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Original Article

Dalit Politics in India: A Critical Overview

Contemporary Voice of Dalit
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Abstract

The origin of Dalit assertion and politics has a long tradition. The main objective of Dalit assertion and politics was to transform the age-old caste-based hierarchical structure of Indian society based on liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice as envisaged by Dr B. R. Ambedkar. During this long period, the nature of Dalit politics has varied from issue to issue and from context to context. During the seven and half decades of our independence, we have witnessed a massive change, like politics in general and Dalit politics in particular. Up to 1980, we have seen a comprehensive Dalit movement in different parts of India. After that time, it is tough to organize such comprehensive politics, especially in the urban centres. Due to selfishness, personal greed for power and other gains of Dalit leaders and activists, Dalit politics become much more fragmented, localized and depoliticized. Not only that, but identity politics also divided the Dalits into different caste and sub-caste groups. Due to these reasons, it is hard to make grand solidarity in politics among different Dalit castes and other weaker sections of Indian society. We have recently seen a new swing in Dalit politics that is very aware, assertive, organized, well-connected, inclusive and beyond party politics. In this study, the author wants to draw a brief sketch of the history of Dalit politics. Further, he wants to explore the changing nature of Dalit politics. In this context, he has tried to discuss the impact of the depoliticization of Dalit politics by the Dalit leaders and the caste identity politics within Dalit caste groups in forming grand solidarity in Dalit politics in India.

Keywords

Dalit, politics, critical, overview, identity politics, depoliticize, grand solidarity

Introduction

The origin of Dalit assertion and politics in India is not a new phenomenon. It has a long tradition spanning millennia when it took the form of a socio-religious movement by some social revolutionaries in the colonial period. The main objectives of Dalit assertion and politics were to transform the age-old

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caste-based hierarchical structure of Indian society based on liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice as envisaged by Dr B. R. Ambedkar. During this long period, the nature of Dalit politics has varied from issue to issue, from context to context. Sometimes it has involved active resistance against the age-old caste-based discrimination, deprivation and economic exploitation. Sometimes it has taken a very militant shape based on radical issues and agendas. However, the nature of Dalit politics has changed sharply during the last few decades. From the active period of Ambedkar to 1980 comprehensive Dalit politics with radical issues has been shown frequently in different parts of India. After that period, the situation changed enormously, and Dalit politics became much more dependent, fragmented, weak and localized. Moreover, the fragmentation of Dalits into different caste and sub-caste groups and the rightward shifting of the newly emerging middle class and the masses for their immediate personal gains has also been visible. We have recently seen a new swing in Dalit politics that is very aware, assertive, organized, well-connected, inclusive, and, to some extent, beyond party politics.

Brief History Dalit Movement and Politics

In India, Dalit Politics was first started in the colonial period in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth century. Many social revolutionaries emerged with their pivotal voices against the deprivation, discrimination, exploitation and untouchability of Dalits by the upper castes in caste-ridden Hindu society. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra, Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu, Bhagya Reddy Verma in Andhra Pradesh, Acchutanand in Uttar Pradesh, Narayan Guru and Ayyankali in Kerala, Manguram in Punjab (Kumar, 2018, p. 20), Harichand and Guruchand Thakur in Bengal were especially notable for the relentless fight for the Dalits. During the colonial period, the anti-caste movements in the form of non-Brahman solid movements and Dalit movements were organized in different parts of India. The leading figures of this more significant anti-caste movement were Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, Baba Saheb Ambedkar, with many others. All the social revolutionaries attacked exploitation in the social, economic, political and cultural fields (Omvedt, 1994, p. 11). All the anti-caste movements were popularly known as Dalit movements in Maharashtra, the Ad-Dharma movement in Punjab, Adi-Hindu movement in UP, Narayan Swami Guru's movement in Kerala, the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu, the Adi-Andhras movement in coastal Andhra, Adi-Hindus in Hyderabad, Namashudras movement in Bengal (Omvedt, 1994, p. 10). In the pre-independence period, Jyotiba Phule was such a great social revolutionary. He is considered the forerunner of both the Dalits and lower caste movements and politics in India. Through his Satya Shodhok Samajh, he tried to organize peasants, backward castes and Dalits to challenge upper castes' hegemony in caste-ridden Hindu society. However, Baba Saheb Ambedkar played the most decisive role in Dalit politics in India. It was an indisputable fact that politics has been centred on him during his lifetime and after. His life and relentless struggles gave birth to a new awareness among the Dalits. Not only that, his writings and speeches become the ideological foundation of Dalit politics and Dalit liberation movements. Ambedkar unleashed such a movement which encompassed all the needs of human society—social, economic, political, cultural and spiritual (Omvedt, 2001, p. 144)

Ambedkar, throughout his life, fought relentlessly for the liberation of Dalits from the shackles of untouchability and the oppressive caste system. He fought an unrelenting battle against the unjust social order and all social evils throughout his life. He was firmly engaged and committed to rectifying the inhumane face of caste-based Hindu society and radical transformation into the human world. He played a decisive role in liberating the Dalits from social, economic and political discrimination, deprivation, exploitation and exclusion. The social, economic and political demands took a new dimension when he formed the Independent Labour Party in 1936. It is formed for the interest of the labourers of all castes

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in general and Dalit castes in particular. The party won a few provincial elections and successfully organized the most significant radical peasants' protest against the landlords allying with the Communists. He broadly accepted the Marxist analysis of class struggle so far as economic issues were concerned (Omvedt, 2001, p. 146). He believed that capitalism and Brahmanism are the two separate systems of exploitation, one to be fought by class struggle and the other by caste struggle (Omvedt, 2001, p. 146). Initially, he insisted that caste be added to a class approach. However, at the end of his life moved away from this analysis (Omvedt, 2001, p. 147). It will not be exaggerated that Ambedkar was the only leader who spread the Dalit movements in all parts of India. The main goals of all the movements under his leadership are to end all forms of social discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and violence, attain equality, liberty and social justice, including dignity and self-respect, and challenge the upper castes' social hegemony.

Within a short period, the Independent Labour Party got dissolved. After going through the experiment of the Labour Party, he constituted the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942. However, the performance of this organization in electoral politics was not at all impressive. By the mid-1950s, he started to form a party of all exploited and oppressed, not merely the Dalit castes (Vora, 2004, p.276). After the demise of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the Republican Party of India (RPI) was formed by some close associates of Ambedkar in 1957. Like Independent Labour Party, the Republican Party had a broad radical agenda. Due to its radical agenda, RPI organized the most significant land movement when the socialists and the Communists joined the land satyagraha in 1964–1965 that spread in Punjab, UP, and Maharashtra. During this land movement, more than 3 lakh party workers had courted arrest, and the then Congress government was compelled to accept the demand of land allocation, minimum wages, debt relief, etc. (Darapuri, 2020). However, the RPI has failed to mobilize the backward castes and Muslims and convince the non-Mahar Dalits. But the setback of Dalit politics became inevitable when the RPI was fragmented due to tactical differences and personal ambitions of the leadership (Kanungo, 2007, p. 1853)

It may say that the entire Dalit politics has lost track after the sad demise of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. The contemporary Dalit leadership was in no way matched with the vision and ability of Ambedkar. After his demise, Dalit movements and politics became fragmented due to the personal ego, greed, selfishness and opportunism of Dalit leadership. As a result, independent Dalit politics during the 1960s became very weak, sporadic and localized.

During the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the Dalit youth in Maharashtra expressed their anger and protested against the Dalits' continuous violence and atrocities. They were furious over the co-option of Dalit leaders and the selfishness of Dalit politicians. Some Dalit writers from Maharashtra warned the government in the early 1970s through a leaflet that if firm steps are not taken to control the violence and atrocities, they would take it into their own hands and even plan an armed revolt (Shah, 2001a, p. 209). Inspired by the Black Panthers of America, two Dalit writer activists, Namdev Dhasal and J. V. Pawar constituted Dalit Panthers in Bombay in 1972 (Shah, 2001a, p. 209) and started a cultural and literary movement in Maharashtra. This cultural and literary movement transformed into a political movement. They were intense critics of capitalism, boycotted the parliamentary system and called for a socio-economic restructuring of Indian society (Breiner, 2020). The movement took a militant and revolutionary shape in Indian politics and mass propagated in the cities and villages throughout the country.

Nevertheless, despite their revolutionary ideology and programs, the Dalit Panthers failed to achieve the total transformation that Baba Saheb Ambedkar envisaged (Omvedt, 2001, p. 153). Despite their radical ideology and militant organization Dalit Panthers movement did not last very long. On 7 March 1977, Dhasal and Pawar announced the dissolution of the Dalit Panthers movement. However, it resurfaced in the late 1970s.

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In 1979, Dalit Panthers launched a Namantar movement (name change movement), culminating in a long march throughout Maharashtra (Jaoul, 2008). We have witnessed a very comprehensive form of Dalit politics in this long march. After that, the Dalit Panthers founded local chapters in different parts of India. Following the Panthers, Dalit movements took a multifaceted expression in almost all parts of the country.

In 1984, Dalit politics witnessed a new upsurge with the emergence of a political party in North India named the Bahujan Samaj Party. It led to a new beginning of Dalit mobilization and politics under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayavati. In the post-Ambedkar era, Kanshi Ram and Mayavati are the most prominent figure in Dalit emancipatory politics. However, critics think both leaders established very unprincipled, opportunistic, bargaining and agenda-less politics in India. This agenda-less politics is the negation of Baba Saheb's agenda-based radical Dalit politics and movement. Because Ambedkar always had broader social, economic and cultural programs backing his political thrust but political power is the single point program of BSP. The BSP firmly believed that everything else would automatically flow from capturing political power. Despite their agenda-less radical politics, BSP had established a robust electoral presence in northern India. It had gained tremendous electoral support in UP, where it had formed the government four times in the 1990s and the year 2007 under the leadership of Mayavati.

The Dalit parties, including Bahujan Samaj Party, are in a deep electoral crisis because many Dalit political leaders and their supporters have migrated to non-Dalit parties. Although Mayavati is still a prominent Dalit leader, the BSP party faces an existential crisis (Pai, 2020). It is true that post-Ambedkar Dalit politics has challenged some crucial aspects of atrocities, discrimination and exploitation but failed to show the path of radical transformation of Dalit emancipation.

Of late, we witnessed a new wave in Dalit politics. Recently, young Dalit leaders led a few organizations and movements like Bhim Army and Azad Samaj Party by Chandrasekhar Azad, the Una Atyachar Ladat Samity by Jignesh Mevani in Gujarat and the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi by Prakash Ambedkar in Maharashtra. With the emergence of these new organizations and their assertive role, the earlier ideology and forms of mobilization used by the older Dalit leaders no longer seem to appeal to the Dalit masses. These young, educated and popular new generation leaders represent a new aggressive and militant Dalit politics (Pai, 2020). One of the most important actions by the Bhim Army was the protest rally against violent atrocities on Dalits by the Thakur at Saharanpur in April 2017. At least 50 thousand protesters from across Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab gathered to show their solidarity at Jantar Mantar on 21 May 2017. A new brand of Dalit politics has emerged (Samos, 2020). However, only time will tell how this brand of politics will take a stable shape or not. Like BSP, Chandrasekhar's Azad Samaj Party has not yet clearly defined and declared its agenda and programs.

Moreover, the experience shows that the mainstream political parties always try to co-opt good dedicated and influential Dalit activists and leaders into their fold. These dedicated Dalit leaders are vulnerable to co-option and other attractions (Guru, 2004, p. 266). We have seen earlier, the mainstream political parties in India were co-opting several Dalit activists and leaders. Of late, the Congress party has co-opted two young Dalit activists and leaders—Jignesh Mevani and Kanaiya Kumar. Moreover, the mainstream political parties are now trying to accommodate the Dalit masses into their party fold. So it is not the appropriate time to say the fate of the new wave of Dalit politics.

Changing Nature of Dalit Politics

During the seven and half decades of our independence, we have witnessed a massive change in the nature of politics in general and Dalit politics in particular. Up to the 1980s, we have seen comprehensive

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Dalit politics in different parts of India. However, it is tough to organize such comprehensive politics in the changing situation, especially in the urban centres. The mobilization space of Dalit politics is on a decline. Dalit politics at the urban level seems to have become much more dependent, flexible and unpredictable. This new form of Dalit politics is much more localized, weak, fragmented and ad-hoc in nature (Guru, 2004, p. 257). Due to the selfishness, opportunism and greed of Dalit leaders and activists, Dalit politics has become much more fragmented and localized. Not only that, but identity politics also divided the Dalits into different caste and sub-caste groups. Due to these reasons, it is tough to make grand solidarity among different Dalits and other weaker sections of Indian society. Moreover, over the years, caste-based atrocities, violence and discrimination are declining in urban India. Dalit leaders also think that 'neither the caste nor the class categories are significant for understanding the urban politics in general and Dalit politics in particular' (Guru, 2004, p. 257).

Till the 1980s, class-caste-based radical working-class mobilization was possible. However, post-1980, this type of working-class mobilization was challenging to organize because of the dissolution of such favourable social sites, which once provided a vibrant and more stable context for coherent politics (Guru, 2004, p. 258). For instance, till the early 1980s, the textile industry was the largest source of employment in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. However, due to liberalization, privatization and globalization, most of the textile industry has been completely ruined. The condition of other employment-generating social sites is no exception. So many working-class people left without jobs whose fortunes had interlinked with those of textile mills. Among the workers, large sections were Dalits, minorities and other weaker sections. Due to the closedown of these textile industries, a significant chunk of mill workers and their descendants left the city. Most of those who stayed back are now engaged in the unorganized sector or as contract workers. Most of them were employed through placement agencies and had no job security (Bhattacharya, 2012). These workers are now doing odd jobs like a maidservant, peon, housekeeper, construction worker, the vendor who sells almost everything like newspaper, milk, groceries, etc. The emerging speculative and commercial modes of accumulation are not ready to absorb the unskilled workers. The previous employment patterns of the cities have changed. On the other hand, despite severe exploitation and domination, the labour force of the emerging sector cannot organize a radical mobilization against their employer. So under the changing situation, it is not easy to organize radical political movements with grand solidarity at the urban level against the owners of the means of production.

However, a coherent political narrative based on caste, class and gender discrimination and exploitation is still possible in a sharply stratified village society (Guru, 2004, p. 258). The socio-economic and political condition of Dalits at the village level is very dismal. Even atrocities against Dalits continue unabated (Shah, 2001b, p. 37). The confrontation between Dalit agricultural labourers, marginal and small farmers, and the landed gentry have been frequent in UP, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and other parts of India based on demands of higher wages, land allocation and inhuman behaviour of the landed class (Shah, 2001a, p. 212). Moreover, Dalit mobilization by some non-party Naxal groups in different parts of India, particularly in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, and the Dalit protest against the OBCs in Tamil Nadu certainly a case of caste and class-based political mobilization. However, all these mobilizations are mainly localized and have no organized expression either by the new leadership or the old one (Guru, 2004, p. 258). The non-party Marxist groups are trying to develop their awareness about the existing socio-economic structure and cultural reality, which is the leading cause of their subjugation (Shah, 2001a, p. 212).

On the other hand, mainstream Dalit leaders are trying to depoliticize Dalit politics by concentrating on artificial rather than radical issues. The lack of radical issues has created distrust among the different sections of Dalits about their parties and their representatives. If we look at the significant issues raised

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by the Dalit parties during the last few decades, we find those issues were not at all the issues of ordinary Dalits. The common Dalits were more concerned about the issue of land rights, minimum wages, employment, eradication of poverty, atrocities and other related issues. So a vacuum has been created regarding Dalit parties. This political void is filled in by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These NGOs are responsible for demotivating the Dalits from galvanizing into coherent political thought and action (Guru, 2004, p. 259). The NGOs continued to work in small areas or pockets over significant social and economic issues. They work on somewhat non-controversial issues like health, education, poverty, etc., in which local people feel consensus. Most of the NGOs are supported either by national or international funding agencies. They are not conducive to furthering the radical issues of the Dalit movements. With the flourishment of NGOs among the rural poor Dalits, the possibility of mass mobilization of Dalits is going far (Deshpande, 2004, p. 399). In other words, the NGOs are seeking the gradual withdrawal of the Dalit masses from active political life (Guru, 2004, p. 259).

Depoliticization of Dalit Politics

Now the question is how the Dalit masses became depoliticized by the political leaders? Despite its anti-Dalit character RSS and its political wing, BJP has projected an illusory casteless Hindu society. In this context, Anand Teltumbde pointed out that many Dalits are falling prey to this illusion because they were neither familiar with their rich history nor aware of Hindutva's shady character. Moreover, Hindutva is also playing the game of divide and rule, which obstructs the emergence of collective Dalit identity and unity (as cited in Kanungo, 2007, p. 1852). The BJP is also using the power-sharing strategy to attract the Dalit-backward castes into its fold for achieving the objective of Hindutva. Panikkar identified two precise objectives behind the Hindutva forces' overtures towards Dalits. According to him, the BJP is intending to reach out to the Dalits for expanding the electoral support base and construction of broad consolidation of Hindus to achieve this political objective. These two are the main factors behind the Hindutva's overtures towards Dalits (as cited in Kanungo, 2007, p. 1852).

These are all the results of the social engineering project of the Sangha Parivar, and this project was started in 1973 when Balasaheb Deoras became the chief of the Sangha Parivar. He made a conscious effort to reach out to the Dalits, Adivasis and the other backward castes through various frontal organizations of Sangha Parivar, like Samajik Samarasta Mancha, Patit Pawana Sangathana, Deen Dayal Sodh Sangathana, Gayatri Parivar, Seva Bharati, Sanskriti Bihar, etc. that are continuing even today. The RSS also attempted to appropriate Ambedkar ideologically and politically (Goldy, 2018; Kanungo, 2007, p. 1852). They very tactfully rejected the radical transformative legacy of Ambedkar and projected Ambedkar as a Hindu social reformer (Kanungo, 2007, p. 1652). Of late, the BJP is trying to appropriate Ambedkar because it has become difficult to ignore Dalits as a formidable vote bank. However, Ambedkar has no ideological proximity to Hindutva politics. All know that Baba Saheb Ambedkar ruled out any type of alignment with Hindu nationalist politics. He believed that Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. That is why Hindutva is incompatible with democracy. So Hindu Raj must be prevented. In the Manifesto of the Scheduled Caste Federation, Ambedkar clearly mentioned that 'The Scheduled Caste Federation will not have any alliance with any reactionary party such as Hindu Mahasabha or the RSS' (Pol, 2020). Ignoring the standpoint of Ambedkar, Dalit and backward caste people are frequently entering into the Hindutva fold. In this context, it is to be said that the so-called Ambedkarites and social justice parties like Samajwadi Party, BSP and other Dalit parties are very insincere to follow and implement Dr Ambedkar's radical vision. That is why the prominent leaders of Dalit backward caste groups are now interested in aligning with the Hindutva forces for their personal greed of power and self-interest.

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In the post-emergency period, Sangha Parivar started the process of accommodating Dalit- backward caste leaders in the erstwhile Jana Sangha. After the defeat in the elections of UP and MP in 1993, the BJP decided to give serious attention to the Dalit-backward caste issue. After that, many backward caste leaders were co-opted into the party fold and continued the co-option process even today. However, it is true that the Congress party first introduced the co-option of prominent Dalit leaders in the mainstream political process. In the post-independent period, Congress appropriated or absorbed a large section of Dalit leaders. Although the fact remains that Dalit society was also fragmented and divided among the centrist, leftist, and socialist political parties. The first two decades after the independence co-option of Dalit leaders spoiled the formation of grand solidarity among Dalit groups. However, later, the BJP has taken the path of co-option and coalition politics more aggressively.

However, the BJP was well aware that only co-option of Dalit-backward caste leaders was insufficient to capture power on its own. Therefore, the party decided to enter into a coalition with other parties. From 1990 to date, BJP allied with many Dalit-backward caste and regional parties to capture political power. The BJP had determined to capture political power at any cost. In the present time, the party knows very well that a coalition is essential for some time or more for capturing political power and pushing its Hindutva agenda (Vora, 2004, p. 294).

By ignoring the fundamental interests of the Dalit castes and their politics, Dalit parties and their leaders are allying with the ideologically most anti-Dalits Hindutva parties for fulfilling their greed and personal interests. That is why prominent Dalit leaders like Ramdas Athawale, Udit Raj and many others are now in the fold of anti-Dalit BJP and directly or in alliance with the BJP-led NDA coalition. However, it must be kept in mind that supporting the Hindutva forces will not realize the democratic aspirations of backward caste and Dalits (Vora, 2004, p. 295). It is destroying the possibility of broad-based Dalit politics, which is essential for the emancipation of the Dalit masses.

People's issues like land rights, minimum wages, employment, right to education, opposition to privatization, political representation, atrocity issue, self-respect, dignity, etc., are slowly disappearing from the thinking, policy programs and campaign of Dalit parties. However, these people's issues are essential for organizing a radical mobilization against the establishment. Nevertheless, due to a lack of radical agendas, Dalit parties have lost the historical role of mobilizing all Dalit-backward groups to capture state power. The Dalit parties do not seem to have any vision of emancipatory politics except to become an appendage of mainstream parties. They are also trying to bargain with the mainstream political parties to become a part of the national coalition politics (Guru, 2004, p. 259). Indeed, the Dalit mobilization space could not develop its liberating potential beyond the liberal welfarist agenda. Reservation is undoubtedly necessary for the Dalits but depends mainly on reservation-centric politics; the Dalit movement and politics have been dissociated from its radical social transformational agenda. The new agenda-less politics was mainly restricted to the urban level and took a very localized shape. Because it could not address the issues of rural illiterates, vast landless agricultural labourers, informal sector workers and Dalit women who were left out from the state's patronage (Deshpande, 2004, p. 391). In fact, due to a lack of revolutionary ideology and programs, Dalit politics have reached an impasse (Gudavarthy, 2020). The Dalit movements and politics have been reduced to a mere pressure group.

After introducing the neoliberal market economy and the pro-market stance of the present government, job opportunities in government services and public sector undertakings and welfare activities are shrinking rapidly. As a result, the demands for reservation have reduced to mere tokenism on the part of the government. In the neoliberal state policy, the government expects its citizens to be self-employed because it has repealed the commitment to provide a secured job (Mhaskar, 2014). However, almost all the Dalit parties and Dalit social groups have not been able to organize an effective mobilization for combating the anti-reservation initiative of the government. During the last four decades, the Dalit leaders have remained

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engaged in electoral politics and aligned with other political parties for immediate gains (Deshpande, 2004, p. 391). Due to the lack of people's agenda, forming any mass mobilization was not possible for them. That is why they were unable to pose any challenge to the existing power structure. In fact, during this period, Dalit politics was blind to this particular notion of grand agitational politics. Even those movements that worked for a new agenda of social transformation are on the decline in recent times. With a few exceptions, agenda-based grand agitational politics of the toiling masses, by and large, has been absent from the Indian political scene in general and Dalit politics in particular. As a result, electoral politics has gained enormous importance in the contemporary Dalit political discourse (Guru, 2004, p. 261). Moreover, electoral politics has become the dominant mode of articulation of the political aspirations of the political parties, including Dalit parties. So, due to the lack of radical agendas, Dalit electoral politics are now in a very crisis.

Political support of most Dalit caste and sub-caste groups is now fragmented into different political parties, even the most anti-Dalit Hindutva political party. Due to these reasons, we have witnessed a very underperformance of Dalit parties over the last few years. Even BSP, the most influential and popular Dalit party, has suffered a steady decline over the last one and half decades. Due to the fragmentation of Dalit politics in Maharashtra their support base has also been eroded significantly. It is to be noted that not only Dalit political parties, even the hold of Dalit organizations on their own communities is diminishing (Singh, 2019). That is why, the independent power to influence all the Dalit parties in local, regional and national elections has steadily eroded. The aspirations and ambitions of the newly emerging Dalit middle class have changed in the age of the neoliberal market economy. The rising Dalit middle class is no longer satisfied with symbolic representation in the political parties, and they want to share in the real power. So the educated middle-class Dalits are willing to support any party that provides immediate gains. It is also one of the reasons for the fall of Mayavati's support base. Because a large section of Dalits are now thinking that her politics can no longer be conducive to realizing their dreams (Singh, 2017). The lust for power, aspirations and ambitions have led to the remarkable rightward shift of the educated young Dalits and the poor masses. That is why the erosion of the Dalit support base has been visible in election after election over the last few years.

Moreover, the newly emerging Dalit middle-class assertion has little appeal to the rural Dalits. Because they need protection against atrocities, to solve land and wage questions, education and employment, and other help for improving their socio-economic conditions. Professor Pai rightly pointed out that the rural poor Dalits have moved away from their traditional parties to fulfil their upward mobility aspirations (2020). Moreover, one kind of disillusionment has been created among the Dalit caste groups over the socio-economic programs of the BSP. Large sections of different Dalit sub-caste groups are now thinking that BSP cannot solve the socio-economic problems faced by Dalits. Actually, Mayavati's shift from a Dalit-oriented policy to a Sarvajan policy was viewed as mainly helpful to the Jatavs and the upper castes Brahmins. Some Dalit sub-castes are now thinking that BSP is represented only by the Jatavs and the upper caste Brahmins. We know that the BSP has compromised with the BJP in the past and woos the Brahmins at present. However, it has still not exhausted its secular potential, which could be an asset in any struggle against Hindutva (Kanungo, 2007, p. 1854).

Dalit Identity Politics

Caste identity politics is an important trend of present-day Dalit politics. It is a well-known fact that caste is the main instrument for the political and cultural assertion of Dalits in India. Dalits recreate caste 'as a new identity of self-assertion and pride. Thus, Dalits and other subordinated castes invoke caste ties as a sign of solidarity, fraternity, pride, self-respect, assertion, and unity' (Satyanarayan & Tharu, 2011, p. 11). However, at the same time, caste identity itself is internally fragmented. Because the issue of

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conflicting interests between the different Dalit sub-caste groups is now coming to the fore and gaining political articulation (Gudavarthy, 2014). Many Dalit castes are now eager to form their caste and sub-caste identity, creating tension among Dalit caste or sub-caste groups in India. Of late, the conflict between Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh over the sub-caste categorization of reservation quota is a classic example of sub-caste division among Dalits (Shah, 2001b, p. 25). The Malas emphasize Dalit unity and Dalit identity, whereas the Madigas prefer to maintain their traditional jati identity (Shah, 2001b, p. 25). Presently, Dalit unity and identity are at stake. The formation of caste identities within the Dalit communities is one of the biggest hurdles to developing unity and solidarity. So, now the major challenge before the Dalit intellectuals, leaders and activists is to resolve the contradictions, which have originated with growing stratification within the Dalit community (Shah, 2001b, p. 25).

New Swing in Dalit Politics

We have recently witnessed a new awareness and awakening in the Dalit movement and politics under the young educated Dalit leadership, which has posed a serious challenge to the age-old caste-based supremacy of the upper castes and the established Dalit political parties and their leaders. Social media has played an important role in this new Dalit consciousness and awakening. This new swing of Dalit politics widened the Dalit movement and politics beyond political power and religious conversion. These new Dalit politics is very aware, assertive, self-critical, organized, well-connected, inclusive, and, to some extent, beyond party politics. Indeed, the objectives of both the old and new Dalit politics are more or less the same, but the expression is very different. The incidence of violence against Dalits at Una in Gujarat, Saharanpur in UP, Udupi Chalo Yatra in Karnataka and the solidarity movement related to Rohit Vemula's suicidal issue in Hyderabad have given birth to a new awareness and assertion among the young educated Dalits in India. In almost all these mobilizations, thousands of Dalit students, youths, lefts and other progressive sections of various states have voiced their anger. The uniqueness of these movements is that unity and solidarity have developed within the various Dalit caste groups, minorities and other non-Dalit sections of society. For instance, the caste violence in Una has, for the first time, united all 32 Dalit sub-caste groups, minorities and other non-Dalit people who participated spontaneously in this Dalit Asmita Yatra in 2016 (Thekaekara, 2016). Thekaekara further pointed out that the Dalit fight back at Una is India's Rosa Parks moment (2016)[1].

The current awakening and resurgence of the Dalit movement and politics are very noteworthy and exceptional because they developed simultaneously in various states. It is true that young educated, politically conscious and aggressive Dalit leaders have developed a new trend in Dalit politics. This new trend will lead to a new era in Dalit politics or not time will tell. However, we cannot deny the fact that the new Dalit leaders have gained much more popularity among Dalit students, youths and other marginal sections, including Muslims.

Concluding Observations

Dalits have to go a long way in achieving the goal of the socio-economic transformation of Indian society as they are internally fragmented into various castes and sub-castes and are scattered almost all over the country. Despite their immense political potential, Dalits could not bring about social revolution due to their fragmentation and disunity (Mandal, 2009, p. 138). It has to rise above mere protest and

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revolt against the suffering of Dalits and launch a movement for socio-economic transformation based on radical agendas and programs. However, for the sake of power, personal interests and ambitions, Dalit leaders compromise with their ideologies and gradually lose their support base. Under the changing situation, Dalit leaders have to develop new ideologies, take new social strategies and tactics, and make grand solidarity for restructuring the existing society and emancipation of the Dalits and other marginal sections of Indian society. In this context, Ambedkar had correctly envisaged the idea that we have to fight against the twin enemies of Brahmanism and capitalism at the same time. These two are responsible for the perpetuation of caste in India. However, the post-Ambedkarite Dalit politics is gradually taking a rightward shift defying Ambedkar's philosophy and ideals. We have to keep in mind that if Brahmanism and capitalism are the two enemies of Dalits, fighting against one and supporting the other Dalit politics could never reach its emancipatory goal. So for the emancipation of Dalit masses, Dalit politics need to make grand solidarity with radical politics led by the lefts and other democratic forces of Indian society. The most oppressed and exploited classes indeed comprise India's most economically oppressed and exploited castes. So, class struggle and caste struggle are not two opposite and contradictory but are closely intertwined, and coterminous struggles (Yechury, 1997, p. 3) and have to be fought simultaneously. In this regard, the Dalits have to keep in mind that the transformation of a caste-based social structure is very tough only by caste movement and politics against the caste system and by ignoring the class factor.

On the other hand, the leftists are to be more attentive and assertive in protecting the interest of Dalits and the other marginal sections against the existing social violence, oppression and exploitation. Another most significant task of the left is to integrate and consolidate the struggle against class exploitation with social oppression. So, grand solidarity between the lefts, the Dalits and other secular democratic forces is not merely desirable but indispensable for fighting against the caste system and the existing socio-economic structure and emancipation of the vast marginal sections, including Dalits.

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Note

1. A civil rights movement started in America when Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in 1955. In this movement, African-Americans and millions of white Americans

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joined together and protested against racism in America. Their slogan was 'we are not the oppressor, we stand with the civil rights movement'.

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