could get some opportunities to upgrade themselves. He arranged for spreading education to these classes and tried to improve their socio-economic conditions.

First anti-touchability movement was launched by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the 1920s in Maharashtra. He saw the opportunity and possibility of advancement for the untouchables through the use of political means to achieve social and economic equality with the highest classes in modern society. Assertion for *Dalit* identity has become a central issue of *Dalit* movement. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar started his epic movement for the social, economic and cultural freedom of the *Dalits* in India. He courageously deterred Gandhi’s Freedom movement by drawing himself into a conflict with Gandhi on the critical issue of the *Dalit* location within the Hindu social milieu. Apprehensive of immutability in the abject and lowly condition of the *Dalits* even after India gets freedom. He resolutely gave a call for the social and Cultural Revolution.

Mahatma Gandhi had also deep concern with social justice to the *Dalits*, but his approach was different in relation to Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted to subvert the caste-system to reach the goal and Mahatma Gandhi wanted to achieve the goal without damaging the existing social structure. At this moment, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s call:

**Educate, Organize and Agitate, inspired the *Dalits* and they lent him unremitting support. The most vital part was that Dr. Ambedkar engendered among the *Dalits* a sense of self- respect and self- confidence.**

The condition of untouchables was awful and pathetic before independence. They were not allowed to draw water the lake or well which was exclusively meant for the upper castes. Therefore, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar started the *Satyagrah* for drawing water from Chavdar Lake at Mahad, a tahsil place of Raigad District in Maharashtra, which was hitherto reserved only for the upper class. There he along with his thousands of followers performed action of the Bonfire of *Manusmriti* in December 25, 1927. Since the untouchables were not allowed to enter the Hindu tempels, Ambedkar, as a protest to this, started the act of entering the Kalaram Mandir at Nasik. These entire actions become the landmarks in

the history of the *Dalit* movement in India.

### **Dalit Movements and Organizations in India**

The problem of untouchability and exploitation of *Dalits* in social, economic and political areas has been a stark reality of Indian society. Various efforts have been made so far by visionaries in this direction by launching movements and forming organizations to highlight and find solution of the problems of the *Dalits* in India. As a result the awareness among the *Dalits* who have started asserting their identity and demanding their due share in power. If we look at the history of *Dalit* movements organized in different parts of the country, it becomes clear that a number of socio-political organizations, struggles and various types of activities of the *Dalits* had emerged out of different socio- economic and political conditions in the past to ameliorate their wretched condition.

### **CONCLUSION**

Dalit Movement , a social revolution aimed for social change, replacing the age old hierarchical Indian society , based on the democratic ideals of liberty ,equality and social justice , has begun much earlier , became intense in the 1970s and began to deem at present. One reason behind this, as pointed out by Uma Chakraborty, is that the academicians are not paying much attention. Books on Dalit Movement are written but these books do not reflect the actual things and are written keeping in view the Brahmin elites. No one want to confront with those who have power. Besides this, the minds of the people are brahmanised through hegemony. Yet another vital issue is that the movement lack people from all the communities of Dalits. Untouchability is abolished but injustice practices are not. Today to wear good clothes is not forbidden, but to get good job is. In the name of reforms and social uplift, today's political and social systems are pitting one group against the other, sowing hatred and perpetuating a sense of rejection from the past. Education is the only remedy for such discrimination. Thus the Movement for social change will succeed only when all the Dalits unite together to fight for equality. However they should accept that caste that is deeply rooted in peoples mind cannot be erased. So here social change would mean to get rid of discriminatory practices and get rights, necessary for the upliftment of the backward section of society-the Dalits.

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