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New narratives of Dalit politics in India: Beyond empowerment

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Abstract
Caste has always been an integral part of Indian social and political life. Political leaders in order win votes reached out to different castes by portraying themselves as some sort of a Messiah of one or more caste groups. Ever since the Constitution of India in an attempt to safeguard the rights of the Schedule Castes through what we call the reservation policy, vying for its benefits became the central theme of caste based politics. In the midst of this there have been separate social as well as movements for the Dalits. However, since 2014 the traditional trend of Dalit politics underwent significant changes. New Dalit leaders have emerged with newer revised narratives are ushering significant changes in Dalit politics. The present essay is an attempt to analyse these changes that are being felt in Dalit politics.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, untouchability, empowerment, vote, leadership, narrative

Introduction
Sumit Sarkar in his Writing Social History observes that the textbook understanding of late colonial India in general and political action and discourse in particular was grounded on the assumption that comprehension of such actions can be only explained through 'the categories of imperialism, nationalism, and communalism, the interaction among which eventually produced the end result of a coming of freedom that was also the portioning of the subcontinent' (Sumit Sarkar 1997 p 358) [5]. This ultimately led to homogenization of several differences of region, caste, class and gender under the banner of 'Indian' nationalism as well as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' communalism. The bulk of the leadership saw the participation of the Hindu upper castes. Indian society has a particular uniqueness whereby groups of people are excluded which results in their deprivation and disadvantage. These groups constitute what is termed as Dalits. K S Madhavan writes 'In the contemporary context of dalit identity and its articulations, the term dalit signifies not simply a statistical category of the oppressed people but a collective, who have been subjected to systematic social discrimination on account of caste system. It represents a consciousness of the oppressed that seeks to create its own social and political space. Dalit identity and its cultural articulation are emerging as major themes in contemporary social science discourse' (Formation of Dalit Identity in Kerala by K S Madhavan in Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 2008, Vol 69(2008) pp 764-770) [9].

One Dalit writer thus noted, 'The national movement was turned into a form of historical mythological movement and ancestor worship…People such as Phule, Agarkar, Gokhale and Ranade who talked about misery and servitude of Shudras and Ati-Shudras, were declared enemies. The intelligentsia won, they succeeded in turning the Indian liberation struggle into a lopsided fight, and in reducing the other movements to a secondary status'. (Baburao Bagul in "Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India" (New Delhi, 1994, p 15 from Sumit Sarkar 1997, p 364) [5]. In Indian society caste has always played as an instrument of exclusion thereby leading to inequality and deprivation.

The present essay tries to locate the status of Dalit identity in the face of emerging new Ambedkarite leaders trying to make inroads into the traditional leadership structure.

The reality is that caste still plays an important role in the socio-political arena of India. Despite constitutional efforts to eliminate caste-based discrimination, caste identity continues to influence various aspects of Indian society, including politics, education, marriage, and employment. As Sudipta Kaviraj has explained that it was hoped that modern economy of industrialization, pursued by both the state and the private sector coupled with democratic

political process would foster 'social individuation' and dissolve primordial identities like caste and religion. On the contrary it went on to strengthen the caste and religious affiliation. The reason was very simple - a democratic polity required elections and elections meant 'aggregation of perceived interests and the format of perception of identity was traditional, appeals to caste or occasionally religious identities were more effective in the short term'. Hence the politicians since independence took the shortest route towards winning the elections. ('Introduction' ed. by Sudipta Kaviraj, 1997 p8). This short-term short cut method led to political manipulation of traditional identities like caste and hence despite talks of modern universal democracy, caste did not wither away, it manifested itself in multiple ways. Kaviraj goes on to say that the Dalit identity emerged as a modern construct which though lacking 'impressive genealogy' was effective and could not reverse untouchability. ('Introduction' ed. Sudipta Kaviraj, 1997 p9). Rajni Kothari too is of the view that while discussing caste and politics in India we need to ask "what form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics or what for is politics taking in a caste-oriented society?" and not "is caste disappearing?" (Article-'Caste and Modern Politics' by Rajni Kothari ed. Sudipta Kaviraj, 1997, p58).

In all this the term Dalit has found itself isolated, torn apart by its lodgment in the diverse network of social identities in the country. To assess the exact space of the Dalits we need to look into the features of the Indian social structure. (Paramjit S Judge, Polish Sociological Review,2012, No.178, p265-279).

- Separation of manual and non-manual labour. While the non-manual labour is performed by the 'upper castes' or the 'twice born' castes the manual labour is done by the 'lower castes'. Again even though cooking and swordsmanship constituted manual labour, they were performed by 'upper castes' due to their non-polluting nature. Rest of the tasks which involved manual labour were considered unclean hence left to be performed by the lowest of the lower castes, namely the Dalits.
- Exclusion of Dalits from the other 'upper castes' in terms of residence, education, non-polluting occupations. This is one very important feature whereby Dalits are subjected to systematic discrimination and exclusion. In certain areas women were not allowed to cover their breasts.
- The Dalits themselves were heterogeneous and practiced exclusion among themselves. They never intermarried since such practices would invite the wrath of the community members. This practice played an important role in the sustenance of the caste system.
- The belief that these untouchables would be rewarded in the next life where they will be born into the higher caste, became a kind of an ideology. Such an ideology based on karma actually made the Dalits stay and work religiously in their menial occupation which was termed to be the 'dharma' as interpreted by Lord Krishna.

Dalit-oppression takes another dimension altogether when it comes to the plight of Dalit women. A peculiar situation emerge where the Dalit women have to fight at two fronts for their rights - the non Dalit upper caste and the patriarchy present within the Dalit fold (Article-'A Journey of Pain-Women Among Dalits in Indian Society', by Arunima Ray in Parthapratim Sen & Arunima Ray Ed, Levant Books, 2020, p60). This is the reason why Dalit women supported the 'feminist radicalism' in the peasant movements in Maharashtra, but refrained from supporting the Dalit subordination in the entire peasant movement. Hence in order to voice Dalit feminism the National Federation of Dalit Women had to be formed in 1995. According to Sharmila Rege, while women's movement in India since 1970s had focused on the plight of women as a collective category, very little attention was paid to women's experiences as Dalits. She concluded that whereas women of 'upper castes' were likely to face violence within the family and the controls of the household, the Dalit women would face rape threats, sexual violence, heckling in the public sphere (Sharmila Rege Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 33, No 44 Oct 31- Nov 6, 1998) As already observed, Dalit in itself is far from being a homogeneous category. It is divided into sub-castes and often not sharing the same sentiment and emotions even though all have experienced injustice, discrimination, violence and utter mistreatment from the so called upper castes. As a result, we do not find uniformity in caste based mobilization not just in case of Dalits but also in case of other 'upper castes'. In West Bengal, for instance, exhibition of caste is looked down upon and is people are more akin to attach themselves to the category of 'Bhadralok' or the civilized ones. As Partha Chatterjee says,

'One of the peculiarities of public life in West Bengal is that…any mention of caste practices…is virtually taboo. It is not acceptable in polite urban conversation to bring up the topic of caste and one who does so is deemed either not civil enough to know such things are not talked about among gentle folk, or deliberately rude and provocative' (Partha Chatterjee, 2016 p83).

Since the Dalits of West Bengal were more keen to get stamped as *anunnoto* or undeveloped rather than depressed, the higher caste never felt the need to assert their caste identities or entitlement (Parthapratim Sen-Article- 'Caste Matters in West Bengal Politics: Where the Matuas Stand' in Sen & Ray Ed. 2020, p100). The urge to get into the 'Bhadralok' bracket has always dominated the tendencies to get mobilized in the name of caste lest get bracketed as the uncivilized 'Chhotolok'. Nevertheless, the Matuas have over the years have become the dominant Schedule Caste group in Bengal which is making forays into the political arena since the late 2000s.

Again, since caste discrimination being not an exclusive Hindu phenomenon, there have emerged categories such as Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, all competing among themselves for constitutional recognition resulting in some form of alleviation in the social ladder.

Since 2014, caste mobilization in Indian politics has been showing some strange and interesting trends which forces social researchers and observers to deliberate on them and find out the reasons behind this development. The rise of Chandrashekhar Azad as a young leader in Dalit politics in western Utter Pradesh has in fact compelled observers to conclude that a new era has been ushered in the horizon of caste-politics in India. Azad's Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) won the Nagina (SC) constituency seat by a margin of 1.5 lakh votes in the 18th Parliamentary elections, 2024 not only reduced the vote percentage of the BJP by 36% but marked a significant shift in Dalit politics since Azad chose to fight the election independently without getting into any

alliance. (Chandrashekhar Azad's victory signifies new era in UP Dalit politics, https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha/story/chandrashekhar-azads-victory-lok-sabha-election-up-dalit-politics-mayawati-bsp-2549779-2024-06-11). His rise automatically diminished the influence of Bahujan Samaj Party and its leader Mayawati.

The rise of new age leaders of Dalit politics are emphasizing more on real issues rather than on 'personality cult'. The dalit voters seem to be tired the 'status quo' of being used as 'foot soldiers' to further the image of personality cults (The Changing Face of Dalit Politics:New Age Leaders are changing the narrative of Dalit politics by focussing on pragmatic issues rather than on personality cults and identity politics by Anand Mishra).

The Dalit vs Dalit has now become more evident when in August 2024 the Supreme Court verdict allowed sub-classification of Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes for the purpose of reservation. The reason for such sub-classification according to the Supreme Court were:

- To recognise varying levels of disadvantage: Not all SCs and STs face the same level of disadvantage.
- Provides wider protections: Sub-classification can help provide better support to the most disadvantaged groups within SCs and STs.
- Addresses under representation: Sub-classification can help address the under representation of certain castes within SCs and STs.

The Supreme Court laid down the procedure for such sub-classification:

- Sub-classification should be based on quantifiable and demonstrable data.
- Sub-classification should not be used for political appeasement.
- Sub-classification should consider factors such as gender, economic status, education, and employment.
- Sub-classification should prioritize access to quotas based on an overall assessment of an individual's marginalization.

This created a furore among the Dalit leaders who became divided on this issue. Most parties and politicians connected to the larger communities, such as Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party, Chandrashekhar Azad and the Bhim Army, and Chirag Paswan and the Lok Janshakti Party, oppose this verdict. However, Jitan Ram Manjhi and the Hindustani Awam Morcha, and various activist groups connected to castes such as Valmiki, Musahar, Dhobi, Koree, Madiga in Andhra Pradesh-Telangana, and Matang, Mang, and Chambhar in Maharashtra have hailed the apex Court ruling (Badri Narayan, Hindustan Times, 12 September, 2024).

Finally, there is a new narrative of 'withering of caste distinction' after the 'Maha Kumbh' congregation which took place at Prayagraj between 13th January and 26th February, 2025. This massive gathering of faithful Hindus happens every 12 years. Since this congregation allows people from every sect, caste and even religion to take a holy dip and witness the different spiritual practices of the Hindu religion, it is now viewed as an event which embraces everyone irrespective of one's caste. (https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/kumbh-mela-is-grand-yajna-of-unity-where-distinction-of-castes-disappears-pm-modi20241213153627/). The official theme of this event was 'Samajik Samta' (social equality) as the poster of the Utter Pradesh Government exhibited during the event (Maulshree Seth, Jan 16, 2025). This is in stark contrast to the various dimensions of Hindu temples and places of worship where priests as well as commoners very candidly practice caste discrimination. The veracity of this claim however will always remain a question for social science researchers.

In the face of these emerging narratives, Dalit politics is undergoing a metamorphosis. While Dalit movements have seen significant progress since the days of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the current state of Dalit politics is marked by challenges, contradictions, and shifting dynamics. Some the reasons are:

- Dalit politics has historically been represented by leaders and organizations such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Republican Party of India (RPI), the Dalit Panthers, and later various regional parties like Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh. However, over time, Dalit leadership has become fragmented into various smaller factions and parties, each with their own agendas. This division has diluted the collective power of the Dalit community and its ability to challenge dominant political forces.
- One of the major reasons for the weakening of Dalit politics is the co-optation of Dalit leaders and organizations by mainstream political parties. Dalit leaders, once seen as voices of resistance and social change, have often been absorbed into the political establishments, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress. In some cases, these leaders have aligned with dominant political parties, seeking power and positions, which has led to compromises on issues of Dalit empowerment and social justice. This alignment has often diluted their support base among the Dalit masses who once saw them as champions of their rights. Between 2008 and 2010, the then Left Front government of West Bengal undertook various measures, dolled out funds and made series of promises to woo the Matuas. Mamata Banerjee paid visits to Thakurnagar, the seat of the Matuas between 2008 and 2009. She as the Central Railway Minister computerized the Thakurnagar railway station. She donated Rupees 32 lakhs from her MPLAD for the different developmental projects of Thakurnagar ('Caste Matters in West Bengal Politics: Where the Matuas Stand'-Parthapratim Sen in Parthapratim Sen & Arunima Ray Ed 2020, Levant Books, Kolkata, pp 112-113).
- While caste-based reservation in education and employment was initially meant to uplift Dalits and other marginalized communities, over time it has been used as a political tool by various parties. This has sometimes led to the diversion of focus from issues like caste-based violence, social exclusion, and economic empowerment to mere tokenism and vote-bank politics. The rise of other identity-based groups demanding similar reservations has also led to the fragmentation of Dalit support and the weakening of a unified voice. Political parties look up to the Dalit voters since they habitually vote in large numbers. In any election, the

voter turnout ranges from 50 per cent to 75 per cent and it is a common site to see the Dalit voters stand in long ques to vote. Even in case of the the non-reserved seats, the Dalit vote matter in a big way which affect the crucial vote swing. In case of assembly elections, it becomes all the more important to woo the Dalit votes. (Dalit Votes Without Voices by Rehnamol Raveendran in Deccan Herald, 13 October 2024, https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/dalit-votes-without-dalit-voices-3230226, Accessed on 11.03.2025). This constant wrangling and hankering for votes have reduce the Dalits to mere vote banks as a result their voices tend to get lost in such a quagmire.

- Despite all odds, the social and economic conditions of Dalits have evolved significantly over the last few decades. Many Dalits have moved to urban areas, gained access to education, and entered new sectors of employment. While this has brought about some degree of social mobility, it has also led to a shift, albeit in to a limited degree, in focus from caste-based politics to broader concerns, such as economic inequality, job opportunities, and quality of life. In some cases, this has resulted in a dilution of caste-based activism, as younger Dalits increasingly view themselves as part of the larger national community, rather than being exclusively defined by their caste identity. However, after the suicide of Rohit Vemula, a Ph.D. student of Hyderabad University in January 2016, Dalit assertion against the upper caste authorities became quite vociferous. Nevertheless, the support for Vemula, who wasn't a Dalit but belonged to the Other Backward Caste (OBC) gradually withered away.
- Dr. Ambedkar's vision was based on uniting Dalits, backwards, and other marginalized groups (known as Bahujans) to challenge the dominance of the upper castes. However, in recent years, this coalition has weakened. Parties like the BSP, which once represented a broad Dalit-Bahujan alliance, have faced internal divisions. At the same time, other political forces have sought to divide these communities based on region, religion, and identity, making it difficult to build a unified political movement.
- In regions like Uttar Pradesh, the Dalit vote, once solidly united with the BSP, has seen a shift. Muslim communities, particularly in areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, have increasingly aligned themselves with political parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and others that advocate for social justice. This shift has altered the dynamics of Dalit politics, as Muslim and Dalit votes are often competing for the same political space. This fragmentation has weakened Dalit's influence within the broader political landscape. Some commentators feel that a Dalit-Muslim unity is a 'castle in sand' (Why Dalit-Muslim Unity is a Mirage? by Faisal C K in The New Indian Express, 08 September, 2021).
- With the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its pan-Hindu ideology, Dalit politics has faced an increasing challenge. The BJP has attempted to position itself as a party of social justice, promoting Dalit leaders in key positions, even as it consolidates a broader upper-caste support base. The BJP's outreach to Dalit communities, through policies like the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and other welfare schemes, has garnered some Dalit support, but this has also been seen as an attempt to undermine the core issues of caste-based discrimination. This shift has made it harder for traditional Dalit political parties to mobilize their base effectively.
- In the digital age, social media has become a powerful tool for activism and political mobilization. However, the online activism that has emerged in response to caste-based violence and discrimination has not always translated into a strong, tangible political force. Many Dalit activists and organizations now work through social media, but this has often been at odds with traditional forms of political engagement that require grassroots mobilization, funding, and political alliances. This shift from on-ground mobilization to online activism has made it harder to sustain the momentum of Dalit politics. Through the social media Dalit activists connect directly with the people, create awareness, garner support for policy changes and plan courses of future action (Dalit Activism in the Digital Age: Social Media as a Platform for Change by Preeti Oza).

In conclusion we may safely say while casteism and caste based politics will remain a significant feature of Indian society and polity, the plight of the Dalits will depend on whether they still wish to remain simple voters following the dictates of their leaders or empower themselves with the opportunities of reservations.

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