

Contextualizing Dalit Mobility

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Dalit is derivative of the Sanskrit word *dalan* which means to trample upon, to suppress. In the post-vedic history, during the social formation of the classes, the emerging dominant class (*sat*, clean) gradually divested the emerging 'labour' of the ownership right of the cultivable land and foisted on them a notion of being *asat* (unclean) to generate, and to perpetuate, a segment of labour's immediate availability for their expanding cultivation, and for other related works particularly after the discovery of iron.¹ In course of time, the *asat* became dalit, the untouchable, devoid of even 'social capital', and the notion became applicable from the birth. The birth became the determining criteria of their vocation and all the cultural appendages were foisted upon them. Their protests and the emerging justificatory / rectificatory philosophical discourses only argued about their subjugation / emancipation and did not seek the alteration of the basic economic premise.

In modern time, it emerged in vogue, in literary use, (first in Marathi in 1930s and then in Hindi since 1970s) when Ambedkar used it for Mahars and subsequently for depressed classes. A Marathi paper, *Dalit Bandhu* (in 1930s), which focused on Dalit issues further facilitated its popular use. However, Harijan restricted its expansion for the next three decades. Since 1970s, nonetheless, its usage, once again, became wide, in fact, pan-Indian and acquired secular-economic connotation transcending the cryptic- religious concept of Harijan coined by Narsi Mehta (a Gujarati saint poet of the era of Bhakti Movement) for the children of Devdasi. This transition, in the use of words and of their connotations is more rooted in the underlying transformation enacted by the percolating benefits of the Ryotwari system and of the Zamindari abolition which transformed the dalit from being a ploughman (without possessing the legal/ customary ownership right of the land) to an owner- cultivator under market economy, first, during colonialism and later on, during the post-colonial transition.

This paper interprets dalit, primarily, as an *economic category* of being an attached labour of dominant landholding castes in pre- capitalist social formations for the cultivation of land with all the other cultural appendages of the labour in the then existent historical era whose bearings continue to haunt even the contemporary generations. Teleologically, he was a cultivator (essentially, a ploughman) without being an owner of the cultivable lands and orchards, and without being a collective owner of 'social capital'. He had no traditional / customary rights to own the cultivable land. He cultivated only other's land. He was denied the ownership of the basic unit of production—the cultivable land- to make him dependent for his livelihood on the dominant landholding castes. His social existence, with this denial to own land and of being an attached labour, was fixed by birth and was perpetuated from one generation to the next. This was the determining factor that imprinted his historic bearing. And it was this economic premise of denial and of subordination on which was erected the wall of cultural segregation which, in course of time, became more prominent relegating the

economic base into oblivion. It was a structure and a process that evolved over the centuries but simultaneously underwent required modification in different ages of pre- capitalist social formations to generate and protect a class of labour (approximately 15%), culturally untouchable, which was closer to modern day property-less wage-labour. Lohia was not wrong when he had observed that class is mobile *caste and caste is immobile class*.

Being an attached labour itself meant cultivating land and performing other related works along with exacting household jobs of the landowner family with which the labour and his family was attached in return for temporary grant of land parted to him by the land owner family to accrue its produce for his labour along with the supplication of other subsidiary requirements. The attachment, however, could be severed either with mutual consent or by either of the party to choose other labour or the other land- owning family. In other words, there existed freedom to choose the alternatives and sometimes, in generational change, the sons did choose the alternative. But usually, such situation did not arise, at least, it was rarely initiated by the *attached labour*.

The attached labour was different from slaves, serfs and bonded labour.³ He was not a commodity to be sold and purchased like slaves; he had his family, cattle and house of his own over which he had his customary rights. But like serfs, he had no traditional rights to be tenants/ owners of land for which he was bound to work on the estate of his lords for a day or two in a week and pay rent/ tax to him. He was not a bonded labour who had become bonded due to debt / unfulfilled obligation for which he was bound to work for his master till he paid his dues. Neither was he the part of jajmani system like gold smiths, iron- smiths, carpenters, etc., who provided services to the land holding families in return for land produce. Essentially a ploughman, the attached labour was paid in kind for his labour and services and for his family requirements which were substantively taken care of by his lord. He enjoyed a large degree of personal freedom-familial, religious and property rights- despite social customarily restrictions of the time.

The most unfortunate part of this existence was the *prevalence of untouchability within the untouchable castes* which was a replica of the macro level in micro form. It may be stated here that there existed layers of hierarchy within untouchable castes out of which some were superior while others were inferior; and they followed similar kinds of behaviour with each other as it was practiced by the upper castes with them. In other words, the stratified labour created segmentary chains within their own ranks and excluded the lower ranks in different proportions for their collective resources and cultural relations. As a result, lower the untouchable castes in their hierarchy maximum was their exclusion from the collective. The social division among the untouchables were segmented to the extreme. Resultant-ingly, it created deleterious effect on individual / social mobility in their mobilization against the dominant class.

Social mobility in this context was highly restrictive. Individual or group mobility, vertical or horizontal mobility, which M N Srinivas⁴ called it as positional shift, within the village was rare, at least within a generation. Spatial mobility, conditioned by prevailing social circumstances, however, did occur either from the villages to cities or from one village to another which facilitated rare opportunities for vertical / horizontal, individual/ group mobility. And it was

this kind of mobility or the opportunities provided for it by the transition of power among the ruling classes that provoked Zia Barani in 14th century to note against such kinds of development in *Fatwa-i-Jahandari* and advised the Sultunate to stop it for the purity of the nobility and for monarchical lineage⁵. Apart from this kind of mobility, the inter-caste/inter-religious marriages, religious conversions, administrative jobs or protest movements of different kinds provided opportunities for mobility. For example, peasants' revolts, Bhakti Movement, 1857 revolts, etc, created social milieu which remained no longer conducive / tolerable for the protestors to live / work in the old condition which compelled them to search for new and better milieu and propelled them to break / transcend the old relations. As a result of it, there was a group / individual mobility, either in terms of spatial or hierarchical, that benefited the labour in terms of better social status and material condition.

The development of capitalism, even in colonial mode, quantitatively changed the condition of opportunities for the social mobility of labour. The settlement of the ryotwari system, the foundation of the modern schooling and the legal system torn asunder the premise of the attached labour - exclusion from land ownership, social capital and cultural relations- and freed him for the new expanding system of modern market economy which also provided impetus to Renaissance, to the 1857 Revolt and support to political parties during freedom struggle. And despite the occupational continuity of jobs among the first generation of untouchables in the rural- urban transition in the early years of colonial capitalism or of its perpetuation even now in the smaller towns and in quasbas which is also applicable for the low ranking / low- paid government jobs, as Yogendra Singh has pointed out⁶, capitalism propelled massive social transformation both in rural and in urban areas that Indian history had not accounted for in the past. Like post-1789 revolutionary France which transformed the serfs into free peasantry, capitalism in India particularly in post-1947 transition has transformed the attached labour into owner-cultivators which has relatively slowed down their migration to urban centers, but has impelled their status mobility.

This legal / social change actuated their political participation in the democratic process. It reflects in their increasing numbers within the ranks of the parties, in the electoral process, in the legislative bodies and in the political executive. More importantly, they are increasingly becoming part of the civil society and in many regions, they are at the forefront of the change. Their egalitarian / labour outlook is no longer despised, at least, in public domain; neither are they the segregated or targeted as cannon fodder of extra-economic coercion. They have been largely accepted / co-opted as part of modern citizenship. Such development has provided opportunities for their rapid vertical mobility.

Thus the expansion of capitalism and democracy in independent India have not only transformed this *historic category* into a common citizen and have put them at par with the rest but have also adopted legal and economic measures to uplift their social condition. The renewed liberalization of market accessibility to trans-national corporations after 1991 has hammered the final nail in the coffin of their past cultural baggages which were impediments in their mobility. The only

unfinished agenda now remains is their transformation into being owners of modern latifundia.

However, it must be stated in conclusion that dalit as labour, of which he constitutes the major part, and as part of the contemporary exploitative base; remains in unaltered situation. What has changed is the feudal method of appropriation of his surplus labour and the elimination of extra economic coercion earlier applied on him. What is new is the availability of large degree of opportunity for his individual mobility which was earlier highly restrictive. □□□

Notes And References :

1. Application of iron in the centuries preceding Buddha facilitated the rapid expansion of cultivation for which a segment of labour's immediate availability was required to expedite the process. See R S Sharma, *Ancient India, NCERT, 1976*.
2. For a detail conceptual study, see Tom Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour*, Frankcass, London, 1999.
3. For an excellent comparative study of India and Europe, see Ram Vilas Sharma, *Marx aur Pichhare Hue Samaj* (Hindi), Rajkamal, New Delhi, 1986 and *Bhartiya Itihas aur Aitihāsik Bhautikwaad*, Hindi Directorate, Delhi University, 1992.
4. See M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Los Angeles: California, 1966.
5. See Muzaffar Alam and Himanshu Roy, *Zia Barani* in M P Singh and Himanshu Roy (eds.) *Indian Political Thought*, Jnanda, Delhi, 1999.
6. See Yogendra Singh, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1986.
7. See Nandu Ram(ed.) *Dalit in Contemporary India*, Vol. I, Siddhant Publications, New Delhi, 2008; Sachchinanda and Niraj Kumar, *Dalit Women on the Move*, Serial Publications, New Delhi, 2005.