Dalit Movements in India: A Perspective from the Below

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The paper analyses the nature and phased development of Dalit movements in India within the perspective from the below consisting of a theoretico-methodological proposition inhering the potentials of empirical verification and generalisation either about a single movement or several movements of different hues. Besides explaining the issues addressed and styles adopted by Dalit movements, it examines them within the caste, class and gender paradigms. Treating the impacts of other factors as constant, the paper finally elucidates the impacts of Dalit movements on both planned and unplanned social change among the Dalits in particular and society in general.

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Dalits in India, earlier known by different nomenclatures, have asserted, through the ages, for their rights of justice and equality, and organised numerous types of movements in several parts of the country. A few of these movements have achieved partial success in their goals but many of them have failed miserably due to reasons like structural rigidity of the Hindu society being eulogised by the religious scriptures, economic vulnerability of the people involved in the movements and the resultant lack of their sustainability along with asserted leadership and so forth. No doubt, even partially successful Dalit movements have left some definite marks on little improvements in socio-religious conditions of the Dalits and proved to be instrumental, at least indirectly, in bringing some changes in others' attitudes and behaviour enabling them to be somewhat liberal and accommodative. At the systemic level, these movements have also created some situations locally which, either separately or through their organic linkages, have forced the society for introspection and for undergoing
varieties of changes. This has certainly been coupled with active roles played by other social forces operative at a much wider scale.

This paper analyses the nature and phased development of Dalit movements in India and enquires into the issues raised and fought by them. Besides examining whether these have succeeded in their goal of bringing desired improvements in the socio-religious and economic status of the Dalits (the ex-untouchables) it elucidates how since early times they have generated a considerable degree of social consciousness among them with which they have been resisting against their exploitation and social degradation and also striving for achieving a respectful collective identity in the society. In the process the paper also analyses the interfaces between caste, class and gender dimensions of Dalit movements in the light of multiple forms of social contradictions existing between Dalits and non-Dalits, on the one hand, and between different sections (castes and status groups) of Dalits, on the other. Finally, it enquires into their effectiveness qua ineffectiveness in regard to changing social reality in the contemporary period in India. The paper, thus, analyses these and a few other related issues in the perspective discussed below.

The Perspective on Dalit Movements

Out of the numerous types of Dalit movements organised in different parts of the country since the second half of the previous century up to the present time, a few have retrospectively drawn attention of some social scientists, including historians, but most of them have gone unnoticed due to either their tiny impact on the social scene of the respective regions or the sociocultural moorings and intellectual orientation of the scholars. However, studies of successful or even partially successful Dalit movements may broadly be put into three categories. In the [first category are those studies which have made passing references to a few Dalit movements in their analysis of social structure and ongoing process of change either in a village or in the caste system or for that matter the backward classes movements in certain regions (Aiyappan, 1965; Gore, 1989; Rao, 1977, 1979). A few studies (Babb, 1972; Dube, 1992, 1993; Gokhale, 1979; Gooptu, 1993; Hardgrave, 1969; Juergensmeyer, 1982; Kumar, 1985; Lynch, 1974; Rao, 1977; Sharma, 1985) which have exclusively focused on individual Dalit movements may be placed in the second category. In the third category are those studies which have analysed and compared two or more Dalit movements drawn from a wider region or regions (Jogdand,
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While some studies (Joshi, 1993; Patankar and Omvedt, 1979; Shah, 1990) have provided an overview of Dalit movements organised over a period of time, others have tried to analyse their forms and styles (Oommen, 1990; Ram, 1995).

Since the last few decades of the previous century, Dalit movements have addressed prime issues like untouchability and related social disabilities of Dalits emanated from the Hindu religion and its caste system, their concern for sharing political power and privileges, gaining self-respect and dignified social identity, their liberation from socioeconomic exploitation and bondage, and so on. Accordingly, studies on Dalit movements may also be classified by taking into account their focus of enquiry with regard to the issues addressed by these movements. As untouchability and related social disabilities of Dalits culminated in the form of their religious disabilities within the Hindu religion, they organised a number of religious movements leading to withdrawal from the Brahmin dominated Hinduism and self-organising. Some of their religious movements studied by different scholars are the Izhava movement in Kerala (Rao, 1977), the Satnami movement in Madhya Pradesh (Babb, 1972; Dube, 1992, 1993; Kumar, 1985), the Adi-Dharm movement in Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1982), the Adi Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh (Gooptu, 1993), and so on.

Dalits in Maharashtra, since the early seventies and later in other states, have realised that the established literature written by the Hindu literateurs is primarily anti-Dalits in its glorifying of the Hindu culture and social system and in portraying their (of Dalits) negative imagery in it even at the pretext of their literary expression about the Indian culture and traditions. In response, they have started writing their own literature — popularly known as Dalit literature — which is accepted as the Dalit literature movement (Bhoite and Bhoite, 1977) attacking the caste system and the socioeconomic exploitation of Dalits, and also asserting for their self-respect and dignified social identity.(Besides, they have also organised separate movements for gaining self-respect and social identity(ies) both within and outside the Hindu religion in the north India specially in the Agra region of Uttar Pradesh (Lynch, 1974; Ram, 1995). Since Dalits have/suffered more from socioeconomic exploitation and bondage especially in rural areas, they had organised a couple of successful movements even in the past for their social and economic liberation. At least two of these need to be
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mentioned here which have drawn attention of social scientists — one is the Bairwa movement organised in the adjoining areas of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh during 1943-56 (Vashishtha, 1985) and the other is the land grab movement of 1970 — grabbing the benami or government's barren land — organised in the Basti district of eastern Uttar Pradesh (Singh, 1974).

Our purpose here is not to draw the list of a few successful or even partially successful Dalit movements and that of their studies but to view the perspectives or approaches adopted by the different scholars for the purpose. At a close scrutiny, one finds that the studies mentioned above and a few others have analysed mainly structures and the successes or failures of the various types of Dalit movements considering them autonomous units or organisations devoid of their necessary links with other forces in society. In other words, they have treated these movements as sectional or caste movements due to their exclusive Dalit followings. These studies have also wrongly perceived both overt and covert manifestations of issues addressed by Dalit movements as their overall orientation or ideology only focusing on improvement of Dalits' status in the caste hierarchy. Contrarily, a couple of studies have looked at both society (including Hindu social system) and social change in India from the materialistic or economic point of view. So also, these have analysed even Dalit movements from that perspective. Even those scholars who have studied Dalit movements organised before Independence have mixed up the widespread Dalits' strifes for social reforms and their assertion for sharing political power and other privileges with their movement. At the conceptual level, some scholars have also tried to examine Dalit movements within the frame of well-defined parameters for studying social movements unlike a few others who have considered even day-to-day protest of Dalits as the main plank of their movements.

What is worth mentioning here is that all these studies have rather ignored the basic tenets of Dalit movements, that is, their latent though occasionally manifested objectives of achieving human dignity, justice, equality and fraternity — together accruing to their respectful social identity and, in a way, leading society to undergo a basic transformation. All this, no doubt, gets demonstrated through their protests against numerous types of exploitation and injustices inflicted on Dalits and also their protests for achieving justice and social equality. In other words, whether Dalit movements have addressed the issues of social and religious disabilities including numerous forms of
socioeconomic exploitation of Dalits or their assertions for power sharing, wage increase and land distribution, the underlying objectives of these are to achieve justice and equality as stated above. The enquiry of all these together is possible only through evolving a coherent and more vibrant perspective or framework for studying Dalit movements of various sorts which may be termed here as a perspective from the below.

The perspective or framework from the below for studying various types of Dalit movements is, thus, conceptualised here as the one which has a greater viability of analysing these movements in a common and coherent string of thoughts. As stated above, Dalit movements whether focussing on socio-religious disabilities and socioeconomic and political (power) deprivations of Dalits or their assertion for sharing power and privileges or on creating a parallel including even a counter culture vis-a-vis ideology of their own — the core of their assertion is to achieve social justice, liberty and equality in particular and, in turn, to establish a just and more egalitarian social order in general. Hence, the perspective from the below is conceived of a framework for analysing this core through transcending the issues addressed by Dalit movements of different hues. Though the issues addressed by Dalit movements are inherently located in numerous social contexts specifically visible in different regions, these are reflective of wider society or social system mainly of Hindus in India. The perspective from the below at the moment is then to be accepted as a theoretico-methodological proposition inhering the required potentials of both empirical verification and generalisation about Dalit movements and other movements as well, whether the unit of enquiry is a single movement or several movements put together for analytical purpose. Moreover, such a perspective derives inspiration from Ambedkar’s understanding and interpretation of Hindu society and culture as well as Indian society as a whole, a part of which was later empirically verified by Mencher (1978) in her study of caste relations in agrarian social structure in South India.

This is, however, not to deny the significance of the perspective from the above if such a perspective is in existence at all for studying Dalit movements. It is true that Dalit movements have been studied mainly by those scholars — both Indian and foreigners — who have remained outsiders both to the situations in which the movements have been organised and the issues these have addressed. The fact of the matter is that while these scholars have creditably analysed some
important tenets of individual Dalit movements, they have not been able to perceive the underlying common quest of these movements. Contrary to this, the perspective from the below not only adheres to the judicious presentation of the insider's experience and exposition of Dalit movements, it also emphasises analytical objectivity and value-neutrality though these themselves have become a subject of enquiry in contemporary social research. However, before we analyse the various facets of Dalit movements in the given perspective or framework, it is necessary to briefly explain their nature and the issues addressed by them. It is also significant to view these movements amidst a number of social contradictions and wider sociopolitical culture prevailing in the contemporary Indian society.

Nature of Dalit Movements

At the outset it is necessary to explain the meaning of two terms used in this paper. The term Dalit has a much wider connotation. It has been used for the Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchable castes) and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs respectively), Buddhist converts, other backward castes or classes, minorities, women and the poor of upper castes in the Hindu society.\(^1\) As such, its characteristics are those of a class or social class though in its usage it has not succeeded in transcending the caste and communal background of those for whom it was conceived in principle. In fact, it is now used for Hindu untouchables or the Scheduled Castes and for those people of these castes who have converted to Buddhism. The term of reference of the Dalit at present is obviously caste in the Hindu caste system though it is strongly contested by the Dalits themselves. I have used this term here for the SCs of the Hindu caste system and for those SCs who have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism and Islam in India.

The second term is 'movement' or social movement which, at the conceptual level, is an organised effort made by some people, group or community for a specific purpose. In other words, 'a social movement is an organised attempt on the part of section of society through collective mobilisation based on an ideology' (Rao, 1978: 2) for achieving a goal. The most essential prerequisite for an organised attempt of a collectivity through its mobilisation is its multiple forms of deprivations — be these power, wealth and privilege or all of them. 'That is, movements are conscious efforts on the part of men to mitigate their deprivation and secure justice.... Thus, movements
emerge when men committed to a specified set of goals participate in protest-oriented, purposive collective actions' (Oommen, 1990: 30).

Then, in the given frame of reference, Dalit movements testify to be a movement or a social movement. Though many a times Dalit movements have been organised in the forms of resistance, agitations, protests and so on, these fulfill most, if not all, the characteristics of a movement as mentioned above. Further, as the SCs of the Hindu faith and those converted to other religions are scattered in villages, towns and cities in the country and have organised their agitations, protests and movements all over, there is nothing like a single Dalit movement organised at the pan Indian level. Instead, there are Dalit movements organised time and again by Dalits for the purposes of wage increase, removal of social discrimination and economic exploitation, and for achieving equality, liberty and self-respect both in rural and urban areas in different parts of the country.

Broadly speaking, the ideology of Dalit movements centred around the goals of achieving equality, liberty, fraternity and social justice — the core of Ambedkar's ideology which is the main source of inspiration for the contemporary Dalit movements in India (Ram, 1995: 34—37). Further, the ideology of protest, which has wrongly been conceived of as Ambedkar's ideology (Gore, 1993), is in actuality a strategy of Ambedkar followed by the Dalits to protest against their exploitation, harassment and also against the caste system as a whole of which the unequal treatment to them is a part. Thus, their movement is a social movement 'with wider social objectives, carried out by the Dalit themselves for their complete liberation from the stronghold of the caste system' (Jogdand, 1991: 9). Jogdand(1991: 14) further says: the quest of the Dalit movement is the levelling up the status of people and it is the real manifestation of a new consciousness among them (the Dalits). This new awakening has not only provided them basis for establishing self-respect, self-determinism and honour among them, but also a means for protesting against the domination of upper castes and classes in the society. Those groups who have joined the movement have a sense of self-respect and feeling of unity, an urge for improving their social and economic status and a political awareness which may be of significant aid in the solution of India's age-old problem of untouchability.

In fact, Dalit movements are protest movements opposed to injustices committed on Dalits by certain social collectivities, groups,
communities and so on. These are also opposed to the traditional social norms, values, systems, and so on as these are considered to be inimical to the goals of social equality, liberty and fraternity. The protest of Dalits 'is also directed against the government's attitudes which, in their opinion, are passive and sometimes partial and even partisan especially on issues like proper implementation of certain constitutional measures and protecting them from both social and physical violence committed on them by others' (Ram, 1988a: 129). We may hasten to clarify that all protests do not qualify to be called protest movements. For instance, if the individual Dalit labourers protest against their economic exploitation by doing less work in more time then that does not mean that they carry out a movement. Or for that matter, various forms of their every day protest (Scott, 1985) may not be regarded a movement in the absence of sustainable collective mobilisation. Then, for a movement or protest movement, a collectivity or collective mobilisation is a must and it should have a specific ideology for attaining certain goals as stated earlier.

Moreover, unrest, agitations and protest movements of Dalits also aim at opposing their age-old deprivations and the privations of the privileged groups or communities. It is argued that 'the disadvantaged persist in seeking change to escape the privations of the status quo more often than not in full awareness that the likelihood of achieving that change is slim. It is a testimony to the depth of their disadvantages, as well as to their courage and the pervasiveness of resistance to oppression, that they persist in the attempts to throw it off (Berreman, 1979: 226).

The nature of the Dalit movements varies from issue to issue and context to context. Some are militant whereas others offer active resistance to the economic exploitation and social harassment. In the' words of Berreman (1979: 24),

the poor and oppressed in India have recently mounted a number of militant movements whose aim is fundamental social, cultural, political, economic and sometimes religious change. These essentially revolutionary movements focus on emancipation from the consequences of low caste and class status through revolt against the entire system which reverses wealth, power, and privilege for the few at the cost of poverty and oppression for many. Their means are often regarded as drastic, but those who employ them are convinced that only drastic means hold the possibility of success.
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It is evident from the consequences of a number of Dalit movements organised recently in different parts of the country that the Dalits confront with caste Hindus who are basically opposed to their (of Dalits) assertion for justified demands of self-respect and dignified status. 'Sometimes, their (of Dalits) protest also gets transformed into a conflict between them and caste Hindus and others, causing the loss and damages to both the sides. In any case, their protest movement at present is governed by Ambedkar's ideology based on the principles of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and self-respect (Jogdand, 1991: 10). Ambedkar's ideology has undoubtedly generated, though not uniformly, a new sense of awakening among Dalits in different parts of the country as mentioned above.

Dalit Movements through Ages: Issues and Styles of Protest

The majority of Dalits living primarily in rural areas have perhaps lacked, since early times, a tradition of well organised and regulated protests or protest movements due to obvious reasons. This is so as 'A tradition of protest (and of movement) refers to a continuous (but not continuously expressed), not just occasional stance of opposition to the established power when this is experienced as oppressive' (Devalle, 1992: 111). Nonetheless, Dalits in different parts of the country did have the tradition or traditions of protest against the individual events of their socio-religious discriminations and economic exploitations besides social and physical violence or atrocities committed on them over a period of time. This is, however, not to say that they had, in the past, a well organised culture of protest which means 'the existence of a consciousness of opposition and resistance' (Devalle, 1992). In the culture of protest are to be found 'the ideas that back political actions, their emergence and development, the means to channel protest in daily life and at the special times of overt rebellion...' (Devalle, 1992:112). The 'culture of protest' is directed against the 'culture of oppression' (Devalle, 1992:197) and may also be accepted as a case of the culture conflict or conflict of cultures of protest and oppression. Thus, the Dalits had not only protested in the past against their numerous forms of discriminations and exploitations, they had also organised a number of movements for their religious freedom, liberation from economic exploitation and bondage, sharing power and privileges as stated earlier.

Dalit movements are also to be seen in the light of the 'culture of terror' prevailing especially in rural areas where people of the upper
and even of the dominant middle level castes have created terror through committing various types of atrocities on the Dalits or SCs. This terror is to tame them and stop their assertion for their constitutional rights and privileges, their urge for achieving social equality and human dignity. The culture of terror is also aimed at achieving their (of Dalits) unconditional acceptance of the traditional and even some new dictates of the former and to remain within their 'limits'. Thus, the intentions of the upper and middle level castes have remained to ensure the Dalits' continued acceptance of their both traditional and newly acquired status superiority within the classical frame of caste hierarchy operating at the local level.

Written accounts of Dalit movements organised before the era of social reform (later part of the nineteenth century upto the early decades of the present century) are not easily available. Yet, being inspired by social reform movements carried in different parts of the country, Dalits had organised a number of movements against their religious discriminations and social degradation. Preceded by the failures of movements for temple entry, these Dalit movements were more clearly visible in the form of religious revivalism of Bhakti traditions of the medieval period claiming their religion as 'adi' (original) and distinct from the Hindu religion. Dalit movements of this period also attacked the caste system and insisted on equality and dignity of human beings. These movements partially succeeded in sensitising and mobilising larger segments of Dalits but they could not transcend the rigid cementation of castes and thus got culminated in sectional movements. Besides, they also got largely subjugated in the movements of Dalits for sharing power and privileges during the 1930s and 1940s in the second phase of the Dalit movements. The glaring examples are of Adi Hindu movements of north India including the Adi-Dharm movement of Punjab and a number of Adi movements of South India. Interestingly, Dalit movements of this period also continued their attacks on the caste system, social-religious disabilities of Dalits and so forth. Needless to say that the challenges of Dalit movements of this period were multiplex which were ably handled under the stalwart leadership of Ambedkar.

The third phase of Dalit movements roughly dates from the dawn of political Independence of the country to the present time. Dalit movements in the post-Independence period have continued, in one way or the other, their attack on the caste system and have resisted socio-religious discriminations practised against the Dalits. Besides
their stress on sharing power and privileges, many Dalit movements have been organised against the socioeconomic exploitation of Dalits in different parts of the country. Quite a few of these movements have also protested against physical and social violence or atrocities inflicted on Dalits in villages. Without going into further details, these movements of different varieties have combined a number of issues related to Dalits as a whole living both in rural and urban areas. These issues are contextual and they manifest differently with their varying stress on one issue or the other. However, being inspired by Ambedkar's ideology their latent objective is to achieve equality, freedom and justice for the Dalit community as a whole.

Out of many problems faced by Dalits, in the past and also in the present time, the main ones are their social, religious and economic deprivations. At the social level, they face the problems of untouchability and discriminations though these have been legally abolished. A majority of them often become victims of various types of atrocities committed by caste Hindus. Their literacy rate and educational level is the lowest in the country. Their social status is still downgraded and the social relations between them and caste Hindus are not free from traditional caste prejudices though new forms of discriminations emanated from the contemporary economic and power inequality are also added to that. Dalits are largely dependent on the economic resources of rich people drawn from the upper and middle level dominant castes and classes in villages, towns and cities. Their economic exploitation is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. They are still regarded ritually or religiously impure and their entry to Hindu temples is resisted in spite of legal enactment existing since long in their favour.

These are general, yet significant, problems faced by Dalits. Along with these are the main issues related to their caste status, educational development, atrocities, social and religious disabilities, economic exploitation, stigmatised social (caste) identity and their negative imagery portrayed in the existing literature. They are concerned not only with their access to political power but also with proper and full implementation of constitutional provisions relating to their welfare and development. They also insist for their physical and social protection from the caste Hindu reactionary forces. They urge for equality, fraternity and distributive justice to be accorded through imparting their due share in the existing resources in the country. Over and above, the important issues before them are of achieving their respectful identity and dignified social status for
which they agitate and organise various types of movements with both successes and failures.

Interfaces between Caste, Class and Gender

The Indian society is a combination of numerous types of social contradictions which are more distinctively visible in the forms of a number of corporate social categories like caste, class and gender besides other social categories of tribals and religious minorities. These differ at the conceptual level and so also they vary in their social structural location and interest articulation. Caste system, for instance, has a rigid hierarchy with sole stress on birth for status determination. Besides a well specified form of social inequality, the interests of each caste in the caste system are mutually opposed. Similarly, class or social class in Indian society is operationally an open caste and has not transcended the social and cultural reflexives of caste so far. Gender as an ordinate attribute, has not only demarcated the role domain of females but also put them in the most vulnerable condition in contemporary Indian society. Their problems have got aggravated especially when they hail from the lower caste and class background. Whether such women have organised any independent movements or actively participated in movements organised by their men is a pungent question.

Dalits undoubtedly continue to oppose in many ways the status-superiority and dominance of the upper and middle level castes as stated earlier. They strive more for improvement in their own social position and thereby achieve social equality. But whether they accept status quo and justify the legitimacy of the caste system is an interesting enquiry. There seem to be three distinct views on this. First, the SCs or Dalits accept the caste system and their lowest position in it as God-ordained. Hence, their occasional protests or protest movements are directed towards achieving their upward social mobility within the existing caste hierarchy through secular means and not through questioning the legitimacy of the caste system and their lowest position in it. The representative of those sociologists and social anthropologists adhering to the caste system being an ideal system may be Dumont (1970) who also finds it not allowing for any dissension in it. But this is a very simplistic view and cannot be accepted as holding much ground particularly in the event of growing tensions and conflicts between the upper and
middle level castes, on the one side, and between the upper, middle and the lower castes, on the other.

Second, Dalits accept the caste system but not their low or lowest position in it. That means, they assert for a superior status in the caste hierarchy and emphasise less on social equality by not opposing the graded system of castes (Berreman, 1963; Moffatt, 1975). Third, those placed lowest in the caste hierarchy are opposed to such position and also the legitimacy and existence of the caste system per se. They emphasise solely on social equality in all aspects of life which is possible only through the annihilation of the caste system and also systems of other distinctions including the class structure (Berreman, 1971: 16-23; Gough, 1960; Miller, 1966; Ram, 1988b: 110-1 11).

Taking the above stated three categories of Dalits and their movements together it can be said that not all Dalits — whether the Hindu Dalits or SCs, converted Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs and Muslims — are equally agitated nor are they involved in organising protests or protest movements. Instead, some sections of Dalits drawn from the said denominations have organised movements of various types along with several issues. According to Oommen (1990: 177):

In the case of Scheduled Castes, the movements were invariably oriented towards status mobility at the initial stages. Thanks to their partial emancipation from the clutches of traditional ritual degradation due to social reforms and social legislations and the state patronage extended to them through the policy of protective discrimination, the Scheduled Castes have become increasingly aware of the need to continuously fight for their economic and political benefits, which triggers off several movements among them. However, the active (caste) groups in this context are only a few, such as the Mahars of Maharashtra, the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh and the Pulayas of Kerala.

Dalit movements are rooted in the multiple forms of deprivations of the Dalits. These are mainly ritual or religious, social, economic and political. As stated earlier, Dalits have been considered ritually impure. They are economically poor and politically powerless, though a small section of them have relatively improved their economic position due to their representation mostly in the lower level bureaucracy. Still, a few others enjoy political power in their capacity of legislators, ministers, and so on. Oommen (1990: 256-57) has put the religious, political and economic deprivations of the Dalits and their consequent
protests or protest movements in sequential yet organically linked hierarchies of deprivations and movements. Their sequentially, however, refers only to their initial emergence but their coexistence or simultaneous pursuance afterwards is not ruled out.

Dalits are, however, engrossed with various types and levels of consciousness of their social, economic and religious exploitation. They are reminded of these exploitations separately in specific contexts but otherwise their consciousness is of their total exploitation. At the specific level, Dalit consciousness has been characterised both as proletarian consciousness and caste consciousness based on their being economically poor and lowest in the caste hierarchy. Accordingly, their struggles for liberation have also been termed as class struggle or caste struggle. Oommen (1990: 225-256) says:

But the advocates of both these positions ignore that, first, all Dalits are not proletarians (though a large majority of them are) and at least a small sub-stratum among the traditionally underprivileged have undergone a process of embourgeoisement; and, second, the Dalit consciousness is qualitatively different from the proletarian or caste consciousness. If proletarian consciousness is essentially rooted in material deprivations and caste consciousness is mainly anchored on status deprivations, Dalit consciousness is a complex and compound consciousness which encapsulates deprivations stemming from inhuman conditions of material existence, powerlessness and ideological hegemony.

Such consciousness is no doubt more distinctively visible today where Dalits perceive their deprivations in totality as mentioned above. However, for the sake of convenience and due to limited means available at their disposal, they fight against these deprivations separately at the local level. These deprivations often get manifested locally in the forms of paying beggar (unpaid labour), payment of low wages, usurpation from land and houses, insistent continuation of customary caste practices, social distance or untouchability, and so on, in rural areas and poverty and inhuman living conditions in urban areas. Also, their resistance and resentment including occasional physical fights are articulated in the local idioms which vary from region to region and context to context. So are the cases of success and failure of their resistance and the movement.

Yet, the nature and magnitude of deprivations of Dalits vary in relation to their location in the social structure. For instance, those
Dalits who have achieved even a marginal improvement in their socioeconomic status and power position are apparently less deprived than the Dalit masses. In fact, their deprivation is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from a majority of the Dalits. These middle class Dalits (in a limited sense) are often said to be both insensitive to the multiple forms of deprivations of the Dalit masses and are also aloof from their movements, whether against socio-religious deprivations and economic exploitation or atrocities. Also, they have been unable to protest or organise any movements against their own exploitation and injustices. Such charges against the middle class Dalits, historically speaking, are unfounded on three specific grounds. First, the middle class Dalits, during the era of Ambedkar's movement, had played very significant roles in articulating various demands of Dalits ranging from social reforms in terms of crusades against untouchability and the caste system to the sharing of power and privileges. Besides impressing upon the government to safeguard the interests of Dalits through enacting a number of welfare and developmental measures in their favour, they had also organised numerous movements of Dalits in different parts of the country. Even in their capacity of elected representatives of Dalits in the post-Independence period they have, by and large, succeeded in leaning some concessions on Dalits in spite of their contiguous sociopolitical constraints.

Second, besides being the vanguards of Dalit movements by providing ideological and strategic methods through their innumerable writings and speeches the middle class Dalits have also provided positive reference to the Dalit masses for achieving upward social mobility. Quite a few of them have come much closer, in recent years, to the Dalit masses in the latter's struggles for social liberation. According to Joshi (1993: 47):

The result of caste conflict within the Indian middle class is that middle class Untouchables have maintained a strong social identification with lower class Untouchables. In consequence, many middle class Untouchables see themselves as part of a single Dalit community victimised by high castes that remain intent upon subordinating all Untouchables as society's beasts of burden. Impoverished and ill-educated Untouchables demanding land, better wages, and an end to caste-defined social humiliations are seen not as an irritating and unreasonable 'they' but as part of an inclusive 'we'.
Finally, the middle class Dalits, whether in politics or bureaucracy and allied white collar jobs, have not subordinated themselves to the upper caste and class bosses in the traditional way. Instead, they have protested time and again against discrimination, prejudiced attitudes and injustices inflicted on them by their colleagues and bosses though they have not always done this on the trade union pattern. Thus, there is an organic link between various types of movements of the Dalit masses and classes.

This brings us to have a brief look at the gender dimension of Dalit movements in India. Notwithstanding gender being embedded in social categories like caste and class, women have all along been asserting for their recognition of a separate social category and in turn claiming for gender equality. This being universally highlighted in recent years, the issues of Dalit women have ironically not drawn attention of gender studies. Anyway, this is not the issue of enquiry here. Rather, we are immediately concerned with questions whether gender as a social category is deciphered and subjugated in the caste-class paradigm of Dalit movements or whether the Dalit movements are patriarchal in terms of their followings and organisational leadership, or whether both Dalit men and women go hand in hand in their fight for human rights and dignity. It is true that Dalit women are Dalit among Dalits. Their majority live in villages where they work mostly as agricultural labourers by the side of their men. Even in urban areas they are mostly illiterate and work in the unorganised sector. In either of the cases they face the brunt of misery similar to their men though their agonies are more due to their vulnerable gender. Hence, they are equally agitated and assertive for their human rights and dignity.

At a closer scrutiny of their participation in Dalit movements, no authentic details are readily available about their role in the pre-Independence period. Yet, a few available evidences suggest that the peasant women in general and the Dalit women in particular (in their capacity of landless agricultural labourers) fought vigorously during the 1940s (under the banner of Kisan and Khetmajdur movements) against the feudal lords and police in numerous villages in West Bengal, the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and so on (see Mencher, 1978; Omvedt, 1980a; Sen, 1985). The main issues in their movements were related to their socioeconomic exploitation in the then existing agrarian social structure. The available evidences also show that these movements were organised either by their men in which they actively participated or, if in some cases they
themselves had taken lead then they were wholeheartedly supported by their men. The lone case of an independent Dalit women's organisation which is widely known in the Dalit circle is that of the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference which had held its session in Nagpur on July 20, 1942. Addressing an impressive gathering of more than 20,000 Dalit women assembled from all over the country, Ambedkar had asked them to remain clean and keep away from all vices, to eliminate the inferiority complex from the hearts and minds of their children, and educate them by inculcating high ambition in them. He had also asked them to stand by their men on an equal footing (Das, 1979: 193-94).

The participation of Dalit women in Dalit movements has become more vigorous and widespread in the post-Independence agrarian social structure. (Except in few cases where they had organised movements in support of their men under the banner of the left ideology (Omvedt, 1980b), they have been fighting against their socioeconomic exploitation and rejecting the hegemony of the Brahmanic social and religious traditions in South Indian villages (Deliege, 1994; Kapadia, 1995). Since there are some visible socioeconomic and cultural differences among Dalit women like their men, their participation in Dalit movements is also qualitatively different. Some educated and in some cases employed Dalit women mostly living in urban areas contribute to the Dalit movements through their writings and speeches and organising the poor and illiterate Dalit women. Even in such cases they are actively supported by their men. Hence an independent movement of Dalit women, either against caste Hindus — both men and women or their own men, is absent. But in both the cases they are inspired by the spirit and ideology of movements organised by Phule and Ambedkar during the pre-Independence period.

**Dalit Movements and Social Change**

It is clear from the above accounts that Dalits in different parts of the country have organised, sometimes with the help of others but many a times on their own, numerous types of movements relating to their self-respect, new social identity, and realisation of their rights prescribed by the Constitution and the state, though several of such movements have not succeeded in achieving their goals. It is also true that in most of the cases their movements have not directly and exclusively addressed to the annihilation of caste or the caste system specially in the modern time. Instead, these have often concentrated
on a better deal within the system of the socioeconomic resources and power position existing at a given point in time. These have, in a word, emphasised the upward social and economic mobility of Dalits within the existing social system though these have also articulated, in the most general manner, their concern for achieving social equality with others. This is, however, not to deny the fact that Dalit movements all over the country have not made any dent to the ever changing social reality in India and have both qualitatively and quantitatively influenced the existing power structure and social relations among various sections of the population in the country.

Measuring the impact of Dalit movements on the nature and pace of social change in India is methodologically difficult as it involves examination of not one but multiple factors which, either separately or together, influence social change of any variety. Such measurement is possible only through factor analysis which is not feasible in studying a phenomenon at the macro-level. Given this limitation, our intention here is to take note of some specific aspects of social change and to analyse how Dalit movements have contributed in one way or the other to the occurrence of such change. Obviously, in the process we have to accept the impacts of other factors on it as a constant. These other factors are the state interventions in the forms of gearing up the functioning of institutions including some new ones, evolving and implementing various schemes and special provisions, regulating the functioning of processes like urbanisation, industrialisation, economic development, political participation and in a word modernisation, encouraging people's own initiatives for bringing change, and so on.

Similarly, in the case of social change itself we are specifically concerned with change in the social-psychological, economic, political and religious or cultural spheres of life of the people in general and of the Dalits in particular. Social change is, nonetheless, analysed here at two levels — at the inter-personal and the societal or systemic levels.

Thus, Dalit movements of different hues have together influenced both planned and unplanned social change, in general, and at both the individual and the systemic or societal levels among Dalits, in particular. At the individual level, Dalit movements have changed the very psychology of Dalits about realisation of their self, of their group or collectivity and of the system or society as a whole. These have also changed their mode of thought and action. The magnitude of such change is obviously more among those Dalits who have been fully involved in organising their movements and taking these to the logical end. However,
changes are also witnessed among those Dalits who have remained partially associated or not associated at all with such movements.

More specifically, a large majority of socially and politically conscious Dalits, living both in urban and rural areas, have successfully changed their self-image from a tamed, servile, exploited and dehumanised entity to an ardent seeker of equality, self-respect, dignity and righteousness. Based on an ethnographic study of Paraiyars (Pariahs — the Untouchables) in a Tamil village Deliege (1994: 144) observes:

In recent decades, however, modern values have permeated the life of Paraiyars: the ideals of social equality and democracy have become very widespread among them and people are even less ready than they might have been before to bear the burden of exploitation and social discrimination. They not only take an active part in the election process but some of them also get involved in various movements asserting the rights of the downtrodden. It is thus certain that egalitarian values are much more evident today than they might have been in the past.

As optimistic human beings, they irresistibly look forward to becoming part of a social identity to lay on justice, rationality and equalitarian values. They look at their group or collectivity afresh and place it at par with other groups or collectivities. Being fully susceptible to the vulnerability of their primordial collectivity, they necessarily quest, at present, for a special opportunity as an input to enhance both their individual and group status and image. But such an input, in their frame of scheme, is not to be seen as a dole or patronage; rather, it is a succour or compensation to both past and present day losses incurred to them on various counts. We have mentioned elsewhere (Ram, 1988b: 92-111) that as a group or collectivity Dalits are now more akin to ethnocentrism leading to socio-centrism than to any other-centrism. In other words, endorsing the futility of being Sanskritised by others especially the twice-born castes they seek pride in their primordial collectivity which, in their reckoning, is to be placed at the same structural level as others. But, in the process, they do not denigrate other collectivities if the latter are guided by the same consideration.

Finally, society for them having been highly discriminatory and exploitative in the past is at the moment in a transitory phase. It has moved in the forward direction for getting modernised in which the country's democratic Constitution, a series of socioeconomic policies
and programmes pursued by the state over all these years, and the country’s exposers to the outside world have contributed a lot. Yet, all these have not fully and sufficiently altered the inegalitarian and relatively closed character of the society. Most of its ideals, adopted after Independence, lay only in principle and need to be fully and properly translated into practice for which more vigorous and sustained movements are to be organised at various levels. Otherwise, much qualitative social change or transformation may not occur in the society, and the goal of achieving a fully modernised society with a real democratic polity and an egalitarian socioeconomic system may remain only a mirage. This, in turn, may provide further reinforcement to the ongoing tensions and conflicts among the various sections of the population.

Retrospectively, social changes that have occurred so far specially among the Dalits can be categorised at structural, cultural and social or societal levels. At the structural level, these can be seen in the forms of some improvement in their present socioeconomic status, political participation and limited access to power, rise in their sociopolitical consciousness and their assertion for social justice and equality as compared to that in the past. This can also be inferred from their assertion for dignified and respectful social identity. 'However, notwithstanding differences in the nature of Dalit movements and meaning of identity, there has been a common quest in all these (Dalit) movements — the quest for equality, dignity and for eradication of untouchability' (Shah, 1995: 23).

The majority of Dalits have rejected the caste customs and Hindu rituals in their day-to-day life both in urban and rural areas. Not only do they undermine the dogma of Hindu religion, very often they criticise and ridicule the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon (see Ilaiah, 1996; Kapadia, 1995). In fact, Dalits had ever been away from the Sanskritic great tradition of Hinduism except for a brief period of Bhakti movement in the medieval time. Even at that time they did not have direct access to the Sanskritic texts nor to the elaborate Hindu rituals and religious rites. This, along with the lessening importance of texts, rituals and rites in the present time has acted as a negative reference for Dalits in which Ambedkar’s teaching for distancing them away from Hinduism has also contributed a lot.

It is true that Dalits in the past had practised numerous types of little traditions seeking legitimacy from the Hindu tradition in villages. But in the recent times even these traditions have strongly been ridiculed by the urban educated Dalit youth. 'A variety of new Dalit religious
formulations not only reject the spiritual legitimacy of the old order, they also encourage secular struggles to establish social and economic equality' (Joshi, 1993: 51). Even in some parts of the country Dalits have been asserting for an altogether new culture of their own which is deeply rooted in their opposition to the traditional culture of subordination, exploitation and human degradation. Hence, their assertion for an independent cultural identity which is still in the process of crystallisation with a greater amount of ideological support from Ambedkar's thought and action (Pantawane, 1986).

Social and cultural changes among Dalits are more pronouncedly observed today in two specific ways. First, there has emerged a growing body of urban based middle class or new middle class (Ram, 1988b) or white collar workers (occupational groups) among them which provides both positive and negative references to the Dalit masses for assertion of rights and for enhancing their socioeconomic status as stated earlier. This also inspires them for achieving a respectful social and cultural identity. This itself has muddled the continuing status order in the caste and class hierarchies.

Second, Dalits' movements for improving their socioeconomic status and asserting for independent social and cultural identity have contributed to both qualitative and quantitative changes in the patterns of their traditional social relations specially with the upper castes and classes. As the middle level castes are on the move for high achievement in social, economic and political spheres, especially in rural areas, the traditional pattern of their social interaction and relationship with Dalits has also considerably changed. But such change is more of the negative than the positive type which often is grappled with various types of tensions and conflicts between the two caste groups. Such a state of affairs has also marred the chances of any viable political alliances between them as is evident from the recent experiences in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. This may also be seen as anchored in two different types of movements organised separately by these caste groups. The object of the former type of movements is to climb up in the caste and class hierarchies by overstraining the Dalits whereas the latter aims at achieving justice and social equality without disdainfully maligning others.

Conclusion

It cannot easily be dismissed that a sizeable section of Dalits involved in organising various types of movements for achieving their identified
goals are very critical of the contemporary social arrangements in the country. For them, various types of changes that have taken place so far are such which have, by and large, maintained the status quo. Hence, the existing social arrangements need to be upside-down at least temporarily if the goal of equality and social justice is to be achieved. This is possible through the means of democratic confrontation only and not through the value-consensus as the latter may never be arrived at by the 'status quoist' forces. It is these forces which have taken over the charge of managing social change highly favourable to them. A more egalitarian type of social change may occur only if these forces are uprooted from their continued grip over appropriating both material and non-material resources. In concrete terms, this may be possible through Dalits and allied forces having full control over the political governance as some may argue but the political governance would have its own limitations as is evident from some recent experiences in several parts of the world.

All this may appear a mere rhetoric to some who may argue that Dalits, with their numerical strength of around one-sixth of the total population, heterogeneous social composition and economic dependence on others, are incapable of bringing any kind of substantive change in the society. Such an argument may obviously come from a vantage point which either overlooks the fast changing social reality or undermines it simply going by the numerical strength of the Dalits and other poor people. Going by the face-value, this may appear so but in actuality this may prove to be a vital force to reckon with specially when it is supported by other saner elements in the society. Any way, such viewpoints, in general and in social sciences in particular, have to take serious note of the other side of the social reality. These have also to work for moulding the public opinion in favour of achieving a democratic and egalitarian social order in the country within the stipulated time frame if the society has to move forward in a more balanced way.

NOTES
1. See the Manifesto of Dalit Panthers for more details in Joshi (1986: 141-147).
2. But this may be true only in those cases where they are illiterate, economically poor and are bonded to the landed gentry in the countryside though a considerable degree of sociopolitical consciousness has also grown recently among them against their such stereotype image.
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