

Pioneering Dalit Resistance: A Study of Saint Visionaries

Residência Dalit pioneira: Um estudo de visões santas

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ABSTRACT

It has been for centuries that the Indian society has been hierarchized on the lines of caste: videlicet, higher and lower castes. Since this division is by birth and perpetual, it needed to be interrogated and critiqued. Such investigation, implying need for awareness and resisting of atrocities was acutely felt from fifteenth century onwards. Saints and seers of the period began to articulate this assertion five centuries ago. It is in the writings of these poet-intellectuals that the earliest questioning of caste divisions and their alternative has been suggested. These poet-seers have stressed innate goodness of human nature and suggested the need for virtuous life that is utopic in its formulation. These voices gained strength and momentum over time and caste their spell on dalit communities. They have led dalit resistance by providing positive resolution to the baneful social divisions that have affected the lives of lower castes in all aspects. These pioneers of assertion of innate human dignity have been torchbearers for subsequent efforts by social reformers and gramscian organic intellectuals, who are trying to improve the lot of communities. Thus, it is imperative to closely study the writings of these socio-economic reformers, in

order to understand the dalit scenario as also the dire need for ascension of the downtrodden in the Indian society.

KEYWORDS: Praxis, peripatetic, sedentarization, subaltern, utopia, hierarchization, segmentation, visionaries, emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

The avowed aim in the present paper is to critique the innate, centuries old rigid caste system prevalent in Indian society. This phenomenon has remained almost incomprehensible to Westerners, since they encountered class struggle in their countries, but not social hierarchization on the lines of caste. Furthermore, high castes and low castes, and even among low castes there is further segmentation. They are confused when faced with such intricate layering, where ostracism prevails and the low caste people are forbidden from entering the place of habitation of the high castes. Efforts were made by a few Europeans to live in India and attempt to comprehend the lives and literature of Indians. Scholars like Sir William Jones, Max Mueller, Mc Cauliffe and others even studied the Indian scriptures, learning Sanskrit and other Indian vernacular languages, but this interaction was with higher/'suvaran' castes. Gradually, such intellectuals attempted to read and interpret the writings by intellectuals from lower or dalit classes, as well.

It is here that it must be discerned that literature, poetic or otherwise, written by anticaste dalit men of learning is of prime importance. These intellectuals were path-breakers, since they successfully presented a viable alternative to subaltern classes, whereby they could gain awareness, transcend atrocities and ostracism and lead a life away from misery and unhappiness. The path was shown and the dalits could reduce segmentation among themselves and lead a life of contentment through being virtuous and industrious. One may be born a low caste, since there is no choice, but far more important is what is made of this life through socio-economic upliftment, aided by education.

AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD-VIEW

The alternative world-view presented by these poet-visionaries may contain utopic elements, but then utopias are necessary as horizons of ambition to strive for ascension. As Gail Omvedt has discerningly observed concerning such utopias, while differentiating them from fantasies that have little touch with reality. She says: "They are utopias, not simply fantasies, because they have a foothold in

reality and yet contradict the uglier aspects of reality" (Omvedt 2016, 11). Gradually, modernity begins to creep in, whereby dalits could gain from consciousness pervading the environment. Elements of modernity entered India through British colonial masters, who exemplified an alternative way of living. The deprived had to be their subordinates and get bits and pieces of awareness through attempting to learn the language of the colonizers, as well as to know about their inventions and discoveries, for instance, their means of communication, like railways, posts and telegraphs to discern these as alternative means of livelihood, away from scavenging given by higher castes to the lower castes, and, consequently, to an extent, witness that dignity of labour prevailed there. These, coupled with teachings of the intellectuals and visionaries from their own community could encourage them to struggle harder and comprehend that Brahmnical society that reduced them to almost non-humans was not the sole reality. They were free to imbibe the teachings of their saint-scholars and, accordingly, attempt to educate themselves.

GENESIS OF ANTI-CASTE LITERATURE

The earliest literature of these saint-scholars came to be noticed and began to grow in volume from fifteenth century onwards. Most of it is poetic and devotional that advocates shedding of pessimism. Literature written in Sanskrit was inaccessible to them, but the writings of these literary men were in their own language, which they could read, comprehend and visualize its emancipatory potential. Such writings, may have, initially, appeared to them as idealistic, but it began to fill them with hope regarding class mobility. Idealism, ideology and utopia have been discussed by many scholars, like, Karl Mannheim, of course, from the Marxian point of view. His *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), explains that these are necessary concomitants of struggle. Mannheim follows Max Weber to show that it is man's "will to shape history and his ability to understand it" (1929; 1936, 263). Richard Norgaard (1994) explains that such idealistic and utopic thought thrived in the times of modernity, while the times of the postmodern stress 'difference schema', and the Lyotardian demise of master narratives. It is in such a scenario that highs and lows of communities and ethnicities are glossed over. Vasant Kaiwar in his Review Article on the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty says:

All stock critiques of historicism and metanarratives, of Marx's myopia about difference, the advocacy of fragments, different ways of being-in-the-world are so many codes for rejecting the Utopian imagination and transformative praxis (Kaiwar 2005, 3738).

Thus, postmodern is a stasis in enlightenment thought, akin to the 'semantic problematic' in the poststructural. Former is retrograde and reminiscent of romanticist thought. A community has to be

forward looking and progressive in its thought, much like the envisioning of the promised land. Omvedt explains succinctly. She says:

Postmodernism in fact harks back to premodern romanticism in that it locates whatever ecstasy is possible in the present, banning the future and efforts to move forward to it as Oppressive grand narratives, making 'Enlightenment reason' into a curse (Omvedt 2016, 14).

ENVISIONING SOCIETAL FUTURE

A community can only progress, if it has a dream of better future, even if it is utopic, because that acts as the motivating factor, inspiring them to struggle and put in more efforts for socio-economic ascension. In fact, such glorious projections exist in all cultures. Latinate world has Thomas More's celebrated work, dating back to early sixteenth century, entitled *The Best State of A Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia* (1516). Here, Omvedt presents a note of caution. She says: "Utopias were not available in Sanskrit. Rather they are found in the visions of dalit-bahujan intellectuals of the radical bhakti movement of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries" (Omvedt 2016, 15). Brahmanical scriptures periodized time into ages or 'yugas', wherein the earliest one was the age of virtuosity, when truth or 'dharma' prevailed. The people had ideal relations among themselves, and there was happiness all around. This was the period when all 'varnas' (divisions of society) were happy, and as the cycle of time moved from one age to the next, ostracism and atrocities by the 'high' castes over the 'low' castes increased. Hence, dalit intellectuals presented a radical vision. They presented an imaginary place in their writings that was devoid of inequalities and coercion. Such literature was inspirational and gave an alternative way of conceiving the world that could be emulated, howsoever idealistic or utopic in its conception/configuration, rather a sort of elysium. Such envisioning and providing alternate perspective was all the more relevant, since inequalities of higher castes had been provided an ideological base by their religion as documented in the brahmanical code:

... the false self-intested religion of the Aryans, the cunning Arya-Bhatt Brahmins consider the ignorant Shudras to be inferior; the ignorant Shudras consider the ignorant Mahars to be inferior; and the ignorant Mahars consider the ignorant Mangs to be inferior ... since marriage and social relations are forbidden among them all, naturally their various customs, eating habits, and rituals don't match with each other. How can such a conglomerate of 18 grains be united to become a 'nation' of integrated people? (Phule 1991, 494).

SEGMENTATION AMONG DALIT CASTES

Thus, there was inter and intra hatred among lower castes as well. First and foremost, it was religion of the 'higher castes' that provided no common ground for a pluralistic society. Satish Saberwal commented upon this 'religion'. He said: "If it be the logic of cleavage between groups ... which its 'shared ideas' stress, we may then speak of the constitution of society only in a weak sense" (1988, 256). Surely,

such a society contains in itself the seeds of radicalism. They are innate. Here, egalitarianism could only be wished for, which was articulated by dalit intellectuals. There was the arrival of the muslims. Muslim presence became pronounced in India with the arrival of the Caliph's soldiers from the Arab world, and then the Ghaznavids, as also Ghurids. It is towards the end of the fifteenth century that the Mughals stabilised themselves in India.

DALITS AND ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Muslim politico-social influence affected the Indian politico-socio-economic scene in important ways. Since, India was riven by caste, the Muslims with their ideology of shunning such divisions provided an alternative, as also a threat to the brahmanical ideology and Hindu political system. Lower castes, obviously, got attracted and the society began to turn pluralistic. This has been lucidly explained by Jotirao Phule, who wrote of Mohammed in terms of "a king of daring, a world hero" striding "alone before the truth ... the sword of fortitude in his mind ... raised the flag of the creator" (Phule 2002, 95-96). Phule poeticized:

He established the book that God
is one, and made humans all
over the world as brothers ...
The majority became his disciples, so
many came to Balistan,
'They learned after coming of the Aryas'
evil, they freed the Shudras from
slavery (97-98).

Then, again, he goes on to critique the prevailing orthodoxy:

The contentiousness of
Aryadharam was broken by
Islam, people ate together
without distinctions,
Along with Mangs the Aryas were
led to the mosque, one clan
as blood brothers all.
Defeating the Kshatriyas and
becoming Rajas the
Mughals freed many,
Took advantage of caste differences
and became great (99-101).

Phule notes that the Muslims performed important political action by taking the "Untouchables slowly to themselves," and consequently "shamed the Aryans all the time" (102). He completes the verse with a rhetorical question: "But say, Dada, who freed the Shudras from the Bhats' slavery and led them to God?" (131-32).

Richard Eaton discussed the Islamic invasion of India and the political rhetoric surrounding it. According to him: "Muslims did at times both plunder and smash" temples, "but not so extensively as they are pictured" (Eaton 2000, 96-97; Omvedt 2016, 41). Eaton went on to elaborate upon the significance of the act, saying that "attacking the main temples ... was a political act engaged in by all kings because the temples themselves were political, representing a major symbol of power" (see Omvedt 2016, 41). Earlier on Andre Wink had talked of vesting of Brahmanical power and its consolidation in temples. He said:

It was the power of the kings, which was decisive in ... Brahmanic order. Brahmanism, cultivating in the cult of Shiva and Vishnu under the patronage of regionally entrenched kings, with huge stone temples clustering in newly arising regional capitals which accommodated peripatetic courts, and sedentarization and settlement of nomadic or mobile groups, accompanied by agricultural intensification -- this was the 'vertical' pattern which ... descended on the open-ended world (Wink 1991, 230).

HIGHER CASTES RECEIVED POLITICAL PATRONAGE

Brahmanical order flourished under local kings. They also amassed vast agricultural landholdings. It was in proportion to the increase in their power that atrocities on lower castes increased. Of course, it did not go unchallenged. It is from the twelfth century that a couple of movements may be recorded. This was much before the coming of the dalit saint scholars, who began to arrive from fifteenth century onwards. One movement was led by Basava/Basavanna and the other by Gorakhnath. Among others, Omvedt makes a mention of these. She elaborates:

Before the ... rise of ... radical Bhakti ... and before any real influence of Islam through Sufism ... two ... movements are important, namely the Virasaiva movement led by Basava which was influential in the Telugu -- and Kannada -- speaking regions, and the Nath Panthi yoga cult led by Gorakhnath, which had a wide spread in much of north and south India (2016, 44).

SIGNIFICANCE OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT

There was also Buddhism, which was ebbing, but still wielded influence as "Vajrayana Buddhism"/"Sahajiya Buddhism" (ibid.). Its overriding characteristic was of compassion/mercy and piety. Virasaivas wore Shiva Linga around their necks and were known as Lingayats. These are the movements that resisted Brahmanism, before the coming of the dalit saint visionaries. These movements were broadly religious in nature, preaching equality and propagated what in ancient Greek philosophy is

termed as the virtue of *Sophrosyne*, of moderation, self-control and egalitarianism. All these movements influenced the later dalit bhakti intellectuals. Peruse, for instance, the following by Sant Tukaram, a prominent saint poet:

Avatar of Buddha, O my invisible one,
with mute countenance, fixed attention.
Dark blue, four-armed for the people,
you speak in whispers to the sants.
The kaliyuga has come, this has fallen
to my lot;
However I move my eyes I cannot see
you thus.
What have you done to me, Narayana,
Why no compassion ? says Tuka
(Tukaram 1973, song 4160).

It is Ramachandra Chintaman Dhere, scholar from the state of Maharashtra, who explains the 'link' between Buddhism and the saint poets. Dhere in his study on Vitthal elaborates upon the thoughts of these scholar visionaries conjoined and descending from the teachings of Buddha. He says: "Jnandev and Namdev ... had an unbroken connection with the Buddha's limitless compassion" (2011, 51). He calls the saint poet Eknath as "... a footsoldier in this tradition of compassionate action" (ibid.). Dhere expatiates that Sant Tukaram "is one who calls his own those who are rusty and dirty and that it is only with such a man that God abides" (ibid. 52). He concludes:

I say without hesitation that as the Buddha ... overturned the water pot of the compassion in his heart and ... the saints ... generously added to it many currents of their loving faith and devotion (ibid.).

BRAHMANICAL THOUGHT AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

The saints repudiated the hierarchized caste division of society of the Brahmanical order, and as Dhere says, "kept up ... accusations against the vedas ... (and) ushered in a new intellectual era in the cultural life of Maharashtra" (ibid.). The earliest dalit poets of Maharashtra have been Namdev and Dnyaneshwar/Dnyandev, although the former acquired more fame as the pathbreaker visionary. Anantadas in an early study of saint scholars clarified: "The first bhakta who lived in the Kali age was Namdev" (2002, 02). Tukaram (1973, 2000) also mentioned Namdev as the foremost devotional Maharashtrian poet. The reason lies in Namdev's treatment of subject-matter that won the hearts of fellow dalits. Namdev writes:

They saw the whole world flock around
me
and the great Brahmins seethed with
rage.
They called me a Sudra, they beat me
and chased me away.
What should I do, my Father ?
But suddenly the world was filled with
wonder,
a miracle happened unsurpassed.
The temple doors swung open for
Namdev, the bhakta.
And slammed shut in front of the
Pandits
(Namdev 1989, 219-20).

There is general difficulty regarding determining time of life and writings of these dalit saint poets. Same may be said regarding Namdev, who is said to have lived between 1270 and 1350. French scholar Charlotte Vaudeville explains in her study that Namdev lived in the fourteenth century (see Vaudeville, 1987). Also, many of these saints were wanderers and their writings were, mostly, collected and collated by their followers, often after many years had elapsed, since their composition. Thus, the exact date of the writing of a text and its sacrosanctity is difficult to determine. Often their followers added their own compositions to the existing corpus, since there was no awareness of the idea of, what we today call as, copyright. Even the names of these saint poets may not be original, i.e. those given to them at the time of their birth. Omvedt attempts an explanation:

Namdev (who lays stress on repeating the name of god), Dnyandev (known for his knowledge or dhnyan), Nama's maidservant Janabai (a woman of the people), Dnyan's sister Mukta and so on. It is beyond the realm of logic that these could have been their birth names; they were undoubtedly given by movement followers (2016, 70).

SAINTS AND THEIR PATH TO THE DIVINE

Their followers looked upon them as religio-spiritual sages, who had endeared themselves to God. Endlessly repeating the name of god was of paramount importance to them and their devotees. This was known as the "power of the name" (ibid.). This "name" has to be iterated ceaselessly. It is "sufficient; nothing else." She further elaborates: "... neither caste status, nor rituals, nor yogic achievements" are "necessary" (ibid.). This is elaborated in metrical composition ("Abhang") of Namdev:

Don't read the Vedas, don't worry about

shastric wisdom,
Memorize the book of the name.
Neither consciousness of Brahman
nor renunciation,
Take the glory of bhakti in the company
of saints
(Namdev 1989, song 1368).

This endless iteration of "name" is a legacy from Buddhism, which in Buddhism, enables them to reach the land of bliss ("Sukkavati"). These bhakti saints indulge in a sort of ecstasy of simultaneous singing and dancing, reaching a state of trance, imparting happiness. The devotees emulate them. Brahmanism stressed on removal of passion and indulging in abstinence, but the subaltern saints were visionaries, seers, since they 'saw' or envisioned their deity joining them in this performance. Janabai poeticizes the performative scene:

A single beat resounded on the river
sands, ...
Namdev sang the stories, dancing in
front was Pandurang --- ...
In the passion of this love, Vitthal began
to dance
(Namdev 1989, song 132).

These subaltern saint scholars of the bhakti movement were united in their radicalism. They presented an alternative way of living and thinking to mankind in general and to dalits in particular. This is true of these saints from the south and the north. Moving northwards the names of Kabir and Ravidas are prominent. They had awareness of both Hindu and Islamic religions, and used this knowledge to critique these ways of life.

KABIR: THE CANDID POET VISIONARY

Kabir is traditionally supposed to have lived for more than a hundred years, between 1398 and 1518. Present day research as documented by Vinay Dharwadkar in his study on Kabir puts it between 1398 and 1448 (2003, 02-03). Similar is the case with Kabir's writings. Date of their composition cannot be determined with certainty. Kabir's oeuvre is scattered, and each collection of his poems presents a different aspect of his works. Kabir scholars have studied them and pointed out differences in tone, tenor, and treatment of subject-matter:

There are at least four major collections, all of which ... suggest different Kabirs. The Adi Granth collection brings us primarily the nirguni kabir: many of the Rajasthan collections are more sarguni and devotional, ... the eastern or Bijak collection gives us Kabir the great iconoclast and philosopher. There is also the oral tradition, which has in fact very little overlap with the written collections Finally there is the most popular version of Kabir in the West --- Robert Bly's freewheeling translations ... and the romantic mystic presented in Tagore's Kabir (Omvedt 2016, 93; see Callewaert 2000; Dharwadkar 2003; Hawley 2005; Bly 1977, and Tagore 1915, 1997).

Acharya Hazariprasad Dwivedi in his study of Kabir and his philosophical poetry (1942) shows the saint poet's inclination towards Nath-Panthi thought, but few believe in this idea. Kabir was too discerning to fall for such sects that put their faith in rituals and religious practices, with leanings towards the occult. He repudiated orthodoxy in all its forms. Religiosity and divinity for him was "... an internalized but also an ethical divine force that required humans to behave morally in a way that was incompatible with caste divisions, wealth and power" (ibid. 95). Kabir is at the forefront of modernistic thought, who transcends Indian society's social schisms and divisions. Linda Hess alludes to Bhaktamal (1600) by Nabhadas, where a balanced assessment of Kabir's philosophical thought has been carried out by the dalit scholar:

Kabir refused to acknowledge caste division or ... authority of the six Hindu schools of philosophy, nor ... the four divisions of life prescribed for Brahmins. He held that religion (dharma) without devotion (bhakti) was no religion (adharm), and that asceticism, fasting and alms-giving had no value if not accompanied by adoration (bhajanas) ... (Hess 1987, 139 n).

KABIR: PRESENTATION OF VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

Hess herself explains qualities of Kabir. He is acclaimed for his "solitariness, vigour, fearlessness and iconoclasm" (ibid. 139). He is severe on both: Muslim Quazis and caste-ridden Brahmanism. He stresses on the oneness of all human beings. Rituals, according to him are inane:

Worship, libations, six sacred rites,
this dharma's full of ritual blights
(Kabir, Hess and Singh, 1986, Ramaini 35).

Kabir is severe on the tale of "pollution" spread by Brahmins, where a mere touch of the dalit pollutes the pandit (brahman):

Pandit look in your heart to know.
Tell me how untouchability was born --
untouchability is what you made so...
(ibid. shabad 41).

Kabir's poetry contains authenticity, since it comes from his personal experience of being a subaltern, a dalit. Imagery in his poems comes from his vocation of being a weaver that aptly describes

the warp-and-woof of life. Kabir is a rebel, but Ravidas is seen as 'serene' in his writings. There is a problem with the exact dates of birth and death of Ravidas also. Scholars, by and large, agree on 1450 to 1520 as the life span of Guru Ravidas/Raidas. He was a tanner and a cobbler, and mentions it in his works, while remaining undisturbed about being a dalit, who is ostracized:

O people of the city, everyone knows
I am a cobbler by trade and tanner by
caste.

One of the low-caste, and yet within
my heart

I meditate on God

(Ravidas. http://www.geocities.com/pritpal_bindra/s-014.html)

ENVISIONING ELYSIUM

Ravidas in his devotional poem envisions a place of bliss and egalitarianism, entitled "Begumpura," where there is no division on the lines of caste and the places of worship are open to all:

The royal realm with the sorrowless
name:
they call it Begumpura, a place with
no pain,
No taxes or cares, nor own property
there,
no wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture
(Ravidas 1988, 32).

Ravidas's poem "Begumpura" is utopic in its description of a casteless and classless city. It is a vision that appeals to the subaltern classes and also an inspiration, a goal that the nation must achieve in the foreseeable future, if we are a 'modern' and egalitarian society, today or tomorrow.

Sant Tukaram Bolhoba Ambile (1608-1649/50) has been an important Marathi saint poet, whose devotional poems cut across caste divisions and he is a major subaltern voice in the seventeenth century. There is a movie entitled Sant Tukaram, wherein he is shown as genteel and a man of calm, who adores Vithoba. Since he was a Sudra (low caste), Brahmans prohibited him from writing, but he protested and continued to write. Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, the Indian historian, who repudiated periodizing of history, commented on the life of Tukaram. He wrote:

(Tuka) ... survived grim famine, the unremitting jealousy of contemporary folk-poets, and the contemptuous hatred of brahmins, ultimately to drown himself in the river (Kosambi 1975, 34).

TUKARAM: ERADICATION OF CASTE SYSTEM

Dilip Chitre in his study of the poems of Tukaram, considers the saint scholar as one of the great poets of his time (see, Says Tuka, 1991). Tukaram and the other poets from the lower castes aimed at protesting and eradicating the rigid caste system, for which they had to, sometimes, pay with their life. Richard Maxwell Eaton in his history of the Deccan (1300-1761) of 2005 misses the point when he calls it as a mere "reform ... movement)." He says: "... from its very beginnings that movement was concerned not with revolution-- certainly not the overthrow of the caste system-- but with reform (Eaton 2005, 153). Here, take the instance of Tukaram. He had to leave everything: house, place, belongings, his family came into suffering and servitude, stakes were so high, hence he concludes his long poem (1333) as follows:

Tuka says, my only assets are
that Pandurang has made me speak
(Tukaram 2000, poem 1333).

Thus for the subaltern saint poet devotion and protest are the most important "assets" that he will not relinquish. Society has to change and as Ravidas said "Begumpura" has to be created on earth. Tukaram's poems are prophetic, with more of the 'personal' described in them. He says:

Girding my loins with strength
I've wrestled with time and death, ...
Tuka says, I've come,
I'm the bearer of the name
(2000, poem 519).

Tukaram's 'Pandhari'/'Pandharpur' is akin to Ravidas's 'Begumpura', a place devoid of pain. As time passes, and the society is on the threshold of modernity, there is more of the rational in the writings and enhancement of questioning and analytics. West, around this time was a witness to Cartesian 'cogito', Galileo's Solar System and the political scientists Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, as well as their Leviathan and "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding." Here, in India, there was thinking out of the box and innovative ideas, but from the 'lower castes', who questioned tradition and hierarchy. It is in Songs of Ecstasy and Economics of Ecstasy (both published in 2001) that Hugh Urban discusses a movement from Bengal called Kartarbhaja that was founded by a bhakt in the line of the acclaimed Chaitanya, by the name of Aulchand. They were in bhakti (devotion) to the Almighty ('Kartar'). The time

was the last years of the eighteenth century. It was a sort of a revisionary effort of the teachings of Chaitanya, with enhanced vigour and devotion. They repudiated casteism and Hindu rituals that granted exclusivism to higher castes. Urban expatiated upon the nature of the movement. He said:

... the Kartarbhaja vision of a caste-free company of the poor offered the hope of a radical new vision of community --- a community based not on wealth or class but on the universal religion of humanity (manuser dharma) and the recognition of the inherent divinity of all men and women. This was a communist ideal distinguished both from the traditional class-based religious hierarchy and from a secular materialist social order of the sort championed by the subaltern theorists (Urban, Songs of Ecstasy, 2001, 37).

ADVENT OF BRITISH: THE COLONIAL SYNDROME

This was lofty thinking and it prevailed for a while, but gradually such thought and vision began to get eroded. The society was changing fast, and it was the time of British rule in India. It was on advent that Britishers were lenient, and dallied with the higher classes. As time passed their attitude hardened and they became exclusivist. Now they were the elite rulers, who subjugated Indians, just like the Brahmins, who had done so earlier in their treatment of lower classes. Masses, more so dalits passed on from one type of slavery to the other. They, now, more than ever, needed their 'organic intellectuals' for giving them a vision of a 'Begumpura', or a 'Pandharpur'. Nicholas Dirks, in his study *Castes of Mind* (2002) attempts an explanation of this phenomenon and the changing semantics of 'caste'. He says:

... caste itself as we know it is not a residual survival of ancient India but a specifically colonial form of ... civil society that both justified and maintained an Orientalist vision. This was a vision of an India in which religion transcended politics, society resisted change, and the state awaited its virgin birth in the late colonial era. Thus caste has become the modernist apparition of India's traditional self (Dirks 2002, 60).

It may be concluded that in the colonial times the British colonizers and casteist Brahmins, in keeping with the convenience of the white rulers, collaborated, since the rulers also needed Brahmins for local mundane tasks, like work on census and report on tribes to enumerate and keep a check on masses. H.H. Risley in his study of castes as well as various tribes had to comprehend 'varna' system with the help of 'higher caste' people. He had to "rely... on varna, and more generally on brahmanical measures and opinions, concerning caste rank" (ibid. 213). Dirks explains that according to Risley "technological change such as the introduction and extension of the railways was having a paradoxical effect. Railways worked to defuse Brahmanical influence, as education worked to expand the reach of Hindu scriptures" (Dirks 2002, 442). Thus there was scarcely any gain for the dalits in this dispensation. They needed to enhance their consciousness of the prevailing scenario. The good effect was that as Indians studied English and had access to Western education, a few of them commenced critiquing the malaise. Modernistic thought began to permeate through scholars like Ram Mohan Roy, although he sought to

retrieve vedic thought. Of course, he advocated the repudiation of superstition in religion, thought and practice as well as idolatry. Dalits fell back on Chaitanya, who had spoken against casteism. Such thought, *mutatis mutandis*, began to reverberate throughout the country.

An important dalit intellectual who took up the cause of the low caste was Jotirao/Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890). He took up cudgels on behalf of the sudras to challenge the social sovereignty of the Brahmins. Phule took pride in his low caste and espoused the dignity of labour. He was well educated, and wrote a number of books, as well as poems critiquing the socio-economic scenario.

PHULE: UNITY AMONG ALL DALIT CASTES

Rosalind O'Hanlon, in her study of Phule's vision and thought, entitled *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (1985) explains that Phule's ambition was to liberate even the lowest and the ostracized of the lower castes from the servitude of the higher castes. Phule indulged in serving the downtrodden by opening educational institutions for them. He highlighted their cause through his writings, and spoke of Muslims and colonizing Christians in favourable terms. O'Hanlon records that Phule made a girl child from the dalit class read out to a Christian, visiting them, the plight of the downtrodden. She spoke that the then ruling dispensation was cruel and callous to them. 'They were'... buried alive in the foundations of buildings ... not allowed to read and write (O'Hanlon 1985, 121). The child went on to read:

God has bestowed on us the rule of the British and our grievances are redressed. Nobody harasses us now. Nobody hangs us. Nobody buries us alive. Our progeny can live now. We can wear clothes, can put cloth around our body. Everybody is at liberty to live according to his means (*ibid.*).

Phule founded an association to fight the elite classes, called *Satyasodhak Smaj* or Society of those who Search for Truth. The aim was to advocate for equality for all the classes and castes. Christian missionaries in India, and, some of them, interacted with the lower classes. George Briggs, for instance, took time to comprehend the dalits, and eventually wrote a book-length study on *chamars* (tanners).

Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy 'Periyar' (1879-1973) was an acclaimed denouncer of casteism in the last century. He was preceded by Kapilar/Kabilar Kundru who poeticized prolifically to repudiate division of society into 'high' and 'low'. There were other dalit scholars like Pambatti Cittar, the sage of the south. Cittar/Siddhar fiercely denounced the caste division. He wrote:

We'll set fire to the divisions of caste,
we'll debate philosophical questions in
the market place,
we'll have dealings with despised

households.

We'll go around in different paths ---

So dance, snake, dance

(Pambatti Cittar/Siddhar, cited in Kailaspathy, 1987, 391).

EMANCIPATION OF SOUL

Most of his poems conclude with an allusion to 'snake' and its 'dance'. It is a metaphor for the freedom of the soul, which is the ultimate aim of his devotion and meditation. This was the time of anti-Brahmanism. Popular scholars like Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) famously said: "We have heard that God and temples are common for all castes of the world. If that is so, why can't people of this community, following Vaishnava or Saivite traditions, be allowed to enter Vishnu or Siva temples?" (qtd. in Omvedt 2016, 192). Then Thass himself articulated the repudiatory reply of the higher castes: "For your community we have given gods like Madurai Veeran, Katteri and Karuppannan; and gods like Siva and Vishnu have nothing to do with you!" (ibid.). So there was one set of gods for Brahmins and another for non-Brahmins. Consequently, Thass was also drawn to Buddhism, and even went to Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) and met scholars of Buddhism. Low caste scholars were attracted to Buddhist thought. Gonzaga de Aloysius, the scholar from the West explained the 'five principles of Buddhism' (or 'Pancha Silam') that induced the dalit scholars: "... all those who declare in the assembly of the Association to renounce idol worship, ritualism and caste discrimination and take Pancha Silam" (Aloysius 1998, 97). This has fascinated dalit scholars all along, and in independent India the instance of B. R. Ambedkar can be cited, who advocated to his cohorts to embrace Buddhism.

It was for a short time that the dalits were drawn towards Christianity, but they soon understood their true motives, since Christians companionated with high caste people. Thus, Thass critiqued their stance that was anti-dalit. He said:

Building churches in the midst of cheris (environs of dalits) and grabbing the resources of the poor to your heart's content without any mercy, you leave them to beg. Not only this, you have included their enemies who have been suppressing them for a thousand and five hundred years, who hold fast to caste discriminations (Omvedt 2016, 199).

DALIT ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

As Phule (2002) said caste thwarts social harmony. He said: "The spirit of caste is inimical, not only to the growth of national unity but also to the emancipation of the individual" (Phule 2002, 113). Such education should be imparted as clears the cobwebs of division(s) in society. Pakala Laxmi Narasu (1861-1934) lauded Buddhism as "... the gospel of a commonwealth sustained by the spirit of loving

kindness and the passion of humanity ... a great cooperative association ... infuse(ing) self-respect" (2002,174-75). Thus dalit intellectuals explored alternatives, since Hinduism was unwavering and uncompromising in its socio-economic divisions.

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was a scholar who advocated women's rights and education for all. She fought for the rights of widows and even founded a society where all women, orphans, widows and children could live together. She was well-versed in Eastern and Western thought, who wanted upliftment of weaker sections through education and also had soft corner for basal features of Christianity. According to her, "Dharma Shastras ... were agreed ... (on) two things ... that women of high and low caste as a class were bad, very bad, worse than demons ..." (Kosambi 1992, 33). She treated all castes equally, without discrimination. Ramasamy 'Periyar', as mentioned earlier, also explored alternatives and leaned towards Islam, as against casteist Hinduism. It was in his journal, entitled *Kudi Arasu* (1931) that 'Periyar' discerned latencies in capitalism, apart from divisions in Hinduism. He wrote: "... just as notions of high and low (castes) have to be abolished for untouchability to be destroyed, so must the division of society into capitalists and labourers be ended for the abolition of poverty" (Ramasamy 2005, 463-64). It is Omvedt who expressed the crux of protest writings from these scholars. She said: "Periyar, like Phule before him and Ambedkar in the same period, put the individual at the centre; in this respect they were among the great liberals of modern India" (Omvedt 2016, 244). Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) has been a Western educated low caste intellectual who fought for social justice and equality of all castes and classes. He advocated the idea of 'Prabuddha Bharat' or 'awakened India'. Ambedkar very candidly said that "to build the strength of the working class, the mental hold of religious slavery would have to be destroyed. Thus, the precondition of a united working-class struggle was the eradication of caste and untouchability" (ibid., 255). It was his envisioning of a world that has to be just that he found Buddhism more appealing and which he embraced, since it appeared to him to be based on equality and being more rational than Hinduism.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the dalit saints and scholars were pathbreakers. They questioned and resisted caste atrocities. This has been a continuous movement, with numerous other interlocutors in this great debate, who have not been alluded to in the paper because of paucity of space. Later day scholars have persisted with this protest through their writings, like their predecessors, and also by assembling masses and collectivities to preach that equality and social justice is every individual's birth-right. It can be safely said with Ambedkar that the lower castes, today, are awakened and conscious of their rights. They are

educating themselves, since education is the weapon that will make the protest successful, and change the scenario for the better, albeit slowly, but surely. There are more chances of success in independent India, since there is presence of alternatives. They also have their 'organic intellectuals' to take them and their cause, further. It is a long and arduous journey, but, it is hoped that they will reach their promised land/Begumpura, sooner rather than later.

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