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A STUDY ON DALIT MOVEMENTS IN ANDHRA PRADESH: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

KEY WORDS: Dalits, Social movements, Caste System, Untouchability, Mala, Madiga, Conflicts.

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of different social movements over time and to what extent they have expanded the space for dalits, in the economy, society and polity in Andhra Pradesh. The state of Andhra Pradesh has a distinct place in the history of social movements in India. Andhra Pradesh was almost a laboratory for international institutions for experimenting with economic reforms and, according to political scientists, one of the objectives was also to capture the response to such reforms from varied social groups and those involved in social movements down the line ranging from the extreme left to autonomous groups. The state has witnessed many social movements involving marginalized and disadvantaged groups and regions.

INTRODUCTION

The Dalit movements in contemporary India follow more than one path under different banners. Each one of them raises issues affecting the whole community or it's one or the other stratum, and expresses the Dalit identity. For some, social issues and the new Dalit identity are more important than economic issues. The new identity that they want to evolve is distinctively different than those of the caste Hindus; others do not adhere to the dichotomy. Their new identity of being Dalit, i.e., oppressed and exploited, is in the making, for that, they do not wish to erase the traditional identity both co-exist. The Buddha and Ambedkar are their prophets and heroes. Their struggle for equality and eradication of untouchability is irrespective of their religion persuasion.

Thus Andhra Pradesh inherited a rich legacy of social movements with radical questions and solutions and the following five decades also witnessed a number of social movements, on almost all social sections either participated or supported these movements. While some of these movements were spontaneous, sectional and local, yet others were organized, comprehensive and regional, if not state-wide. There are some overlapping issues as well as separate, particular, local or regional issues. One important factor of all these movements is that, either at the time of conception or during the course, they raised radical questions in every walk of life and attempted to offer meaningful solutions.

Origin Of Dalits Or Untouchables

The Hindu social system is marked by a unique and unnatural division of labour which dehumanizes and degrades all those who come under this system. The Purusha Sukta in the Rigveda, the sacred text of caste Hindus, declares that the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra have come from different parts of the Creator Brahma's body. The Brahmins come from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet, to perform societal functions, as priests, warriors, entrepreneurs and the servile class. This arbitrary classification was named the Varna or caste system.

Outside of this fourfold classification is a fifth class, which comes not from the body of Brahma but to serve the fourfold classes of Hindu society. Dehumanized, this fifth class has constantly been subjected to change of nomenclature from epoch to epoch, as Panchama, Nishada, Chandala, Pariah and, currently, Dalits. The Dalits, as the wretched of Hindu society, have always been ostracized by upper caste Hindus, cursed, starved, persecuted and forbidden to amass material goods. Their innate human development has been systematically blocked by this inhuman system. But, as B.R. Ambedkar says, the starving men of slavery and oppression in human history will not always remain quiet. The Dalits in India, traditionally known as 'Panchamas' or untouchables, and now called Scheduled Castes by the legal dispensation of the country,

have always borne the brunt of the caste system. The term Scheduled Caste was first used by the British government in the Government of India Act, 1935. Prior to this, some of these castes were included within the depressed classes, a category which was used for the first time in the beginning of this century.

Concept Of Dalit Consciousness:

Historically, the Dalits since the early fifth century BC to medieval period to till the attainment of independence Dalits are sought to defy the caste and untouchability in Indian society. In India include Phule's slavery, Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, the Riddles of Rama and Krishna and several of his writings and speeches awakened the Dalit consciousness. They are the prime resources to understand and contest the caste issues in Indian context. Dalit consciousness refers to the Dalit politics and identity in terms of political awareness and the notion of collective identity among the diverse Dalit communities. These two uses are fundamentally the same in their emphasis on the need to be aware of the exploitation based on caste.

Dalit consciousness is guided by the Ambedkarite ideology, programs, leadership and organization and incorporates both institutionalised and non-institutionalised individual and collective actions initiated and adopted by the community to achieve desired goals. Leadership provided by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had powerful impact on the community and subsequent course of Dalit movement draws inspiration and strength from his vision. To understand Dalit consciousness is a complex process as it incorporates several complexities like political consciousness. It includes the understanding of the Dalits politics, processes of political socialization and political culture among Dalits, its impact on the construction of political consciousness and its different ways of expressions including literature. An effort has been made to understand Dalit movement in India in the following section along with the understanding of Dalit aesthetics. The emancipator ideology formulated and articulated by Dalits was independent of the nationalist discourse. The "Adi dravida and Adi Andhra movements initiated in Hyderabad state by Bhagyareddy Varma had also its impact on the coastal districts of Andhra."

Dr. B.R. ambedkar And Dalit Movements

It is observed that the approaches used by scholars to study the social movements of Dalits are not uniform. Further, most of the studies undertaken on scheduled castes or Dalits in Andhra Pradesh are related to the Ambedkar period, prior to 1956 before the formation of the state. Therefore, the studies do not focus on the process of change and the issues that are generated from these struggles. Most of the studies concentrate on Ambedkar movement as an extended ideology of all India character without considering the specific nature of each state and region. As a result, they have

failed to bring out the shortcomings of the movements to provide insights into the problems.

Andhra Pradesh was formed as a separate state in 1956, the year in which Babasaheb Ambedkar passed away. Therefore, the scheduled castes agitations in the state need to be viewed as Post-Ambedkar agitations. Though Andhra Pradesh is administratively emerged as an independent entity, it is in fact consisted of four distinguished regions. Each region has its own socio-economic and geographical identity. But, in the mainstream literature the dominant region of coastal Andhra is projected as Andhra Pradesh. This has inhibited the unique nature of scheduled caste problems in Telangana, Rayalaseema and North Andhra. The so-called social movements and protest movements of Andhra Pradesh as depicted and explained by scholars relate to coastal Andhra Pradesh only. In fact the region had a unique advantage of conversions by 1931. It was estimated by Forrester D.B. that 20 per cent of depressed classes in Godavari districts, 32 per cent in Krishna and 57 per cent in Guntur have been converted to Christianity by 1931. It was in this region Ambedkar movement originated. Except in the studies of Gail Omvedt who has studied Ambedkar movement separately for Telangana (Hyderabad) and coastal Andhra, none of the scholars paid any attention to the diversity in the problems of scheduled castes in different parts of the state. The social movements in Telangana region are absorbed in the left and radical left struggles from 1950, before the formation of the state. The Rayalaseema region has a unique problem of factionalism and the scheduled castes are the active players in this game.

Dalit Movements

The "Dalits have started raising their heads and asserting their dignity, became intolerable to the upper castes. They are demanding land, economic betterment, education, employment and above all social and economic equality. The self assertion of Dalits however unpalatable to the upper Hindu caste people in the state resorted to atrocities on Dalits. Viewing the scheduled castes agitations in Andhra Pradesh from this angle makes the problem difficult as the struggles in the state appear to be not qualified to call them as movements. They are sporadic, momentary and issue based. Therefore, we have refrained from using the term social movement to understand the dalit agitations in Andhra Pradesh. We have also not used the term dalit as a collective of all socially deprived groups.

There is no social cohesion among the 59 identified scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh. Further, a separate agitation for the identity and share in the benefits has been spearheaded for the last one decade in the state. In fact the colonial identity of the scheduled castes or ex-untouchables is lost long back with protracted war against the indigenous culture of the native Indians. This has been done deliberately by the settlers both in the past and in recent times. Interestingly the native Indians themselves have played into the hands of their enemies by denying their own cultural identity once they are converted into a different faith. It is almost disappeared in the mainstream dalit consciousness in Andhra Pradesh except in a few pockets in Telangana and other under developed regions of the state.

The Dalit movement can be classified as (i) reformative and (ii) alternative. Reformative movements focus mainly on the study of changes in the caste system and the institution of untouchability. Issues relating to conversion to other religions for example, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, through education, economic status and political power are taken up in the study of alternative movements (Shah, 1990). He also highlighted Mahatma Gandhi as an ardent champion for removing untouchability within the Hindu Chaturvarna framework (Shah 2001). Ilaiah's (1996) experience of

everyday life gives him a platform to take revolutionary steps to criticise the Hindutva ideology. The idea that, 'Hinduism is a religion of humanity is totally rejected by the followers of Ambedkar and later by the Dalit Panther. Freeman (1997) has done an extensive and well versed life history of untouchables.

Conflicts Within The Dalits

There is also a long history of conflicts and discrimination within the Dalit groups (Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh) themselves in one form or the other since times immemorial. This conflict has intensified in the recent past and has been manifested in identity movements by the Madigas and their allies. The Karamchedu incident catalyzed the Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh and the conflict between the Malas and Madigas subsided for a short period. However, over the time the Dalit movements has seen some fissures in it and some sub-castes, including Madiga, started questioning the hegemony of Malas in usurping all the benefits of reservation. Madiga Hakkula Parirakshana Samithi holding the banner of Madiga Dandora demanded further classification of the Scheduled castes and provides reservation according to the relative backwardness. Though the demand was democratic and seeking redress of piled up discontent, nonetheless the movement resulted in fragmentation of Dalit movement.

Emergence Of Madiga Dandora:

The MRPS was founded by a few self-conscious assertive Madiga youth on 27 July 1994 at Edumudu village in Prakasam district. This is in stark contrast to the earlier Dalit organisations which were urban based and headed by well off educated Dalits. Apart from the common caste and caste related problems they addressed; there was very less for the common Dalits to relate themselves to their caste organisation. But with MRPS this has changed. It started in a village with a rural base of only 20 members under the charismatic leadership of Manda Krishna Madiga, and within a few months they were already a political force to be reckoned with at the state level. For the first time in the history, this leadership has brought their community on the streets to raise their voice about their rights and plight."

One of the main reasons of the movement was the seething discontent among Madigas over their relative backward status compared to Malas. The immediate factor was their contempt about the monopolisation of resources and reservation facilities by Malas. They complained that though the Malas are relatively lesser in number than the Madigas they were benefited more by the reservation policy. As a result, they initiated a movement to fight for justice, popularly known as "Madiga Dandora".

Emergence Of Mala Mahanadu:

However, the Mala Mahanadu resumed an anti-categorization movement vehemently opposing the division and demanded that the government should withdraw the orders issued classifying the Dalits into four groups like A,B,C and D. It argued that the division of reservations is the divide and rule politics of dominant castes and Dalits should fight united against the caste annihilation. Unconvincingly, Mala Mahanadu raised two issues: one is that the concerning of reservation benefits by Malas attributed to their individual "merit" and argues that although the Madigas have been oppressed by the upper castes but they are unforthcoming because of their marked occupancy, and the Madigas were expected to repeat the cycle of skill acquisition, improvement in competitive spirit and "merit" for any modern occupational ladder.

However, considering the importance of the 'Dandora' movement, the Andhra Pradesh government enacted "Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes" (Rationalization of

Reservations) Act 20 of 2000 based on the Justice Ramachandra Raju commission's recommendations. Again Mala Mahanadu went to the Supreme Court challenging the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes (Rationalization of Reservations) Act 20 of 2000.

The Supreme Court in its verdict said that the mini classification based on micro distinctions is false to the very egalitarian spirit of Indian Constitution and violates Articles 14, 15 and 16 which constitute the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. Though there is a temporary impasse on the division of reservations as demanded by the Dandora movement, the movement has brought out yet other important questions before the Dalit movement as the democratization in Andhra Pradesh.

CONCLUSION

Dalit movements were grounded in social discrimination; hence the fight is within civil society. The evolution of different social movements through the ages and to what extent they have expanded the space for dalits, in the economy, society and polity in the state. Dalits are the suppressed people at the lost rung of the cast based hierarchy. Their inferior occupations and low levels of ascriptive status make them susceptible for attacks at the hands of upper-caste people. The organizational efforts made by Dalit leadership for uplifting their status are known as Dalit movement. It is a protest against untouchability, casteism and discrimination faced by the Dalits. This movement indicates some trends of protest ideologies which entail the following, withdrawal and self organization, high Varna status and extolling of non-Aryan culture's virtues, abandoning of Hinduism and embracing other religions like Buddhism and Islam. It is also clarifies that no use of dalit conflicts within the dalits in any circumstances.

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