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Between Exclusion and Exclusivity: Dalits in Contemporary India

Abstract: The article explores the alternative strategies adopted by the lowest caste groups known by the generic term dalits to improve their social status in India. The mapping of various strategies has been done by taking into consideration the four historical stages, namely, medieval period, renaissance, postcolonial modernity and postmodernity. It has been argued that in these stages different strategies were employed by the dalits. It is in the postmodern state that the dalit discourse of equality has shifted its emphasis from inclusion and equality to exclusivity and difference. There are two predominant dalit discourses, each complimenting the other, in contemporary India. The first is the use of democratic means to claim power at the formal level by creating a distinct voter-constituency through the articulation of dalit identity. The second is a strong articulation of the exclusiveness of the dalit experience. The argument is that the dalit experience cannot be comprehended by non-dalits as a result of which only dalit can theorise his experience.

Keywords: Exclusion, exclusivity, dalit, postcolonial, modernity, dalit intellectuals, Bhakti movement, equality.

The expression 'dalit' is now synonymous with the lowest sections of the traditional Indian society, who were known by different names at different points of time. 'Un-touchables,' depressed classes, schedules castes, underprivileged castes, etc. are some of the names given to them. At present they constitute about 15 per cent of the population of India—the number which could be higher than a large number of countries of the world. With the exception of north-eastern tribal part of India, the caste system is most common form of social organisation of India, which provides a broad context of thinking of and conceptualising Indian society. Various studies suggest that caste is found among other religious communities, particularly among Sikhs, Christians and Muslims—a result of conversion of people in India. However, understanding caste and dalits is not an easy task, because there has been a great degree of complexity in the caste hierarchy largely due to variations in culture, social practices, and religious practices across the country within Hindu community. Caste system among the non-Hindu religious communities offers another difficulty in making a clear-cut generalisation about the Indian society. Despite the presence of caste hierarchies in these religious communities, there have been noticeable differences among them from the Hindu caste hierarchy. For example, many of the castes that occupy upper caste status among the Sikhs are lower castes among the Hindus (Judge 2002). Despite all these difficulties, it is possible to make certain broad generalisations about caste system. Certain common properties/markers of caste have been succinctly delineated here.

The purpose of this exercise is to situate dalits in the Indian social structure with its major specific features.

First, in virtual all regions of the country two broad divisions exist among the numerous caste communities, namely, the separation between manual and non-manual labour. All those castes that are involved, in ideal typical sense, in non-manual occupations are bracketed as twice-born upper castes. Two occupations that come immediately to the mind as exceptions are swordsmanship and cooking, as these were performed by upper castes. However, the reason for these occupations' higher status is quite obvious. All the caste communities which were doing manual labour were regarded as lower castes. There have been two kinds of manual labour—unclean and clean. The castes involved in unclean/dirty/polluting work were considered untouchables whose touch could pollute the upper caste people. In this way, the dalits belonged to the lowest rungs of the Indian society.

Second, all the dalit castes faced discrimination and exclusion, which varied across castes and regions. One of the prevalent discriminations was that they were not allowed to touch the upper caste people. Virtually everywhere these caste communities were living in distinct localities away from the upper caste houses. They were excluded from getting knowledge of religious texts, education, and non-polluting occupations. Among the numerous exclusions and discriminations the most horrifying in certain cases was that their women were not allowed to cover their breasts thus denying them the basic right to honourable living.

Third, all the dalits were internally heterogeneous and practised exclusion with each other. Caste endogamy was the way of life for Indian society and it was the first principle of division among the dalit castes. None of them intermarried and any such instance could invite the wrath of the caste community, particularly the caste of the girl in a patriarchal society. Internal divisions among the untouchables became highly functional for the sustenance of caste system.

Fourth, underlying the complex social structure was an equally powerful ideology of caste system, which justified the lowest status of the untouchables. It was the dharma/karma principle, supposed to have come from the mouth of Lord Krishna—the incarnation of Vishnu, according to which each caste member should perform his dharma righteously by taking up the occupation of his caste. The reward was promised in the next birth in the most abstract form, that is, birth in the higher caste.

The above explication of the traditional Indian social structure and the location of the dalits suffices enough to conclude that the caste status was quite similar to racial inequality. However, it should not mean that there has been no challenge to the birth-based caste inequality and its exclusivist character. The first challenge emerged as a result of the interaction between the Indian tradition and Islam in the medieval period. In the form of Bhakti movement, the plausibility of questioning the power of the upper castes within the framework of Hindu ideology of dharma/karma was realised. A large number of saints, such as Chokamela, Namdev, Tuka Ram, Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak to name few, questioned the legitimacy of keeping the untouchable castes excluded from the right to worship in temples. The dalits had never accepted their low caste position, which is evident from Deliége

(1999) that they had a large storage of stories that tended to explain why they got the lowest position in the caste hierarchy. What is interesting about all these mythical accounts of origin is that these do not question the legitimacy of caste system. In a way, the medieval Bhakti movement, which in certain respects was a contemporary to the European period of renaissance just failed to usher in modernity in India. The subsequent developments got corrupted into the mystical world by withdrawing from the social intervention. During this period Europe witnessed Copernican revolution, Reformation, Enlightenment and Newtonian revolution, which radically altered the understanding of external physical universe as well as the internal spiritual world.

Enlightenment attacked the social, political and religious oppression that fundamentally changed the intellectual world, despite the fact that most of the people remained ingrained in religion and spirituality (Bayly 2004).

Two dimensions of India's medieval period could be highlighted with regard to the dalits. First, there is no way of identifying the primacy of any of the exclusions of the dalits, because all aspects of their dehumanization seemed enmeshed with each other and secondly, the Bhakti movement demonstrated that it was possible to reinterpret ostensibly rigid and inegalitarian ideology. However, the Bhakti remained embedded in the religious tradition and could only emphasize the right to worship as the natural right of all individuals. Except for Guru Nanak, who started his own tradition which later on became a distinct religion, all others could not transcend limited boundaries of religious worship.

Renaissance and Modernity

What distinguished Indian renaissance from the Bhakti intervention was the way the caste system and untouchability were understood. Whereas the Bhakti movement did not come out of the religious framework and tried to show the plausibility of achieving equality of worship, the Enlightenment philosophy questioned the religious basis of social inequality thereby ushering in modernity. The Bhakti perspective, though tended to alter the existing perspective, remained largely within the framework of tradition. Therefore, it was not an issue of exclusion but of social arrangements, which were patterned in a particular form and were seen as a normal life process. The limited occupations available for the members of society provided for a justification of including everybody in the economic life.

The arrival of British in India broke occupational structure in a fundamental way. We have a considerable debate on whether Marx was right in his characterization of Indian villages as stable and unchanging. Interestingly, Marx argued that the population growth did not lead to the change in the division of labour in India. Rather, the population pressure led to the formation of new village settlements, which were the replica of the original settlement. The British colonialism was essentially a capitalist imperialist rule. With British came new mode of production, western education and philosophy. The British administration required educated Indians to do the clerical

work at the lowest for which they were to be trained in the language of the rulers.¹ The response to the British rule, so far as Indian social structure was concerned, was one of introspection, which paved the way for renaissance in India. Indian renaissance, like the Indian socio-cultural and religious reality, had multiple trajectories. Starting from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1947 when India got independence, the renaissance and nationalist intellectuals remained ambivalent towards social reform as well as the British rule (Chandra 1992). The major impact of the British rule became visible in the field of economic development where despite the imperialist character of British Indian economy marked by various regressive policies that only suited to the British but were harmful for the people of India, there was development of infrastructure, both economic and administrative.² Economic development started escalating as a result of the increase in the trade and beginning of the industrialization process. All these developments created new job opportunities. Two trends began to develop and both had consequences for the dalits in the long term. First, various artisan activities began to undergo technological changes and artisan production began to transform into industrial enterprises. Secondly, new jobs were created and interestingly, these jobs were not linked with caste. Taking up new occupations, given the opportunity, implied moving away from the caste milieu. Despite the caste based discrimination, both the changes created consequences for the dalits. Intensification of leather trade, as noticed by Briggs (1975) in the nineteenth century, improved the economic conditions of the Chamars.

Transformation in the Indian society, however limited it might be, raised the aspirations of the dalits and other depressed castes and thus began dalit renaissance symbolised by Jotiba Phule. Phule was able to create an alternative tradition through the construction of the myth of Bali Raja—a mythic figure deceived by God Vishnu. The dalit struggle began in real earnest after the arrival of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was modernist in the strict sense of the term. Exclusionary practices emerged when the dalits were denied entry into new occupations and prevented from getting modern education. Certain forms of discrimination, which were earlier taken as part of the tradition and were depressive and exploitative in character, began to be reinterpreted as exclusionary in nature. These particularly included right to worship and entry in the temple. Dalits sought to end all forms of discrimination and exclusion by various means. They rejected sanskritisation—a way of improving one's caste status by imitating the ways of life of the upper caste—and resorted to protest, collective mobilisation and religious conversion. We, therefore, have certain instances in the colonial India where the dalits successfully changed their social conditions. The Nadars of Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave Jr. 1970), the Ad-dharmis of Punjab (Juergensmeyer 1982), and the Mahars of Maharashtra (Zelliot 1970) are some of the classical instances. In

¹ There has been a controversy over the introduction of the English language in India. However, it may be pointed out that the language of the rulers has been imposed in general. Even in India Persian was the court language in many regions.

² Permanent Settlement, destruction of indigenous production, commercialization of agriculture for imperialist needs, etc. harmed the people of the country.

all the three cases the religious conversion or new religious identity was either the starting point or the culmination of their struggle.

The rising tide of dalit consciousness under the leadership of Ambedkar paved the way for their recognition as a distinct identity of the depressed castes. At the Round Table Conference he represented the dalits. He argued for a separate electorate and got it from the British Indian government. Gandhi did not accept it. There was a fundamental difference between the two leaders. Ambedkar was of the opinion that without the change in the constitutive rules of the Indian society and polity the social inclusion of dalits could not take place. On the other hand, Gandhi was of the opinion that since the problems of the dalits are a matter of internal constitution of Hindu society, what was required was the change in regulatory rules.³ Since Ambedkar was adamant, Gandhi decided to go on fast unto death in December 1932. The pressure mounted on Ambedkar to withdraw the demand for separate electorate to save Gandhi, which he ultimately did. Known as Poona Pact in which Ambedkar withdrew the demand and got into an agreement with Gandhi was the turning point in the history of dalit struggle for equality in India. The fundamental difference in the perceptions of Gandhi and Ambedkar was rooted in their commitment and priorities. Dalit scholars interpret that Gandhi's fasts "...not only helped him to maintain his dictatorship in demanding unquestioned obedience from the Congress but also to coerce others to fall in line as he did with Ambedkar during Poona Pact" (Gudavarthy 2008). It is essentially an interpretation which is possible, but lacks some degree of understanding of Gandhi in totality. For Gandhi caste based untouchability was undesirable, but held the conviction that reform was to be brought about from within the system. On the other hand, Ambedkar became progressively convinced that there was no hope from within the system and redemption lied in moving out of the system. Whereas Ambedkar was for non-communistic constitutive transformation of the Indian society, Gandhi hoped that reform and appeal to the upper castes' conscience would bring out the desired results.

Postcolonial Modernity, State and Dalits

The adoption of the new Constitution in 1950, three years after independence in which Ambedkar was involved as the chairman of the drafting committee, signified the beginning of a new era in Indian politics as well as society. It was based on the principle of inclusion making all citizens equal irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. Introduction of universal suffrage ended various kinds of disabilities imposed on dalits and other marginal communities in the political sphere. At the same time, the path to the achievement of the objective of social equality was not easy. To end ages-old discrimination and oppression the constitutional declaration was not enough. It was also known to the ruling elite of the independent India. Interestingly, the Indian Constitution also provided for the state intervention in the areas of social

³ The help of my friend, Prof. Satya P. Gautam is gratefully acknowledged with regard to the distinction between the perspectives of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

disabilities as a proactive agent by introducing the policy of preferential treatment to the dalits and tribals. A schedule of the list of the castes and tribes was annexed to the Constitution, as a result of which all these castes were labelled as scheduled castes and the tribes were henceforth known as the scheduled tribes.

What is now christened as reservation policy was based on the modern liberal principle according to which the individual has been the target of various benefits. The Indian state, through its modern liberal rationality, sought to end caste based exclusions by improving the conditions of individuals with the perspective that such actions would automatically break the caste-occupation barriers. Modern occupations were inseparably linked with acquisition of education and reservation policy, as enshrined in the Constitution, provided for certain proportions of the seats in the educational institutions. It was followed by the reservations in the public sector jobs. The percentage of seats was determined according to the population proportion of the dalits in the country as well as states. Besides the above, reservation in state legislatures and parliament were also provided for subject to their review after every ten years by the Lok Sabha. The practice of untouchability in any form was made a cognizable offence subject to penal punishment. The postcolonial Indian state also undertook various development measures to ameliorate their conditions.

Since all these measures were put into effect in the first decade after adoption of Constitution, evaluative studies began to appear in the 1960s. Most of these studies clearly indicated two trends which had emerged in the implementation and consequences of the reservation policy. First, there was a poor implementation of the policy on account of the fact that owing to widespread poverty among them, the number of dalit students getting enrolled in educational institutions was far less than expectation. Subsequently, they were unable to fill the quota of jobs reserved for them. The only exception was the political reservation where requisite number of the scheduled castes was always there to take benefits from the reservation policy. Second, certain sections among the dalits could benefit more than others from the reservation policy giving rise to what was subsequently known as emergence of creamy layer. Such a development was not contradictory to liberal principles as the reservation policy was individual-oriented. It could have never led to the corporate mobility of the dalits. Two trends could be observed in this context. The first was the formation of classes within castes (Seth 1981) and secondly, certain castes exploited these opportunities more than others. For example, the Ad-dharmis in Punjab benefited more than the Balmiki caste.

An unintended consequence was the collective reaction of the non-dalits against the reservation policy in 1970s (Bains 1997). Two categories of upper castes began to protest and form associations. The first was the students of medical colleges, particularly in Gujarat, who began the open protest. The second category was comprised by government employees. The dalit employees who got jobs under the reservation policy were called 'sons-in law of the government' by the upper caste employees. Various state governments introduced carry over system under which the unfilled post were to be added in the next year's quota. Such a policy was resented by the upper castes everywhere. It was during this period that the dalit students and employees were constructed as inefficient, incapable and incompetent. The argument was that the dalit

employees did not work and were getting salaries without any work. In many states the dalit employees were also ghettoised in one department, namely, the social welfare department, of the government, whereas the rest of the government departments would have very few dalit employees. Against those dalits who would be admitted to the medical colleges against reserved seats were also constructed as dull and unintelligent and there would invariably be an argument that when these people would become doctors, they would not be able to do justice to their profession. Nobody asked such constructionists that they had to go through training and also clear all examinations.

It becomes clear that the postcolonial modernity fundamentally rooted in the liberal principle of justice failed considerably with the exception of one important and permanent contribution which was destined to make an impact when the arrival of postmodernity was announced in the west through the seminal work of Lyotard (1986), who argued that the grand narrative of the modernist discourse had broken down. This exception was the creation of dalit intellectuals. A section of educated dalits kept their commitment to the cause of dalits, whereas many dalits tended to hide their dalit identity (Guru 2008). The failure of modernist project of the Indian state was also accompanied by a radical shift in the dalit politics. Ambedkar had a project of bringing various dalit castes at par with upper castes for which he waged struggles and also made an attempt to realise this goal through state intervention. A casteless society was the desirable and cherished goal for an egalitarian system to exist and function.

Postmodern Twist and Dalit Assertion

It is not necessary that economic development and cultural superiority would go together. Pluralism may not necessarily be the sole privilege of post-industrial societies, as it may characterise the traditional society, which may be interpreted as multicultural reality. Indian subcontinent is a mosaic of myriad social formations ranging from archaic to postmodern. In this time and space convergence and divergence, the dalits are located in every part of the social landscape. The trajectories of emerging dalit consciousness have been multidirectional and engage the discourse of caste hierarchy in a number of ways. At the aggregate level, there is a paradigmatic shift in the way they have begun to handle the entire question of dalithood. Our proceeding discussion is aimed at mapping this shift.

From Equality to Power

In the decade of 1980s it began to emerge that various steps undertaken by the Indian state for caste equality had not been succeeding to the extent it was expected. The hegemony of the upper and dominant castes in every part of the social and political life remained largely unchallenged. Caste-based associations had emerged among the upper and middle castes to articulate their interests in the political sphere and some of them, as it happened in Haryana, began to intervene in social affairs. The social and political resurgence of the Yadavs and the Kurmis in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

had further strengthened caste based solidarities. Not only that, these castes started demanding reservation for the other backward classes (OBCs) to which many of them belonged. Seeking OBC status, something unheard of earlier, was a function of the emerging competition for public sector jobs in an economy that was developing at a slow pace. In other words, caste seemed to be emerging as a more powerful entity rather than an extinct category.

Kanshi Ram, who emerged as the undisputed leader of the dalits in the 1990s, shifted the paradigm from equality and castelessness to political power. One of the major defects in modernist discourse was that it was state enforced and was confined to the end of exclusion of dalits in public sphere only. The upper caste people could be persecuted if they discriminated on the basis of caste in the restaurants, educational institutions, utilisation of common facilities, entry into religious places of worship, job market, etc. However, a person could not be punished, on the basis of the liberal principles if he refused to invite people on account of their caste. Somehow Gandhi's regulatory rules had a meaning in the sense that caste as an ideology existing in the mind/consciousness of the upper castes could not be erased through enactment and affirmative policies. It never meant that these policies did not produce any desirable result. As a matter of fact they enabled the dalits to cross the most crucial barrier in their march forward. It empowered them to get educated, organise and agitate.

Kanshi Ram understood it well and shifted the emphasis to acquiring of political power by creating a discourse of anti-Brahmanism. After establishing the Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharash Samiti in the 1981, he was quick to realise the available political space and organised Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984. Dubey (2001) has analysed the emergence of Kanshi Ram as the major leader of dalits. He used anti-Brahmin rhetoric to its extreme in his public addresses. His protégé, Mayawati became the chief minister of the largest state (in terms population size), Uttar Pradesh, in 1995. In view of the fact that the BSP depended on the caste identity for coming to power, it reinforced caste with one difference. It challenged the hegemony of the upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, and designated them as Manuwadi forces.⁴

The influence of the BSP spread to other states, but it never reached the level of attaining power on the pattern of Uttar Pradesh. However, the discourse and practice of the BSP are not fundamentally different from the other political parties. The charisma of Kanshi Ram and after him, Mayawati has assured the success of the BSP. How do we make sense of the caste appeal of the BSP? Is it a retrogression and promotion of caste identities? The BSP, in fact, has changed the paradigm of caste equality. By emphasising the fact that castes are going to stay in India, it has moved the trajectory of discourse to the plausibility of the existence and prevalence of caste differences without necessarily having caste system. Such a possibility, according to its perspective, exists through the capturing of formal power. The success of such a perspective requires some time for which one has to wait and see. However, there is a reasonably successful case of the Ad-dharmis of Punjab, which we shall discuss in the next section.

⁴ Ancient/medieval Hindu sage who authored *Manusmriti*—a text that codifies the caste system covering all aspects of social life of the Hindus.

Identity Assertion

Punjab is a small state of India, but almost thirty per cent of its population belongs to the scheduled castes.⁵ There are two major castes in the state which constitute three fifth of the total population of the scheduled castes, namely, Ad-dharmis/Chamars and Balmikis/Mazabis. The Ad-dharmis/Chamars have experienced tremendous change in their conditions, as they were the first to exploit the opportunities made available to the dalits under the reservation policy. In the third decade of the twentieth century they also organised a successful movement to be recognised as distinct religious community. Despite the fact that they have been supporting Ambedkar's philosophy of social change, they have never resorted to conversion to Buddhism. Most of them continue to be professing the Ad-dharm and worshipping Ravidas—a medieval dalit saint—as their Guru. In one of his recent stories, Rasoolpuri (2008) has highlighted the tension within the Chamar caste on account of religion. In the process he has been able come out with an answer to the question why Buddhism did not struck roots among the Punjabi Chamars.

Punjab is a Sikh dominated society and among the Sikhs the Jats constitute an overwhelming majority.⁶ The Jats are traditionally the landowning peasants, whereas most of the Chamars live in villages and used to be artisans-cum-agricultural labourers. Punjab experienced high rate of agricultural growth in the late-1960s as a result of the introduction of high yielding varieties of seeds (wheat), chemical fertilisers, institutional credit, and irrigation. The phenomenon of high agricultural productivity is popularly known as the green revolution. The consequences of the green revolution were economic in the sense that the Punjab peasantry experienced unparalleled prosperity. Same thing happened to the peasants of Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh and coastal Andhra Pradesh little later. Before the trickle down effect could really benefit the dalit agricultural workers, the influx of migrant labour from Uttar Pradesh began which did not only depress the wages of the local labour but also partially displaced them from agricultural labour. The Chamars responded to the emerging situation by moving out of the agricultural labour by learning emerging skills thus reducing their dependence on the upper caste landowners.⁷

The development in agriculture ran parallel to the emergence of the Chamar middle class through education, modern occupations, and international migration. According to an estimate of Juergensmeyer (1982), in the initial years in late 1950s and 1960s, ten per cent of the total emigrants to various countries of the English-speaking west belonged to the dalit castes. Predictably, the Chamars constituted an overwhelming majority among the emigrants. The third aspect of the development among them has been the intensification of the trade in which they were traditionally

⁵ As a matter of fact, after the state notification according to which Mahatam/Rai Sikhs have been included among the scheduled castes, the percentage has already gone up to approximately thirty five per cent.

⁶ According to the estimates based on the data of Census of India, 1931, they should be about 65 per cent of the total Sikh population.

⁷ See Judge (2010).

involved, namely, rawhides and leather. Boota Mandi, near Jalandhar, became the major centre of trade in rawhides with its connections with rest of India. Some of the Chamar traders became rich and they began supporting the politics and religious institutions through funds. The rich Chamars of Boota Mandi have been consistently supporting all mobilisations of their caste people to the extent that all protests now set off from this place.

The Chamars have begun to assert their caste identity—a trend that was not only absent in the 1970s but there was also a tendency to hide their caste status. Three interesting features could be witnessed in recent times so far as the Chamar identity is concerned. First, there is an obvious trend in publicly displaying their identity. It is evident from the fact that one finds graffiti on personal vehicles signifying the caste identity of the owner. For example, “Putt Chamaran De” (Sons of Chamars) could be seen scribbled on the back side of motor vehicles. It is not simply an identity assertion, but an effort to create counter-structure, because such a trend was exclusively found among the dominant Jats. Secondly, the Chamars seek to maintain their caste identity by sticking to caste endogamy.⁸ The third trend is a corollary to the above mentioned developments, that is, they are moving towards an exclusive caste group. Instead of fighting exclusion the Chamars have begun to emerge as a socially exclusive group, which has enabled them to exclude themselves from the other dalit groups for which they had to pay political costs. Unlike Uttar Pradesh where Mayawati has moved towards dalit unity, the Chamars in Punjab have continued to align themselves with either of the two major political parties, namely, the Congress and the Akali Dal. The Chamars constitute an interesting case of confronting caste inequality by maintaining caste identity. However, they are also an illustration of how an upwardly mobile caste could exclude other lower castes in the social world.

Social Science Theory and Dalit Intellectuals

Postmodernity of the dalit discourse is evident from the way they have confronted the exclusionary character of social theory in India. For the first time it has been shown that the dalits have been excluded from history and recent works also show that the dalits were also denied their anthropological past so far as the dominant discourse was concerned. Anthropological construction of the dominant upper castes remained confined to the construction of justificatory models of caste hierarchy. Guru (2002), Ilaiyah (2004) and Prasad (2006), to refer some of the writers, have questioned the way the dalit identity and Indian history have been articulated in the social sciences in India. Besides the emergence of a distinct area of dalit literature, recent years have witnessed a popular trend in the publication of autobiographies on the part of the dalit intellectuals belonging to different parts of India. The trajectory of dalit consciousness is multi-directional articulating an attempt to recover what has been missing in the dominant upper caste discourse. As we shall see, the dalit discourse has created a paradox, which may trap them in casteism, and in order to come out

⁸ See Judge and Bal (2009) for detailed discussion on the issue.

of it, they require a politics of inclusion. However, before examining the how of this paradox, it is important to outline various trajectories of dalit consciousness.

Let us begin with the social science theory and the egalitarian discourse. Guru (2002) argues that social science theory does not take cognizance of the dalit experience. In other words, he strongly argues in favour of the construction of society as a subjective reality. Treating society as a subjective reality, for Guru, would amount to situating dalits at their rightful place, because only the dalits are capable of articulating their experience into theoretical discourse. He is not the only one among the dalit intellectuals, who claims the exclusive nature of the dalit experience. Predictably, there is more than one assumption implicated in such an argument. First of all, it assumes that Indian social inequality is unique in its form and content. Here comes the important paradox. Recently, at the Druban conference on racism, the dalit intellectuals made all efforts to show that caste is equivalent to race.⁹ If we accept, for a moment, the argument that caste and race are not different, then the dalit experience loses its unique character. The second assumption is that all experiences can be theorised. However, it is important to mention that theorisation needs concepts, propositions, and on top of that, language with semantic and semiotic universe. The construction of theory would occur in the given language frame (that is, a set of vocabulary and grammar). Can we say that dalit experience would be theorised in a language, which could only be understood by the dalits? At the outset it becomes clear that for such an enterprise the first precondition is either the existence of a distinct language or the emergence of a new language. So far this has not happened. Since the distribution of dalits in India is such that they are multilingual, to go far an exclusive linguistic innovation is far from practical. Obviously, Guru (*ibid.*) would not accept such an argument regarding the distinctness of language. Then, it should be reminded that social reality is not subjective, particularly when we are dealing with collective life-world such as that of dalits, we need to remind that it is an intersubjective reality.

The intersubjective social world assumes the existence of common stock of knowledge among the members of the society and their biographically determined situations enable them to understand each other's actions. If this is the theoretical logic, then arguing for the exclusive nature of theoretical discourse of a particular group is presumptuous without any base. Interestingly, all dalit castes do not undergo common experience, because of the nature of empirical reality. Numerous dalit castes are occupationally divided and hierarchically ordained endogamous groups. Their caste-based exclusion makes them one unit only in a situation of their relationship with upper castes in particular contexts. Or the Indian state has identified them as scheduled castes. The similarity ends there. What emerges as a result is an aggregation of groups who have been put together by virtue of their exclusion from social interaction, history and anthropological past.

We may now turn to dalit autobiographies which have recently come up in great numbers covering most of the regions of India. An autobiography is again a realm of the subjective and the memory. In the case of dalits, narrative of life experiences

⁹ See Thorat and Umakant (2005) on the issue of race and caste.

is not a simple depiction of one's life story, which is representative of the caste to which the author belongs, but also a mode of praxis. Most of the autobiographies have been authored by well known dalit writers in their respective fields. Madhopuri (2004) and Malagatti (2007) are poets and Valmiki is a writer, whereas Moon is known as the editor of Ambedkar's collected works. The dalit writers in Maharashtra have extensively written on their life experiences. Besides Moon from the earlier generation, Gaikwad's (1992) autobiographical account makes an interesting reading, because it depicts the life world of caste whose traditional occupation is stealing. There are many other autobiographies in vernacular languages and all of them have been noticed, discussed and translated in other languages.¹⁰ All these works share certain common features. The first is that these provide a vivid account of the childhood of the writers. The early age was also marked by the overwhelming presence of caste based discrimination. Whereas Moon's childhood provides us the knowledge of post-Poona pact times in Nagpur, all others largely narrate the periods of 1950s and 1960s. Interestingly, all of them become successful after getting education and their narratives either become selective or terminate at such a moment. It implies that these autobiographies are selective and purposive, but they carry valuable sociological information about the Indian society and caste based discrimination.

What these autobiographical narratives depict is life lived in deprivation, humiliation and discrimination. All of them struggled and became successful through education and taking up of new occupations. In a way, their personal accounts turn into the description of the life conditions of their respective castes. An autobiography is the account of one life narrated in the form of story, which the author writes when he has passed all these stages. Thus the role of memory becomes important in the autobiographical discourse. It is because of this reason that most of these narratives are episodic in form. These works have added to our understanding of the social reality considerably, but, at the same time, these works have further contributed to the overemphasis on the personal experience as the basis of the construction of social theory.

Autobiographies have added to the already growing literature which has carved out a niche as dalit literature. It began from Maharashtra (Zelliot 1992) in the form of a distinct identity of dalit literature, but has now spread to different parts of India. As a matter of fact, dalit autobiographies are a part of the broad category of dalit literature. It has evolved as a powerful voice of the dalits. Kumar (2010: 124) makes the following comment on dalit literature:

Serious critique is sine qua non for any literary work of significance. Dalit claims that literature of the dominant group or so-called upper castes is petty and false and overpowered by romanticism. It ignores the social reality of appalling poverty and oppression of the Dalits. Stating that high-caste literature is artificial and false, 'like a paper flower', Wankhade notes that 'a Marathi writer's understanding of life is restricted by his birth and upbringing in a particular caste and class and he is unable to come out of his own pond...'

Similarly, the dalit writers, according to Kumar (ibid.), have highlighted how they have built critique of "traditional structures of the Indian society such as caste

¹⁰ We are referring five autobiographies for the sake of convenience. However, it may be added that these five works fairly represent the writings of this genre of literature.

village, and religion.” Literature provides unlimited possibilities of explorations into the world of subjective experiences, but at the same time, the existence of the term dalit literature is also a result of either exclusiveness or exclusion. Sensitising human perceptions regarding sufferings and oppression of certain sections of the society is important and necessary also. It may however be seen whether such classified forms of literature remain within the parameters of the given genre.

By Way of Conclusion

Widely located at different social spaces between tradition and postmodernity, the dalits of India are facing two kinds of challenges. The first is emerging from outside the milieu of dalithood. We may call it the challenge of inclusion. Till today, they have remained excluded in various ways. Despite the state intervention through various policies, the overall social location of the dalits remained at the fringe of the Indian society. Prevalence of caste differentiation among them has prevented them to make collective efforts for various inclusionary strategies. Still majority of them remain a part of the poor sections of the Indian society. There are certain pockets in India where a caste has been able to overcome certain forms of exclusion, as is the case of the Chamars of Punjab. Other castes in the same regions have failed to do so. Evidence and stories of atrocities on dalits can still be read in newspapers. Even if oppression on dalit comes to an end and all of them achieve certain level of development, there is no guarantee that they would not face exclusion. As we noted, inclusion of dalits is taking place in the public sphere of Indian social life. We generally ignore the private sphere, which involves interfamily relations and interactions, friendship and socialising. It requires change in stereotypes, prejudices and consciousness of the upper castes to abandon the caste perspective in interpersonal relations. Such a state of affairs may not be realised in near future. The relevance of Gandhian approach could be realised in such a context, where individuals are not acting in accordance with the rules of the state in public sphere as citizens, but as autonomous individuals with rights in the liberal framework. The state thus cannot pass the law whereby a percentage of invited guests is reserved for certain caste groups in the marriage ceremony/celebration, as it would infringe the rights of the individuals as citizens. Encapsulation of social groups gets reinforced when hierarchical order is threatened by the egalitarian principle of the liberal state. There are parallel instances of such a process in other parts of the world where immutable differences of race and ethnicity have led to the recognition of multiculturalism, which is nothing but a form of mutual and consensual separation despite the equal rights guaranteed by the liberal state.

The second challenge is emerging from within the dalit discourse. We may call it the challenge of exclusiveness. The dalit discourse is multi-vocal and covers different aspects of the existential conditions of the dalits. There is a history of protests of dalits, largely caste-based instead of being a collective mobilisation of dalit castes, against their exclusion, discrimination and oppression. In most of such cases the character of mobilisation implicated the assertion for better treatment, equality and end of exclu-

sion. In most of these cases the upper castes reacted sharply and sometimes clashing with dalits. All these mobilisations helped them to improve their conditions without necessarily ending their servitude. Frustrated by the failure of achieving desirable results after independence a section of the dalits moved away from their religious milieu by following the path of religious conversion. They considered Hinduism as the ideological basis of the perpetuation of their continuing oppression and exclusion. Normatively, such a perspective cannot be regarded as wrong or right, but such a movement that took them away from their religious milieu also led to their emergence as exclusive groups without necessarily changing the material conditions of their existence.

The argument for the exclusive nature of the dalit experience and the construction of social science theory is again an effort towards demonstrating exclusive identities of the actors. Can diverse experience be the basis of exclusive identity? It is important to know how the experience is posited on the existential conditions. Unfortunately, all human experiences are articulated through language which is shared by all members of the society. Therefore the dalit exclusivity cannot be theoretically positioned in the context of experience. Whereas the construction of history and invention of tradition simultaneously accompany the discovery of historical and anthropological past, arguing for the exclusive character of identity in the historical sense seems little far fetched. Thus buffalo nationalism and cow nationalism are equally divided and could not be associated with the secular and egalitarian Indian society. However, if the trend continued towards the emphasis on the distinct and unique life experiences, which others cannot understand, the dalit assertion would continue to be ambivalently located between exclusion and exclusiveness.

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