
UNIT 7 DALIT MOVEMENT

Structure

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Who are Dalits?
- 7.3 Political Mobilisation of the Dalits
 - 7.3.1 Pre-independence Period
 - 7.3.2 Post-independence Period
- 7.4 Bahujan Samaj Party and the Dalits
 - 7.4.1 Ideology
 - 7.4.2 Limitations of the BSP
- 7.5 Summary
- 7.6 Exercises

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growth of academic interest in dalit mobilisation and movements in India. This is mainly due to the fact that there has been greater mobilisation and political participation of dalits in the electoral process in the country as a whole. It is primarily the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which in fact is responsible for the mobilisation of the dalits and the democratic upsurge revolving around the dalits in the country. This unit focuses on dalit mobilisation, assertion and movement in the contemporary India. It deals with the meaning of dalits, their mobilisation in the pre and post-independence period. It also discusses the ideology of BJP and its mobilisation of dalits.

7.2 WHO ARE DALITS?

In the beginning let us turn to the question, who are the dalits? What is their condition in the society? The term 'dalit' is a Marathi word and literally means 'ground' or 'broken to pieces' and it was first popularised by the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra by which they meant the Scheduled Caste population. Later on there had been attempts to broaden this definition to any oppressed group (Chandra, 2004). Dalits generally refer to the Scheduled Castes alone, the castes that in the Hindu Varna system were outside the Varna system and were known as Avarnas or Ati-shudras. They were considered as impure and untouchables and were placed in the caste hierarchy which perpetuated inequality. There are even some people who include the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, the Other Backward Classes and even other converted minorities into this category. For our present purpose we shall, however, refer to the SCs alone and not the other categories. The Dalits constitute around 15 per cent of the Indian population and belong to the lower rungs of the Indian society, economically and socially. According to the 1991 census their number was 138 million persons i.e., around 15.8 per cent of the Indian population. According to the 2001 census they constitute more than 1,666 lakhs and around 16.2 per cent of the entire population. They are spread throughout the country though they are concentrated more in some states like Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa and Maharashtra.

Their population is spread throughout the parliamentary and assembly constituencies but in the country as a whole it constitutes around one third of the electorate (Chandra, 2004).

The Dalits not only belong to the lower caste category but also belong to the lower class category of the Indian society. They are mainly poor peasants, share-croppers and agricultural labourers in the rural economy. In the urban economy they basically form the bulk of the labouring population. Studies show that the condition of the Dalits in the country as a whole has not changed significantly over the years (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998) even though the state in India had pursued pro-poor policies aimed at ameliorating the condition of the poor among whom the Dalits constitute a large chunk. Mendelsohn and Vicziany argue that the “post-independence regime has failed to bring about a systematic redistribution of resources in favour of those at the bottom of society, and it has also failed to pursue a consistent, albeit non radical, strategy of supplying ‘basic needs’ (health education and simple welfare) to the poor”.

As a result of the policy of protective discrimination an elite (mainly middle class) has emerged among dalits and it is these elite who have been the main beneficiaries of the state policies. As D L Sheth has noted that the middle class that comprised essentially of the upper castes now includes a small section of the lower castes or dalits (Sheth, 2002). As a result of these changes the entire dalit population may now be divided roughly into two sections; a section of dalits who have remained as they were earlier and a small, a narrow section who are relatively better off than the majority of the dalit population. This, however, may be considered as a positive change since it is this section (the middle class) among the Dalits who are primarily responsible for their mobilisation and assertion in contemporary India. Another change may also be noted and that is blatant form of caste discrimination which was practised for centuries is not practised in India today.

7.3 POLITICAL MOBILISATION OF THE DALITS

7.3.1 Pre-Independence Period

At the All India level Ambedkar initiated the articulation of dalit interest for the first time in the 1920s. Prior to Ambedkar there had been attempts to bring about reforms in their condition in some of the Indian states, for example, Phule in Maharashtra. But it was an attempt towards reform rather than towards the mobilisation of the dalits for political objectives. Ambedkar is known to have developed differences with Congress on several important questions relating to dalit issues and more or less remained the only spokesperson and the pre eminent advocate of the dalits from 1919, for more than three and half decades in the pre-independence period. Though the Congress talked about the necessity of removing untouchability, yet it did not articulate any concrete demand or programme to protect the interests of the depressed classes till 1917 (Shah, 2001). In contrast, mobilisation by Phule and Ambedkar in 1930s was firmly based on the belief that unless the caste system is destroyed the social evil of untouchability cannot end and that it is possible only if dalits acquire power. Hence in 1942 he formed the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF). Earlier he formed several organisations, the most important being the Indian Labour Party (ILP). The ILP was an organisation of a different kind in the sense that it aimed and attempted to mobilise a

broader section of the Indian society and not exclusively the dalits. He sought to use this organisation to appeal to wider audience including the industrial workers and the agricultural labourers. Duncan argues that he formed the ILP probably because he was convinced that a wider support base than the Scheduled Caste was essential and hence he embarked on a more class like strategy (Duncan, 2000).

7.3.2 Post-Independence Period

The formation of the AISC was a very significant development in the history of dalit mobilisation in the country though it was not much successful and suffered defeat in the elections of 1946 and again in 1951. These reversals convinced Ambedkar that a separate political party was required which will have a wider electoral strategy. After his death in 1956, the AISC was dissolved and the Republican Party of India (RPI) was formed in 1957. The party, the first of its kind accepted the fundamental provisions of the Constitution and vowed to pursue its objective through the medium of parliamentary democracy. It functioned for almost two decades and was successful in establishing its base in the state of Maharashtra and to a limited extent in the state of Uttar Pradesh, though it is in the latter the RPI succeeded more in electoral terms than in Maharashtra. The RPI was also able to launch some major agitations for example, the agitations for land distribution in 1959 and 1964-65. These agitations, however, were more of an aberration rather than a general feature of RPI politics; they were, in fact, isolated episodes and not 'harbingers of sustained mass movements' (Duncan, 2000). The sporadic nature of RPI politics was probably the main reason why the RPI could not keep its base intact and always had to confront the problem of losing its support base as soon as the agitations ended.

By the mid 1960s it had established itself in the state of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. These were the states in which it had a strong presence. Very soon, however, the RPI weakened largely because of internal differences on the issue of aligning with the Congress. A section of the leadership within the party was pragmatic and was interested in joining hands with the Congress whereas others were of the view that an alliance with the Congress would lead to a dilution of the greater objective of the party of promoting solidarity of the SC population in the country. On this issue some of the leaders broke away from the party and joined the Congress. It broke into several factions and today the various factions only play a marginal role in the politics of Maharashtra.

The failure of the RPI to keep up to the lofty ideals of Ambedkar and to fulfil the aspirations of the dalit youths led to the formation of the Dalit Panthers in Bombay in 1972. The Dalit Panthers drew its inspiration from the writings of Ambedkar and Marx. Its leaders criticised the RPI leaders for having failed to keep up to the ideals of Ambedkar and for its persistent splits and electoral failures. They sought to project themselves as an alternative to the RPI and very soon were successful in attracting the Dalit youths and students. Though initially it tasted success in the state of Maharashtra, yet very soon the movement (organisation) fell prey to the same problems that had confronted the RPI. Due to internal conflicts among leaders on several issues, the movement collapsed in a few years after its inception.

Why is it so that dalit political parties including the association formed by Ambedkar could not succeed or could succeed only partially in their political objectives? There are numerous reasons behind these. Duncan (2000) has noted three problems with these

associations. Firstly, the parties/association to him always 'relied on the support of particular caste groups rather than on the Dalits as a whole'. The organisations mainly relied on the Mahars in Maharashtra and the Chamars (Jatavs) in northern India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. It is these castes that formed the backbone of the associations. As a result the other dalit castes felt neglected and suspected these parties as a party of that caste group and not theirs. Secondly, according to Duncan one of the issues for the organisation was the issue of whether to support other political parties as a part of their strategy during the elections or not? Ambedkar had left no clear directives in this regard. In the absence of a clear guidance from Ambedkar, the party leaders were caught up in ideological and strategic struggles. Some were in favour of supporting the Congress and other parties, whenever the need arose, whereas others felt that supporting the Congress will lead to dilution of the aim and objectives of the party. On this question alone many of the parties including the RPI split and this weakened the movement in the country as a whole. Thirdly, these political parties did not develop any modern organisational structure which could be geared up or could be used for the purpose of diffusing inner party struggles and help achieve cohesion. All these hastened the decline of the Ambedkarite parties including those formed by Ambedkar. Another cause of decline may be added. The Ambedkarite parties were unable to cut into the vote banks or support base of the Congress party, which was really an overwhelming phenomenon. Since Congress was a political party of all sections of the Indian population the lower caste population did feel comfortable with the programmes and policies of the RPI. The welfare policies of the Congress appealed to the dalits in the country in general and in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in particular. The expansion of the dalit parties in recent years has taken place only after the Congress had declined considerably and has created a vacuum for other political forces in the country. Hence, it is not surprising that the BSP has grown in a state (Uttar Pradesh) where the decline of the Congress has been more rapid and complete than in any other state in India.

7.4 THE BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY AND THE DALITS

The formation of the BSP by Kanshi Ram in 1984 marks a new beginning in the history of dalit mobilisation and politics in the country. One of the significant features of the BSP happens to be the fact that it had succeeded at least partially (particularly in North India) where Ambedkar and Ambedkarites failed in their objective in the country in more than fifty years. The BSP succeeded at a time in north India when the dalit parties in western India were under disarray. The BSP after its formation has not only succeeded in establishing a stronghold in some states in northern India but it has also been able to form governments along with its pre or post electoral allies in the critically important state of Uttar Pradesh. Though the governments were short lived, yet these are remarkable events since it has important implications for the dalits not only in the state of Uttar Pradesh but throughout the country.

Gail Omvedt has termed the formation of this party as deliberate. It has its root in a government employee's federation called the BAMCEF i.e., Backward and Minority Central Government Employees Federation, which was formed in 1978 by Kanshi Ram in Punjab but later on extended to Uttar Pradesh. Initially the BAMCEF supported the activities of the RPI in Maharashtra and sought the support of all the SCs and politicians from other parties (Chandra, 2004). Its primary aim, however, was to organise the elite section of the dalits who had benefited from the policies of reservation of the Government

of India. The formation of this organisation was critical because it is this organisation that provided the initial organisational and financial base for the BSP. Kanshi Ram tried to argue and mobilise dalits on the grounds that the further advance of the community could only take place if the whole community stood in a group. He was successful in this effort considering that within a span of more than a decade in the early 1990s the BAMCEF had a membership of around of 2 lakhs (Hassan, 2000).

The most important decision that was taken in the course of the formation of the BSP was the formation of Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samaj Samiti commonly known as the DS4 in 1981. The formation of this organisation was of critical importance considering that it is through this organisation Kanshi Ram tried to increase his influence among other sections of the society, which were hitherto not touched by the BAMCEF. The DS4, in fact, served as the organisational base for the formation of the BSP and took up political issues. It did so in two significant ways. One was through ideological campaigns that it carried with its mouthpiece "The Oppressed Indian" and secondly through the organisation of meetings, rallies mainly bicycle rallies and social action programmes throughout the country. Through the first it sought to 'educate, organise and agitate' the oppressed groups and through the second it sought to restore self-respect and equality for the oppressed castes in the society (Singh, 2002). The activities of the DS4 were prominent and frequent in 1983 and 1984, i.e., just before the formation of the BSP. Hence, it is clear that the DS4 was the precursor to the formation of the BSP by Kanshi Ram and in this sense the formation of the BSP was a calculated and deliberate one. It appears that it is through the DS4 Kanshi Ram sought to do the necessary spadework before the formation of the BSP.

Having set the stage and the ground Kanshi Ram inaugurated the BSP on the 14th of April 1984. He acquired a useful partner when he persuaded Mayawati to join the party in Uttar Pradesh. The joining of Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh became crucial for BSP because with this the party was able to get a solid leader in the state. Mayawati belong to a Chamar family and studied in Meerut and Delhi Universities and was in the teaching profession. She left her job to become a full time politician. Her family was in fact associated with the RPI for some time in Uttar Pradesh.

Kanshi Ram, it is said, deliberately tried to construct a new ethnic category, the Bahujan which included the SCs, STs, OBCs and the converted minorities (Chandra, 2004). This he did deliberately keeping in mind that the SCs alone cannot give him the much needed power because of their number which is around 15 per cent of the population and one third of the total electorate in the country. With a careful appeal to the ex-untouchables and with the appealing slogans of *Brahmin, Bania, Thakur Chor Baki Sab DS4*, the BSP made an immediate impact on the dalits vote bank in north India. Dalits in northern India had traditionally rallied behind the Congress party but soon it was found that the BSP was making inroads into the Congress vote bank. In the Lok Sabha elections which were held in December 1984 and the assembly elections in March 1985 though it lost all the seats in the state it contested, it was able to draw million of votes. More importantly it was able to draw the votes of the Congress as a result of which 51 seats went to the Lok Dal (Omvedt, 1994). It was able to repeat its performance in Punjab in the same year held after a few months. It adversely affected the Akali Dal in Punjab. In this period the BSP and DS4 campaigned throughout the country through naïve means and could consolidate its support base further in northern India. Naïve forms of campaign included the use of by-cycles, organising huge cycle and other form of rallies and

awakening programmes. In these campaigns the BSP chose to attack the domination of the upper castes in the society and the wretched condition of the scheduled castes and other downtrodden in the country. This helped the party, extended and consolidated its base and its proof was the Allahabad Lok Sabha bye-elections in 1987. Kanshi Ram as the BSP candidate was able to secure 18 per cent of the popular votes against 24 per cent of Sunil Shastri and 54 percent of V P Singh (Omvedt, 1994). On the whole in the elections, the BSP showed its growing popularity among those social groups, which were earlier with the Congress. It was with this election that the BSP emerged as a central political force and Kanshi Ram became a national figure.

The 1989 Lok Sabha elections followed and the party fared quite well by securing three seats with 2.4 per cent all-India votes from the 235 Lok Sabha constituencies that it contested. With this impressive performance, the BSP was able to become the sixth all India party in terms of votes polled. It continued its electoral gains and was successful in getting itself recognised as a National Party by the Election Commission in 1997. In Uttar Pradesh it has been the largest gainer. Its seats went on increasing in the state assembly from 13 in 1989 to 66 in 1993 (Kumar, 1999). In the elections held in 1996 it gained 66 seats, its best performance however has been in the 2002 elections when it secured 97 seats. This performance of the BSP is remarkable considering that in the previous elections it had secured 66 seats, though its strength ultimately got reduced to 43 by 1998 due to a number of splits in the party. Its vote share in the state has been around 20 per cent, which is very impressive. After having discussed about the spectacular growth of the party let us turn to its ideology and strategy that it had adopted so far.

7.4.1 Ideology

The BSP ideology has to be understood in the background of the overall effort made towards mobilisation of the dalits since the national movement in India. It must be noted in the beginning that its ideology has been shifting from time to time according to its strategic needs. Gail Omvedt has noted that the BSP ideology can best be described as vague. She argues that there is no clear ideology in the programme and functioning of the party. The sole thrust is on the breaking of the caste system after acquiring state power (Omvedt, 1994). What is, however, true is that it has no economic programmes as such and hence the party is not clear what it intends to do after acquiring power. It is because of this ideological vagueness one finds that most of its agitations are symbolic in nature and it is not around economic issues. And secondly because of this it had vacillated on economic issues after acquiring power in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Due to this vagueness it becomes very difficult to comment on its ideology. A tentative effort must, however, be made here. One thing that needs to be said in the beginning is that, ideologically the BSP draws heavily from the writings of Ambedkar and to a large extent from the speeches of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. The party also draws inspiration from Phule and Periar. The central point regarding its ideology is that it provides a critique of the Brahminical social order in the country. In this critique it draws heavily from Phule who provided a critique of Brahmanism and Brahmin power in Maharashtra in the second half of the nineteenth century. The BSP and Kanshi Ram believe that the Indian society consists of two different groups. The first group consists of the low castes including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and the religious minorities. In the second category it is the Brahmins, Kayasthas, Baniyas and Rajputs or the traditional upper castes (Singh, 2002). The higher castes

though constitute only a minority (around 15 per cent of the population), yet still they manage to rule, because of the votes and thus the consent they acquire from the lower castes. This system, according to the BSP, will not continue and will come to an end as soon as the lower castes capture political power.

In Kanshi Ram's opinion the Brahminical social order that exists is Aryan in its origin. The Aryans evolved this social order after invading India and subjugating the original inhabitants or the *Mool Nivasis* that is the Dravidians in the country. After the Aryan conquest the Dravidians were reduced to the level of untouchables. This social order that came into being after the Aryan conquest to Kanshi Ram is based on caste and not class and it rests upon falsehoods and religious myths. Hence the Brahminical social order, which emerged was a social order that was unjust and in which, Brahminism became the ruling socio-cultural ideology. The purpose of this ideology was the complete justification of the division of the society into major caste groups. Historically, the BSP argues that no Hindu community but only Jati's and the Samaj, ever existed which came into existence. Hence, one notes that the perception of the BSP on the Indian society is similar to the perceptions, which emerged in South India during the colonial period as reflected in the Dravidian movement of Naicker (Periar) and the early ideology of DMK and also that of Phule.

It is from this assessment of the Indian social order that they construct their objective and strategy. The main aim is to end or destroy Brahminical rule and attain political power for the Bahujan's. Attainment or capture of political power is the key to them. According to Kanshi Ram 'political power is the master -key with which you can open any lock, whether it is (a) social, educational or cultural lock' (quoted in Chandra, 2004, p. 145). Therefore, the attainment of political power is central to their strategy by which any transformation (real transformation) can be made. This will help improve the economic advancement of the bahujan's in the society. It is only after the attainment of state power historical injustices can be corrected and the bahujan's and more particularly the dalits can improve their socio-economic conditions. Thus, the BSP believes in total revolution; in the total destruction of the Hindu social order but this was to take place only through the ballot box. It firmly believes that the condition and position of the dalits can improve for the better by a two stage revolution. The first is through electoral victory from the Brahmins and the upper castes those who constitute only around 15 per cent of the Indian population and in the second stage the revolution will penetrate deeper into the society and will thoroughly transform it (Singh, 2002).

The BSP contends that democracy which exists in the country is a fake dominated by the upper castes. It belongs to them. The establishment of this democracy through adult franchise has helped the upper castes and their parties who continue to hold power over the political and social system. The Congress, the dominating political party in the country, has been the political party of the upper castes and had pursued policies throughout for the benefit of the upper castes. The policies, which it pursued for the lower castes did not benefit them at all. In this kind of the situation what is therefore necessary is to establish real and substantial democracy where power would be in the hands of the majority, the dalits –the bahujans.

7.4.2 Limitations of the BSP

Now let us focus on the problems the limitations which the BSP confronts as a political party. We will see that the limitations the BSP faces are serious enough and some of

these problems are similar to what the other Ambedkarite parties including the RPI had faced earlier.

One of the more serious problems, which it confronts, is the problem of ideology. It appears that the BSP has an exclusive ideology. It has a programme for the dalits in the country but not for the vast mass of the poor even though it claims that it represents the majority or the bahujans. Secondly, the ideological programme does not contain any economic programme for the category which it sought to mobilise. In the absence of an economic package or content the BSP ideology looks very limited, or restricted to social justice alone. That is why it has become difficult for the BSP to pursue or give directions to economic policies whenever it has attained power in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Thus the ideology of the BSP happens to be an exclusive one.

The second problem with the BSP, which Jagpal Singh (2002) and others have noted is that the BSP is a leader-centric party. Though it has adequate number of leaders and functionaries, yet it is a party in every sense led by its supremo Kanshi Ram and to some extent by Mayawati though in more recent times Kanshi Ram had been sidelined. On several important occasions it is these two important leaders who have taken decisions alone by ignoring the party altogether. This is a problem, which we have noted earlier, a problem common with the Ambedkarite parties formed after the death of Ambedkar. The RPI and other Ambedkarite parties have faced similar kind of problems. Even Ambedkar himself never had any inclination for a strong organisation and an organised movement. Ambedkar's biographer Keer has noted that:

Ambedkar did not try to organise his political party on modern lines. He had no taste for individual organisation. There were no regular annual conferences or general meetings of the organisations with which he was connected. Where and when he sat was the venue of the conference and the time for decision (quoted in Ian Duncan, 2001).

The more serious problem with the BSP is its limited social base. Despite of all the talks of Bahujan Samaj and all the claims that the BSP will represent 85 per cent of the population in the Indian society the fact remains that in north India it remains a political party of Chamars/Jatavs. The Chamars constitute the backbone of the BSP support. We have seen earlier that the Chamars or the Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh were the most politicised of the castes in the state. It is this caste which benefited from the policy of reservation of the central and the state governments and it is this category that forms the backbone of the BSP. It does not represent the interest of the Balmikis or the Pasis who are the poorest among the dalits but it represents only the elite among the dalits. In UP it had expected to increase its appeal, it has even attempted to become a catchall political party but failed miserably in this effort. The primary contenders in UP of the party are the Samajwadi Party, the BJP and the Congress. In a situation of this in a fragmented party system where the competition is highly multi-cornered kind it looks very unlikely that the BSP will be able to improve its vote share further though in terms of seats it may gain some more seats as seen in the 2002 elections. The expansion of its social base is more unlikely also because the BSP governments in the state have clearly shown its caste bias in favour of the Chamars which alienated other castes and the minority communities from it. Moreover, apart from UP the BSP does not have a significant presence in other states especially in the west, southern states and the east.

Fourthly, since the prime agenda of the BSP is to capture power and this had led the party to pursue unusual strategies to attain power in Uttar Pradesh. It had formed alliances with parties with which it does not have any ideological and programmatic affinity at all. Its alliance for example with BJP on three different occasions including during the 2002 elections has raised considerable doubts about the sanguine purpose and objective of the party. This had two different kinds of effects. In political circles and in the eyes of the electorate, the BSP's credibility has gone down; very often it has been referred to as an opportunist party ready to form coalitions with strange forces. This kind of opportunism and lack of purpose to a large extent has eroded the credibility among a large section of the non-dalits, these non-dalits are included by the BSP in the category of bahujans. With these limitations, the BSP will find it extremely difficult to expand its social base among these sections of the community. But despite these limitations the progress of the BSP in the recent years particularly in the 1990s has been dramatic.

7.5 SUMMARY

A brief survey of dalit mobilisation and movements in India in the contemporary period reveals that though the mobilisation of dalits at an India level had started prior to independence with the efforts of Ambedkar who differed with Gandhi and the Congress, it gained momentum with the mobilisation efforts of the BSP after its formation in 1984. The BSP had succeeded in many respects, it had mobilised dalits politically to a significant extent in some states. Though it suffers from its own set of problems it has succeeded in coming to political power in the largest state of Uttar Pradesh which no dalit organisation either formed by Ambedkar or later was able to do. All this probably indicate that in future years there will be greater participation, assertion and mobilisation of dalits at the all India level.

7.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Explain the meaning of "dalit" and discuss dalit mobilisation during the pre-colonial period.
- 2) Critically evaluate the growth, ideology and the social base of the Bahujan Samaj Party.
- 3) What are the limitations of the BSP? Discuss.