

CASTE SYSTEM

A CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE POOR

**THE DALIT QUESTION OF INDIA-1998
FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSION
STILL FAR AWAY**

**51 YEARS OF FREEDOM WERE
ONLY FOR THE INDIAN ELITE**

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So much has been written on the caste system in reference to India, the root cause of social political problems in India. This short note, far from an academic, is an account of activists who struggle with Dalits to change their present living conditions which are both unjust and discriminatory, a product of the caste system.

Part-1 : FIFTY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Soon after independence, it became increasingly clear to many naive idealists that the congress party, in spite of all the Nehruvian rhetoric and Gandhiji's name, is nor a party of change, equality, land reforms and emancipation of the Dalits, Tribals and OBCs (Other Backward Castes). It was a party of the status quo, i.e. continued rule of the upper Caste (Class + Caste). Class and Caste coincide and overlap in most cases in Indian society. The upper Caste consists of only about 20 to 25 percent of the total Population.

The worst to be affected by this status quo have been the Dalits, (The word 'Dalit' - Means oppressed . It has been Promoted or create homogeneity and discourage Sub-Casteism) and the poor. The beneficiaries have been a small class of privileged persons, who wield social, economic and political power. The basic design has been to maintain the existing socio-economic structure by any means, wether violent or nonviolent.

Not surprisingly, after the fifty years of independence Dalits are stuck with the problems such as : obtaining a ration card, getting electricity connection for the house, having a primary school in the village, the implementation of minimum wages for the agricultural labor, getting possession of a piece of agricultural land which was given on paper for past fifteen years, getting of a widow pension, right to walk in public places, right to entry in the temple and police protection against the continuing harassment of Caste Hindus.

The list can run into several more pages. But to conclude, it is a fact that even after fifty years of independence, Dalits who from 14 % of national population has remained where they were, the second class citizens. Their rights, Constitutional as well as natural are not protected. The root cause is the caste system which rules each and every sector of Indian society. The irony is that the system has enslaved both the Dalits and the Non-dalits. The system is so well designed, that if at all Dalits would hold someone responsible for their pathetic conditions, it shall only be themselves.

Part-2 : WHAT IS CASTE SYSTEM ?

The issue of Caste, when raised at international platform is averted by Indian authorities as an "internal social matter of Indian society". Often people and groups outside India and other Asian counties try to compare 'caste' with 'race'.

It is natural that people who are directly and adversely affected by caste, find it almost impossible to understand Caste and it is influence on the psyche of those who are at the receiving end.

1. VISIBLE AND NON VISIBLE :

Caste system as an institution has division of various social groups as ' Caste'. Each Caste has it's own customs and rituals which are visible. The system also has a religion-sanctioned ideology which ranks Castes as 'higher' or 'lower', which is invisible. The net product to this hierarchy is untouchability. The Higher Caste Persons would be defiled if they physically touched 'Dalits' the lowest class of untouchable Caste. It is this invisible ideology that forms the dominant part of one's socialization. A child as old as three years, under the socialization process is convinced above any doubt one's Caste-based social status as 'just' and 'natural'

To that extent Caste system is a **double edged sword**. It convinces without any doubt to the so called 'upper Caste' that his/her social status in society and behavior which may affect others adversely is 'just' and 'rightful'. It convinces people who are the sufferers that their exploitation and hardships are 'God given', a punishment for the sins of their previous births. The remedy for the same is beyond the human reach.

2. SANCTIFIED BY RELIGION :

The Caste system has sustained itself for more than three thousand years because it has been validated by religion. The structural poverty and Caste inferiority of Dalits

instills in them a permanent sense of insecurity and helplessness. For a Dalits, to oppose Caste and Caste-based oppression is tantamount to opposing religion and rebellion especially the poor ones, as generally poverty goes with orthodoxy, i.e. fear of social disapproval. That is why Dr. Ambedkar, the Dalits leader said, " Untouchability will vanish only when Caste Hindus will unlearn their way of life ...which is sanctified by their religion. To change their way of life is almost to change their religion".

It is not worthy that all attempts to change or question the exiting social, economical and political system having its roots in the Caste system, have been deflected on religious grounds. Even the religious movements such as Buddhism and been countered in the like manner.

3. **CASTE-SOCIETY AND CASTELESS-SOCIETY :**

Caste system is justified by Dalits themselves because it's ideology gives a person the 'meaning' or 'convincing explanation' about one's position and it's value in society, and a hope to look forward to better prospects in the next birth, according to the theory of rebirth.

The **Internalization** of caste ideology has resulted in affecting Dalits adversely by creation of the **sub-Casteism**. Dalits, within themselves have not only hierarchy, but even untouchability. Therefore, one does not complain about being 'low' since he/she can find oneself 'higher' to some other person and group.

The only exception to this is the scavenger community, which has no one lower to them.

4. **THE BLACKS IN U.S. :**

The famous slogan or strategy of black leadership, "Black is Beautiful" to enthuse the community with vigor and self-respect to counter the low self-concept has worked wonders. Because to exist as black in color is a reality. The fight is against me value attached to color. One can therefore take pride in a reality or a fact. When it comes to Dalits, their status believed to be 'true' is fundamentally a **lie**. This lie brings humiliation, discrimination and exploitation. But its more fatal attack is on the growth of self-respect. One can not accept a lie and take in something which is not based in fact.

Another major difference between Caste-society and Casteless-society and race is in the creation of **Class consciousness**. In the Caste-society, people poorer than Dalits refuse to drink water or accept food from Dalits. I do remember as a child that beggars who come to our house would accept grain and nor the cooked food.

5. **CASTE SYSTEM IS DEEP ROOTED :**

Those who are not part of the Caste society shall perhaps understand how deep rooted the caste system is by looking dispassionately at the **Christianity** that had and continues to have interaction with the Caste system.

Caste and Christianity : Let us remember that Christianity as a system is 2000 years old. Moreover of the world's population. It has it's roots into a previous couple of centuries old culture.

Southern part of India is believed to have embraced Christianity in as early as 1st century AD, much before the British invasion, had a different dimension. The first converts were Iyengar Brahmins, considered as the highest Caste in the social order. (The present Hindu fundamentalist who are targeting Christians as the product of forceful conversion from Hinduism do not answer why Iyengar Brahmins embraced Christianity.) But the later converts were from fisherman, Dalits and Tribals. In the state of Gujarat, The conversion to Christianity that started a hundred years back, has been only from Dalits and tribals.

Not surprising for Indian population, the **church** has maintained **segregation** between those who originated from the so called 'high' and 'low' Caste. Not only the churches that are **separate** for Dalits and Non Dalits but even the burial spaces for those who are already dead in search of heavenly abode are maintained and protected separately. There have been incidents where the corpse of a Dalit has been removed from the grave by Brahmin Christians on grounds of untouchability. The influence of Caste ideology on clergy is more than visible. To that extent, Christianity which proclaims equality has

failed to influence the Caste system, indirectly certifying the pervasiveness of Caste system.

6. TRIBALS AND DALITS :

The Tribals are considered outside the Caste system since they were never influenced by the culture of the plains. Their subsistence on the forest was endangered by the encroachment of the plains over the hills who subsequently over exploited of the natural resources. The Tribals had no option but to come to the plains as 'migrant workers' wandering here and there in search of labor, homeless almost through out the year.

The tribals who were never part of the Hindu society on having to interact with the Hindu culture of the plains have started observing untouchability towards Dalits, who were socially, educationally and economically much ahead than them.

7. CASTE-SYSTEM AND WOMEN :

In a Caste based society the status of a women irrespective of her Caste and class background is as low as the one that a Dalit has. The status of Dalits women in this context can be imagined.

One often does not make a distinction between the fact that while the feminist movement in the west has a focus on the development of women, in India the primary concern for women is the very existence, which is in danger. One does not also visualize the role that the Caste system play behind the women's present conditions.

Dalits and Women as a Class : the Dalits and the women movement for liberation from their Caste based status is crippled by the internalization of Caste ideology. This internalization does not allow the growth of class consciousness.

8. CASTE SYSTEM AND THE OTHER NON-DALIT POOR :

The inequalities between the rich and poor are glaring. About 60 % of Indian population, fall under the so called poverty line'. Even though over 25 % of workers are landless farm workers, the nation does not have a uniform legislation to govern the wages and working conditions. A bill has been pending for approval in parliament for the past twenty years.

Farm workers wages in Gujarat are as low as Rs. 12/- per day, which is one third of the official minimum wage. As if the government supports these facts of underpayment, they announce schemes such as widow pension for those whose monthly earnings do not exceed Rs. 200 a month.

The constant insecurity of employment therefore forces people to migrate for more than six months in a year. This is the story of Gujarat which is considered the most developed state in the nation. Now, under the WTO pacts, it is expected that the present labor laws would be further relaxed in favour of the MNCs.

But in spite of exploitation that Dalits and the non-dalits poor face alike, one requires great patience and herculean efforts to unite them as a class, because according to the invisible rule of Caste system, to relate with Dalit means defilement, which can only earn social boycott from the fellow-Caste men.

Part-3 : INFLUENCE OF CASTE IDEOLOGY ON DALITS :

Marx said religion is the opium of the masses. This belief can be extended in the context of poor within Caste system, that religion can convince people to **justify** those very actions that bear a direct **threat** to their own **life and liberty**. This may happen even though deep down some of them may also doubt, about the rightfulness of their own belief. This mixture of belief and disbelief creates a **schizophrenic** state of mind for the awakened and enlightened Dalits with modern consciousness.

But for many Dalits, just as for most non-dalit Hindus, life without Caste as unthinkable, because Caste ideology is product of the unique Hindu-Brahmanic rural, agricultural, feudal, unchanging, closed universe of socio-economic-religious-cultural order which cannot be described as "society" in the modern western sense.

1. INSECURITY :

The question naturally arises : Why Dalits continuously allow themselves to be fooled ? The answer lies in their situation. Insecurity takes control over their action, and pushes the person towards security on matter where it comes from and at what price.

In the case of an enterprising, bright or educated Dalits, in spite of being equipped with required qualifications, natural talents and intellect, he / she would not have the same opportunities as the non Dalit would have. One can therefore imagine the systemic insecurity that the Dalits experience in all areas of public life. The competition that Dalits face in society is not only in the areas of finance, knowledge, education and technology, but largely from the Caste mind.

2. DIVIDE AND RULE :

The ruling Caste, i.e. the dominant Caste-class making up what is known as "authorities" know that in cases of any trouble - complaint or dissent against any injustice poor ordinary Dalits can be managed (silenced, suppressed, frightened or bought over) by local district level or state level Dalit sub caste, of course for a price. That is how a handful of British ruled over India for 200 years. In most such cases the poor, frightened Dalit-in-trouble has no use for the critical awareness and the sane honest practical advice or help by the modern, secular-minded and honest social activist (even of the same sub Caste) because that advice can benefit only in the long run for which the insecure Dalit has no patience or confidence. And it will be difficult to blame him for that perception. For Dalits, the intense struggle for survival leaves attention remains focused only on self and the community.

3. IMPACT ON CHILDREN :

Children are considered to be playful and innocent. But in the case of children from Dalit communities, there is something more awaiting them.

The following true life story shall prove the point.

In 1996, a public school in the small town of Dhandhuka, in Ahmedabad district of Gujarat caught attention of the state. A boy from Scavenger community aged around 10 years, was accused by the teacher of kicking his scooter to engine immediately. Various please and apologies by the father went to deaf ears of the teacher who insisted on dismissal of the boy with a bad character certificate.

It was only after long persuasions and having tendered the written apology, the father thought that the matter was settled, until late evening when his son did not return home. The family was dumbfounded on suddenly hearing that the dead body of their son cut into three pieces was lying on the railway tracks near their house. It was taken as an accidental death until a piece of paper that was proved in the forensic lab to be the child's own handwriting was discovered during the autopsy from the boy's clothes. The last paragraph of a long letter that gave the account of the happenings since the morning of that day read thus :

"I would not have felt bad if the teacher had slapped me. I would not have felt bad if the teacher had abused me. But the way my father was humiliated, i felt very bad. And lastly, after my father left and as i was entering the class room, the teacher stopped me and told me that he would see how i will manage to study further and go ahead in life, i **felt extremely hurt.....** and if i am going to be allowed to study further and go ahead in life, what is the meaning of living the life. **I am therefore committing suicide"**

One hears many such stories from the mouth of these tender kids.

Their complaints include: other children not playing with them in school, the teacher being rude only with them, they being served meals separately from other kids during the Government sponsored mid-day meal, the teacher asking them to sit at the end of the classroom, not allowed to drink water from where others drink and on and so forth.

4. CASTE SYSTEM AND THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION :

How does one bring about equality among the poor, when many of them believe that it is better to be poor or die of hunger than to dine with a Dalit ?

There is a **Constitutional catch** which discourages such attempts though not directly. The Constitution of India guarantees **fundamental right** to all its citizens, "the right to practice, profess and propagate the religion according to their conscience."

There were some isolated instances of conversion of Dalit groups to Christianity in some religions of Gujarat during the first half of this century. The largest conversion movement of Dalits to Buddhism on Maharashtra was led by Dr. Ambedkar, the father of India Constitution. In a historic statement he said, " To be born as a Hindu was not in my hand, but i shall not die as a Hindu."

Change of Religion and Loss of Special Constitutional Status : Constitutionally, person who ceases to be a Hindu, also ceases to be a member of 'scheduled Castes', (The schedule, a part of the Indian Constitution, is drawn up of Caste communities suffering untouchability) and therefor he / she can not avail of various special benefits. These benefits include various welfare schemes and benefits of 'reservations' in jobs and educational institutions, because it is assumed that Caste is an integral part of Hindu only and no other religion.

Although it has been proved again and again by various studies that the change of religion has neither brought any change in the social or economic status of Dalits nor in the treatment meted out to them by Caste Hindus. The demand to treat such converts as 'scheduled Caste', do not find many takers, including the Supreme Court of India.

5. **POLITICS OF CONVERSION :**

Lately (in 1997) just before it's fall the previous national government expressed its intentions to extend the 'scheduled Caste' status to Christian converts, Which met with stiff **resistance** from Hindu groups, only to reinforce the point that the so called benefits can be extended only to those who are in the **Hindu fold**.

Surprisingly, almost at the same time the same status was **extended** to Neo Buddhists, who followed Ambedkar to **Buddhism**, without the slightest opposition. In the present times, Ambedkar has been portrayed as great man by all the political parties, including the Hindu fundamentalists, to woo Dalits, definitely a large (14.5 %) **vote bank**.

6. **FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND POLITICS OF RECONVERSION :**

This, Constitutional catch, is not only taking away a citizens right to freedom of religion, but it also indirectly **promotes** the Caste system by offering **special incentives** and schemes under the banner of provisions for scheduled Caste. To be a Hindu means to belong to a hierarchical Caste structure with untouchability as its integral part, a fact that the highest authority of the nation acknowledges.

Interestingly, as part of the Hindu fundamentalists program to bring back the converts in the fold of Hinduism, there are many who choose to return to Hinduism for number of reasons. The procedure of reconversion is simple and the religious ceremony for the purpose is called "**SUDDHI**" means "**Becoming clean**"

This is only to Sanction that Dalit's impure status in Caste society was the result of his/her **fate** but his/her conversion to other religion has made him **impure**, which is earned to **voluntarily**. Naturally, you have to purify yourself of your voluntarily impurity to return to your God-given impure status.

The logical conclusion is that apart from becoming eligible for special benefit as member of scheduled Caste you also save your children from suffering due to your voluntary impurity.

7. **CASTE SYSTEM AND RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE :**

Historically, it was Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitridevi who started the **first school** for Dalits and women in 1848. Jyotirao, a non-Dalit activist from Maharashtra addressed the issue of untouchability in a major way. According to the Hindu scriptures, both Dalits and women did not have a right to knowledge. The attempt of Phule met the toughest **hostility** including physical attacks from Brahmins, who accused phule of **defiling** religion. In response to British Government more to open public schools to Dalits, the Brahmin teacher preferred to resign from their jobs rather them educating Dalits finally it was some **Muslim** teachers who took up the job to educate Dalits.

8. BUREAUCRACY'S CONTEMPT FOR THE POOR :

One of our activist colleague had a public protest program to the district education officer, complaining that apart from the teacher not attending the school in a particular village, there were no elementary schools in many villages. The children affected were the Dalits and the poor. The education officer replied, "Why do you bother about these children who are not going to be doctors or engineers anyway ?"

9. ATTEMPTS TO DIVIDE DALITS, MUSLIMS AND TRIBALS :

Serious attempts are now at work by the fundamentalist parties to pose Dalits against the Muslims during the communal riots only to divide them and break whatever linkages (of poverty, food, residential locality etc.) they share, to make sure that in future they do not pose a united threat to their dominance. The same plans are at work where Dalits and Tribals are pitted against the Christians, the converts from Dalits and Tribals.

Part-4 : DALITS AND POLITICAL POWER

1. PRE-INDEPENDENCE :

Dr. Ambedkar, the dalit leader demanded "**Separate Electorate**" for Dalits in 1932. Under the envisaged system Dalit candidates were required to be elected primarily by Dalit voters only. This according to him would ensure effective political representation where the candidates would remain loyal and committed to their primary electorates. The demand reflected long term political empowerment for Dalits.

He apprehended that once Independence was achieved, Dalits would continue to be treated as 'second class citizens' as they had been for centuries. In fact the provision for separate electorate had already been existing for Muslims and Anglo-Indians.

Dr. Ambedkar's **apprehension** was rooted in recent history, showing the weakness of pro-reform Hindus in the national independence movement, which, though started on two fronts of social reforms and political independence, later on dropped the agenda of social reforms, saying that once independence was achieved, social reforms would follow.

The reforms were aimed at abolition of untouchability and discrimination based on Caste; stopping cruelty on women by banning child marriages, promoting widow remarriages, banning 'sati' system, (Inducing widows to immolate themselves after the death of their husbands) etc.

2. GANDHI'S DENIAL OF SEPARATE DALIT ELECTORATE IN SPITE OF THEIR SEPARATE EXISTENCE :

The sole reason for denial to Ambedkar's demand came under the leadership of Gandhiji who went on fast unto death until Ambedkar dropped his demand saying, "**It would divide the Hindu society**". According to Gandhiji the present inequalities based on Caste, which promoted Ambedkar to raise his demand, was an **internal matter** of Hindu society. Therefore the British had no business to concede the demand and went to the extent of saying that his fast was "a gift of God".

3. OPENING OF TEMPLES FOR DALITS : A TOKENISM :

Gandhiji's appeal to Hindus to do away the Caste discrimination resulted into opening some temples for Dalits. Ambedkar argued that his demands were part of the long term political strategy to ensure that the legitimate demands of Dalits were guaranteed. For him, the temple entry was temporary emotional spur of Caste Hindus, on which he would not base his decisions. After all, temples which otherwise open to dogs were now open to Dalits.

4. COMPROMISE FORMULA FOR POLITICAL RESERVATIONS :

Dr. Ambedkar had no option but to drop his demand and accept unwillingly the system of present political reservations. The provincial election that followed after three years witnessed Ambedkar's defeat at the hand of an unknown Dalit candidate, sponsored by the Congress party. This was so because under the system of reservation the Dalit candidate had to depend on the votes of non-Dalits, the majority. It became very clear

therefore, that a Dalit candidate who would not pose a challenge to the non-Dalit interests, would be elected.

Dr. Ambedkar's apprehensions have proved right after independence.

The nation which evolved and accepted the concept of political 'reservation' or 'affirmative action' as termed in USA., for Dalits, Tribals and lately for other poor communities on the **basis of Caste** was originally envisaged only for 10 years. No such time-limit was set for reservations in government jobs, since the 'Equality' as guaranteed in the Constitution was supposed to be achieved by then. Today, after 50 years, it has become a '**trap**' for the Dalits masses. The system seems so attractive to politicians who enjoys people's goodwill without delivering anything substantial to masses. All Political Parties are trying to perpetuate it. Poor, Dalits people are a powerful vote bank open to cheating.

5. **IMPACT OF POLITICAL RESERVATIONS ON DALITS MASSES POST INDEPENDENCE :**

One does not have to go very far to understand this as the living example of what has been the result of political reservations for the Dalits is right in front of our eyes. We have reached a point where the **loyalty** or **commitment** of Dalit candidates, is more and **absolute** to the political party than to their own communities, contrary to the very objectives of the Constitutional provision for reservation.

It was painful to witness total silence from all the 13 Dalit assembly members, elected on reserved seats, on the issue of manual scavenging. The issue had already caught the national attention. This was in spite of lobbying, where all relevant details about this crude form of human right violation was supplied to all these members at their door step.

It has become a **pre-condition** that a dalit politician should cease to be a Dalit in sense of representing his interests or sharing their pains after elections.

Thus political representation of Dalits has proved to be a mere eyewash wherein political parties have learned to keep them divided by promoting sub- Casteism. During the last fifty years, all natural resources and benefits of development have been cornered by the small minority of upper Caste classes.

Gandhiji's description of the living condition of scavengers in a colony of Bombay in 1992, would also apply to their condition in Gujarat and other states in 1998.

Political power is helpful only if it can bring about effective political representation, i.e. by addressing the agenda of social change, Which has not yet happened. And so political reservation have to be understood only as **tokenism**.

6. **THE BRAHMINS :**

Traditionally, they are supposed to be the supreme Caste (in Caste or Varna hierarchy) because of living a pious life and engaged in learning, teaching and preservation of religion and knowledge, and some of them in priestly duties. But during the last 200 years they have increasingly taken to secular jobs and dominated politics, professions, civil services, all white collar jobs, arts, journalism and literature.

According to one estimate based on the 1931 census (which included caste category for the last time) Brahmin were 3.5 percent of the population in parts of the present-day Maharashtra state formed only in 1960. According to one estimate, their all India average could be less than seven percent. But at one time their representation in the national parliament was more than 30 percent. The top **leadership** in all major political parties are in the hands of upper Castes, and particularly the Brahmins.

Lately, in the last decade one finds a visible change in the political parties, where one finds representatives coming from Dalit or Tribal communities as party office bearers. But it is all part of the **survival game**. By the total failure of poverty alleviation programs and increasing suffering of the poor there is a rise in political awareness amongst the poor. This is because the struggles of the poor, including Dalits to survive has intensified so as to cause the 'law and order' problems, and tilt electoral results.

7. NEW LABELS FOR THE OLD DISEASE :

In this context Politicians have begun to worry about the votes of 'Dalits' 'Tribals' and 'women'. Earlier the votes that could be secured on 'Poverty Alleviation' card has become defunct. Hence the same has now been replaced with the card of 'Social justice'. Lately, some of the state government are renaming the 'Social Welfare Department' which carry out social welfare programs for the poor as Department of social justice and Empowerment'.

8. ACCEPTANCE OF THE ISSUE IS NOT SUFFICIENT :

Learning to Distrust Politicians. The moment the state recognizes the issue one begins to feel **hopeful**. The next step is to join hands with the state agency. The communities affected already full of **desperation** are waiting for the results with open mouth. The aspirations of the communities loads an additional psychological stress on the social workers, who mediate with the state on behalf of the people.

Once an activist has joined hands with the state, naturally the weapon of criticism ceases to operate, thereby reducing pressure and **embarrassment** for the state. The media which has a limited interest-based role are no more your allies now. It is only much later you realize that what you received as progress or a hopeful signal has turned out to be a **mirage**. The only role that you are subsequently left with is to try to explain to your desperate communities as to why things have failed, a task which otherwise the state is bound to perform.

The hope never ends.... not even after fruitless fifty years of independence.

9. AMBEDKAR AND DALIT LEADERSHIP :

Ambedkar is described by Louis Fischer as, "a distinguished lawyer with international experience who had played a big part at the Round Table Conferences in London, owned a powerfully built body and strong stubborn, superior intellect. The accumulated **bitterness** against Hindus that rankled for centuries in millions of Harijan breasts found expression in Ambedkar's Himalayan hatred." He was humiliated in his life time since he questioned the core of the Caste system under the pretext of Hinduism not mincing words.

Ambedkar who laid a corner stone of the Dalit movement for self-assertion is now hijacked by the very political parties who destroyed him. Almost all the Government have taken up some populist measures such as naming roads after him that lead only to Dalit location and setting up his status in Dalit location, while the pathetic conditions of Dalits are safely ignored.

Lately, one finds incidents of desecration of Ambedkar's statues, causing riots and enabling opposition parties to turn the episode against the ruling party as its failure to protect his statues. The state of Maharashtra alone has witnessed 508 such incidents of desecration of statues in the last decade.

Part-5 : WHAT ARE THE MAJOR ISSUES FOR DALITS TODAY

When does one ever cease to be a 'Dalit' is moot fundamental question in the context of dalit identify at this (1998) stage of our history. Even assuming that the rising at critical mass awariness, questioning the unjust system is a giant leap towards liberation, it is definitely not sufficient. The fight against the Caste system has to continue on several fronts. Though Caste is a social stigma it's influence on economic and Political structure of the nation is dominating.

The major issues of Dalits can be summarized as the following.

1. Existence :

The Primary concern is to ensure Protection to the person and property of Dalits.

1.1 Atrocities : Violence :

During our experiences of Past 18 years, working with Dalits, we have witnessed the following.

- a. According to Police reports, in Gujarat the general crime rate has decreased by 1.35% during 1990-1993, but the crime against Dalits have gone up by 90%.
- b. The Police reports are based only on registered crimes. It is learnt that 13.50% victims of atrocities are criminally pressurized not to lodge complaints with Police, while complaints of another 15.75% victims though recorded by Police, the same is not shown on records.
- c. 20% of crimes against Dalits are of serious nature, which includes rape, murder and grievous bodily injuries.

2. **Survival :**

Structural poverty adds to the already degrading living conditions of majority Dalits, both in urban as well as rural areas.

a. **Scavengers :**

The attached paper on living conditions of scavenger portrays their pathetic conditions.

b. **Landless agriculture workers :**

Though the combined numerical strength of the Dalits and Tribals in Gujarat is 23% of state's Population, 54% of State's landless agriculture workers belong to this class. This is the same for the nation. The specially enacted lobar courts to protect their rights have failed to do so. The under Payment of wages to this class of farm workers in the state is estimated to 5,000 million rupees a year. They are not governed by any central legislation as the wages for then differ one state to another.

c. **Child labour :**

and illiteracy are associated with the struggle for survival. Normal thinking of the rural community is that it is better ti be illiterate of less educated and be employed locally, than to be better educated and find oneself unemployed always in search for a job. The children of the rich and upper Castes are in better position to complete for jobs in organized sector.

d. **The unorganized urban labour force :**

Most Dalits self employed as cotton weavers in rural areas had no option but to migrate to cities to join the British introduced high Productivity oriented weaving technology based textile industries. Now with the shift from cotton to Poly Yarn and high technological innovations, the old mills have shut down rendering thousands unemployed. It is a common sight to see their children polishing shoes or employed in tea shops, their women working as domestic servants and the unemployed Workers as casual construction workers.

3. **Development :**

Existence and survival are the pre-conditions for development Scores of promises were made to Dalits pre and post independence, including the constitutional guarantees aimed at providing them opportunities for their development. These promises and guarantees have Proved to be tigers.

a. **Land Reforms :**

Was a major programme of Agricultural land redistribution. It aimed at Protecting the rights of tenants over land and fix a ceiling of Land holding.

In Gujarat, Only 7,00,000 tenants could become landowners as against 13,00,000 registered talents. 3,71,000 tenants lost their over land, for fear of retaliation and assault from landlords, if they claimed their rights. It is estimated that under the land reforms while majority of beneficiaries were the Dalits and Tribals, more than 1 Million acres of agricultural and has slipped away is the hands of rich landlords. The state and Judiciary have remained mute spectators to the ugly implementation of land Reform programme.

However, it has to be noted that the land under the reforms has gone more in the hands of middle Castes than to the Dalits and Tribals. Successive Government, barring the Marxist, speak about social justice, but not about land reform.

b. Government welfare measures :

It is learnt that the implementation of Government sponsored welfare measures have not been above 40% Needless to say, that even this Scantly implementation has not remained untouched from the corruption.

4. Struggle : There are some psychological blocks, which impede the growth of the Organization

a. Organization the poor on a non-party basis :

The poor who believe their Caste to be their fate, later become victims of the system by **co-option**, as political agents, who try to defeat the non-party movement for personal and ultimately party's political gains. The influence of upper Caste and money in political parties is not always visible.

b. Ideological deceptions :

But the major fight is with the State which continuously creates a web of ideological deceptions about Law, Justice, Neutrality, Equality, Equal Opportunity and the worst of all "Democracy" Whereas in practice they will do just the contrary : Bureaucrats, judged, and the police carry their Caste prejudices wherever they work.

In July 1998, in the state of Uttar Pradesh a district judge, (empowered to award any sentence including capital punishment) on being transferred and taking charge of his new office, washed the entire office space with 'Gangajal' (water from the holy river Ganga) to purify it since the previous occupant to that office was a judge from dalit community.

Part-6 : HOW TO FOND A WAY

1. Fight the Psychological exploitation, though Awareness :

After working on issue of Caste with Dalit communities, we feel the reason of Dalit movement not being able to shake up the roots of the Caste system lies in the psychological exploitation of Dalits. It is a fact that the agenda we follow, including the means we adopt to fight the system are greatly colored or influenced by the psyche of the upper Castes, the beneficiaries of Caste system. All our efforts consciously or unconsciously promotes the sanction of the Caste system or that we look for strengthening the comforts that are deceitfully inbuilt within the Caste system, thereby not touching the very core of the system that we seek to change.

2. Reject the Caste system : Sub-Casteism :

We believe that to organize only Dalits, however strong that the organization may be, in a way promotes only Caste seclusion. The very approach which promotes homogeneity accept and strengthen not only hierarchical order but even the relationships for interaction with other Caste groups.

3. Develop Agenda for the Community :

We some forget that the culture, (values, attitudes beliefs, or perceptions) that we carry as 'ours' are ultimately influenced by the system that we live in. It is only when fresh cultural perceptions going beyond the Caste system that are lying deep down in the self of the social activist forms into a mass consciousness and forms the ideological basis for their actions that we move forward towards creating an agenda for social change.

4. Fight the unjust, anti-poor Policies :

It is partisan state that governs India. Liberalization and globalization only further promotes the interests of the fittest. It is perceived that the poor are the obstacle to

national development. The new economic policy basically tells everyone to take care of oneself.

5. Constitution elected Governments can not do it. :

During the nationally televised special five day parliamentary debate to celebrate 50 years of Independence, the Legislation across the party confessed that they had failed the country, especially the poor-the dalits of India for whom Gandhiji and the congress party had sought freedom.

Conveniently blaming each other for it, they listed all their crimes against the people especially the poor of India :

1. Corruption
2. Criminalization of politics or polities taken over by criminals; use of money- power and muscle- power in election
3. Breakdown of the sanctity of all parliamentary institution: frequent defections for a price by legislature members destroy parliament and the party system.
4. We (politicians) have not fulfilled our basic promise, made to the people and to Gandhiji, of providing every citizen with food shelter employment, drinking water, literacy and medicine; none of our poverty-alleviation schemes have been sincerely implemented.
5. We could and ought to have done much more in reducing inequality and removing poverty.
6. Due to frequent midterm election and political instability and mass poverty people have lost faith in elections and democracy itself.
7. Hence forth, our party members will behave with due parliamentary decorum in the house. We will have nothing to do with criminals if other parties also do the same etc.

This Only proves the point that the elected governments, who have been responsible for the decay of the democracy, can not be expected to resolve the Caste issue.

The point also calls for attention that in this context the role of the voluntary groups becomes very important. Mobilization along with action oriented programmes and political awareness can lead the path for resolution of the caste issue, although at a slower pace.

TO CONCLUDE

Therefore the Caste system in India is the ancient religious device to divide the poor so that they can never unite under one banner and challenge the present social, economic and political structure which is not only unjust but it is also criminal.

It is basically a culture of "shamelessness" , where even the sight of hungry children of the poor 'lower' Caste does not arouse an appeal among the 'upper' Caste people. It is a conspiracy against the poor.