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UNIT 7 DALITS OF INDIA*

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, students will be able to:

- introduce *Dalits* of India from an anthropological perspective;
- provide various theoretical perspectives on *Dalits*;
- understand the issues and concerns of *Dalits* in contemporary India; and
- discuss the role of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in shaping the *Dalits* and Indian society.

7.0 INTRODUCTION

The Scheduled Castes, that the Constitution of India has recognised them under the policy of protective discrimination of Indian populations, constitute an important segment with 16.2 per cent of the total Indian population according to 2011 Census. Since the recent past they preferred to be called with the neologism *Dalit*, though the government of India has not recognised this terminology. It has its origin in Sanskrit; it means 'divided, split, broken, scattered', and it was applied to the Scheduled Castes since nineteenth century. It is not clear who had first applied the term *Dalit* for the untouchables. However, the Dalit Panther's movement in 1970s has popularised the term and now *Dalit* is a widely accepted term as a synonym for a Scheduled Caste.

Social scientists of India and abroad particularly sociologists and anthropologists, who have been concerned with the Indian society, have showed greater interest in comprehending the *Dalit* societies from historical,

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biological and socio-cultural perspectives. There is a huge body of literature available in this regard; we shall touch upon certain aspects of the *Dalits* in India. The *Dalits* basically known as untouchables in the past are now called "ex-untouchables" as the government of India has out-lawed the practice of untouchability.

The *Dalits* have detested the practice of untouchability in any form: avoidance of physical touch, use of abusive words, and no entry into the physical space of the upper castes, to not allow even the shadow of *Dalits* to fall on them and so on. Now, in practical terms there is a perceptible change in the degree of practice of untouchability, but it cannot be said to have been totally disappeared particularly in the rural side. In fact, such a practice is not confined to India but it is wide spread in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries. It is almost absent in Egypt and Japan. The unit basically provides a very broad picture of *Dalits* in history, theoretical perspectives of various academic and non-academic scholars. It also deals with the socio-economic conditions of the contemporary *Dalits* and the efforts of the government for ameliorating their deplorable situation and gaining access to political power. Finally, it briefly discusses the movements of *Dalits* in their struggles to overcome their plight.

7.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The contemporary Indian society has long historical roots, and its rudimentary form can be found in ancient religious Sanskrit texts known as Veda, Upanishad, Dharma Shastra and Purana, and others. One can find in them that the social intercourse was taking place according to categorisation of populations and one's place in it through biological relationship and birth. Education was imparted according to the social background of the student as we learn from the stories of Satyakama Jabala in Chandogya Upanishad 4:4:1 and Ekalavya in Mahabharata. Though the social intercourse was fluid in the beginning it became more rigid by the time Manu Smriti came into existence between 200 BCE and 220 CE. The inflexible Varna system developed restrictions on the social intercourse and valorised the practice of untouchability on the basis of religious ideology coupled with occupational, social customs, and livelihood practices of the social groups. The Varna system gradually changed to the stringent caste system on which the contemporary Indian society is said to have been based on though not as rigid as it was in the ancient times. Those outside the Varna system were called Avarna (no Varna); a dualistic categorisation of those within Varna and those outside the Varna system. The latter category basically refers to tribes and other immigrant populations who did not conform to the Varna system and those included in this category were called by different names Mlecha, Chandala, Nishada, Antyaja and so on. Similar to these, the castes that were not allowed to live within villages but included in the caste system and village community to take the lowest rank and whose touch was believed to have caused pollution due to their occupations related to death of humans or

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cattle or human waste were called as untouchable castes during the colonial rule. The Colonialists brought these categories of social groups under the concept of "Depressed Classes" in recording early Census prior to 1935. Dr Ambedkar termed all these Depressed Classes as Dalits who are now categorised as Scheduled Castes that number about 1,263 in total and they are listed separately for each state. Let us begin with some academic and non-academic theoretical explanations offered and an understanding gained about the *Dalits* of contemporary Indian society.

7.2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DALITS

The creation story found in the religious text of Rig Veda and other texts mentioned above provides a broad Indian's sociological of their own society including the *Dalits*. However, most significantly the *Dalits* have preserved their own versions and origin of Indian society and their own also in myths and stories. For example, Matangis of Maharashtra believe in their descent from Matang Rishi, Parayar of Tamil Nadu trace their descent to Jamadgni Rishi and Renuka, Madiga of Andhra and Tengana believe as the descendants of Jambava Muni (Rishi), etc. All these myths have been interpreted in several ways. Some reject the position ascribed to them while some account for their low position. Thus, Indian sociology has its own explanations for the prevalence of the caste system and the place of each caste in it.

Mahatma Gandhi believed in non-hierarchical Varna system and as such all occupations are of equal value, and the Brahmin who serves other castes should not feel superior, and all castes should render their occupational services, and children should learn the occupations of their parents. There is no need of changing one's Varna or occupation, and all are important for smooth functioning of the society. It is similar to anthropological structural-functionalist theory. William Wiser brought out the idea of *Jajmani* system which later has come to be known as caste system. It a system of interdependency of castes, and there is no exploitation of any particular caste and each caste contributes for the good of the village community. Thus, in the village structure, each caste has a status and an occupational role to play for the survival of the social system.

Louis Dumont, a French anthropologist argues that caste system is essentially religious in nature and its inherent feature of hierarchy is based on the religious values of purity and impurity or pollution which are interdependent, and purity is always superior to pollution. The Brahamin who are at the top of the hierarchy maintain astute religious purity, and the untouchable at the bottom are inherently impure owing to their dealing with the death and impurity. What is significant in this theory is that there is consensus even from the untouchables to this religious principle and to their lowest position in the caste system and the impurity ascribed to them according to Michael Moffatt.

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In Marxist Approach, the contemporary Indian social system is an outcome of the medieval feudal system that ruled through pre-colonial and colonial period, and the Dalit lived at bottom of the social hierarchy as the most exploited lot by the upper castes or classes. Gail Omvedt's works on *Dalits* clearly reflect this approach. While fully endorsing the upper caste exploitation of *Dalits*, Dr Ambedkar proposes the theory of Broken.

According Dr B.R. Ambedkar, years ago there were several tribes and each one was against the other for cattle, fodder, food, and women. While some settled and practiced agriculture and production of grains, some other led nomadic life, and the latter used to ride over the villages of the former. In these wars those that were defeated became broken-men. With the increased value for the settled life, the broken-men were enslaved for defending the settled villages from the attacks of the barbarians and for extracting labour from the broken-men. Some broken-men consented to the demands of the settled tribes and joined them in course of time but settled outside the village. The untouchable are these broken-men.

Social inequality is ubiquitous and racial discrimination is almost universal. According Berreman, the racial difference in USA is no way different from the castes in India, and untouchables are like Blacks and the treatment and discrimination meted to them is as that of the Whites against the Blacks. Thus, he draws an equation between caste and race, and untouchables are the most exploited lot. A related issue of race is ethnicity. Of late, ethnicity, an important concept in anthropology with reference to the culture and social intercourse among the social groups, and its political character has come into the discourse of caste in contemporary Indian politics. In this regard Christophe Jeffrelot argues that the Dalits in India have taken the path of ethnicity through politics pioneered by Dr Ambedkar for assertion of their rights and gaining of political power instead of *sanskritisation* adopting the Brahmanical Hindu customs and practices. Deepa Reddy on the other hand points out the caste outside India in the context of immigrant Indians in USA, UK and other countries has taken the identity of ethnicity. She argues, caste has changed its character perceptibly assuming the political character which is not the case in the tradition system. Therefore, the *Dalits* have become conscious of their rights and fight for equality guaranteed by the Constitution.

Check Your Progress

1) How do anthropologists explain the position of *Dalits* in contemporary Indian society?

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7.3 SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION AND CHANGES AMONG THE DALITS

According to 2011 Census, of the 1, 263 scheduled castes Karnataka state has the highest number (101) followed by Odisha (93) and Tamil Nadu (76). However, the highest percentage of scheduled caste population to the total state population is found in Punjab (33.94 per cent) followed by Himachal Pradesh (25.19 per cent) and West Bengal (23.51 per cent),and the least percentage is found in Mizoram (0.11) where there is scheduled caste population in the state of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. However, in terms of the total scheduled caste population distribution the highest concentration is found in Uttar Pradesh followed by West Bengal and Bihar. The percentage of scheduled caste population living in rural areas in 2011 has got decreased to 68.8 from 72.2 which indicate the increased migration from rural to urban areas.

Early childhood mortality rate is 55.8 when compared to others 38.5 during 2015-2016. The peri-mortality rate is also higher among the SCs during five-year period preceding 2015. While the prevalence of anemia stands at 55.9 and among others it is 49.6.

The literacy rate among the SCs according to 2011 is 66.1 as against the total population of 73.0, and among the genders it is 66.6 among the males and 56.5 among the females. Though there is a steady improvement from 10.27 in 1961and 54.70 in 2001 there exists a gap between the scheduled castes and the total population and between the genders. Further, there continues to be a high drop-out rate of about 30 percent in the primary school itself.

While the percentage of population below poverty-line among the SCs during 2011 is 31.5, it is only 16.1 among the others in rural areas, and it is not different in urban areas also. According to 2011 Census, only 8.5 per cent of the households have regular or salary earnings while 33.7 per cent live by self-employment and 52.6 per cent live by casual labour and within this category those depending on agriculture labour is 31.4 per cent and 21.2 per cent on non-agriculture labour. In contrast to these figures, 13.3 per cent of the households in the category of others and 9.0 per cent in OBC category are of regular or salaried households. The percentage of landless households in each of the social categories shows SC-7.18, ST – 9.41, OBC – 9.68 and Others – 7.40. The percentage distribution of labour force (persons) among different social group shows SC – 18.8, ST- 8.7, OBC – 44.0 and Others – 28.4. (Govt. of India 2018)

Given the vulnerability of the scheduled castes, the government of India has a separate Department of Social Justice and Empowerment under the Ministry of Social Justice and Employment for ameliorating the conditions of scheduled castes through various welfare measures. In this regard the government of India adopted the policy of protective discrimination by

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identifying these castes and providing them reservations in education, employment and political institutions. The Constitution of India guarantees the social justice and equality under the Articles 17, 38, 46, 330, 352, etc. Further, the government has introduced Special Component Plan for Scheduled Caste during the Sixth Plan periods which was later called SC Sub-Plan for speedy development of scheduled castes and eliminate poverty. The welfare measures include Centrally Sponsored Schemes which include pre and post-metric scholarships to students to study in India and abroad, separate hostels, coaching schemes, Finance and Development Corporation, rehabilitation of manual scavengers, enactment of Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955, 1989 for preventing the atrocities against the SC/STs, Pardhan Mantra Adarsh Gram Yojana, etc.

The following statement makes it clear about the contemporary socio-economic conditions of the scheduled castes.

Despite 68 years after Independence, the Scheduled Castes are still subjected to practices like untouchability and social discrimination by some sections of society. This has resulted in denial of education, as well as economic, social, political and cultural deprivation…

While the figure-wise allocations of the funds for welfare look handsome, but actual allocation to this sector is not sufficient to cater to the needs of the scheduled caste population. As a result, the social and economic development of the Scheduled Castes has not improved as per expectation since Independence. (Government. of India 2015-16:236)

Given the socio-economic background, experiences of social exclusion and the political climate during the Colonial period and the availability of leadership the *Dalit* leaders began to articulate about improving their conditions during the Colonial period. They participated in social movements launched by non-Dalits at that time keeping their own interest. But when Dr. Ambedkar was recognised as a national *Dalit* leader they followed him closely and joined his movements.

7.4 DALIT MOVEMENTS

Social movement or movement is an endeavour, occasionally unplanned also, with a short or long term goal(s) to achieve that a group organises collectively. It should have an ideology and framework besides set goals. The Dalits have been organising concerted movements since the Colonial period sporadically or as everyday form of protest or for a longer duration. The forms of protests and agitations of aimed for social and economic equality, dignity and respect. The goal is to put an end to untouchability, economic exploitation, discrimination and exclusion. These are popularly known as *Dalit* movements, and organised at rural, urban level and often at all India level also; in fact, it is a pan Indian phenomenon. Nandu Ram (1998) finds

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three phases in the *Dalit* movements: Protests before the religious revivalism, Bhakti movement, and post-independence movements.

As regards to earlier *Dalit* protests, some scholars have mistaken that the *Dalits* accepted their subordination since there were no visible forms of resistance and their religion also does not indicate any protest but they did have the 'culture of protest' against the 'culture of terror' in the earlier period. There were overt sporadic and unrecognised and isolated protests though not in the present style. The terrorisation of dominant castes suppressed them every successfully and today one can notice such resistances in *Dalit* oral traditions in covert form. The open or visible forms protests that one can notice from the second half of nineteenth century have the source of inspiration in the non-hierarchical Hindu religion and social reforms initiated either by the British or Indian social reformers.

Kabir Panth (between 1398 and 1518 BCE), the Lingayatism (eighteenth century) in Hindu tradition having roots in Basavanna (twelfth century) and Veera Brahmendraswamy (nineteenth century) etc., preached against the caste discrimination. Guru Nanak (1469–1539) the founder of Sikh religion also preached against the caste system and untouchability. In 1861 the Brahmo Samaj established on the non-caste Hindu Vedic religion which was initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore also rejected Brahmanism. These religious philosophies had given strength to the conceptualisation of social equality and human dignity that the *Dalits* cherished for ages. With the emergence of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823–1892) Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu (1848 –1919) etc., the inclusive process gained momentum. Other noted reformers with political bend include Mahatma Gandhi (1869– 1948), Vinoba Bhave (1895 – 1982) etc. It is also a fact that the integration of Dalits with the Hindu society was not acceptable for several of the upper caste leaders and common people. However, the Dalit movements derived more inspiration from the social reforms of the nineteenth century lower caste secularists such as Jyoti Rao Phule (1827-1890) and Periar Ramaswamy (1879-1973), etc., who engaged in mass mobilisations rejecting the Brahmanical supremacy and Aryan hegemony for Brahmins' identification with Aryans.

The second phase of Bhakti movement of the *Dalits* can be located in the emergence of *Dalits*'s rejection of Hinduism and *Dalit* leaders. The social and political reforms of the British by providing education to lower castes and jobs in the army, etc., census enumeration by caste and preference given to the upper castes in the army and administration by the British also encouraged them to resist the domination of Brahmins and upper castes. *Dalit* leaders such as Ayothee Thass (1845-1914), Bhagyareddy Verma (1888-1939), Swami Achhootanand (1879 -1933), Mangu Ram (1886 – 1980) etc., initiated reforms among the Dalits by raising the consciousness. Ayothee Thass was the first *Dalit* who embraced Buddhism. Adi-Dharmi and Adi-

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Hindu movements claimed autochthonous status and indigeneity to the Dravidas and *Dalits*. The 'Adi' (meaning first or original) concept originated in Brahmo Samaj from the Vedas when there was absence of caste rigidity. It spread rapidly in Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and so on. In assumed the title of Adi-Hindu, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Dharma, Adi-Karnataka, etc., rejecting the hierarchical Hinduism and the lowest position accorded to the untouchable castes. They demanded separate census enumeration in religion as different from Hindu.

The third phase of *Dalit* movement was started by Dr Ambedkar. Drawing inspiration from the above leaders Dr Ambedkar launched Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 taking a rally of *Dalits* to exercise their right of using the water tank and organized rallies for the rights of workers in 1920s and 1938, and for peasants in 1930 and 1938. Further, he launched Kalaram temple entry for *Dalits* in 1930. He also launched agitation for the abolition of Mahar Vatan system since 1927s, but it was accomplished only in 1959. Nandu Ram states,

Broadly speaking, the ideology of Dalit movements centred around the goals of achieving equality, liberty, fraternity and social justice — the core of Ambedkar's ideology which is the main source of inspiration for the contemporary Dalit movements in India. (Ram 1998:105)

From the above it is clear that there was not any *Dalit* national leader and the *Dalit* movements were localised struggles but after Poona Pact in 1932 Dr Ambedkar emerged as the national *Dalit* leader. Having received inspiration from Jyoti Rao Phule and Ayothee Thass' writings and acceptance of his representation of *Dalits* by the British Dr. Ambedkar toured several provinces and towns and spoke in public gathering strongly advocating for AISCF and seeking unity of the *Dalit* communities. Having understood that Mahatma Gandhi has betrayed them from giving political power the *Dalits* supported Dr. Ambedkar. The maxim of Dr. Ambedkar 'Political power is the key to all social progress' had a long effect on the Dalit leaders. Though none has replaced Dr. Ambedkar as a national leader, the *Dalit* moments in the post-independence continued to exist in different states on local issues but all of them struggled for upward mobility of the *Dalit* community and for stamping out the practice of untouchability in Indian society. However, *Dalit* Panthers in 1970s in Maharashtra, the inspiring literary form, once again galvanised the movement after the demise of Dr. Ambedkar. An important aspect of the Dalit movement is Dr. Ambedkar's dictum of gender equality; the *Dalit* women's immense role in the Dalit movement and struggle for equality within the *Dali*t society as well as outside. Their contribution through literature continues to be great support to the *Dalit* movement. These movements can be comprehended in greater depths from the theoretical perspectives of caste, class and gender within the *Dalits*.

The *Dalit* movements not only helped conscious rising among the *Dalits* in terms of asserting their rights guaranteed through the Constitution, the need

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for political participation, etc., further they have been giving messages to the government to take up their issues at the appropriate level. The government not only brought out Atrocity Act and formulated several plans and schemes for their welfare and socio-economic development and among these Special Component Plan for Scheduled Castes (1980-85) is a notable one. In other words, a positive social change had taken place across the country.

Check Your Progress

2) Do you think, *Dalit* movements solved their problems and enabled them to achieve their goals?

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7.5 DALITS AND POLITICS

After independence the *Dalits* entered the domain of the state politics duly encouraged by Dr. Ambedkar for participation in the decision making process through political institutions within the provisions made available through the Constitution. It further led to the mobility of masses for asserting their rights and privileges enshrined in the Constitution and the democratic principles that the nation embraced. The *Dalits* of India would have never thought about entering into electoral politics but for Dr. Ambedkar they could wrest political power at least in one state, though for a short stint. Dr. Ambedkar made a history initiating the *Dalits* politics by conscious raising and setting up an example by him contesting in the elections. The British granted the Communal Award in August 1932 in favour of Depressed Classes with 71 territorial constituencies in the Legislative Council along with other Minorities only because of his persuasion. It means in these constituencies only depressed class people elect their representative and others do not participate in the elections. Though he initially demanded for separate electorates in his representation to the Simon Commission in 1928, and persuaded the British government in the Second Round Table Conference held in London in 1931, the final the Communal Award was granted in the following year. Accordingly, 71 constituencies to Depressed Classes through the Communal Award were granted in the Legislative Council which was to be the premier body of Legislature for the entire British Dominion. But it was not acceptable to Gandhi and he went on hunger strike. Dr. Ambedkar finally yielded himself to save the life of Mahatma and it resulted in 'The Poona Pact' in 1932. Accordingly, an agreement was reached for 147 seats in total for the Depressed Classes in the Provincial Legislatures across all the 8 Provinces but not in the Legislative Council. The British Parliament enacted

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an Act 1935 accordingly and it came into force in 1936; Dr. Ambedkar established a political party with the name Independent Labour Party in 1936 to contest the elections. Elections were also held for Bombay Presidency and the Independent Labour Party won 15 out of 17 that the Party contested. Thus, the *Dalits* made an entry into the electoral politics. Later in July 1942 Dr. Ambedkar established All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) party which contested election held in 1946 and 1952 but lost them. Towards the end of his life dissolving the AISCF he replaced it with Republican Party of India in October 1956 which continues to exist even after his death on December 6, 1956. The party participated in 1957 and 1962 General Elections and won many seats not only in Maharashtra but also in other states of India. In all it won, 12 Lok Sabha and 29 State Assembly seats in 1957; 3 Lok Sabha and 20 State Assembly seats in 1962; 1 Lok Sabha and 22 State Assembly seats in 1967. But at the moment Republic Party is active mostly in Maharashtra state and it is ridden with internal problems, and as such it has not able to achieve much by itself.

However, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) that emerged in North India has made over the loss of Republican Party in the electoral politics. Though BSP is not restricted to the *Dalits*, it is identified with them and the efforts of *Dalits* under the BSP bore fruits since 1989 and emerged as one of the third largest political party in the country. Kanshi Ram established the party as a national party 1984 and Kumari Mayawati emerged as a major leader and the former remained as her mentor, and for the first time the party contested elections in 1989 and won 4 seats in Lok Sabha; 67 seats in the Uttar Pradesh State Assembly in 1993 and 2 seats in the Assembly of Madhya Pradesh in 1990, 57 seats in the Assembly of Rajasthan in 1990 and so. In 2003 Mayawati was able to become the President of the party in 2003 and she also became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for some period in 1997 and 2002. The party fared well in the 2007 elections and came to power in Uttar Pradesh and completed its full term during 2007-2012, and the BSP continues to have its presence in several states. Since 2012 it seems the BSP has lost its sheen and its future remains to be watched.

Until BSP emerged as a national political party, there has not been any Pan-Indian Dalit party. However, since independence the *Dalit* have been actively involved in the general elections and leaders entered all the political parties. When they got elected they have also been participated in the decision making processes in the Parliament at the Centre and Assemblies in all the States. They served in the offices of Ministers of the State and Central governments and nominated positions in various institutions.

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Check Your Progress

3) Whether political power is necessary for the upward mobility of Dalits? Explain.

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7.6 SUMMARY

The unit has attempted to provide a brief history of *Dalits* and various theoretical perspectives about them, and their social and economic conditions. It also discusses the circumstances under which they entered into the electoral politics and their participation in the decision making institutions in the country. The unit brings to light the issues, problems and concerns of the *Dalits*. It concludes with the background of movements that they have been engaged for their liberation, assertion of their rights and aspirations for gaining sense of equality and dignity.

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1) Refer to section 7.1 & 7.2

2) Refer to section 7.4

3) Refer to section 7.5