Dalit–Hindutva alliance and the Dynamics of Dalit Politics

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Since the 1980s and the 1990s, the rise of the Hindutva movement set in motion by the brahminic Hindu rightist outfit, the RSS, has led to unleashing of forces that have tried to present a monolithic notion of culture, history, society and identity in India. The notion of Hindutva including the project of a brahminic Hindu Rashtra has existed for some decades. It occupied for most of its life the fringe of right wing and reactionary ideology. It became a potent social and political force only in the past four decades or so thanks mainly to the systematic, planned, and persistent work of the RSS. The hegemony of monolithic brahminical perspective on India's culture, history and society, realized by harbouring fanatic religiosity, has led to attempts at 'rewriting' of history and production of a particular kind of knowledge on the one hand, and the most violent and ghastly events in recent social history on the other. Moreover, making the monolithic brahminic view of culture and history essential components of nationalism has further led to privileging unconditional loyalty to the brahminic notion of nation and condemnation of the Other who does not abide by this view. Thus with the tool of Hindutva, Brahminism has assumed the power to 'discipline and punish' the Other who asserts the different multi-cultural and non-brahminic view of India's culture, history and society.

Hindutva's relationship with the Other is characterized by three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, approaches: constituting and containing the Other; its marginalization; and finally, its elimination. This has happened in three ways: The first is the accommodation, re-interpretation, and then appropriation of religiosity and traditions of non-brahminic groups within the 'mainstream' Hindu fold—of course, in a subsidiary manner—to enlist their support for the brahminic Hindutva project. The second is the 'advice' to non-Hindu communities that assert their difference: accept the brahminic notion of nationalism or run the risk of being termed anti-national and hence, become liable to be punished. The third is the cooptation of the Dalit struggle that seeks to advance a counter articulation of self and society, in order to contain it and ultimately to marginalize it; this of course is attempted to bring the Dalits under the total sway of brahminic hegemony. This is seen in the simultaneous efforts to absorb Dalits into Brahminism and at the same time to condemn the Dalit movement as sectarian and 'pro-British' in orientation before independence. Thus, Brahminism has assumed the right to centre the centre and define and constitute the Other.

Of course, despite being defined, constituted and objectified by Brahminism, Dalits, adopting the Ambedkarian worldview, sought to redefine their status and as an essential part thereof strove to restructure Indian society on the basis of justice, equality and liberty. The concern for reconstructing society, a quest for egalitarian social order, has led Dalits to engage in an active critique of Brahminism, advocating the need to dismantle it. These attempts are best represented by the Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. It was in this movement that a broad category of the oppressed—Dalits, marginalized peasantry and working classes—had come together and effectively interrogated the structure of brahminic knowledge/power. Ambedkar provided a clear vision for dismantling Brahminism and for reconstructing Indian society.

However, in post-Ambedkarian times, barring some expressions of radical Dalit assertion for dignity and some providing possibilities of engaging with broader emancipatory struggles of the marginalized, the educated leaders of the Dalit movement pursued the dream of political power as a panacea for addressing the Dalit question. They deliberately vulgarized Ambedkar who had exhorted them to be the ruling community in the particular context of emphasizing the importance of political power as 'a key to all problems'. Running after the mirage of political power through electoral process, necessarily led the Dalit leaders astray from meaningful emancipatory politics of the oppressed and trapped them into the ruling class net. Dalit politics and the Dalit movement were thus largely subsumed by ruling class politics.

Recently, electoral efforts of the Bahujan Samaj Party that had carved out itself from the organization of all Dalits, OBCs and religious minorities met with considerable success in the northern states. For the first time a Dalit party catapulted to the political mainstream and captured political power in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, albeit with support from a party that claimed to share its constituency in BCs and Muslims. While this success enthralled Dalits in the state, it emboldened the

BSP to pursue political power with utter ideological impunity. This has further reinforced the notion of political power (rather, electoral success) being a panacea for addressing the Dalit question. This reckless pursuit of political power, led the BSP to ally with the very same Manuwadi and castiest forces, the fight against whom was its declared raison d'être. The BSP politics in Uttar Pradesh shows that Dalits and brahminical forces have developed a fluid configuration of 'accommodation and resistance' towards each other. This experiment of a strange alliance is seeking to take place in Maharashtra in the form of unity between Bhimshakti (Ambedkarite forces) and Shivshakti (forces of the Shiv Sena).

With this background, it is important to understand the dynamics of the Dalit movement that brought it to the point where the relationship of the BSP-BJP kind became a reality or Bhimshakti-Shivshakti type is more or less seriously attempted. It is also necessary to understand the implications of such formations for the broader Dalit struggle aimed at emancipation of the oppressed. The dynamics may be understood by mapping the journey of the Dalit movement in terms of the broad phases of Dalit politics: 'politics of identity', 'politics of issues', 'politics of accommodation' and 'politics of interests'. It attempts to argue that the imbalance between these four components essentially created the space for the Hindutva overtures. Hindutva on the other hand needed to neutralize the Dalit challenge for its Hindu Rashtra project. I contend that despite the confounding developments in contemporary politics, the marriage of convenience between the Dalit movement and Hindutva can never be consummated. The contradictions between Hindutva and Dalits are of antagonistic nature and cannot be easily glossed over by some slogans and deceptive apparitions. Unless Hindutva forsakes its essential Hinduness, snaps its umbilical cord with its canons and aligns itself to the worldview symbolized by liberty, equality and fraternity; an impossible proposition, this alliance is not possible. On the other hand, unless Dalits give up their emancipatory aspirations, accept to live as they have lived in their preordained slots of the brahminical social order, again an impossible proposition, this alliance is unthinkable. Thus, though in the short term the Dalit leadership may mislead the Dalits, it cannot do so for long. Lastly I would suggest that the long term viability of Dalit politics lies in its alliance with the forces articulating concerns of the marginalized such as peasants, workers and women.

Dalit Movement and Politics of Identity

Dalits were defined and objectified by Brahminism as 'Untouchables'. Born with the stigma of Untouchability, Dalits suffered the worst forms of discrimination, various civic and religious disabilities and exploitation forcing them into dirty, demeaning, and unpaid or ill-paid forms of work. Despite this imposed designation, Dalits have sought to redefine their social status and transform the character of Indian society. The century-old Dalit movement thus exhibits this concern.

The initial concern of the Dalit movement for securing dignity and justice was expressed as the Dalit assertion for human rights. Dalits sought to enter Hindu temples in order to assert that as human beings they too had equal rights to temple-entry, denied to them through the system of Untouchability. Another expression came in the form of assertion for Dalit identity, sought to be constructed defiantly outside the framework of Brahminism through a rediscovery of Dalit history and culture located in an egalitarian order, real or imaginary, as opposed to the iniquitous brahminical social order. Thus various 'adi' movements in India, namely, 'adi-Dharam' movement in Punjab, and 'adi-Dravida', 'adi-Andhra', 'adi-Kannada' movements in South India advanced an ideological claim that Dalits were the original inhabitants of this country—a la sons of the soil—and belonged to a superior egalitarian cultural tradition. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, Dalit groups such as Mehtars, Bhangis, Chamars, Doms, and Jatavs claimed that they were Buddhists, questioned caste discrimination against them and asserted that they were the original inhabitants of India who were conquered by deceit and manipulations by the Brahmins coming from outside. Of course, apart from this assertion of human identity in the traditional and religious framework, rediscovery of traditions and religiosity, the Dalit movement in later years approached the question of justice in the modern secular context.

Dalit Movement and Politics of Issues

The Dalit movement in the 1930s saw a shift from temple-entry satyagrahas to rights to education, employment and political representation as necessary prerequisites for securing justice. Concluding the temple-entry satyagraha, Ambedkar pointed out that Dalits were not interested in entering temples of a religion that teaches inequality and injustice as part of religious duty, that they carried out temple-entry satyagrahas only to assert their equal humanity. He also pointed out that justice can be ensured only through struggle for education, employment and political representation. Thus the Dalit movement articulated the question of justice and dignity in the context of a modern secular framework, rather than the traditional religious mode. In terms of identity, this shift from traditional to modern can be seen also in the conversion of many Dalits to Buddhism in 1956. Buddhism, as Ambedkar conceptualized, was in consonance with the modern, secular worldview that simultaneously presented a critique of iniquitous social orders. Thus Dalits campaigned for education of Dalit children, and had to struggle to end discriminatory attitude of teachers and school authorities. However, the question of political representation, the question of separate electorate for Dalits, brought Ambedkar to the bitter and well-known controversy with Gandhi and the Congress. This also shows that perhaps caste Hindu hegemony would have 'tolerated' Dalits entering temples, and occupying a designated space in religious structures, but Dalit assertion for a share in modern resources capable of initiating social change and thereby undermining the authority of Brahminism was visualized as a real threat to brahminical hegemony.

Thus the politics of issues, a concern for a share in the resources in modern structures (not mere acceptance and benevolence) as possible mechanism of empowerment and change was the focus of the Dalit movement. Of course, the Dalit concern for politics of issues also saw the other oppressed such as marginalized peasantry and unorganized working class as victims of exploitation and oppression. It is important to note that while other working class struggles, especially in Bombay, were campaigning for concerns of workers in formal organized sectors, Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party (ILP) focused on unorganized sector working classes. Thus with the formation and struggles led by the ILP, the Dalit movement exhibited a concern for politics of the issues of the larger marginalized constituency, which also presented a possibility of the broader conception of politics of emancipation.

Politics of Accommodation

Despite these early concerns with the politics of the issues of the broader marginalized constituency, the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement, with an exception of the Dadasaheb Gaikwad led satyagraha of landless agricultural labour, came to be entrapped in the politics of accommodation. Absorbed in the Congress politics of accommodation, the Dalit movement lost its edge as a possible vehicle of the politics of the marginalized. Thus the Republican Party of India, with a tie up with the Congress, resulted in both accommodation of Dalit politics and marginalization of Dalit politics from its larger focus. This continues to be one of the faces of Dalit politics even today. Indeed, the emergence of Dalit Panthers led to a resurgence of the Dalit consciousness. Dalit youth, inspired by Dalit Panthers, criticized 'accommodated' Dalit leadership that was ineffective in addressing the atrocities the Dalits encountered. They sought to damn the brahminical social order and dreamt of radical change leading to a just India. Moreover, Dalit Panthers attempted to provide a broad content to the category Dalit by articulating the concerns of Dalits, landless agricultural labourers, marginalized peasantry, toiling working masses and women, as represented by the term 'Dalit', and attempted to provide a broader conception of struggle.

Despite this, Dalit Panthers too were soon trapped in the politics of accommodation. Thus, though Dalit Panthers presented an ideologically conscious Dalit rebel, who challenged the existing Dalit leadership for being ineffective in arresting growing atrocities on Dalits and also succumbing to politics of accommodation, they themselves were soon to be accommodated and contained in the gamut of politics

of interest. Moreover, despite contributing to the resurgence of Dalit consciousness that gave rise to Dalit revolt in other parts of India, in terms of acquiring political power through electoral politics, Dalit Panthers too were unsuccessful. This marked the shift in the Dalit agenda: from social movement of the marginalized to political formation to achieve political power through electorates for some Dalit castes. Further, this also marks the beginning of politics of interest in Dalit politics. The political power is controlled by dominant political parties that also represent dominance of the upper and dominant castes even in the democratic set up and have also appropriated Dalit votes. Hence, it was felt that Dalits should politically consolidate their votes and also articulate Bahujanwad in the realm of electoral politics. Furthermore, it was felt that only through political power of seats in assemblies and parliament could the Dalits hope to change the oppressive order of Manuwad.

Politics of Interests and Politics of Issues

Such a formulation became successful in the form of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. From an interest group of Dalits working in government and public undertakings, the BSP gradually moved to become a political party with the capacity to achieve electoral success, and assumed political office in the largest state of India. The BSP's success in elections gave Dalits the panacea of political power: it is through success in electoral politics that Dalits would emerge as a ruling class; and that it is through such a success alone that Dalits could campaign against their socioeconomic marginalization and also fight oppressive Brahminism. Indeed, these formulations have been successful in installing the first Dalit woman chief minister in India, in one of India's highly feudal and caste-conscious states. It has also led to the creation of certain structures named after leaders like Dr Ambedkar and Jotiba Phule and Shahu Maharaj. However, change initiated by these efforts has largely been limited to symbolic spaces, that has not altered the oppressive character of the social order, neither has it brought a change in the socioeconomic status of the marginalized Dalits. Moreover, the political office too has proved to be elusive in nature.

Certainly, the BSP has emerged as an important player in Uttar Pradesh politics. However, the BSP's holding of political office in the state has depended on the support of the traditional ruling castes and classes (represented by the SP or the BJP). The latter joined hands with the BSP insofar as it served their own interests. Whenever it did not, they have not hesitated to pull down the BSP-led governments in the state. Indeed, the political developments in Uttar Pradesh have led social analysts such as Christophe Jaffrelot to call it a silent revolution from below.[1] A Dalit woman leading the government of one of the most feudal and caste-ridden states, the transfer of political and bureaucratic power from the upper castes to Dalits, and the consequent psychological boost to them, indeed provides a basis for such a celebration. However, these developments have not helped in substantially lessening the social-economic marginalization of Dalits, nor have they altered the oppressive character of the social order. The common Dalit masses continued to suffer atrocities, marginalization and also had to dampen their struggles under political compulsion.

The emergence of the BSP is also paralleled by the political prominence of the fundamentalist formation—the BJP—that also is hegemonic and appropriating. By harbouring fanatic religiosity, the brahminic outfit, the RSS, finally succeeded in assuming the highest political office in India, when the BJP and the NDA were in power at the centre, and thereby attempted to provide a brahminical character to society and culture in the country. The political prominence of the BJP, apart from leading to fundamentalism, communalism and casteism as markers of Indian society, has also posed a challenge to both centrist (Congress) and leftist ideological persuasions. These political outfits (that are also dominated by the upper castes and upper class groups) are threatened by RSS fundamentalist and communalist politics and are seeking new alliances. Thus Congress, which earlier practised politics of accommodation, now seeks the support of Dalits to fight communalism; and Left ideologues, who refused

[1] Christophe Jaffrelot, India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India (London: Hurst, 2003)

to see beyond class, have become aware of caste as a marker of oppression and exploitation in India. Hence, this has resulted in formulation of politics of collective interest.

Another form of politics of collective interest is witnessed in the BJP and the Shiv Sena enlisting support of some Dalit caste groups, especially in Maharashtra. Dalit groups such as Charmkars and Matangs, with the feeling of being ignored if not rejected by the leadership of Republican parties, and with the view of getting a share in political power, have joined these forces. This has resulted in some members of these communities being elected to legislatures and even occupying ministerial berths. Further, apart from the possibility of a share in political power, the BJP and Shiv Sena's occupation with Hindutva too found ready association among some of these Dalit castes. Thus, this too has led to formation of politics of collective interests.

Politics, Interests, and Wave of Unity of Shiv Sena

In addition to the politics of collective interests, the politics of individual interests too has found a space in this formation. Often in political parties such as the BJP, Congress, Left parties and even Shiv Sena, political activists either come from stable independent economic background, or the parties create sources of empowering political activists. Some of these parties even have full-timers whose day-to-day needs are taken care of. As a result, activists are not all the time pressed for day-to-day survival, and are free and committed to work for the party's ideological persuasions. Compared to this, activists in Dalit politics have been drawn from the Dalit movement, many are from Dalit Panthers, and have generally been drawn from very humble economic background. As youth inspired by Ambedkarist consciousness, and participating in struggle against Dalit atrocities, these activists left college and other professional education incomplete, and hence are without any source for day-to-day existence. Further, activists in Dalit struggles have often been elder sons of homes that have spent meagre family earnings on their education. When dreams of changing the order become more distant and inability to help even their families that need them is an immediate and continuous experience, these activists tend to get frustrated. In addition to this the lack of any political recognition, despite long participation in the struggle leads them to feeling of dejection. The author personally knows many such activists who have undergone this experience. On the other hand, like other political formations, Dalit politics too has attracted people who harbour the wish to pursue political careers. When, despite working for the party for long time, they become unsuccessful in getting elected to a political office, they tend to look for new areas of political habitation. The recent wave of the unity of Bhimshakti and Shivshakti has roots also in these feelings and concerns.

Though the move of unity of Bhimshakti-Shivshakti sounds alluring to 'dissenting' and politically 'eager' voices among Dalit communities, its implications for long-term politics are full of perils rather than promises. For, though 'empowering' some with political office, it has dangers of new patron-client formation, ironically, emerging even in urban and modern conditions. Moreover, it also has serious implications for recovery of Dalit subjectivity and autonomy, not only in the realm of the politics but identity, culture and economy. Further, since the unity with Bhimshakti is the need of the 'hour' for Shiv Sena, it is Shiv Sena's project that decides the nature, development and outcome of this project. Such a move is dictated by the compulsions of politics of numbers by the Shiv Sena and the BJP, and it is these forces that determine and direct the discourse and the agenda. Thus, not only is the autonomous voice of the Dalit critique lost in such formulation, there is a danger of the Dalit remaining a perennial marginalized Other of the brahminic centre. Hence, the Dalit movement asserting for autonomy of the Dalit voice in the socio-political sphere cannot be a long-term ally to the BJP and Shiv Sena forces.

At this juncture, let us try to understand why the developments within the Dalit movement have led to attempts of collaboration with ideological adversaries such as the BJP and Shiv Sena. It is also necessary to note that the political aspirations of Dalit communities outside the Ambedkarist fold, the perception of the Dalit question shared by forces advancing politics of issues such as the Left, and

the feeling of loss of possibilities of sharing political power among Dalit activists, will have to seen as factors contributing to the attempts of alliances with the ideological adversaries like the BJP and the Shiv Sena.

Earlier, we noted that the Dalit assertion in the beginning of the twentieth century was expressed in the form of assertion of Dalit humanity in terms of the right to dignity and equal humanity. Thus, various ideological 'adi' movements sought to recover Dalit history as rooted in non-brahminic egalitarian framework (see also Essay 6). However, the rise of Ambedkarism saw the question of Dalit humanity as rooted in the oppressive and exploitative structures of domination; hence, the Dalit movement during the Ambedkarist phase pursued the politics of issues, and attempted to extend this concern to the politics of issues of the larger marginalized categories. However, in the post-Ambedkar phase the focus of the Dalit movement came to be restricted in achieving spaces of political offices and issues of identity. As a result, the Dalit movement lost connections with the issues confronting both Dalit masses and other marginalized sections. Here it should be highlighted that the efforts and strength of the Dalit movement was spent on struggling with the traditional issues of the practice of Untouchability and caste discrimination. The growing consciousness among Dalit masses, both in rural and urban areas, and assertion against the oppressive caste system gave rise to further cases of atrocities, caste discrimination and social boycott. Thus the Dalit struggle was forced to engage with the issues of discrimination resulting from the traditional social order. This is also a telling comment on the nature of caste rigidities and prevalence of caste consciousness even in Maharashtra that is seen as a land of rationalist, reformist and even working class movement and consciousness. Indeed the Dalit Panthers did try to infuse a new consciousness and attempted to provide a broader content to the category 'Dalit'. However, in the absence of a stable organized structure, the Dalit Panthers also become willing victims of tactics of the politics of appropriation. Some of its leaders tried to share political space with the Congress, whereas others, that too leading ideologues, have ironically, seen possibilities of politics of masses in formations such as Shiv Sena. Political parties such as Congress, Shiv Sena and BJP are keen to share a political space with the Dalits. Such a concern however, emanates more from claiming Dalit votes rather than commitment to annihilate the traditional caste order and ushering of progressive social change. Moreover, it has contributed to creation of claimants for political power among Dalit communities, which in turn has led to further fragmentation of the Dalit movement and the weakening of the possibility of the politics of issues.

On the other hand, political formations claiming allegiance to left ideology and attempting to articulate the politics of issues have shared a problematic relationship with the Dalit movement. Though many Dalit youth are active in Left political formations and Left ideologues have now 'recognized' caste as context of oppression, Left politics have traditionally seen Dalit movement as sectarian, pro-British and divisive in character. Moreover, ideologically Left parties have privileged the category of class over that of caste as sites of exploitation and oppression; and also as a source of revolutionary politics. Thus Left formations saw class as a subsuming category and held that the class struggle alone would lead to revolutionary emancipatory politics. There is ground to believe that such a denial of caste as a site of oppression and exploitation was a result of the Left ideologues' social location. On the other hand, Dalit activists encountering discrimination ignored the fact that such discrimination also emanated and reiterated in exploitative and oppressive structures of economic domination. In this situation, there is a need to reinvent the politics of emancipation.

Reinventing Politics of Emancipation

Let me end by attempting to articulate the concerns of Dalit politics in the times to come. In 1938, while speaking before G.I.P. railway workers in Manmad, Dr Ambedkar had pointed out that Dalit and marginalized sections of this country would have to fight against two adversaries: Brahminism and Capitalism. Ambedkar's attempts to articulate and campaign for these issues through the Independent

Labour Party indicated the possible emancipatory politics Dalits ought to engage with. What is more, in contemporary times both these adversaries have emerged as formations threatening life with minimum human dignity in social, economic, political and even cultural spheres and have contributed to the process of disenfranchising. The economic changes that have taken place under the process of globalization are adversely affecting lives of agricultural labourer, marginal peasants, workers in unorganized sectors in urban areas and women. As a result of the withdrawal of the state from key social sectors and growing erosion of state support structures from these areas marginalized people have little hope in managing survival, let alone the possibilities of positive change.

The Dalit population comprises the bulk of these categories. Hence Dalit politics of today too has to be focused on the issues of the marginalized sections such as landless agricultural workers, poor peasantry, unorganized sector workers, urban poor and women, and specifically on the issues confronting Dalit women, who have been victims of intersecting ideologies and structures of patriarchy, gender and caste. Though Dalit women have participated in the Dalit movement, issues confronting them have not become central to the Dalit struggle. These ought to be the priorities of Dalit politics in contemporary times. Similarly, like the oppressive processes of globalization, the emergence of Hindutva has led to a cultural hegemonic formation assuming the centre that dictates and polices the Other. This presents a threat to the social and cultural autonomy of the religious minorities and the lower castes. Again, Dalit critiques of asymmetrical formations and contributors to the alternative egalitarian culture have engaged with hegemonic Hindutva. The concern with politics of emancipation could be seen in the Ambedkarian conceptualization of culture of resistance and reconstitution. Through his re-articulation of Buddhism as located in a critical space and ethical reconstruction, Ambedkar sought to recover the subjective agency of the subjugated in critiquing the ideologies and structures of domination on the one hand, and in reconstructing of social order on the foundations of justice, reason and autonomy on the other. In an atmosphere of growing disenfranchising—of losing voices, being silenced and made invisible—the critical space that 'modernist' Buddhism offers provides a context for emancipatory politics. Certainly, such a concern warrants a perspective of Buddhism as rooted in 'materiality and ethicality of human life', as rooted in the 'real' conditions that characterize human existence.

Such an emancipatory agenda cannot be realized unless those offering the politics of issues affecting the marginalized sections, for instance, the Left and other progressive forces, become sensitive to the specificities of oppression and exploitation resulting from the structure of caste. They need to realize that social locations dictated by caste not only influence identities and culture but also the economic, social and political dimensions. Caste thus is not mechanically located in the superstructure, but this superstructure often interacts with, and influences, the base. Often those who voice the issues of the marginalized from class and patriarchal (feminist) axes exhibit an ideological arrogance, a sense of superiority in articulation and legitimization of issues. However, the very fact that issues of identity, ethnicity and communalism have assumed a central place in social discourse prove that homogenized and unproblematic views of class and patriarchy as social markers have been untenable in understanding social processes. The same perhaps holds true in regard to the environmental politics in India, which often is blind to politics and relationship of caste and resources. Thus, broader and collaborative politics based on issues, commitment to the concerns of the marginalized rooted in genuine democratic ethos, a genuine, not procedural, democracy that privileges the issues of justice and human dignity will contribute to the politics of emancipation.

Notes

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