

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR AND DALITS' POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

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Abstract

In the political history of Dalit leadership the role of Dr. Ambedkar has always been acknowledged as leader of Dalit in every spheres of their life. The leadership of Dr. Ambedkar has strengthened in emergence of Dalit political leadership with completely new dimension of socio – political consciousness among the Dalits and equipped with this consciousness within the Dalit leadership. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the first major leader of the Dalits who rose to the height of logical articulation and materialization of their socio – political aspirations and interests of larger Dalit community in India. It is not very difficult to find at what stage the idea of protest takes shape in the mind of an individual. It is yet relatively easy to say when that idea of protest gets crystallized in some form of social action. From this standpoint, the year 1919 seems important in tracing the historical beginning of the Dr. Ambedkar's movement, because he appeared on the political scene for the first time in the year 1919, when he was called to testify to the Southborough Committee. More generally, it is now clear that there can be no single political strategy for Dalits throughout India. The common political objective of Dalits is to strengthen their collective power and build Dalits leadership in electoral political system of the country.

Key words: Dalits, Leadership, Political consciousness, Political Leadership and Political freedom.



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Introduction:

Dalit leadership in India has always been perceived as synonymous to the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the Indian social and political history. Dr. Ambedkar was the first Dalit leader who was an all India Dalit Leadership from Dalit liberation to ensuring political rights and representation to Dalits community in this country. Such leadership had existed in different parts of the country. In this context, Dalits had organised demonstration in Poona and Madras against the functioning of the National Congress way back in 1895 and had even burnt its effigy.¹ They had carried out more organized movements for achieving their goals of equality, self-respect, self-right etc., in different parts of the country since the 1920's onwards. The political mobilization of the Dalits on the national scene can also be traced

¹ Ambedkar, B.R., 1990, "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables", in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, p. 190.

back to the late 1920s when the British Government initiated a series of Round Table Conference to provide political safeguards and representation to various minority communities including the Depressed Classes (Dalit) as they were known by that time.² Therefore, the 1920's can be taken as the culmination point for analyzing the nature, social composition and crisis the of the Dalit leadership in different parts of the country. This period is testing time for the Dalit leadership as there was no pan India organisational basis for the Dalits.

The Dalit leadership had yet produced a number of leaders with a large following throughout India. For instance, among the early known Dalit leaders in Maharashtra were Kisan Faguji Bansode (1870-1947), Gopal Baba Walankar, V. Ravji Moonj Pundit (1860-1924), Shivram Janba Kamble, Kalicharan Nandagawali (1886-1962), G.A. Gawai (1888-1974) and others.³ Similarly in South India M.C. Rajah, the leader of the Adi-Dravida movement, was the chief spokesman of the Dalits and also their representative in the Madras Legislative Council in 1926. The Adi-Dravida Movement had been active in Madras since 1918. The other important leaders of the South were Bhagyareddy Verma, Murugesh Pillai, etc. Swami Achchutanand was working during the 1920s in the north India for the betterment of Dalits. The other key leaders during this period in north India especially in Punjab were Vasant Pai, Thakar Chand, Shudranandand Mango Ram.⁴

Dalits have began to form their independent political and social organisations in the 1920s. The first Independent Dalit political movement in India Depressed Classes Federation was established in Maharashtra under the encouragement of the Bombay Presidency Social Reform Association. Its initial purpose was to pressurize the Indian National Congress to include in its main planks the removal of untouchability. Consequently, the Indian National Congress had incorporated this in its agenda, adopted in its annual secession held at Calcutta in 1917. It is interesting to note that the Indian National Congress, after 32 years of its formation, had adopted the agenda of the removal of untouchability, which were in effect manifestations of its neglect about a grave problem effecting millions of human beings.

² Oommen, T.K., 1990, *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 23.

³ Omvedt, Gail, 1994, *Dalit and the Democratic revolution, Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage, Publications, New Delhi.

⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark, 1982, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*, University of California Press, Barkeley, p. 35.

Over the years the political climate in the country changed substantially. The government of India Act, 1919 explicitly provided for communicable representations in the Indian Parliament. This has stimulated the formation of new Dalit organizations, which aimed not only to secure benefits for the Depressed Classes or the Dalits but also to organize them into coherent political blocks. No doubt, there grew general concerns among the Untouchables or the Depressed Classes for forming their separate autonomous political organization (s) throughout India during the early 1920s. As the social, economic, political and geographical realities of the various regions in India were different, so were the dominant issues related to the emergence of autonomous Dalits leadership. Not only that but each region had different level of social – political consciousness about oppression and exploitation of the Untouchable castes that has resulted from their number of social movements organized in the past.

Dalit Leadership in India and the Role of Dr. Ambedkar:

In the political history of Dalit leadership the role of Dr. Ambedkar has always been acknowledged as leader of Dalit in every spheres of their life. The leadership of Dr. Ambedkar has strengthen in emergence of Dalit political leadership with completely new dimension of socio – political consciousness among the Dalits and equipped with this consciousness within the Dalit Leadership. According to Zelloit, Dr. Ambedkar's programmes were intended to integrate the untouchables (Dalits) from a state of dehumanization and slavery into one of equality through the use of modern methods based on education and the exercise of legal and political rights.⁵

It is the fact that several Dalit Leaders who had organised a number of Dalit movements in different parts of the country before Dr. Ambedkar emerged on the political scene. Most of these leaders had their allegiance to the Indian National Congress and they tried to achieve upliftment of the Dalits within the Hindu – fold. Only a few Dalit leaders had their independent organizations and asserted themselves for achieving a separate social identity for Dalits. Before Dr. Ambedkar there were no lower caste leaders of national stature who could speak the language of the educated elite without being too closely identified with them. In fact Dr. Ambedkar was the first major leader of the Dalits who rose to the height of logical articulation and materialization of their socio – political aspirations and interests of

⁵ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari (ed.,) Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 158.

larger Dalit community in India. It is not very difficult to find at what stage the idea of protest takes shape in the mind of an individual. It is yet relatively easy to say when that idea of protest gets crystallized in some form of social action.⁶ From this standpoint, the year 1919 seems important in tracing the historical beginning of the Dr. Ambedkar's movement, because he appeared on the political scene for the first time in the year 1919, when he was called to testify to the Southborough Committee.⁷

The first Public political appeal of Dr. Ambedkar's for Dalits in 1919 resulted in failure. In the colonial rule the Southborough Committee ignored him and a number of others who urged for the direct representation of the depressed classes to the Bombay Legislative Assembly but the Committee made provision for one member to be nominated to the same. But Dr. Ambedkar did not stop at this point. In 1920, he established a Marathi fortnightly, "Mooknayak" (Hero of the Dumb) which was dedicated to making the Dalits aware of their conditions. Through its editorial, he addressed himself to two important strands of thought: One of these reflected his reactions to the dominant nationalist movement as led by the Indian National Congress. He addressed the questions of whether and how the Dalits should relate themselves to the Nationalist movement and how they could successfully articulate their own specific goals without appearing to obstruct the larger National goal. The second issue was the relationship of the Dalits own movements for securing their rights to the reformist movements carried on caste – Hindu social reformers on behalf of the Dalits.

In clarifying his own stand on the national movement for transfer of political power and the upper caste-led reformist movements, he argued, as Gore writes "in such a stratified society self – government was not enough. There must be an equal emphasis on good government – a good government dedicated to opening up the channels of development to all sections of society".⁸ Dr. Ambedkar raised this question because the Indian National Congress, which initially had achievement of good government as its main objective, under the influence of the extremists leaders of Congress, had changed its goal to attainment of self – government. He opined in the Mooknayak, "while one cannot object to the principle

⁶ Gore M.S., 1993, *The Social Context of an ideology, Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 74.

⁷ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, *Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra*, in Rajni Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 40.

⁸ 8. Gore M.S., 1993, *The Social Context of an ideology, Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 75.

involved, we would not be able to support this change in objective unless we know whose self – government this is going to be and what will be its practical goals – for practice is more important than principle.⁹ He further writes in another issue of the *Mooknayak*, ‘freedom or self – government’ must mean freedom and security for the individual, the recognition of his right to property, equality before the law, freedom to act in consonance with one’s conscience, the right to be represented in the legislature and the right of opportunity for employment in public or government agencies.¹⁰ He wanted to be assured that the untouchables (Dalit) would also have a share in such self – government as without it the self – government would mean a government to rule over the already depressed people. Dr. Ambedkar argued that the untouchables (Dalits) should receive not just a proportionate representation but also a weighted representation in the legislatures. The more backward a group, the higher should be its representation. Without opposing the struggle for political freedom, Dr. Ambedkar made it clear that the agitation for ‘self – government’ could not appeal to the Dalits unless it gave them an adequate share of political power in the legislatures and that too through their own representatives. Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar criticized the upper caste leaders of keeping the government ignorant of the true conditions of Dalits. He also wrote that the upper castes were opposed to the Dalits for demanding share in the political power through their independently chosen representatives.

The All India Conference of untouchables (Dalits) held in May 1920 at Nagpur. In this conference, Dr. Ambedkar Criticized the representation submitted by V.R. Shinde to the Southborough Committee and made an important policy speech. As a result, the conference passed a resolution requesting the government to reject Shinde’s suggestion of nominated member and to let the Dalits select their own representatives. Social Scientist M.S. Gore writes about this resolution, “This demand for a separate electorate was the most important political demand of the Dr. Ambedkar movement. It followed logically from the ideological position taken by Dr. Ambedkar in the first instance, viz., that the interests of the untouchables were not the same as the interests of caste Hindus and that they could not be subsumed in the latter.¹¹ Thus, with these three events of submitting a testimony to the Southborough Committee, publishing the *Mooknayak* and appearing at two major conference

⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 76.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 79.

of Dalits during 1920, Dr. Ambedkar made his claim to be an alternate but independent leader of the Dalits. His main objective was to prepare the Dalits for having their own identity and not being used any more by caste Hindus in the Indian Society.

Leadership of Dr. Ambedkar's

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's leadership spread into three inter-related phases. These phases were complementary and supplementary to his efforts for achieving equality, liberty and justice for the Dalits. Each phase enriched his experience in fighting against the existing inequalities of the Hindu social order. The periodization of his leadership is also necessary to understand the rationale of his changing socio – political stances in his long struggle. The first phase began in early 1920 and continued till 1930.¹² During this period he acted more like a social reformer in fighting against the rigid caste system and its rue practice of untouchability. The second phase started in 1930 and ended with his resigning from the Nehru Cabinet in 1951. Being fully recognized as the undisputed political leader of the Dalits, he emphasized the need of acquiring political power for raising their socio – economic status. Finally, in the third phase of his leadership (1952-56), he embraced Buddhism along with his followers. He emerged during this period a religious reformer for Dalit and led a revolt against Hinduism.

First Phase: Social Reforms Movement

Throughout his life Dr. Ambedkar favoured social and religious reforms instead of harping directly on political reforms. Hence, in the early 1920s he participated in a few attempts of the Dalits for their sanskritization in which they imitated some rituals of the caste Hindus. But soon he realized the futility of such efforts for Dalits because their efforts of sanskritization failed to accord them a higher status in the caste hierarchy therefore, before taking on to mass action to gain socio – religious and political rights for the Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar formed a society called the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha, a society to serve the interests of outcastes on July 20, 1924, which could place their social and political problems before the government. The prime motto of this organization was 'Educate, Organize and Agitate'. In a note seeking enrolment of members, Dr. Ambedkar clarified the objectives of the organization. "In order to bring about the uplift of outcastes it is first necessary to awaken them. Any community before it can progress must develop a consciousness. As someone has

¹² 12. Mathew, Joseph, 1986, Ideology Protest and Social Mobility, Inter –India Publications, New Delhi, p. 60. : Jogdand, P.G., 1991, Dalit Movement in Maharashtra, Kanak Publications, New Delhi, p. 52.

put it while the poor are certainly handicapped by their poverty, the real obstacle in their path is their inactivity and their indifference. To overcome this inactivity and indifference it is necessary that they should become charged with resentment of the injustice of their own condition. Without it, they cannot get rid of the factors that obstruct their progress.”¹³

Dr. Ambedkar went for a mass action programme in 1927 and in the same year he was nominated by the Governor to the Bombay Legislature. The event that catapulted Dr. Ambedkar to the front – rank of Dalit leadership was the Mahad Satyagrah campaign. This was the first act of public protest by Dr. Ambedkar. The Satyagrah consisted simply of the assertion of the right of Dalit to drink water from Chowdar and open public tank in the Teshil town of Mahad in Konkan. A group of thousands Dalits moved on to the tank and drank water. Later in 1927 Dr. Ambedkar called another conference at Mahad to reiterate the Dalit right to use the public water supply. In his presidential speech he said that the movement was not only to gain access to the water or the temple or to remove the barriers to commonality. But its aim was to break down the Varna system, which supported inequality in society. One can observe here a definite broadening of goal of achieving equality and eradication the contradictions of the Varna system. The Immediate programme of drinking water from the Mahad tank was only symbolic protest.¹⁴

Another very unique event that took place during the Mahad Satyagrah was burning of the Manusmriti the sacred law book of the Hindus. Moreover, Gangadhar Neelkanth Sahasrabuddhe, Brahman Associate of Dr. Ambedkar, moved the resolution proposing the burning of the Manu Smriti. Justifying his action of burning the Manu Smriti, Dr. Ambedkar said in the 3rd February, 1928 issue of his *Bahishkrit Bharat* that his reading of the Manu Smriti had convinced him that it was abusive and insulting in its treatment of the Shudras and it did not even remotely support the idea of social inequality. To burn a thing was to register protest against the idea of social equality. To burn a thing was to register protest against the idea it represented. By so doing, one expected to shame the person concerned into modifying his behaviour. He further said that it would be futile to expect that anyone who revered the Manusmriti could be genuinely interested in the welfare of the untouchables.”¹⁵ Gore (1993) argues that Dr. Ambedkar compared the burning of the Manusmriti to the burning of foreign

¹³ Gore M.S., 1993, *The Social Context of an ideology, Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid*. p. 106.

clothes recommended by Gandhi. Further, he argues that though Dr. Ambedkar justified the burning of the Manusmriti, he still regarded himself as a Sanatan Hindu. Dr. Ambedkar revealed, “though I do not accept the authority of the Vedas, I consider myself to be a Sanatan Hindu”.¹⁶

In 1930 Dr. Ambedkar organised the largest and longest Satyagraha at Nasik for the Dalits, entry to the Kala Ram temple. Around 15,000 Mahars and Chambhars had assembled at Nasik. But, the temple had to be closed for about a year to keep them away from entering it. The Parvati Satyagraha in Poona also met the same fate. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar’s effort of social reforms could not bring any positive result in changing the Hindu social order, which he argued was based on graded inequality.

Yet, he took up the challenge as he was convinced by his knowledge about the social and political reforms carried allover the world. He argued that, “history bears out the proposition that political revolutions have always; been preceded by social and religious revolutions. The religious reformation started by Luther was the precursor of the political emancipation of the European people. In England, Puritanism led to the establishment of political liberty. Puritanism founded the New World. It was Puritanism, which won the war of American independence, and Puritanism was a religious movement. The same is true of the Muslim Empire. Before the Arabs became a political power they had undergone a thorough religious revolution started by the Prophet Mohammad. Even Indian history supports the same conclusion. The political revolution led by Chandragupta was preceded by the religious and social revolutions of Buddha. The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about by the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak. It is unnecessary to add more illustrations. These will suffice to show that the emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people”.¹⁷ That is why, he used to criticize the Indian National Congress for giving precedence to political reforms over social and religious reforms. Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar was much critical of the types of reforms, which the Congress was promoting, and the genuineness of its concern about the amelioration of the conditions of the Dalits.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 117

¹⁷ Ambedkar, B.R., 1979, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches Vol. 1, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, pp. 34-44.

Taking note of the kind of social reform which reformers were agitating for, Dr. Ambedkar opined that it was necessary to make a distinction between social reform in the sense of reform of the Hindu family and social reform in the sense of the reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu society. The former had emphasized widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage etc., while the latter related to abolition of the caste system. The Indian National Congress and the contemporary reformers were concerned mainly with reform of the high caste Hindu family. That is why the social reforms did not provide any help to Dalits. This fact has been highlighted by Barbara Joshi, she argues that “early Indian social ferment sprang from high caste Indians who focused first on changes relevant to those of their own status. For instance, the early heated debates by reformers about Sati and widow remarriage were largely irrelevant for the lowest caste, whose traditional cultures usually permitted and sometimes encouraged widow remarriage, widespread ignorance of low caste living conditions plus instructive defense of elite preeminence. The high degree of sub – culture variation and a very low level of communication and empathy among castes plagued Indian Social Reform”.¹⁸

Regarding the genuineness of the Congress for the amelioration of the conditions of the Dalits, Dr. Ambedkar was very much suspicious. His suspicion was based on the historical resolution passed by the Congress at its annual meetings; its various programmes and views of its leaders. The Congress passed after 32 years of its existence in 1917 a resolution for the amelioration of the conditions of the Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar’s blamed that the Congress did this with an ulterior motive of getting some concessions announced on 20th August 1917 by Mr. Montague, the then Secretary for India. Prior to that Dr. Ambedkar had a bitter experience of B.G. Tilak leading the anti – social reform section of the Congress workers and threatening to burn the ‘Pandal’ if the Congress allowed the use of it for the Social Reform Conference. Taking note of Annie Besant, the President of the 1917 annual session of the Indian National Congress, Dr. Ambedkar said, “I don’t know that she was ever a friend of the untouchables. So far as I know, she felt great antipathy towards the untouchables”.¹⁹ To prove his point he quoted from Annie Besant’s article in which she had expressed her opinion on the question whether the children of the Dalits should be admitted to the common school where the upper caste children also studied. She wrote, “here, as

¹⁸Joshi R. Barbara, 1982, *Democracy in Search of Equality*, Hindustan publishing Corporation, Delhi, p. 38.

¹⁹ 19. Ambedkar, B.R., 1990, *Op.Cit.* No. 1, p. 3.

everywhere, education is the lever by which we may hope to raise the untouchables, but a difficulty arises at the outset... The children of the depressed classes need, first of all, to be taught cleanliness outside decency of behaviour, and the earliest rudiments of education, religion and morality. Their bodies, at present are ill – odorous and foul with the liquor and strong smelling food out of which for generations they have been built up; it will need some generations of purer food and living to make their bodies fit to sit in the close neighborhood of a school – room with children who have received bodies from an ancestry trained in habits of exquisite personal cleanliness, and fed on pure food – stuffs. We have to raise the Depressed Classes to a similar level of Physical purity, not to drag down the clean to the level of dirty, and until this is done, close association is undesirable”.²⁰ Focusing on the reforms envisaged by the socialists for the amelioration of the Dalits he argued that, the socialists of India following their following Europe are seeking to apply the economic interpretation of history to the facts of India. They preach that political and social reforms are but gigantic illusions and that economic reform by equalization of property must have produce over every other kind of reform. He rejected the realization of socialism in the Indian society without uniting the Proletariat of India with social reforms. Unless and until the felling of equality and fraternity is not there the Proletariat cannot bring about the revolution. Currently, “Can it be said that the proletariat of India, poor as it is, recognise no distinctions except that of the rich and the poor? Can it be said that the poor in India recognize no such distinctions of caste or creed, high or low? If the fact is that they do, what unity of front can be expected from such a proletariat in its action against the rich? How can there be a revolution if the proletariat cannot present a united front? Suppose for the sake of argument that by some freak of fortune a revolution does take place and the Socialists come in power, will they not have to deal with the problems created by the particular social order prevalent in India? I can’t see how a Socialist State in India can function for a second without having to grapple with the problems created by the prejudices which make Indian people observe the distinctions of high and low, clean and unclean”.²¹

This entire episode even compelled Dr. Ambedkar to take up social reform as his primary goal for the amelioration of the conditions of the Dalits. He also confessed that, social reform was very necessary for Dalits because it was through this that they could be united and made

²⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

²¹ Ibid, p. 190.

conscious. Equipped with a clear – cut ideology and sorting out who were friends and who were enemies, Dr. Ambedkar prepared himself and his followers for the second phase.

Second Phase : Ambedkar’s Leadership for Political Power

In the second phase of his leadership, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized on acquiring political power for his people. Why did Dr. Ambedkar resort to the political weapon to get over the age – old disabilities, degradation and backwardness of the Dalits? This may be because “religious movements have failed to bring about any improvement in the social status of Dalits in a substantial measure, it was thought that the Hindu social order should be attacked from more secular grounds like economic betterment, education and political representation of the downtrodden in the body politic”.²² Dr. Ambedkar wrote that, “when the untouchables lost all hope for their salvation through social reform, they were forced to seek political means for protecting themselves”.²³ Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar proved that the problems of Dalits were essentially political. Contrary to the Congress treatment of Dalits problems as social, Dr. Ambedkar opined that, “it is wrong to say that the problem of the untouchables is a social problem. For it is quite unlike the problems of dowry, widow remarriage, age of consent, etc., which are illustrations of what are properly called social problems. Essentially it is a problem of quite a different nature in as much as it is a problem of securing, to a minority, liberty and equality of opportunity at the hands of a hostile majority, which believes in the denial of liberty and equal opportunity of the majority and conspires to enforce its policy on the minority. Viewed in this light the problem of the untouchables is fundamentally a political problem”.²⁴

Dr. Ambedkar’s plan to lift the status of Dalits through political means became very clear from his submitting a memorandum to the Simon Commission, testifying before Southborough Committee, his participation in the three Round Table Conferences and forming political parties. As a result of the political plea made by him to the Southborough Franchise Committee legislatures as stated earlier D.D. Gopala and Dr. Ambedkar himself were nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council (Dr. Ambedkar was nominated in 1926). This was basically a result of the ‘Muddian Committee report. Further, Dr. Ambedkar along with eighteen depressed classes (Dalits) associations testified willingly to the Simon

²² Parvathamma, 1989, Scheduled Castes at the Cross Roads, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 132.

²³ Ambedkar, B.R., 1990. Op.Cit. No. 1, p. 190.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 190-91.

Commission in 1928 and asked for separate electorates for Dalits. (The Congress boycotted the Commission). Dr. Ambedkar told the Commission that “the untouchables were relieved of anxiety because the Simon Commission did not include an Indian, since such a nominee could not be truly representative of all groups”.²⁵

However, he did not renew, till 1931-32, his 1919 demand for separate electorates for the Dalits, instead he asked for adult franchise and reserved seats, up to 22 in all in a Bombay Assembly of 140 (15 According to their numbers plus seven weightage to insure their rights). Dr. Ambedkar also requested guarantees of the Depressed Classes, as did an appeal from the Central Provinces Depressed Classes Association. This group requested: (1) an increase in the government power of veto for protection of the minority, (2) Separate representation not only in legislature, but all public bodies including universities in proportion to their numerical strength, (3) posts in government service for Depressed Class members, with minimum qualification required, (4) representation in the Cabinet dependent only up on Depressed Classes votes, (5) special grants for education, and (6) no application of a bill affecting the Depressed Classes if three fourths of the community opposed it.²⁶ Though Dr. Ambedkar couldn't achieve anything by his representation to the Simon Commission, these demands proved to be a testimony to the confidence, which Dr. Ambedkar had revived, in the modern political institutions by which he sought to uplift the Dalits.

Later, Dr. Ambedkar was nominated to the 1930 Round Table Conference held in London to discuss India's future constitution. This was an acknowledgement of the leadership he had gained among the Dalits. Zelloit writes that by this time his fame had extended to every corner of Maharashtra and beyond. For Dr. Ambedkar, his own and of Dewan Bahadur R. Srinivasn's nominations to the Round Table Conference meant, that “the untouchables were regarded not merely as a separate element from the Hindus but also of such importance as to have the right to be consulted in the framing of a constitution for India”.²⁷ This was a great achievement so far as Dalits were concerned. Though their efforts through social reform movements could not give them a separate identity this political movement accorded the same in no time. This can also be seen as a victory for Dr.

²⁵ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari (ed.,) Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 101.

²⁶ 26. Ibid, 102.

²⁷ Ambedkar, B.R., 1990, “What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables”, in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, pp. 40-41.

Ambedkar's political vision to shift from the social reform to acquire a separate political identity for Dalits. He opined that, "it is only in a Swaraj (self) constitution that one has any chance of getting the political power in one's own hand without which one cannot bring salvation to one's people".²⁸

At the First Session of the Round Table Conference held in November 1930, Dr. Ambedkar put the list of the safeguards to be providing to the untouchables (Dalits) for their protection against the tyranny and oppression of the Hindus. The list included subjects like equal citizenship, fundamental rights, free enjoyments of equal rights, punishment for boycotting of Dalits, their protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the Legislatures and cabinet adequate representation in the services, special departmental care, etc. The list of demands proves his knowledge of law and also his ability to use the Round Table Conference as a forum for asking for political safeguards for Dalits so that social justice can be assured to them.

Gandhi opposed the demand of Dr. Ambedkar of separate electorate for Dalits at the second session of the Round Table Conference convened in 1931. Speaking on behalf of the Congress he said, "the Congress has reconciled itself to special treatment of the Hindu – Muslim – Sikh tangle. There are sound historical reasons for it but the Congress will not extend that doctrine in any shape or form to the untouchables. Therefore, I would most strongly resist any further special representation."²⁹ Gandhi further said that the separate electorate would create a division in Hinduism which "I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever. I do not mind untouchables, if they so desire being converted to Islam or Christianity. I should tolerate that, but I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set froth in the villages."³⁰ Replying to this version of the Congress and Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar opined after some period that "the reasoning of the Congress appears to be correct. But, it is only a superficial view of the matter. These elections take place once in five years. It may be asked how can social solidarity between the Hindus and the untouchables be advanced by one day devoted to joint voting if for the rest of the five years they are leading severely separate lives. Similarly, it may well be asked how

²⁸ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari (ed.), Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 162.

²⁹ Ambedkar, B.R., 1990, "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables", in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, p. 57.

³⁰ 30. Ibid, p. 69.

can one greater separation than what already exists or contrariwise how can one day in five year devoted to separate voting prevent those who wish to work for union form carrying out their purposes. To make it concrete how can separate electorate for the untouchables prevent intermarriage or inter-dining being introduced between them and Hindus? It is therefore futile to say that the political recognition of the untouchables as a separate element and granting them constitutional safeguards will perpetuate separation between them and the Hindus if the Hindus desire to put an end to it”.³¹

Dr. Ambedkar succeeded in getting the separate electorate accepted for the Dalits like for the rest of the minorities. It was an important achievement for him. British Government announced its decision known as the Communal Award on August 14, 1932. The Communal Award gave 78 seats to Dalits. Besides, Dalits had two more advantages, viz., (i) A fixed quota of seats for the Dalit representatives to be elected by separate electorates and (ii) The provision of the Double Vote, one to be used through separate electorates and the other through the general electorates. According to Dr. Ambedkar the separate electorate system gave a special status to the Dalits. “The second vote given by the Communal Award was a priceless privilege. Its value as a political weapon was beyond reckoning. The voting strength of the untouchable in each constituency is one to ten. With this voting strength free to be used in the election of caste Hindu candidates, the untouchables would have been in a position to determine, if not to dictate, the issue of the General Election. No caste Hindu candidate could have dared to neglect their interest if he was made dependent upon the votes of the untouchables”.³² But, before anything could be achieved in concrete terms; Gandhi proposed the Communal Award and went to a fast unto death. Dr. Ambedkar issued to the press statement on Gandhi’s fast exposing his tactics, “suffice it is to say that although Mr. Gandhi declared a fast unto death, he did not want to die, he wanted very much to live”. The fast created a problem of how to save Gandhi’s Life. All eyes turned on Dr. Ambedkar for the same. Because the Prime Minister had made it clear that the British Cabinet would not withdraw or alter the Communal Award of its won. In response to the urgent plea of the Congress party leaders and others, Dr. Ambedkar agreed with lot of pain to forego the privileges of the Communal Award and signed a Pact, which later became famous as the Poona Pact. In the words of Dr. Ambedkar, “as to myself it is no exaggeration to say that no

³¹ 31. Ibid, 191.

³² 32. Ibid, p. 90.

man was placed in a greater and graver dilemma than I was then. It was a buffing situation. I had to make a choice between two different alternatives. There was before me the duty, which I owed as a part of common humanity, to save Gandhi from sure death. There was before me the problem of saving for the untouchables the political rights, which the Prime Minister had given them. I responded to the call of humanity and saved the life of Mr. Gandhi by agreeing to alter the Communal Award in manner satisfactory to Mr. Gandhi".³³

The Poona Pact had produced different reactions. Dr. Ambedkar himself felt that Dalits were at a loss. Because, he thought that the joint electorate was not useful to the Dalits as far as their effective and real representation was concerned, he opined that in the Joint electorate only that Dalit would be elected who was a nominee of the Hindus and, hence, a tool in their hands. He also argued on the basis of the composition of the constituencies in which the Dalit voters were outnumbered in the ratio of 1 to 24 or in some cases 1 to 49. Further, according to Parvathamma, "Dr. Ambedkar was forced to sign the Poona Pact and retrace his steps. Gandhi shot two birds with one bullet. He proclaimed that Dalits are Hindus. As Hindus they cannot have communal representation. But as socially, economically, politically and educationally degraded Hindus, he was willing to concede some special provisions for their upliftment. Dr. Ambedkar thus lost the cause of the SCs as a separate entity. Having retraced his steps once – rightly or wrongly – he was just not able to claim for SC separatism, though he kept on fumbling along these lines for the rest of his life."³⁴

Anyway, Dr. Ambedkar had to satisfy himself with the social and political reservations, which he got through the Poona Pact. But, he did not restrict himself to these gains only. Having won the privilege for the Dalits to elect their own representatives for the first time in history of Indian political scene Dr. Ambedkar went on to form a separate political party for Dalits. He had realised during his struggle that if the interest of the untouchables had to be protected in the era of electoral politics which was about to being, the Dalits needed to be organised as a political party hence he established Indian Labour Party.

³³ Ibid, p. 88.

³⁴ Parvathamma, 1989, Scheduled Castes at the Cross Roads, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 218.

Convinced about the less effectiveness of the Dalits, own party, he sought the support of the industrial and agricultural labourers who had common interests with the Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar's new party won as many as 11 of the 15 reserved seats in the 1937 elections to the Bombay Legislature. This was a great achievement for Dr. Ambedkar, as his party became a political force within not time. The Indian Labour Party was not very successful though it had won some rights for Dalits. It failed in the areas concerned with labour and agricultural policies. It also failed to secure a base among caste Hindus.

In 1942, Dr. Ambedkar reformulated his political plans. He formed a new party with the name the Scheduled Castes Federation. This time, he limited its organization to the Dalits only in the hope of uniting all the Dalits in anew battle for political power. But in the 1945 elections to the provincial legislature, the Scheduled Castes Federation was declared an organization with local influence in Bombay and the Central Provinces by the Cripps Mission. This was a setback to Dr. Ambedkar, as the Congress gained an upper hand. In 1956 Dr. Ambedkar made another attempt to transform the Scheduled Castes Federation into a party which would speak for all the dispossessed – the Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes, other Backward Classes and the Minorities. This attempt again was for taking Dalits out of untouchability into a larger political group. But Dr. Ambedkar passed away before the party could start functioning.

Dr. Ambedkar not only worked independently for political and social rights for Dalits. In 1942 he joined the Viceroy's Executive Council as the in-charge of labour affairs. There also he asked for the safeguards and protective discrimination for the Dalits in services and scholarship in education. It is thus evident that Dr. Ambedkar always tried to avail every possible opportunity for gaining rights for Dalits whenever and from wherever they came. After independence Dr. Ambedkar joined hands with that vision with the Congress government at the Center as the Law Minister. He was also made the Chairman of the Drafting Committee to draft the Constitution. His presence in the Constituent Assembly facilitated the making of suitable provisions in the Constitution in favour of the Dalits. Since he never compromised on the basic issues related to the Dalits, he resigned from the Cabinet in 1951, when he found that the government was not interested in uplifting the Dalits.

Third Phase : Ambedkar's Leadership in embracing Buddhism

Being out of the Cabinet, Dr. Ambedkar faced two election defeats and increased illness in the final years of his life. But, the last two public acts of his life namely his conversion to Buddhism and the foundation of the Republican Party should not be accepted as symptoms of his failures or renewed expression of separatism, Zeilliot tellingly portrays, "the conversion to Buddhism in October 1956, which came just before his death was the result of a personal conviction as well as a conscious effort to lay down a way his people could follow after his death".³⁵ Further, Vishwanathan argues differently, "drawing on Dr. Ambedkar's writings on culture and religion, I shall argue that, despite his disappointment with the aborted demand for separate electorates, his conversion was less a rejection of political solutions, than rewriting of religious and cultural change into a form of political intervention. Such intervention was important not simply in demographic terms (that is, creating a numerically significant constituency distinct from Hinduism), but more so in terms of creating a new mythology around which the political identity of Dalits could be mobilized. This mythology offered an alternative to mobilization around a structure of electoral reform that was flawed from the start because of its derivation from brahmanical and colonialist ideologies".³⁶ This conversion, which is considered as a religious movement, has been regarded as the final phase of his movement. Basically, he declared his intention to relinquish Hinduism at the Yeola Conference in 1935. It was because of his growing detachment with efforts to change the orthodox Hindu opinion and with Hindu reformist elements. He saw no future for his people in Hinduism. "His major critique against Hinduism was that it supported institutionalized inequality in society inequality based on the birth in a caste. He said that the Hindus had no social conscience. What they had was only a tradition, a ritual for social life and an abstract philosophy whose noble doctrine declaring man to have the essence of the divine in him bore no relationship to the prescription for daily life".³⁷ Criticizing Hindu society he himself opined, "the first and the foremost thing that must be recognized is that Hindu society is a myth. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. Each caste is conscious of its existence. A caste has no feeling that it is affiliated to other

³⁵ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari (ed.), Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 136.

³⁶ Viswanathan, Gauri, 1998, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 212-213.

³⁷ 37. Gore M.S., 1993, The Social Context of an ideology, Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 50.

castes except when there is a Hindu – Muslim riot. On all other occasions each caste endeavors to segregate itself and to distinguish itself from other castes. Each caste not only dined among itself and marries among itself but each caste prescribes its own distinctive dress. What other explanation can there be of the innumerable styles of dress worn by the men and women of India, which so amuse the tourists. Indeed, the ideal Hindu must be like a rat living in his own hole refusing to have any contact with others”.³⁸ That is why he turned to Buddhism.

To him Buddhism differed from Hinduism. He observed, “Hinduism believes in God. Buddhism has no God. Hinduism believes in soul. According to the Buddhism there is no soul. Hinduism believes in Chaturvarnya and the caste system. Buddhism had no place for caste system and Chaturvarnya”.⁴⁰ He thus embraced Buddhism because, Buddhism spoke of this worldliness, social equality between human beings, and self –respect to the individual. It emphasised compassion as a central moral and spiritual principal. In sum, it had all the three elements of liberty, equality and fraternity, which a democratic system should have. Hence, it was more useful for the Dalits. In his own words, “I Prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajan (understanding as against superstition and Supernaturalism), Karuna (love), and Samta (equality). This is what man wants for good and happy life. Neither god nor should can save society.”³⁹ When Dr. Ambedkar was asked why he was embracing Buddhism he had stated angrily, “Why cannot you ask this question to yourself and your forefathers as to why I am getting out of the Hindu fold and embracing Buddhism? He asked why they want his men to remain Harijan to enjoy only such ‘benefits’ as those of reservations. He asked them whether the Brahmins were Prepared to be untouchables to enjoy these privileges. He also declared that he had once told to Mahatma that though he differed from him on the issues of untouchability, when the time come I will choose only the least harmful way for the country. And that is the greatest benefit I am conferring on the country by embracing Buddhism; for Buddhism is part and parcel of Bhartiya culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land”.

Embracing Buddhism by Dr. Ambedkar was another important era for his leadership in India. Dhanajay Keer has discuss about this fact that “Dr. Ambedkar also declared that he

³⁸ 38. Keer, Dananjay, 1994, Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p. 492.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 490.

would propagate Buddhism in India when equipped with proper means for the task. As maker of the constitution, he had already achieved several things to that end. He described the provision for the study of Pali made in the constitution, the inscription of Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the imposing Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, and the acceptance of the Ashok Chakra by Bharat as her Symbol, as his personal achievements. The Government has declared Buddha Jayanti a holiday mainly through his efforts”.⁴⁰ His last effort to popularize the Buddhist faith in India was a book on “Buddha and his Dhamma”. He tried to explain the tenets of Buddhism, in this book, in most simple language for the common masses. We may conclude, that all this exercise forth propagation of Buddhism was undertaken by Dr. Ambedkar to provide Dalits a new identity and way of life, so that they can lead a dignified life.

Contemporary Dalit Leaders and Leadership during Dr. Ambedkar Era: Though there were Dalit leaders and Dalit Leadership at the time of Dr. Ambedkar but these were overshadowed by the dynamic and colossus personality of Dr. Ambedkar. Some of these leaders were with the Congress Hindu Mahasabha and some were working independently. Dr. Ambedkar became the sole representative of Dalits. Not only this, he became the focal centre of the other political organizations too. His growing popularity can be testified by the episode relating to the Poona Pact. “Dr. Ambedkar’s chief rival for Depressed Class leadership, Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah of Madras, was also involved in political action. Rajah, the first nominated member from the Depressed Classes on the Central Legislative Assembly, also instituted Depressed Class Conferences, testified to the Simon Commission, and had some following among the Mahars of Vidarbha as well as in the South of India. He and Dr. B.S. Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha brought forward a compromise plan allowing reserved seats in general constituency for the Depressed Classes in 1932 before the Poona Pact was signed, but although M.C. Rajah was present at the Poona Pact was signed, but although M.C. Rajah was present at the Poona Pact negotiations, he was eclipsed in importance by Dr. Ambedkar’s.”⁴¹

M.C. Rajah, (1883-1947) a Dalit Leader from south was born at St. Thomas mount, Madras. He belonged to the Pariah Caste. Educated in a Missionary school and Christian

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 498.

⁴¹ Zelloit, Eleanor, 1986, Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari (ed.,) Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p. 105.

College he became a schoolteacher in 1906. In 1917 he was nominated to elementary education committee and in 1924 to the Madras University Senate. He started Dravidian school at Nungambakkam in 1936. He was of the view that education should infuse in the students the spirit of social uplift. He became secretary of the state Adi – Dravid Mahayan Sabha in 1916. Through this organization he worked for the upliftment of the Dalit masses. Considering Britain as the liberator of the lower classes in India Rajah popularised the view of free and compulsory education to the Dalits. In 1928 he was also elected as the President of All India Depressed Classes Association. Nominated to the Madras Legislative Council in 1920 and in 1927 as the member of India Legislative Assembly, he continued as a member of Indian Legislative Assembly till 1937.

One of the most significant achievements of M.C. Rajah was regarding the change of nomenclature given to Dalits during his period. In the year 1922 as a member of Madras Legislative council M.C. Rajah had moved a resolution for the deletion of the terms ‘Panchama’ and ‘Paraya’ which were used to designate the Dalit at that time. His demand was accepted as Government of Madras issued an order forbidding the use of terms Panchama and Padriah in the region. When Dr. Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan put the demand of separate electorate for the Dalits at the Round Table conference (RTC) in London in 1930, Rajah supported the demand. He criticized Mahatma Gandhi and India National Congress for not supporting the demand and there by the Dalit cause. However, he entered into a pact for joint electorate and reserved seats, with Dr. Monje, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. Slowly he was sidelined and faded with Dr. Ambedkar’s success in mobilization of the Dalits.

The other leader acknowledged by Dr. Ambedkar himself in the Dalit movement was Dewan Bahadur R. Srinivasan (1859-1948) a member of the Dalit community from Madras. He was born on 7th July 1859 in Chengalpet district in Tamil Nadu. His father Rattamalai was a poor Adi – Dravida former. He became a Government servant on Mill Station of Nilgiri District where he met Colonel Olcott and Madam Blatvastky. In order to organise Dalits; he founded Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha in the year 1891. Through his organisation he convened first conference of Dalits in December 1893. He carried out many struggles against untouchability, caste system and religious myths. He also started a magazine named Parayan in 1893 to concretize masses about the exploitation of the Dalits Srinivasan was nominated to the Madras Legislative Council as a representative of depressed classes in the year 1923 and

remained in legislature till 1935. Later on he was nominated as a representative of the depressed classes in India to the Round Table Conference held during 1930-32 in London along with Dr. Ambedkar.

Like Dr. Ambedkar, Srinivasan also believed that the tyranny of untouchability can be removed if the Dalits are granted political power. He opined that separate electorate is only a temporary measure for the Dalits to improve their conditions. In fact he wanted reservations of seats on a population basis. However, Srinivasan did not support the declaration of conversion by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in 1935. Later, he remained aloof from the Dalit political movement.

Shyam Sunder was another Dalit Leader who was also a scholar, thinker and writer. The credit for transposing many of Dr. Ambedkar's revolutionary thoughts into an action packed programme goes to Shyam Sunder. He had formed Bhim Sena; a militant force of dedicated Dalit youths, which created tremendous impact particularly in the three states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.⁴² In fact the Bhim Sena, derived its name from Dr. Ambedkar's name, Bhim Rao. He called the Bhim Sena a self – defence force based on truth and justice. But he also could not make his independent identity and remained in the shadow of Dr. Ambedkar. Besides these, B.S. Venkat Rao was a prominent Dalit leader from Hyderabad State Depressed Classes Association, established in 1938. In 1939 this organization agitated for separate electorate along with the reservations of seats for Dalits in the state. The organization also asked for educational concessions. Besides, there were other Dalit leaders also like G.A. Gavai and Jagjivan Ram but they were associated with the Congress. Hence, they had no independent status but Jagjivan Ram needs a special mention here.

Jagjivan Ram (1908-1986) was born on April 5th 1908 at Chanddwa, Ara district in Bihar. He was born to a literate farmer Shri Shobiram who had 20 Acres of land. His mother's name was Basanti Devi. Having done his schooling in village he went to Banaras Hindu University (BHU) for higher education. He passed his graduation in 1931 from Calcutta University. In his school days he also suffered the same type of discriminations as were suffered by Dr. Ambedkar. Jagjivan Ram was conscious of the plight of the Dalits from his school days that is why he established Ravidas Mahasabha to unite Dalits in 1928 when he was in Calcutta. In 1930 he joined Congress and remained in it till 1977. It is said that he

⁴² Ibid, p. 131.

was influenced by two personalities, Madan Mohan Malviya and M.K. Gandhi. Malviya had advised him in his childhood to shift to Kashi Vidhyapeeth for his higher studies. On the other hand Gandhi's call to Hindus to give up the practice of Untouchability during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930. Added together these two personalities unconsciously dragged him in the fold of Hinduism and made him pro Congress. It also distanced him away from Dr. Ambedkar's movement and time and again they found themselves standing against each other. It is said that Congress deliberately groomed him to oppose Dr. Ambedkar and attract Dalits to its fold. He was one of the signatories of the Poona Pact in 1932 and opposed the proposal of separate electorate of Dr. Ambedkar.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad initiated Jagjivan Ram in his own organisation Anti Untouchability Society working for the Dalit upliftment in Bihar. Later on he introduced him to Mahatma Gandhi who entrusted him with the responsibilities of Harijan Sevak Sangh in Bihar. In the year 1934 in the annual conference of Ravidas Mahasabha at Calcutta it was decided to establish the Depressed Classes League following which a conference was organised in 1935 at Kanpur. The conference formally declared the formal establishment of the Depressed Classes League with Rasiklal Biswas as its President and Jagjivan Ram and P.N. Rajbhoj as Secretaries. Jagjivan Ram during 1935 also participated in the Hindu Mahasabha conference held at Lucknow. The main aim of the conference was to plan a policy to stop Dalits from converting to other religions. Infact Jagjivan Ram had moved a resolution to throw open the temples, watering places, schools, etc., for the Dalits which was opposed by Shri Shankaracharya of Puri, but later on the resolution was passed. Madan Mohan Malviya praised Jagjivan Ram in his Presidential address for his services to Hinduism by keeping Dalits within the fold of Hindu Society.

Another trait of Jagjivan Ram's leadership was that unlike Dr. Ambedkar he wanted the upliftment of the Dalits within the fold of the Hindu Society. He opposed the conversions of the Dalits to other religious. When Dr. Ambedkar had given a call that "he will not die as a Hindu" it was he who persuaded Dalits to postpone the mass conversion programme indefinitely in the conference of the Dalits held at Lucknow in the year 1936. Jagjivan Ram was elected to the Bihar Provincial Assembly on Congress platform for the first time in the year 1937. He became one of the strong pillars of the Congress during the Quit India Movement in 1942 and had to undergo imprisonment for a period of 14 months. When the interim Government was formed on August 12, 1946 under the Prime Ministership of Nehru,

Jagjivan Ram was inducted as Labour Minister. He also became the member of the Constituent Assembly. In the post – Constitution era he became the Minister for Communication in which Dr. Ambedkar was the law Minister. From the above description of activities, offices held by him, it could be argued that Jagjivan Ram aligned with the dominant socio-political forces of his time to achieve some rights and privileges for the Dalits. Moreover, he was the sole representative of the Dalits in the eastern part of the country as Dr. Ambedkar’s movement was largely restricted to western and to some extent northern parts of the country.

As far as identity for the Dalits was concerned, the nature of Dr. Ambedkar’s leadership became that of protest. With protest he wanted to change the identity of the Dalits, which used to be that of the meek and servile, uncomplaining and ever obedient, Dalits whom swept the village streets and worked in the farms of caste Hindus. Before embracing Buddhism Dr. Ambedkar had sought to establish the identity of the Dalits, through his explorations in history. In his book, Ambedkar put forth the hypothesis that the Dalits were historically “broken men”, i.e., primitive tribes. They were defeated and hence, broken into segments. He rejected the theory of racial differences as the basis of untouchability. He believed that the broken men of ancient India were followers of Buddhism and had not cared to return to Brahmanism when the latter triumphed over the formers. Dr. Ambedkar postulated that the Dalits were made to live outside the village not because they were ‘untouchables’ because they had always lived outside the villages. They came to be regarded as ‘untouchables’ later because of their religious differences and the imposition of new Brahminism. So, when Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism along with millions of his followers, it did not surprise many. But he definitely did this to take them away from untouchability and pull them into a larger religious group.

Dalit Politics and Leadership in Post-Ambedkar Era:

Until the emergence of the Bahujana Samaj Party in 1970s, the only postIndependence example of a party centered on Untouchables was the Republican Party of India (RPI). This was the final political vehicle devised by Dr. Ambedkar, though its formation is reached fruition only some months after his death. The Republican Party was a transformation of the Scheduled Castes Federation, electorally unsuccessful and also judged to be an inappropriate organizational form for Buddhists who had sloughed off caste by the act of abandoning Hinduism. Again, as in the days of the Independent Labour Party, Dr. Ambedkar planned a

party along class rather than caste lines. But almost from the beginning the RPI ran into ideological, organizational and factional problems. The first major division was between an old guard more deeply rooted in the village world of the majority of Mahars, and a younger and more highly educated leadership that increasingly focused on the opportunities inherent in urban life and the scheme of compensatory discrimination. This generational conflict was connected to a split between those who saw the future of Mahar politics in terms of broader economic and class struggle - some of these were the older village-based activists and an emerging leadership less committed to working with caste Hindus and even other Untouchable communities. While Dr. Ambedkar himself had been far less concerned with agrarian problems than with broader questions of political and constitutional principle, his stature had been such as to engender loyalty right across Mahar society and thus to blur the divergence of interest within it. After Dr. Ambedkar, and in the context of growing social and economic diversity among the Mahars, there was no one who could command this general loyalty. By 1959 division in the RPI was so deep that the two major factions held separate conventions (Gokhale, 1993: 224). Inevitably it was the younger, better educated and more prosperous faction based in the cities that became the more energetic element of the party.

The RPI carried its divisions into the election of 1962, and failed to win a single Lok Sabha seat from the new linguistic state of Maharashtra.' It did somewhat better in the State Assembly election of that year, but after that it won only a handful of Assembly seats in Maharashtra. The RPI also put down roots in several States where Dr. Ambedkar's influence had been relatively strong - particularly Uttar Pradesh (notably the cities of Agra and Aligarh) and Punjab, but also Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Extraordinarily, the RPI was electorally more successful in Uttar Pradesh than in Maharashtra. Its success in UP was built around a substantial Buddhist politician of Chamar origins, B.P. Maurya, who drew votes away from Congress by engineering a local coalition of Untouchables and Muslims in the city and District of Aligarh. But the inherent instability of this alliance - there had been no historical sympathy between Chamars and Muslims - and the Congress split of 1969 quickly changed the electoral equation for the RPI in Uttar Pradesh. By 1971 B.P. Maurya and his major opponent within the party, Ramji Ram, were both returned to the Lok Sabha under the banner of Indira Gandhi's ostensibly left-orientated branch of the congress. This was the effective end of the Republican Party as a force in Uttar Pradesh.

In Maharashtra, the death or eclipse of one Dr. Ambedkarite form has been a prelude to the rise of another. Thus in the early 1970, an organization calling itself the Dalit Panthers was formed with the project of reinstating class-based Dalit politics following the Republican Party's perceived lapse into narrow self-interest (Gokhale 1993, 264). The name, with its insurrectionist symbolism, was borrowed from the Black Panthers of the United States. At the time India was marked by widespread famine, pervasive student activism and a non-party oppositional politics, which later developed into Jayaprakash Narayan's direct confrontation of Indira Gandhi. But the Dalit Panthers proved unable to connect up with broader leftist politics. They were also no more attuned to the Dalit 'masses' - a majority of Mahars were still illiterate villagers - than was the Republican Party, and within a couple of years they were even more driven by ideological and personality differences. The core ideological split was publicly evident by 1974 and was personified in the two pre-eminent leaders of the movement, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale. For Dhale's faction, the defining moment in Dalit history was the mass conversion to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar; future gains were to be made primarily through a deepening and widening of Buddhist consciousness rather than through secular political action. Namdeo Dhasal, on the other hand, represented a more orthodox leftist, indeed Marxist, position, which gave both Dr. Ambedkar and the conversion movement less of a defining role. Abolition of Untouchability was an issue of class and economics more than of caste, religion and consciousness, and the natural allies of the Untouchables were the poor classes of whatever religious or caste community. Consistent with this view Dhasal had seen the CPI as the appropriate overall leader of the Dalits. But within a few years Indira Gandhi's anti-poverty programs of the Emergency period persuaded Dhasal that here was a leader genuinely committed to the poor, and his faction supported Congress in the 1977 election. By then the Panthers were divided into a number of geographically centered factions of little potency, and it was only the riots in 1978 surrounding the Maharashtra Government's decision to add the prefix 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar' to 'Marathwada University' that brought them into some prominence again. The Dalit Panthers had failed to define a durable role for themselves - they were political activists without a political party or a clear strategy agreed among themselves. Moreover, they had become scarcely more radical, and certainly no more connected to ordinary Mahars, than the Republican Party. And, of course, they had demonstrated little capacity to reach out to other untouchable castes.

The void left by the demise of the Panthers has been filled not by another party or other directly political organization of the Mahar Dalits but, extraordinarily, by a literary movement. A whole new literature has sprung up on the common basis of rejection of varna. The lives and interior world of Untouchables have been explored by a profusion of writers, some of them highly talented. It is tempting, and indeed legitimate, to see this new literature as heir to the great tradition of bhakti, though many of its exponents reject this tradition, Chokha Mela in particular, for its acceptance of inequality in the expectation of a better world in the life-to-come. The resort to literary means of communicating Dalit anger has been consciously adopted in disgust at what is perceived to be the failure of orthodox politics to transform the lives of the Dalits. Clearly the Dalit literature is an intensely political body of writing, some of it infused more with passion than with concern for literary effect. But, the best Dalit writers are widely recognized as having created a literature of genuine merit.

This Dalit literature was not confined to Maharashtra there was a vigorous assembly of Dalit writers in Karnataka too. The immediate origins of this movement can be located in a speech delivered in 1974 by a Minister in the Congress Government of Karnataka. Basavalingappa, an Untouchable, was moved to describe the literature of Kannada, the language of the region, as little more than boosa or cattle fodder. He had in mind this literature's lack of attention to the lives of ordinary people, among them the Untouchables (still usually called Adi-Karnataka). It was as if Basavalingappa had put a torch to a pile of tinder, so great was the explosion of both acclamation and repudiation. To the orthodox custodians of Kannada literature the Untouchable Minister had defamed their cultural heritage in the service of a mindless radicalism. But to an astonishingly large number of actual or aspiring Dalit writers, Basavalingappa had opened the door to a palace of opportunity to express their rejection of their own place in Karnataka society (Mahadeva, 1989). A conference of Dalit writers was held in 1974, and some hundreds are said to have attended (Indudan Honnapur interview: in January 1988). In subsequent years this Dalit literary movement has moved in a number of directions. For example, one group of young Dalits has established a popular weekly magazine, Sugathi, which combines the transmission of popular culture (film features and so on) with political and social comment on Dalit affairs. Its readership is mostly drawn from Adi-Karnatakas themselves, and in 1988 circulation was some 65,000 copies.

The literary movement preceded any narrow political expression of Dalit radicalism in Karnataka, and subsequent institutional forms have not followed the pattern of Maharashtra. Without the direct legacy of Dr. Ambedkar, the Karnataka Dalits have not sought to establish a Dalit political party. Rather, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti has been set up as something of an umbrella organization for the various Dalit groups within the State. Dalit activities have been directed to educating the consciousness of Adi-Karnataka adults and children, and staging agitations and demonstrations on matters of particular concern. A special focus has been on Harijan atrocities. Within particular industries - the nationalized banks, for example - there are organizations of Dalit workers. Many of the Dalit activists have embraced Buddhism and are engaged in increasing their knowledge of the literature of this religion and proselytizing among the unconverted. But while the Karnataka movement has derived its inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar and from the Maharashtra movement in general, there is also a concern to avoid what is seen to be the Maharashtra defect of being too inward looking and exclusive. Some of these activists have gone so far as to reject reservation of jobs and parliamentary seats as a trap, which cuts them off from other progressive elements and also fails to do anything for the larger Dalit community. And there is special scorn for the occupants of reserved seats in legislatures. While there have been no intense ideological splits in Karnataka, there is evidence of the same tensions that have so destructively affected the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. The recurrent choice for radical Untouchables everywhere is between cultivating a separate Untouchable identity and constructing alliances with all oppressed people who are prepared to listen.

However, despite the limitations of the Ambedkarite movement as an electoral and mobilizing force in western India, the thought and life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar enjoy a tremendous and indeed fast-growing potency across large parts of India. Within Maharashtra itself one of the recent expressions of this was the demonstration and counter-demonstrations surrounding the publication of Dr. Ambedkar's work *Riddles in Hinduism*. This work is part of a multi-volume set of Dr. Ambedkar's writings being published, or usually republished, by the Government of Maharashtra under the direction of Dalit scholars. That the project has gone forward at all is testimony to the weight of Dr. Ambedkar's writing and the political passion of his followers. *Riddles in Hinduism* had been considered too inflammatory a work to be published during Dr. Ambedkar's lifetime, and tens of years after it was written the work had scarcely become less controversial. While Maharashtra and neighbouring

Karnataka remain the centers where Dr. Ambedkar's legacy is taken most seriously, the physical image of the historical figure is now to be found on posters and in the form of statues in countless locations throughout India. The propagation of Babasaheb's image has become both a sacred duty to his followers and also an easily available means for politicians and political hopefuls to position themselves as radical champions of their own communities. Juxtaposition of one's own image beside that of Dr. Ambedkar can now be an alternative to statement of a clear political position. But more positively, through the politics of iconography Dalits have been busy reclaiming their own twentieth-century history. The great loser in this struggle of images is Gandhi. Whereas once Gandhi could be portrayed as the great champion of the 'Harijan', now Dalits themselves prefer to ignore or even castigate him for condescension and adherence to subordinating orthodoxy. Now it is Dr. Ambedkar who shows the way in thousands of out-of-the-way locations to which his writ did not run during his own lifetime.

Conclusion:

As far as the nature of the Dalit leadership during Dr. Ambedkar era is concerned it was more assertive than the pre-Ambedkar era. Dalits under the leadership of their own caste leaders have started learning the use of political means for achieving their rights and privileges. Dalits also learned the art of direct action i.e., agitation, sit-ups, strikes, etc., which were very scanty used by them in the early part of their organising. The style of leadership of asking the rights of the Dalits through Petitions and Prayers also changed. With more and more Dalit political representative in the legislature, Dalits became more and more politically conscious. Newsletters, Pamphlets, Weeklies, became prominent medium of communication among the Dalits of different regions; this also indicated the increasing literacy among them. The unfortunate aspect of this era was the division of the Dalit leadership into two main streams, i.e., 'dependent' and 'independent'. The former aligned with dominant socio-political forces of their time like Indian National Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, etc., and the latter led an autonomous struggle of the Dalits without any support of the said forces. Despite the shortcomings, which were very few, of Dr. Ambedkar's Leadership, his struggle helped the Dalits in getting those social and political rights, which were enough for the Dalits to march ahead. A concrete foundation was prepared for the transition to a higher level of socio-cultural and democratic movement of the Dalits, for the Dalits and by the Dalits. In other words Dr. Ambedkar had provided such a dimension to the struggle for the Dalits, which had reached a point of no return.

The great change in the politics of the Untouchables is that over large parts of India they can no longer be taken for granted as a dumb vote bank. To a much greater extent than even a decade ago they have begun to shape their own politics. The biggest change has been in the north, and the single most potent factor has been Kanshi Ram. He has given

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encouragement to Dalits across India, even though he has failed to have a major electoral impact outside a few States of the north. More generally, it is now abundantly clear that there can be no single political strategy for Dalits throughout India. If India had developed a dominant national politics constructed on the basis of class and relative disadvantage, the situation might be different. But it is also a mistake to assume that such a politics would necessarily have taken a form advantageous to the Dalits. The current fragmentation of party politics means that no party can realistically hope to command a national majority of the Dalit vote. But this too is not necessarily unfavourable for the Dalits. It will be recalled that in the era when they voted overwhelmingly for Congress their political and social power was considerably less than it is today. The common political task of the Dalits is to add to their collective power, but there can be no single strategy that will deliver this objective.

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