

The Post-political Dalit Movement in Maharashtra

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The contemporary Dalit movement in Maharashtra is marked by five distinct trends, that is, increased militancy, sub-caste assertion, middle-class activism, public symbolism, and a rightward shift. These are not manifested through political mobilisation but predominantly in sociocultural spheres. The congruence and divergence of these from B R Ambedkar's normative political project need to be explored.

In 2019, just before the announcement of general elections, the Dalit politics in Maharashtra gained the much-needed buzz. Prakash Ambedkar's Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh, a small political outfit mostly limited to the Akola district, decided to launch the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) by forming an alliance with All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), a controversial Muslim party from Hyderabad. The curiosity about the future of Dalit politics in Maharashtra has increased as this alliance had altered results in some closely contested seats and became a nightmare for the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party. This re-emergence is vital as it was assumed that the independent Dalit politics in Maharashtra is almost dead. The VBA's initiation may help to revitalise the dormant Dalit voices substantively and one can imagine a new political alternative against the contemporary hegemony of the Hindutva right. However, this task is difficult as in the last three decades, the conventional Dalit consciousness has improvised into non-political spheres. The collective notion of unified Dalit mass that objectively moves with normative political promise is unavailable. Today, there are multiple Dalit agents who are not obliged to any one moral prescription of B R Ambedkar's political philosophy. Instead the Dalit groups are operating as free-floating rational agents, engaged to fulfil subjective sectional interests.

I would argue that there are no specific characteristics that bring a collective and homogeneous sense to the Dalit identity and its movement today. The Dalit social activism has remained fragmented, localised and autonomous. Any attempts to form broad political normative framework has failed here as the varied social assertions by the Dalits are

agonistically related to each other. These fragmentations have distanced themselves from the egalitarian principles of social justice and are consistently adopting neo-liberal democratic modes to amplify certain subjective interests.

Ambedkar and Democracy

Ambedkar thought that democracy as a system of governance is not only about procedural electoral norms or about the accountability of the ruling elites but it must also function as a "good society" based on equality, liberty and solidarity (Drèze 2019: 171). Social justice and ideas of representation are integral concepts in Ambedkar's thought on democracy. Modern liberal state must take adequate measures for substantive participation of the minorities and the socially marginalised communities in the decision-making process (Rodrigues 2017). Ambedkar maintained that the principle aim of any democratic constitution is to dislodge the governing classes from their position of power in favour of the servile classes (Ambedkar 2004: 64). Democracy, however, is also distinct from the Marxist brand of militant class struggle, as it adopts peaceful and non-violent means to bring revolutionary transformations in people's social and economic conditions. Ambedkar was hopeful that the newly independent India would adopt constitutional morality as a virtue and would generate greater public conscience towards its minorities and the downtrodden people. He visualised that the liberal constitution would also help the ex-untouchables to escape the caste prison and allow them to enter the democratic polity as right bearing dignified citizens. Borrowing heavily from the British and American political traditions, he also envisaged that his political party, the Republican Party of India (RPI), may emerge as an effective political opposition in the parliamentary system and may build a democracy more accountable and responsible.

However, derailing from Ambedkar's ambitious political project, the RPI remained insignificant in providing leadership to most of the marginalised and

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oppressed communities. It failed in amplifying the concern for social justice, in mobilising the poor working class (Dadasaheb Gaikwad's attempt to mobilise the landless labourers is a notable exception) and in building impressive opposition against the hegemonic domination of the Congress. The post-Ambedkar Dalit politics under the RPI was also in perpetual crisis due to rampant factionalism (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 2000: 212–13). It remained functional as a passive political subject without any audible impressive voice. In contrast, in 1970s and 1980s its social counterpart, the Dalit civil society witnessed vibrant visibility. The Dalit social has been groomed by autonomous modes of mass protest (emergence of Dalit Panthers), formation of sociocultural and religious organisations (Buddhist faith-based organisations) and has engaged in the building of bourgeois class associations (Kanshi Ram's BAMCEF). In this respect, it has distanced itself from conventional political rhetoric and has offered nuanced reflexivity over community's social and cultural objectives. It is at the social spectrum—especially in everyday economic, cultural and intellectual spheres—that the post-Ambedkar Dalit consciousness has registered its evident presence.

Ambedkar's heightened political ambitions to launch an enlightened political community through the RPI appears moribund and inconsequential, as the contemporary Dalit social spectrum has been engaged in the post-political life conditions. I am borrowing this term from the impactful works of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau in which the diverse popular social upsurges (like feminist or ecological movements) are seen important events with critical political content but it is also noted that these forces are divorced from a strong political normative. As there is no single privileged moral force or actor that determines the nature of political change, the social actors operate in plural fashion, challenging the authorities at their segmented location (Mouffe and Laclau 2014).

In the post-Ambedkar period, especially in last three decades, there are five

major trends that demonstrate the shift of Dalit movement from political to a post-political condition. The Dalit movement today represents nuanced actors that are engaged not only in campaign against caste atrocities and in asserting their cultural rights through Buddhist symbols but, alongside influential new Dalit groups, are also engaged with bourgeois right-wing ideological camps. These segments have democratised the public sphere considerably, representing the arrival of powerful social and class segments, however due to the closed and narrow approach of each group there is a lack of cordial deliberation resulting in the absence of any substantive political imagination.

The following narratives about the Dalit fragments reflect five major tendencies that dominate the Dalit consciousness today. These are not sectarian compartmentalised groups and often allied with each other on various social programmes. However each group has its distinct operative field and agenda that differentiate one from its counterpart. Their differences are well pronounced and established. These groups do claim to fight against Brahminism and caste-based discrimination, however it has not yet created any equivalence between them by which they can act with defined political objectives together. A post-political condition, however, is also pregnant with possibilities that these multiple divergent modes of social activism may integrate and form a broader collective to achieve justice.

Dalit Militancy

Dalits face caste atrocities, social discrimination and economic exploitation in their everyday life. The society remained Brahminical and resisted the humanitarian appeals of Dalits for dignity and fraternity with brutal attacks, humiliation and discrimination. On the ground, Dalits are building resistances and have been continuously reacting to everyday casteist slurs, discrimination in schools and government institutions, harassment and rape of Dalit women, social boycott by the upper-caste elites, non-payment of wages, social prejudices and exploitative customs, and not allowing

victims to lodge first information reports (FIRs) against caste-based violence. Dalits are engulfed in such social tragedies persistently, and through numerous small, local and sporadic struggles such discriminatory social attitudes are being challenged.

On occasions, Dalits also have organised statewide massive resistances. In the post-1990 phase, the Dalits mobilised and protested militantly on three important incidents. First, in 1997, the Dalits took to the streets to protest against the desecration of Ambedkar's statue in Mumbai. It was a massive protest and 10 Dalit youths were killed in police firing. Second, on 29 September 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to Mahar caste were murdered in a small village called Khairlanji in Bhandara district. The women of the family were paraded naked before being murdered. Almost two months after the incident, the news became widespread on electronic media and Dalits started protesting against the atrocities in all major cities. The news became global and pressure was built upon the government for speedy action. Third, a vibrant and powerful Dalit protests on the streets of Maharashtra were witnessed again when at Bhima Koregaon, near Pune, some lumpen right-wing groups attacked the Dalits, assembled to commemorate an annual community event of historic significance. The Dalit response was spontaneous, angry and the protesters put the normal functioning of the state to a halt.

Such sporadic awakening of Dalit masses is the testimony that Dalit movement has retained its radical uncompromising characteristics and can take militant street action against the Brahminical forces. These civil society struggles are often delinked from their political counterparts as several local Dalit groups protest as flash mobs, often autonomously organised to raise their grievances. In the recent times, Ambedkarite protesters have faced extreme hostility from the state–society combine and are being projected as militant hate-mongers against the Hindus and the Hindutva-led nationalist-state. In the current context, there is an increasing imposition of tags

like miscreants, lawbreakers, Naxals and even anti-national to the protesters. The attempt to arrest Anand Teltumbde, a known Dalit intellectual, on a false premise of sedition and anti-state activities is a visible example of state's anti-Dalit character (Bajoria 2019). A nationalist collective Hindu self is being evoked to target the "separatist" political voices of the Dalits. Thus, the resisting Ambedkarite Dalits are now projected with unlawful and criminal categories. These strategies on the social fronts have cunningly projected the Ambedkarites as "other" social minority. From being revolutionary and radical, like the Dalit Panthers of the 1980s, the vocal and agitating Dalits in contemporary times are cornered as Maoist and anti-national.

Sub-caste Assertion

The Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra is often associated with the assertion of the Mahar community. However, in the post 1980s, comprehensive mobilisations of non-Mahar Dalit castes, especially amongst the Matang and Charmakar castes, have emerged highlighting the disparity, inequalities and exclusion within the Dalits. The mobilisation of Matangs over the demand of separate sub-quota within the Scheduled Castes reservation is made in order to overcome the caste's relative deprivation (Hiwrale 2018). The mobilisation further advanced its demands for the appointment of autonomous state commission to examine the social, economic and educational backwardness of the non-Mahar Dalit castes and to establish welfare institutions for the promotion and safeguards of the poorest Dalits. Such demands became the rallying point for the community assertion and have democratised the Dalit sphere in a substantive manner. The awakening of the worst-off Dalits demanding access to middle class assets and participation in institutionalised power is a progressive churning and has the capacity to build greater solidarities for social justice.

Within the conventional Dalit discourse the independent mobilisation of Matangs and Charmakars is judged as a divisive strategy crafted by the political elites to keep the traditional social

ruptures intact. The claims for nominal benefits by evoking immaterial social difference are treated as anti-Ambedkar in spirit and may derail the political project of Dalit unity (Gopani 2019: 181). For example, in conventional social discourse the Charmakar caste is identified as superior over Mahars and therefore its distance from the Ambedkarite movement is justified. It pushes the group to become an alibi of right-wing politics. Such social divisions are utilised mostly during the local elections to defeat the dominant Mahar/neo-Buddhist candidates. Increasingly, the Mang–Matang communities provided an independent Ambedkarite leadership and political objectives. Leaders like Anna Bhau Sathe and Lahuji Salve become the new icons of social dignity alongside Ambedkar and Jotirao Phule. Numerous community-based organisations like Akhil Bhartiya Matang Sangh, Manviya Hakk Abhiyan, Anna Bhau Sathe Foundation, etc, have influenced the community to raise critical issues of representation. These assertions have been critical of the dominant Mahar leadership for appropriating most of the benefits of state policies, however, new claims for Dalit solidarity for political action are also evoked.

Within the Dalit discourse, the need to form broader caste solidarities has been expressed and in the recent past the Matang caste is joining the Ambedkarite social movement in the most committed way. Their organic demands for separate quota and special packages for community welfare are still intact, however, it hardly creates visible contestations. Periodically this agonistic site is improving as the sub-caste mobilisation is also creating new alliances and solidarities over the issues of caste atrocities and land question.

Active Dalit Middle Class

The emergence of active Dalit middle class is a visible phenomenon now. A significant Dalit section has entered the realm of middle class comfort by gaining higher education, utilising the facilities of reservation and other welfare measures of the state. This section has remained the backbone in establishing Ambedkarite political parties like the RPI till the 1970s

and by the mid-1980s promoted the Bahujan Samaj Party. However, in the post-1990 period, the Dalit middle class has shifted its priorities, and has invested and engaged in social fronts, especially by establishing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), running faith-based Buddhist organisations, building community centric welfare associations, starting educational institutions, running cultural collectives and opening associations for economic advancement. For example, in recent times there is a growing interest to start independent print and visual media. As a response, there are a dozen daily newspapers, numerous magazines and periodicals and three 24×7 television channels that mainly focus and deliberate on the Dalit politics and Buddhist issues in Maharashtra.

One of the major initiatives that started in Maharashtra was the establishment of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICC), with an objective to foster entrepreneurial attitude within the Dalits. The organisation aims to be "the job givers and not job seekers" and therefore argues that the state policy towards Dalits should further be supplemented by new affirmative action policies, especially in the realm of market economy (DICC 2019).

As the state has backtracked from its welfare agenda, the focus has now shifted to democratise the market economy. In the globalised era, the DICC looks at the state as the moral partner that would bring new modes of safeguards, protection and benefits and would initiate policy framework so that the Dalits can be integrated as equal partners in the neo-liberal economic development. It demands that a proactive affirmative action by the state and the market leaders will reduce the vulnerability of the Dalits and they can become the new beneficiaries of the globalised economy. The DICC promoters are hoping that the market economy—with its restrictive sense of affirmative action—will allow the Dalits as new beneficiaries in the global market.

This is a crucial shift in the post-economic reform period. The new middle class is not agitating or forcing the state to return to its socialist promises and

provide state support for economic empowerment. This eventually can provide some solace to the marginalised groups. However, accusations are levelled against this initiative for becoming overtly comprador to the capitalist giants and neglecting the extreme poor, Adivasis and other marginalised groups that continue to be exploited by the neo-liberal agenda. It was wrongly understood that the neo-liberal market would promote the Dalits as a new aspiring class within the capitalist development and therefore it has liberatory potentials. Instead, at the end, the new Dalit middle class will be nothing but a “low intensity spectacle” to justify the hegemony of market over its people (Guru 2012).

Symbolism in the Public Space

Social symbolism based on public events, memorials, conferences, rallies, etc, stands as a major feature of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. The public spaces here are increasingly becoming inclusive and democratic because of Dalit’s active presence. Major cities like Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur and Aurangabad have periodically witnessed the growing presence of Dalit cultural and Buddhist symbols through public ceremonies, memorials and monuments. These social symbols and public installations have an emotional appeal among the Dalits as they look upon these icons with a poised aspiration and as a mark of social empowerment and dignity. In the last three decades, Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur, Chaitya Bhoomi in Mumbai and Bhima Koregaon memorial near Pune have emerged as robust Dalit heritage sites.

Erecting Ambedkar’s statue and mobilising people around it seems to be the focal point for renewed Dalit aspirations towards democracy and equality. Dalit public symbolism has the capacity to dethrone the hegemony of abstract elitist standards of public and national spaces. It democratises the secular spaces substantively and provides a new meaning (Wankhede 2010). These symbols have demonstrated that the Dalits are endowed with reflexive agency having the capacity to promote themselves as a group of equal beholders of all the public spaces.

The iconisation of the Dalit heroes in public is the most assertive gesture of growing democratic consciousness of the socially deprived sections. The cultural and social symbols have amplified significantly in the last few years with massive public assemblies of the Dalits to celebrate and commemorate the anniversaries of the Dalit–Bahujan icons. The critical conjecture is that the continuous appearances of such Dalit public through celebrations and other symbolic gestures can contribute in projecting them as bourgeois culturist away from the ethical concerns for substantive social emancipation. These annual functions are massive and occupy public spaces without much fear or antagonisms. The new Dalit middle class has converted the annual Dalit gatherings into popular public rituals mainly to showcase self-confidence of the community and its new economic pride. In the recent times, there is also a growing intervention of the state and the Hindutva parties to appropriate these public ceremonies.

These were local and sporadic celebrations till the 1990s and the Dalits were organised around local *viharas*, community centres or Ambedkar statues to plan such events autonomously. However, in the recent times, there is an increment in political patronage and middle class engagements into these events. The right-wing forces have understood these claims better than the Congress party and have addressed the Dalit anxieties comprehensively. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government has announced a grand memorial of Ambedkar at Mumbai while commemorating his 125th birth anniversary.

Rightward Shift

Further, the BJP in its political campaigns has systematically utilised Ambedkar’s name, promised not to disturb the reservation policy and also offer affirmative actions for economic empowerment. The government appears proactive over the Dalit issues and has consciously supplemented the social and cultural assertions associated with the Dalits. Such associational endeavour by the right-wing party to promote Dalit symbols has helped it to attract a sizeable Dalit mass into its fold.

Dalit identity in Maharashtra is a powerful political block. Its legacy of struggles for social justice has gained an iconic presence in contemporary democracy. The Ambedkarite Dalits, especially the neo-Buddhists have resisted the Brahminical cultural assimilation by asserting their religious and political autonomy. Dalit identity has remained a *bête noire* to the Hindutva project and in the past, the right-wing has avoided an open engagement with the caste question. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) understands the dynamic legacy of the Dalit movement in disturbing the Hindutva’s ideological rigour. Hence, to neutralise the impact of Dalit assertion on the political and social fronts, the right-wing forces have improvised its tactics.

Since the inception of Narendra Modi regime at the centre, representation of Ambedkar as a Hindu reformist nationalist icon has taken precedence over his radical anti-caste identity. The BJP wishes to showcase that they are equally sensitive to the ideas of Ambedkar and committed to the values of social justice. On 14 April 2017, the Prime Minister Modi visited Deekshabhoomi at Nagpur and made a loud political statement by announcing various welfare measures for the Dalits. Newer monuments, cultural programmes, statues, memorials and other symbolic events are built or supplemented by the current dispensation to showcase its sincerity towards Ambedkar and his followers. Further, the BJP in Maharashtra has promoted its pro-Dalit character by building a political alliance with Ramdas Athawale-led faction of the RPI. It has helped the party to increase its electoral support base in the regions like Mumbai, Nagpur and Solapur.

Such strategies have surely helped the BJP to improve on its conventional anti-Dalit character. The sub-caste factionalism within the Dalits helps the BJP to mobilise the worst-off Dalits into its fold through various sociocultural initiatives. For the first time, the BJP has gained a considerable support amongst the Dalit middle classes and within the neo-Buddhists too. The party is also cultivating a new Dalit leadership that often speaks the political language of the RSS without being apologetic to its communal character.

The new Dalit entrants in the right-wing politics regard it as a pragmatic and rational option, especially when the other political forces have failed in bringing any substantive material benefits to the community (Gudavarthy 2014).

Conclusions

Without Equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of few over many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. (Ambedkar 2014: 1216)

This is one of the most quoted addresses that Ambedkar made to the Constituent Assembly on 25 January 1949. Fraternity is idealised as the necessary attribute to reconcile the classical debate between liberty and equality. Democracy offers this promise of linear progress while acknowledging and arranging a sum of many contradictions. Ambedkar's nuanced ideas on annihilation of castes, Buddhism and constitutional democracy envisage a social-democratic sphere that moves towards substantive transformation of social and economic conditions. As a political ideologue he was closest to the tradition of democratic socialism. In this arrangement, he hoped that the Dalit intellectual class and political leadership would play a crucial role in shaping the agenda of democratic polity. He envisaged a reformed social milieu, effective liberal institutions, representative democracy and an expansion of welfare state. He thus offered multitudes of social and political solutions for the empowerment of the Dalits. Alongside, Ambedkar also envisaged a dynamic political location for the Dalits in the new democracy hoping that his community would emerge as a vanguard revolutionary class. The RPI was formed mainly for this grand purpose.

In Maharashtra this political project has failed miserably as the political hegemony of the social elites remained unchallenged. Further, the current sociological mapping of the Dalit conditions suggests that it has taken a post-political turn as it utilises the democratic spaces to raise sectarian subjective concerns and remain distanced from the actual political processes. The multitudes of social assertions are not utilised to imagine

new political road map supplementing to Ambedkar's idea of democratic socialism. Instead, the rising multitudes disturb the normative Ambedkarite agenda of crafting a fraternal social life too. Certain social assertions are further distanced from the agenda of social justice, as they often remain exclusively committed to particularistic caste-class interests. It is increasingly visible that the effects of neo-liberal right-wing ideology have contaminated the contemporary Dalit social condition and its political consciousness too. The Dalit middle class tendencies are increasingly tilted towards bourgeois consumer values, cultural festivities and in finding comfort in ritualistic social practices.

In the recently held general elections, the BJP–Shiv Sena combine has dominated the electoral politics comprehensively, whereas the Ambedkarite politics, including the assertive vBA, have categorically been marginalised. It is only at the non-political locations that the Dalit voices have become louder, visible and active. The plural Dalit subjectivities thus enrich social democracy and sharpen the struggle for recognition and redistribution at varied levels; however, it does not share any serious commitment that may pose a radical challenge to the conventional political authorities. With the growing domination of the right-wing Hindutva forces, one can see that the advancing Dalit social groups may also face disadvantages and burdens. It is possible that the Dalit fragments while

retaining their distinct objectives, may form ideological fraternal alliance on the principles of social justice and may build comprehensive political struggles too.

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