Dalit Empowerment: A Sociological Discourse

Dr. Arun Kumar Singh*

All societies have been hierarchically divided at one or the other time but most complicated system of social stratification in Indian society has been due to its ramifications, rigidity and extremely harsh effects on people's life and living baffles social analysis world over (Prasad R. 1996:07). Indian social structure is based on caste model whose permeability or the case of entrance to and exit from any position in the social system is almost zero leading to inequality (Svalostoga:1965:40) in society and emergence of stigmatized grouping. But in Independent India; this stigmatized grouping (Dalits/SCs) has been trying to cast off inherited negative baggage and has covered a journey of emancipation and empowerment despite so many odds.

Dalit : Conceptual Analysis

Main features are as follows:

(A) Use of Different Terms :

Before the emergence of word Scheduled Caste in Indian Constitution in January, 1950 this group of people has been termed differently at different points of time though these terms did not have universal acceptance. The examples have been Avarnas, Achhuts, Namshudras, Parihas, Adi-Dravidas, Adi-Dharmis, Depressed Classes, Outcastes, Oppressed Hindus and Harijans.

The term 'Harijan' coined by Mahatma Gandhi during freedom movement has remained in usage for a long-time.

(B) SCs and STs

Indian Constitution has grouped certain caste in the category of Scheduled Castes since these have been put in certain Schedule of the Constitution, through a process of identification on certain criteria.

STs have also been scheduled constitutionally but as Tribes not as Castes.

(C) Dalits

The literal meaning of Dalit is 'ground down' or 'broken to pieces' in both Hindi and Marathi.

In 1920s, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used this word which covers in its ambit SCs only. But, the term used, by Dalit Panthers, where it includes in ambit SCs, STs, the landless and poor peasants, OBCs Women and all those who were exploited socially politically and economically as well as culturally on the basis predominantly religious beliefs and practices. Thus, the meaning of Dalit given by Dalit Panthers is based on class rather than caste.

However, Dalit Panthers also accepted the following arguments for taking SCs and STs as Dalits:

(i) Non-SC subgroups included in Dalit connotation have no such debilities as in case of SCs.

(ii) The exploited socio-cultural reality of the SCs is somewhat unique and no other exploited group of Indian society suffers from.

* **Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith, Varanasi**

(iii) Deprivations in case of SCs stem from inhuman conditions of material existence, powerlessness and ideological hegemony.

(iv) It is argued that it is not only economic and political deprivation, but in case of SCs, its stigmatization is in existences in case of Dalits.

Thus, due to uniqueness of debilities faced by SCs as well as their stigmatized existence, the term SCs and Dalits are used interchangeably for transaction of all business pertaining to this specific group of Indian citizens. But, conceptually Dalit is a grouping consisting of a basket of occupations in Indian society. They can be Hindus, Non-Hindus (other religions branched off from Hinduism i.e. Buddhism and Sikkhism) as well as Muslims and Christians.

The Concept of Empowerment

Many disciplines and arenas share concept of empowerment resulting into difficultly in bringing out a clear definition or meaning of empowerment. However, the precise meaning of empowerment is largely dependent upon the nature of people and the contexts in which it is being seen. Consequently, the concept of empowerment has been explained keeping different issues in mind:

1. Empowerment is bestowing or giving power hence making powerful. This conception of empowerment draws its idea from power which is understood as core of the concept of empowerment. Here, empowerment is viewed as encompassing economic power, communicative power, class power, social power and disciplinary power (Steven Lukes:1987) as well as psychological and political power (Smelser:1998:402, Fook:193:102, Gutierrez:1990:210-219; Katz and Hermalin:1986:171).
2. Empowerment is a multidimensional social process which provides collective and individual autonomy for gaining control over their own lives; makes people capable for taking actions on important issues confronting them, helps people to participate effectively in decisions that affect their lives at family, community and higher levels of social, political, economic and cultural processes; encourages people to involve themselves in defining and promoting their own agenda for political and social actions for bringing change; builds capacities and confidence for taking decisions about one's own life at individual and collective level and gaining control over resources; developing individual and social identity of people, helps in fulfilling the objectives of achievement of the more equitable distribution of resources and non-exploitative relationships between people and the enabling of people to achieve a creative sense of power through enhanced self-respect, confidence, knowledge and skills; releases the potential and strengths of social systems and discovers as well as creates resources and opportunities for promoting adoptive social functioning in resolution of the problems, issues and needs of people undergoing change and supports people undergoing change (Swift:1984:VIII; Rapport:1987; Thomson:2000:14; Suzy, Craft and Peter Beresford:2000:16; Braye and Preston Shoot:1995:48; Adams:1990:43; Ree: 1991:10; Lee:2000:34; Facocett et al:1994:471,474; Singha Roy:2001:14; Batliwala:1995:23-34; Pillai:1995:16).

To conclude, it can be maintained that empowerment is not bestowing power to someone by disempowering others but it is a process of enabling or authorizing an individual to think, behave, take action and control work and decision making in autonomous ways; refers to

a state of mind having a feeling of being worthy and competent or pursuing power or control resulting into self-empowerment to take control of one's own destiny and modifies social structure in order to distribute resources for overcoming the effects of discrimination and oppression. Thus, empowerment is a process of change through active involvement of persons who strive for change.

The Concept of Dalit Empowerment

Rowlands (1997) has developed multidimensional and interlinked power relations framework based on the works of Kabeer (1994), Nelson and Wright (1996) and Oxal and Baden (1997). This is based on the premise that empowerment is a process which helps in articulation of the dimensions of empowerment as well as strategies for achieving the empowerment goal. This framework is as follows:

1. Power within: individual changes in confidence and consciousness.
2. Power to: increase in skills, activities including earning an income access to market and networks.
3. Power over: changes in power relations in communities on at macro level.
4. Power with: organization of the powerless to enhance individual abilities and/or ability to challenge and challenge power relations.

This framework has been given new explanations by the Commission on Women and Development (CWD) which is as follows and this may be applied in case of Dalit Empowerment:

(I) Assets (Power to):

This refers to greater economic power in terms of material assets such as income, land, tools or technology.

(a) It is also said that economic power includes better health, more time, access to certain services such as loans, information and training, health centres and markets etc.

(II) Knowledge and Know-how (Power to):

This means:

(a) Having more practical and intellectual knowledge or skills, enabling a person or a community to make the most of the opportunities that arise.

(b) Management of people (leadership), techniques or procedures, training (literacy) as well as the development of thought and reason as critical analysis skills.

(c) Know-how highlights the importance of applying knowledge or the ability to translate one's knowledge.

(III) Will (Internal Power): This refers:

(a) Power within, psychological strength or spiritual power (one's values and fears, self confidence and self-perception).

(b) Ability and will to make one's own choices for the future, the awareness of one's own life plans as well as the challenges facing one's community.

(c) Two state of minds (being)and ability to use it towards others (knowing how to be).

(IV) Capacity (Internal power and power with)

This means:

(a) Having the opportunity to make decisions, take on responsibility, be free to act as one pleases and use one's resources (assets, knowledge, will).

(b) Decision making which includes:

(i) Ability to make one's own decisions;
(ii) The ability to take part in decision making;
(iii) The ability to influence decision making; and control those who make decisions on one's behalf;
(iv) The ability to make decisions for others and to show authority (in situations where someone has to make the final decision).

Provisions Made and Measures Taken

Constitutional Provisions

1. Promotion of educational and economical interests of weaker sections and protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Article 46-Part-IV).
2. Scheduling of SCs/STs (Article 342).
3. Prohibition of denial of equality of opportunity to seek justice on grounds of their socio-economic or other disabilities. Article 38 & 39)
4. Equality before law (Article 14).
5. Prohibition of discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth (Article 15).
6. Prohibition of denial of admission into state aided institutions on grounds of religion, caste, language etc. (Article 29).
7. Prohibition of forced labour (beggar) (Article 23).
8. Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha (Article 330).
9. Reservation of seats in Vidhan Sabha (Article 332).
10. Reservation of Quota in Public Employment (Article 335).
11. Provision of Special Officer for investigating all matters related to safeguards provided to SCs/STs and later on replaced as formation of National Commission for SCs/STs (Article 338).
12. Reservation of seats for SCs/STs in Panchayats (Article 243-D).
13. Reservation of seats for SCs/STs in Municipalities (243-1).

State Measures : They can be categorized as:

1. Political Representation in:

(a) Respective Assemblies of States and Lok Sabha in Parliament.
(b) Panchayat Raj Institutions and Urban Municipal Bodies

2. Educational Development Initiatives which include:

(a) Pre-mature and post-matric Scholarships
(b) Hostels for boys and girls
(c) Financial assistance (Fee, Boarding, Lodging, Books, Stationary, Computer etc.) for pursuing professional Courses
(d) National Fellowship for PG Courses (M.Phil.), Ph.D. in India and abroad.
(e) Training and Skill Development particularly for IT, Aviation, Fashion Technology, Hotel Management, Tourism etc.
(f) Reservation of seats in admission to Courses of study.

3. Economic Development Initiatives include:

(a) Self-employment schemes.
(b) Reservation in employment including employment guarantee schemes.
(c) Employment for scavengers.

(d) Training and assistance for starting small scale economic initiatives.
(e) Coaching for competitive examinations.
(f) Special Component Plan.

4. Social Empowerment through:

(a) Prevention of untouchability.
(b) Prevention of atrocities through PCR Act 1974 and SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act,1989.
(c) Reservation in Government Construction Contacts (in U.P. during Mayawati Regime).
(d) Construction of memorial of Dalit icons.
(e) Naming Institutions in the name of icons.
(f) Propagation of Dalit literature and thinking through seminars/symposia.

Dalit Empowerment: Myth and Reality

It is argued that Dalit Empowerment is myth since Dalits are subjected to discrimination in forms of:

(a) Disabilities i.e. disadvantages placed by ritual order treating Dalits unequally in society, economy and polity.
(b) Atrocities i.e. acts (Social boycotts, access to water, land, loss of work engagement, etc.) of oppression against Dalits either as individual or as a collective transgression or their rights guaranteed under Constitution and laws of land,
(c) Violence under. SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 mentions that violence refers to violent acts against person/property of Dalits as per provisions of the IPC and other laws of land.

Radical Dalits view that even social disabilities imposed on Dalits through the Brahminical caste system constitute psychic violence since these have forced the mainstream of the Dalits to accept these unfair, indeed inhuman, indignities as something ordained and something that has to be accepted as hard facts of life.

Discrimination and Disabilities in Case of Dalits

Marc Galantier (1991) presented following disabilities suffered by Dalits specially SCs:

1. Denial or restriction of access to the public facilities such as well, school, roads, post offices and courts.
2. Denial or restriction of access to temples where their presence might pollute the deity as well as higher- caste worshippers and from rest houses, tanks and shrines connected to temples.
3. Exclusion from any honourable and most profitable employment and relegation to dirty or menial occupations.
4. Denial of access to resources such as those provided by the baseless, laundry men, restaurants, shops and theatres or requiring the use of separate utensils and facilities within such places.
5. Restrictions on style of life, especially in the use of goods indicating comfort or luxury, riding on horseback, use of bicycles, umbrellas, footwear, the wearing of gold and silver ornaments, the use of palanquins to carry besides grooms.
6. Restrictions of difference in forms of address, language, sitting and standing in presence of so called higher castes.

7. Restrictions on movement- Dalits might not be allowed on roads and streets within prescribed distance of the houses or persons of higher castes.
8. Liability to unremunerated labour for the higher castes and to the performance of menial services for them. Besides this, Dalits do not have enough resources to meet the needs of emergencies, calamities etc. However, above mentioned disabilities are not exhaustive or complete.

Some notable discrimination faced by weaker sections in general and Dalits in particular are as follows:

1. Systematically and tactically refusal to hire or accept the participation of members of Dalits despite having all the competencies and at the same time giving favours to members of higher caste who have equal competences or even less competences.
2. Labour market discriminations take place regarding Dalits in form of restrictions (official or unofficial, formal or informal) in hiring or in wages or in working conditions or in opportunities for upward mobility having equal education, training, work experience etc.
3. Restrictions for preventing the entry of Dalits into occupations of majority group members or facing differential treatment in the acquisition of facilities and services necessary to enter the market.
4. Certain menial occupations are fixed for Dalits leading to another dimension of discrimination.
5. Certain rituals and traditions are fixed for Dalits. The Jajmani system is an example of this.

Thus, in short, social exclusion in its more specific manifestation as discrimination- refers to the processes through which groups are wholly or partially restricted from full participation in the economic, educational and social institutions that define social membership (Thorat and Neomani 2007:4122).

Consequences of Discrimination and Exclusion

These are as follows:

1. There are differences in human behaviour due to socio-economic inequalities and exclusion leading to the notion that possibility of changes in macro level social variables depends largely on the possibility of changes in socio-economic structure.
2. The social inequality and exclusion determine social status of person which determines style of life, socialization, values, mobility and accomplishments.
3. Due to the discriminations, the person of lower class feel discouragement and lower self-confidence leading to poor performance and sometimes limiting access to income and education.
4. The caste system creates imperfect, segmented ad monopolistic divisions in markets by preventing the free mobility of human labour, land, capital and entrepreneurship sparring gross inefficiency in resource allocation (Akerlofe:1976, Scoville:1991, Lal:1989, Ambedkar:1936 and 1987).
5. Caste becomes a direct cause of voluntary unemployment for higher caste individuals and involuntary unemployment for those in the bottom.
6. In the work ethics of caste system, the dignity of physical labour is nearly absent though it is the key aspect of works/jobs at the bottom of the status hierarchy.

7. Some socially degrading jobs such scavenging have been forced to persons of certain caste origin which ultimately put them in low status in Indian society.
8. The basic caste system is restriction which ultimately breeds inter group conflict and existence of a feeling of hatred.
9. Due to weakness and powerlessness of these groups, human rights violations related to them are common.

Another argument says that empowerment of Dalits is a reality, since

1. There is emergence of separate identity in case of Dalits who have received education and employment through affirmative action.
2. There is increase in identity assertion as well as fulfilment of their rights in case of livelihood and culturally specific life style.
3. There is upward movements also in case of accepting and practicing rituals of upper caste.
4. In this era, there exists free mobility of human labour, land, capital and entrepreneurship leading to the enhancement of self-confidence among Dalits which negates powerlessness.
5. Changes have taken place in socio-economic structures (status, values, mobility, accomplishments, style of life, values, economic opportunities etc.) leading to the availability of opportunities and choices to Dalits in the direction of improvement of their life and living.

Thus, it is clear that Dalits have certainly began to claim for ownership, access and control over resources and they perceive them to be their legitimate rights. However, the process of exclusion, deprivation and discrimination still exists but the ruling classes would concede the rights of Dalits only, if they have no other options left (Goran Therhorn: 1983.)

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