

Positioning Dalits in the Post-Globalised India: Shift from Micro to Macro

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ABSTRACT:

All over the world now a days people are discussing the problems of marginalized groups-their social, ethnic, economic and cultural problems. By and large, most of the marginalized groups constitute minorities-religious, ethnic, linguistic or otherwise. Invariably they are impoverished people constituting of minority groups. They suffer from economic, social or political impoverishment and find themselves estranged from this main stream. One such group in India is Dalit, the previously known untouchables which were born due to the falsehood of our religious scriptures and been followed through generations as a discriminatory force.

Inequality has led Dalits under guidance of Dr. Ambedkar to follow more generous Buddhist traditions as a revolt of the dominance of Hindu culture. Their existence is by and large peripheral. The marginalized groups of sections are consciously or unconsciously distanced from the power centers. They are scattered here and there and lack cohesiveness and strength. Deprived of economic, political or religious power, they grope in the dark for survival. Accepting Buddhism has led them to a different conscious platform where they were not judged along with Hindus. This shift also provided a slow but steady rise in the status of dalits in India.

This paper focuses on a path breaking initiative and its results with the help of a different spiritual base and that of the Buddhist Dalit entrepreneurs in India. Many innovative initiatives have started to motivate Dalit youth to enter the business & industry sector as entrepreneurs and to carve their own niche. Also discussed here is how the marginalized group with the help of Buddhist ideals and spirituality is encouraged to contribute to the nation's economy through wealth creation and to spread the spirit of enterprise to other fellow members.

INTRODUCTION:

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Objective/ Purpose:

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Buddhist ideology and Dalit faith:

Essentially, according to Buddhist teachings, the ethical and moral principles are governed by examining whether a certain action, whether connected to body or speech is likely to be harmful to one's self or to others and thereby avoiding any actions which are likely to be harmful. In Buddhism, there is much talk of a skilled mind. A mind that is skilful avoids actions that are likely to cause suffering or remorse. A lay Buddhist should cultivate good conduct by training in what are known as the "Five Precepts". To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings. This precept applies to all living beings not just humans. All beings have a right to their lives and that right should be respected. To undertake the training to avoid taking things not given. This precept goes further than mere stealing. One should avoid taking anything unless one can be sure that is intended that it is for you. To undertake the training to avoid sensual misconduct. This precept covers any overindulgence in any sensual pleasure such as gluttony as well as misconduct of a sexual nature. To undertake the training, to refrain from false speech. This precept covers slander as well as speech, which is not beneficial to the welfare of others. It is also about avoiding lying and deceiving. To undertake the training to abstain from substances which cause intoxication and heedlessness. This precept is in a special category as it does not infer any intrinsic evil in, say, alcohol

itself but indulgence in such a substance could be the cause of breaking the other four precepts.

Buddhist:

The Buddhist work ethic and business and professional ethics would ideally be closely tied to respect for the environment. It is well described in E.F.Schumacher's book '*Small is Beautiful*'. "While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation. But Buddhism is the Middle Way and therefore in no way antagonistic to physical well being. The keynote of Buddhist economics is simplicity and non-violence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern - amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfying results."

Ken Jones in a paper called "Buddhism and Social Action" comments: "Schumacher outlines a 'Buddhist economics' in which production would be based on a middle range of material goods (and no more), and on the other a harmony with the natural environment and its resources."

Dalits and Buddhism:

The Dalit Buddhist movement is a 19th and 20th-century Buddhist revival movement in India. It received its most substantial impetus from B. R. Ambedkar's call for the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, to escape a caste-based society that considered them to be

the lowest in the hierarchy. After publishing a series of books and articles arguing that Buddhism was the only way for the Untouchables to gain equality, Ambedkar publicly converted on 14 October 1956.

Dalits who have followed Dr. Ambedkar and got converted to Buddhism have progressed in all the fields of life as compared with Hindu Dalits. Buddhists have changed their occupations by leaving low paid and dirty professions. Better education has opened for them new opportunities for advancement. They give more importance to the education of their children resulting in higher rate of literacy.

They are more self respecting and assertive in their rights. They have become self makers, self dependent and competitive. They have grown intellectually. Their women and children enjoy better status in family and society. They have become enlightened and are saved from religious exploitation and bigotry. Thus Buddhism has definitely liberated them spiritually and materially.

Current scenario:

In 2004-2005, according to the NSS, in rural India, 34% of Scheduled Caste and 46% of Scheduled Tribe households were in self-employment (with corresponding urban proportions being 29% and 26%). This was a huge untapped work force which, if get the right direction, can make wonders to not only to their lives but in the Indian economy also. But they had many road blocks in their ways. The most

important barrier to their progress was their marginal social status.

The picture is gradually changing. Although India's Dalits suffer brutal caste-related violence and discrimination in education and the workplace, they have become a powerful political force in recent years as parties have courted them for their votes. Almost one in six Indians are Dalits – 166 million people, many of them concentrated in key states like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh where the Dalit-based BahujanSamaj Party was in power until earlier this year. There are many initiatives taken up by their own community people have tried making difference to their lives in recent times. One such case study is that of DICCI (Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) which works on the motto- "Be Job Givers – Not Job Seekers"

The Pune-based Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) was established in 2005 by Milind Kamble, a civil engineer and entrepreneur. While Mr. Kamble is currently the Chairman, the organization has grown with the help of new state chapters. Its membership base is rapidly expanding as more Dalit entrepreneurs become aware of its activities and what it can offer them. The Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce champions those 'untouchables' and other lower castes who are transforming their families' lives through enterprise. Many have become multimillionaires running successful companies and their slogan is 'fight caste through capital.'

The activities of its members are quite diversified ranging from manufacturing (sectors such as chemicals, agri-products, frozen foods, plastics, textiles, pest control, metals and metallurgy, marine engineering, solar energy, sugar refining), construction and services (health care, hospitality industries, education and international trade).

The chamber helps in three ways: Bring together all Dalit entrepreneurs under one umbrella, work as a one-stop resource centre for existing and aspiring Dalit entrepreneurs and promote entrepreneurship among Dalits as a solution to their socio-economic problem

DICCI focuses on entrepreneurship, as it believes that 'Dalit Capitalism' will help Dalits rise to the top of social pyramid and will pave the way for the end of the caste system. However, in order to understand the spread of "Dalit Capitalism" it is not enough to focus on the top end of Dalit businesses (the Dalit billionaires), but instead, to investigate the extent and spread of Dalit participation in small businesses, which more accurately reflects the material conditions of millions of Dalits who are not in wage employment.

In India, certain castes and communities have traditionally been business communities, and entrepreneurs from these communities start with clear natural advantages in that they possess insider knowledge, know-how and strong business networks passed down through

the generations. In this context, an important channel of social mobility would be the extent to which marginalized groups, whose traditional occupations have not been business-based, have been able to break into established networks and establish themselves as entrepreneurs. While this dataset does not have detailed and specific jati (caste) information, the evidence suggests that entrepreneurship as a significant vehicle for social mobility for Dalits is yet to become a reality for India.

As Milind Kamble, founder of DCCI argues, “capital is the surest means to fight caste. In Dalits’ hands, capital becomes an anti-caste weapon... Dalit capitalism is the answer to that regime of discrimination”. Undoubtedly, dalit’s foray into the arena of capitalism defying Manu’s dictum is the latest talk of the town. We are being told that from the corporate honchos to the big bosses at the planning commission to the members of India’s multi-colour polity, everybody is ready to embrace this new breed of entrepreneurs for what they have done against heavy odds and what they intend to achieve.

For the proponents of dalit capitalism the whole thing is ‘full of promises’ and ‘compelling need for the future of India’ and in fact, is a critical element in ‘desegregating the Indian society.’ To make it happen dalits need to get integrated into capital / market.

To confront ‘illegitimate dominance of the Caste Hindu Order,’ Dalits need to

create a middleclass based on education/ white collar jobs/professions. It is being declared that public sector with its attendant reserved seats is no more the panacea for the communities problems. Yes, affirmative action should be extended to private sector but it would be inadequate in producing an effective middleclass. The booming small scale industry presents a possibility before the dalit middleclass to grow into a big economic and social force.

The whole idea and its likely implementation seems to be a ‘veritable revolution of sorts’ in the ethos perpetuated by Manu Dharma which had prohibited a dalit from becoming an employer of non-dalits or becoming a money maker. For an outsider the logic definitely looks attractive. If millions amongst them become entrepreneurs then thousands amongst them can metamorphose into big time capitalists. And this way they can chase away Manu Dharma. It is also underlined that without support from state and society it would be impossible to achieve this.

Limitations of the study:

Question like the following arise:-

whether Dalit Capitalism can really liberate/ free/emancipate dalits from the ‘illegitimate dominance of caste Hindu order’ as it is claimed to be or would further consolidate/ strengthen its stranglehold on the exploited and the oppressed with some dalit billionaires finding space in the list of

'Fortune 500' or 'Forbes 500' and broad masses of the dalit people left in destitution without any semblance of security? Can it be said that it is THE step needed for the post Ambedkarite movement to break asunder the chains of servitude and usher us into the much cherished 'economic democracy'? Should one see it as further extension of the emancipatory project launched by legendary Dr Ambedkar or its exact opposite leading to further cooption of the radical potential inherent in the dalit movement? How does one compare the recent experience of Dalit capitalism with that of Black capitalism? Whether capitalism with an adjective - black, hispanic, dalit or white - have any import for the situation on the ground, does a black capitalism or dalit capitalism is more 'bearable' to the 'black' or 'dalit' toiling masses?

In an ambience where the socialist project - to usher us into a more egalitarian society - has faced tremendous reversals since last two decades, coupled with the historical limitations exhibited by its proponents here to understand the complexity of caste - leading to valid accusations about their 'sociological blindness - it has not been possible for left intellectuals of our times to engage with the issue. The legatees of the Ambedkarite project, who have faced splits after splits have also found themselves, wanting on this occasion as on earlier many occasions.

CONCLUSION:

This case study is an example that the economy-caste-progress-society is a

newly found nexus and if this equation is possible to solve, it is only because of such bold and daring initiatives taken by the marginal groups themselves. Let all the success be with them.

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