The Political and the Social in the Dalit Movement Today

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Post-Ambedkarite movements for dalit emancipation in India have had different currents. In Uttar Pradesh, the assertion of the Bahujan Samaj Party has initiated a new era of democratisation, while the upsurge of dalit castes through Buddhist conversion has brought about social change in Maharashtra. Yet, both these separate phenomena suffer from the disadvantages of not addressing vital issues raised by Ambedkar. This paper tries to synthesise a model out of the dialectics of the socio-political movements in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh from the vantage point of Ambedkarite philosophy.

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The year 2007 will be contemplated in the history of dalits as one of the most significant years as it witnessed a new rise of dalit assertion in the arena of politics and religion. The emphatic victory of Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh ridiculed all "poll pundits" and showed that the dalits' political activism has come of age and it was high time that dalits got their proper share in the national political mainstream. At the same time in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, while celebrating the 50th anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion, numerous dalit castes are converting to Buddhism.[1] Both these historic events should be linked together and seen as the progressive realisation of Ambedkar's vision, to which the dalit masses are paying their tributes. Dalits, differing from the mainstream political discourse, are demonstrating a new path for social and political transformation. Both the modern Buddhists and the new aggressive dalit political elites reject all "the given" liberal identifications and "cultured" nomenclatures, eventually constructing a socially robust political identity in the public domain.

Formulating a dignified social and political identity for dalits is always valued as one of the essential tasks of modern social movements in India. Among all such movements, one can witness a conflicting relationship between "the given" identities and the identities carved by the "dalit self". The non-dalit identities of the self in general imagine or construct a meta-narrative of cultural identity based upon highly parochial and xenophobic ideas. This idea is further propagated among the masses to encompass all the "cultured self" as one and this identity is used for preserving the traditional dominance of some particular ethnic groups over others. The imaginary political Hindu, the modern liberal-secular citizen, Marxist proletariat, parochial Dravidian, etc, are some of the modern entitlements which seek to form a "common universal identity" surpassing the internal differences based on religious, social and class status.

The dalit political discourse has produced a concrete alternative to the mainstream nationalist formulations in all the realms of public reason. The discourse legitimises the thirst for political power, as it is one of the prime instruments in bringing a radical change in social relationships [Sudha Pai 1998: 40]. On the one hand, rejection of political dominance by the "manuvadis" became the mantra of the new dalit political ideology. On the other hand, the Ambedkarite Buddhist identity challenges the "immoral", unscientific and regressive mode of social system and is hopeful of building a modern social order based on human values. This alternative conceptualisation of religious identity

relates the dalits to a proud historic legacy of Buddhism and helps them to imagine new cultural symbols in contrast to their degraded cultural representations.

Both the assertion of a new political identity and the converted Buddhist identity become essentially important to understand the aspirations of the modern dalit, as they supplement equally well the radical agenda of social transformation. In the public domain of politics, a dignified presence of an individual is essential to exploit the fruits of modern democracy. I shall argue that the modern Buddhist identity offers this dignity to the new assertive dalit self without which he/she will be identified as a wretched, degraded, lower caste "Hindu self".

Ambedkar formulated and conceptualised the meaning and political philosophy of both these domains with certain prerequisite modern ethical norms. The contemporary dalit movements have followed divergent routes to achieve social transformation without any dialogical relationship between them. This paper will focus on the reasons of an imaginary distance between the two recent transformations: the social upsurge of dalit castes which embrace Buddhism to bring social change and the assertion of BSP as a political party under the leadership of a dalit woman for a dynamic change in the politics of India. In social science, both this phenomena are often studied and analysed separately. This is an attempt to examine the limitations of these movements in forging a meaningful synthesis out of their friendly dialectics. Since both the social and political models have the potential of enriching the movements of the subaltern masses through their divergent motives, experiences and ideals, it is imperative to judge them on their ethical credentials.

Ambedkar and the Dalit Identity

The underprivileged sections, especially, the "bahujans" and the "dalits" have had a history of struggle in challenging "given" identities and furthermore constructing their own alternative identities and political concepts to fulfil the requirements of contemporary times. In this discourse "dignity of the self" became the outcry for targeting the nature of then existing social control.

> Dalit-bahujan thinkers conceive the nation as a good society where its members, considered as individuals or collectivities, respect one another; protect mutual rights and show concern and solidarity. Self-respecters, therefore, felt that as long as there is the existence of untouchability, all talks of freedom and self-rule is empty.[2]

In the social history of identity formulation of the deprived castes, Ambedkar's name is the most prominent as he was the thinker who successfully formulated an assertive and separate dalit identity. He demonstrated that the exploitative relationships of the untouchables to the other Hindus were a result of the battle between two divergent cultures. He argued that the brahminic counter-culture destroyed the great Buddhist civilisation, which resulted in the enslavement of Buddhist population as "untouchables" [BAWS 1990: 372-374]. He had a firm belief that within Hinduism any kind of radical social transformation is almost impossible. Therefore he argued against the "reformists" and the "bhakti cult" for their lack of social protest and content of social reform. The representation of dalits in their discourse was highly passive and lacked any kind of radical challenge to the social system. He convinced the people that with the bards of Hindu culture, emancipation would be a difficult task [Zelliot 1996: 11-13]. Furthermore his encounter with Gandhi over the question of "separate electorate" and "harijan" demonstrated that he was not interested only in some kind of separate nomenclature but he was deeply introspecting about how an identity of his people will be placed in the public domain. What would be the rights of his community in the nascent independent country? He was overtly concerned about the dignified positioning of "new dalit" as a citizen in the realm of modern secular democratic order [Chatterjee 2006]. In 1936 as a response to the burning questions of dalits' political and social identity, he declared two separate modes of struggles; he announced his conversion to Buddhism at Yeola and on August 15, he established his first political outfit, The Independent Labour Party. The reason behind formulating such a twofold agenda for dalits lies in his insight about India's social and political nature.

Secularism: Important for Ambedkar

Ambedkar was a modern secular thinker. Religion as a political identity was observed by Ambedkar as a dangerous formulation in a multi-religious country like India [BAWS 1990: 29-30]. He had also witnessed the communal tensions between the Hindu and Muslim political elites. If religion as a seer political instrument succeeds, it would further endanger all the minority communities. Understanding such a drastic impact of religion on democracy, a secular polity was essentialised by the makers of the Constitution. Ambedkar understood that under such a conflict-ridden situation, politically mobilising dalits over the issue of separate religion would have a dangerous impact on the secular polity of contemporary India. But he was also convinced that Hindu religion as a social mechanism is highly undemocratic, orthodox and antagonistic to the modern values of citizenship. He observed that the "impure" Hindu identity of dalits is responsible for their demoralised and undignified social status. Therefore a radical transformation of society is essential so that the social values and status of every individual would supplement the goals of modern political ideals.

Conversion to Buddhism was a result of Ambedkar's deliberation over the social and political context of India in which the dalits were one of the main groups. Ambedkar as the chairman of the drafting committee of the constituent assembly visualised that the future constitution of the country would be based on the western model of citizenship along with the secular rights to the minority communities. Even though the rights of his community were formally structured in the modern constitution, he was aware that the implication of constitutional norms was going to be very troublesome as the Hindu societal attitude went against the ethics of the constitution. He warned the constituent assembly that if the social and economic inequalities remained operational in society then one is doing nothing but "putting our democracy in peril".

> On January 26 we are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man

> one vote value. In our social and economic life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long can we continue to live a life of contradictions? How shall we deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we do so only by putting our political democracy in peril.[3]

The propagators of the Hindu caste system would be the main hurdles in the progressive march of the modern nation. He was not a critique of western modernity but understood that it had its own limitations in tackling most of the cultural problems and therefore a recovery of dalit agency through conversion to Buddhism was suggested as an alternative conception of nation and community [Viswanathan 2001: 216].

He envisaged that Buddhism had that radical social message which would not only transform the social relationship but in future enhance the human values of the Constitution in public. Buddhism for Ambedkar was not just a tool for identity formulation among dalits but he wanted to establish concrete moral norms in the society, which was hardly encountered in the past.

Morality as a Common Signifier

Like Machiavelli, Ambedkar established a relationship between religion and politics by making morality a common signifier. The religious order of society should supplement the great ideals of a secular political establishment. Any antagonism over the ideals between the two will result in a social oligarchy of minority groups over the majority.

Religion as a social identity should propose a common and proud legacy of cultural past, social relationship with dignity and liberty to every individual to acquire profits out of his/her labour. For the dalits, such essential components of public life were absent in Hindu religion but were granted by the modern Constitution. His respect for western modernity was to its commitment to individual liberty, human rights and scientific progress of human civilisation. He also imagined that these moral principles were enshrined in the teachings of the Buddha. Ambedkar visualised Buddhism not as a ritualistic religion but as a social doctrine to establish morality in the society. By proposing "Navayana Buddhism"[4] to dalits, Ambedkar tried to bridge the gap between the new born political ideals and the societal norms under which the dalits were living a wretched life.

Ambedkar in his last years of life paid little attention in mobilising the masses for political goals and put great emphasis on the goals of social transformation. It led him to seek refuge in the Buddha on October 14, 1956, where he made an announcement that he would dedicate his entire life for the propagation of Buddhism in India. Furthermore, understanding his responsibility as a political leader of a vast population, he formulated a new political outfit, the Republican Party of India (RPI) to be able to participate in the democratic polity. Surprisingly, the secular principles of the political organisations, which Ambedkar established, reiterated the teachings and social ideals of Buddhism.[5] For Ambedkar societal reforms vis-à-vis the Constitution became the prime task and therefore his new political party never constructed any hyperactive political ideology, but revolved round the same principles of social change. Being a spiritual person, he aspired to bring social change through the most non-violent, human and collective mode of cultural resistance. He imagined the dalit as a modern citizen endowed with basic human rights, dignity and a glorified cultural past, with which s/he would be capable of entering the domain of politics.

The post-Ambedkar dalit movements, in contrast, especially in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, have developed two alternative models for bringing about social transformation. These social and political alternatives, because of their separate existence from each other, failed in generalising the basic ethical notions of Ambedkar's teaching, essential for any programme of social transformation.

Dalit-Buddhist Movement in Maharashtra: Limitations

Many social scientists have developed an elusive scholarship over the positive impact of Buddhist conversion movement on the dalits in Maharashtra. Socially, the dalits represent a distinct religious identity with new forms of rituals, symbols and festivals. They crafted a whole new set of public culture around the iconography of Ambedkar and the Buddha by building numerous Buddha Vihars. A dynamic and popular Buddhist literature also became the part of public consciousness, which represents revolutionary songs, plays and realistic autobiographies by dalit authors and poets [Guru 1997]. Most importantly, it is emphasised that the conversion movement has a psychological dimension as it has freed the mahar from the sense of inferiority in public [Zelliot 1996: 220]. These illustrations argue that in Maharashtra the conversion movement precipitates a silent social and cultural revolution among the dalits.

The above-mentioned analysis has a practical validity but it does not reflect the whole truth. The impact of any movement should be measured on all the parameters: social, cultural, economic and political. In Maharashtra, the conversion movement has significantly changed the first three arenas but failed in the last, the political domain. The post-Ambedkar political leadership, especially in Maharashtra, failed in asserting themselves as the true heirs of Ambedkar's socio-political legacy.

RPI and Dalit Panthers

RPI, which was established with a great moral commitment and ideology to work for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections, including the Buddhists, in a very short period of time was grasped by the self-interested mahar leadership. They failed to capitalise on the cultural capital created by the vibrant dalit movement and mostly worked against its ethos [Guru 1997: 21]. The RPI is divided into as many as 11 different factions today and the mahar leadership dominates ardently most of these factions. The RPI has not only failed in mobilising the backward castes and the Muslims against the ruling Congress but also failed in convincing the non-mahar dalits. Furthermore, in their desperate move to remain visible in the power structure they forged opportunistic alliances with the Congress Party. This made them a "stooge" of the ruling elites and thus a negligible force in Maharashtra's politics. They heralded the importance of Buddhist conversion in most of their public meetings but hardly tried to develop a sound synthesis and

mass mobilisation on economic and political problems faced by the deprived sections of the state.

In the same period, against the opportunistic and corrupt RPI leadership, in 1972 the Dalit Panthers emerged with a radical socio-political programme and spiritedly occupied the imaginations and hopes of young, newly educated dalits [Kuber 2001: 329-331]. This was an intellectual movement, which succeeded in establishing new cultural and religious values among the urban dalits. But at the peak of its popularity a confrontation broke between the two most dynamic leaders of Dalit Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, over the primacy of Buddhism in the movement of social transformation. The movement split into two distinct camps with one group (Dhasal) adopting the Marxist class perspective and the other (Dhale) adopting the Ambedkarite Buddhist model for bringing change. The movement also faced the problems of unavailability of infrastructural assets, sound political vision and a direct onslaught of militant Hindutva forces. Due to the divergent ideals of the leadership and other related problems, the Dalit Panthers died after a half-won battle leaving behind a great legacy of vast revolutionary literature and culture [Omvedt 2001].

In the recent past, the post-Ambedkar Buddhist movement has had a limited appeal among the dalits and has become a non-issue in the public discourse. It has constructed a small elite coterie of dalit intellectuals, bureaucrats and some political leaders who monopolise the symbols of Buddhist movements for their personal interest or to criticise the other political elites for their compromising attitude to Ambedkar's legacy. Ambedkar hoped that the neighbouring Buddhist countries like China, Japan and South Korea would help the newly converted dalits in building an international Buddhist fraternity, but their help and fraternal relationships are restricted mostly in building decorative pagodas at Bodha Gaya and Sarnath in Bihar. One faith based organisation (FBO), Trilokya Bouddha Mahasangh Sahayak Gana (TBMSG) is effectively functioning among the Buddhists, which proposes a non-political, non-confrontationist but a "spiritual" model to propagate Buddhism. Some of the new enthusiasts who have joined the Buddhist movement possess questionable public credentials because of their non-social outlook. The non-dalit Buddhist organisations like Bouddha Mahasabha of Kolkata is so insensitive to the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement that it does not even mention Ambedkar's religious conversion as an important landmark in their souvenir on 2,500 years of Buddhism in India. Such insensitivity is also visible in the Mahaboudhi temple of Bouddha Gaya, where even after a 10 year long struggle by Bhadant Surei Sasai, most of the monks are brahmins and not Buddhists [Lokhande 2005].

The dalit-Buddhist movement in Maharashtra has failed in generating a dynamic cultural assertion, which can encompass the aspirations of all the oppressed sections. These movements overestimated the values of ideological commitments and failed drastically in the arena of politics. The attempt to bring socio-religious change for the dalits in a constitutionally secular but culturally communal atmosphere through political mobilisation had a moral imperative but as a political strategy was disastrous. The RPI and Dalit Panthers tried to utilise the aspirations of the newly created Buddhist identity but overestimated its practical value in the politics of Maharashtra. Here they fell short in understanding the dynamics of caste politics in Maharashtra and mistakenly employed a monolithic Buddhist category to judge the credentials of its supporters. The non-mahar dalits refused the leadership of RPI and Dalit Panthers because of the impractical and self-centred attitude of the mahar leaders. Instead of developing Buddhism as a political philosophy they instrumentalise it as a political ideology and thus alienate many dalit castes and their leaders from RPI [Jaffrelot 2006: 390]. The recent upsurge of mass conversion in Maharashtra has been used again by the dalit politicians for their petty political needs without paying attention to the numerous economic and political problems faced by the larger dalit masses in the state. The dalit political leadership failed to demonstrate their willingness to forge a strategic secular alliance with the other non-Buddhist communities as has been done by Kanshi Ram's BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP and the New Dalit Political Ideology

The BSP under the leadership of Kanshi Ram has brought the most significant change in the psyche of dalit masses by providing an umbrella identity, futuristic vision, myths, social ideology and a political strategy to become one of the most significant players in the game of power politics in contemporary India [Kumar 2002: 168-69]. The BSP from its very initiation as a political party symbolised the political aspirations of the downtrodden oppressed masses in India. The name of Kanshi Ram's first political party, Dalit Shoshit Sangram Samiti (DS-4), had a broader philosophical appeal in the fight for the rights of the oppressed and thus reflected the unwavering influence of dalit social movement on him. Babasaheb Ambedkar also understood that the dalit as a community was not only economically exploited, culturally segregated and socially discriminated but also remained untouchable in the realm of political power. Therefore he advocated the capture of power as one of the main objectives for emancipating the lower castes from the elite domination [Jaffrelot 2006: 423]. As early as in 1932 at the All India Depressed Classes Congress at Nagpur, he proclaimed his wish to establish dalits as a ruling class in India.

> It is very necessary that the political reins should come in the hands of untouchables. For that, all of us should unite and secure a political status. Untouchability in India will not be eradicated so long as the untouchables do not control the political strings.[6]

In the post-Ambedkar era, Kanshi Ram became the true torchbearer of Ambedkarite struggle in the political arena of India. He materialised this vision by giving a practical road map of social revolution based on the idea of social engineering. The political "bahujan" was one of the most imaginative political categories, which Kanshi Ram coined to overturn the dominant generalisation that the deprived classes are always submissive bearers of political power. The bahujan identity also rejects the mainstream formulations based on class, religion and secularism because they favour and legitimise the control of upper castes over the rest. The political philosophies of social elites disregard the aspirations of dalits and lack any radical programme to bring about social transformation. Challenging the limitations of these national parties, the BSP argues that an inclusive and representative

social engineering of castes and minorities is the most appropriate formula for power sharing.

Democratic Political Alliance

This alternative conceptualisation of a political party based on a majority-minority dichotomy mirrors the classical Marxist category but with new cultural attires suitable to the Indian context. Social identity not only replaces the class category in this mode but also democratises the whole structure by sanctioning the autonomy to every cultural, social and religious group before forming the alliance. The bahujan identity neither believes in the total submission of all deprived communitarian identities to become one nor does it philosophise a complete suppression of the minority ruling elites to achieve its political ideals. Bahujan identity is a democratic political alliance between the politically deprived caste groups of contemporary India under the leadership of the most exploited castes of Indian history, the dalits. This coalition of all deprived minority communities (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward castes, and minorities) in practical sense represents the majority of the population in India [Hasan 2004: 382]. The BSP mobilises its voters using this newly carved meta-narrative by making one grand promise that power is the "guru-killi" or master key which enables its wielders to open every lock, whether social, political, economic or cultural [Dubey 2001: 228-310].

The dalits being the formulators and leaders of the bahujan category are also the most stringent advocators of the BSP's political strategies. They have discovered a pan-national legacy of "bahujan leaders" as their ideologues and constructed a distinct political discourse based on Ambedkar's thoughts. Being dalits, they endeavour to overthrow the social, political, cultural and economic dominations perpetuated by the Hindu social order. Such a revolutionary appeal is the basic component of this vanguard party to bring real social change in India and therefore, "dalitness" becomes the core value of bahujan political philosophy.

The BSP's magnificent victory in the recent Uttar Pradesh elections has shown that they are second to no political outfit in providing political leadership to all those people who want a great and inclusive democracy, corruption-free society and state system based on strict observance of law and constitutional norms. This victory has a capacity to generate a revolutionary spirit in the whole democratic system for a required change. Political power in India is controlled and instrumentalised by the upper caste ruling elites for the benefits of a small and exclusive group of people and has persistently denied the bahujans from its valid share. Mayawati has shown the way that the dalits as the leaders of the people can discover new political arithmetic between the social groups and can mobilise them towards a concrete political victory. This is indeed a real social revolution under the proletariat dalit leadership in a most democratic manner, without spilling a drop of blood.

Limitations of BSP as a Social Movement

But there are some cautious warnings too along with such warm analysis. The political power seizure by BSP has introduced the party in public with a new political ideology different from the consistent idea of "social engineering" between the deprived sections of the country. In its recent 'avatar', the BSP is riding the chariot of power with the help of a community, which is notoriously condemned in history by the ideologues and thinkers of bahujans for its shrewdness, greed of power and criminal valorisation of their social status. Keeping such a partner in power can compel the BSP to dilute the vital issues of social justice, law and order and secularism. Secondly, there is a threat that due to its fixation on power, the BSP will forget the ethical idea of empowering the "bahujans". In the thirst of capturing "sarvajan", there is a possibility of compromise in delivering social justice to the bahujan masses. Such openness to the non-bahujans can also undermine the moral guidelines of the movements and offer an opportunity to the manuwadis to gradually consolidate their domination under the garb of sarvajan [Guru 2003: 26]. The BSP must remain committed to forge an unbreakable unity of all the deprived sections of the society.

Furthermore, such grand emphasis on the instrumentality of political power in bringing about social change underestimates the control of social and cultural mafias in their respective fields. It will be a mistake by the BSP to think that hierarchical social relations based on sanctioned religiosity can be overhauled through the employment of power [Rodriguez 2006]. BSP thus underestimates the values of social movements in fighting these ills at the ground level, especially of the Buddhist social movement. Even Ambedkar had warned the deprived sections not to solely depend on political power for their emancipation.

> Those who depend upon these political safeguards must think as to what will happen after these safeguards are withdrawn. On the day on which our political rights cease to exist, we will have to depend upon our social strength. I have already told you that this social strength is wanting in us. So also I have proved in the beginning that this strength cannot be achieved without the conversion. None should think of the present only. To forget what is eternally beneficial and to be allured by temporary gains is bound to lead to suffering. Under these circumstances, one must think of what is permanently beneficial. In my opinion, conversion is the only way to eternal bliss. Nobody should hesitate even if the political rights are required to be sacrificed for this purpose.[7]

Tenets of Social Movements

The social movements of India's deprived castes are based on three major tenets: firstly, the social movement identifies the basis of exploitation by identifying two categories, namely, the exploiter and the exploited subjects. In India, caste categories based on "pure and impure" births become the base for such categorisation. Secondly, in the struggle against oppressive social system, the movement challenges the domination of the oppressed in all the arenas of civilisation. Periyar challenged the hegemony of brahmins in the social, political, cultural and religious order and forged a plan for complete destruction of the brahmanical system. Thirdly, the social movement imagines the alternative model for a better society. Ambedkar prioritised a society, which would be based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, against the cherished varnashrama dharma of Gandhi. Thus, a self-conscious dignified social identity, a commitment to

end the oppressive social order and a hope for the establishment of an equal and libertarian society, become the basic tenets of the social movements in India.

To fulfil the agenda of dalit emancipation, a relentless struggle with a non-compromising commitment to the ideology of social emancipation should always be prioritised in the movement. BSP as a social movement initiated its public activism as a crusader against social and political maladies, which under the strategic political compulsion transformed its ethical imperatives into bourgeois political tactics. BSP's new mantra acknowledges the credentials of every group, not according to its social location but according to its political representation. Under this consideration they have located that the brahmin and baniya castes are marginally represented in the political map of UP and therefore it became their sole credentials to be the part of the social movement led by the BSP. This alliance defies the first core principles on which a democratic social movement of India's proletariat should have emerged.

Furthermore, a consistent onslaught on the caste system is needed for its total transformation. Dalits are the worst affected sections because of the perpetual social discrimination existing in the society. This is also the community whose committed support enabled the BSP to play in the corridors of power. The BSP should take keen interest in the emancipation of the dalit masses by fighting all kinds of social evils and work to radicalise the society towards an inclusive and fraternal social order.

Social and Political Agenda of Dalits

A separate analysis of these movements demonstrates that both of them at their respective spaces are unconsciously prioritising two distinct alternatives for bringing social change. There is lack of respect vis-à-vis each other's strategies and many times these movements are critical and antagonistic to each other. On one hand the Buddhist movement in Maharashtra cunningly valourises its cultural and psychological impact on the mahars but fails to provide any kind of political alternative to the vast deprived non-Buddhist communities. It is unsuccessful in aggregating the interest of the deprived sections. On the other hand, in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP succeeded in providing a dalit leadership to a multi-caste, multi-religious political alliance, but lacks in providing an empowered social milieu for the dalits. The political socialisation of dalits has a limited impact on their present social, cultural and economic status. A vast majority of dalits in Uttar Pradesh are prone to the ills of untouchability, poverty and illiteracy and a symbolic dalit political leadership is facing limitations in fighting these evils through the corridors of power. Both the movements further provide sound references to Ambedkar's political and social writings to legitimise their claim as right and perfect.

Ambedkar had employed Buddhism in the society, by giving an insight to the larger political context and its moral purpose in the modern world [BAWS 1990]. He was convinced that Buddhism possessed a moral doctrine with two major objectives to perform. Firstly, in the political domain, it will be helpful for the dalits in creating a non-communal political ideology and identity against other existing perspectives of violent political identities. He was also convinced that Buddhism provides a comprehensive socio-political and cultural alternative, which is conducive to an effective functioning of the democratic polity. Secondly, in the social domain, Ambedkar assumed that conversion, as a conscious apparatus of subaltern masses will bring radical changes in the socio-cultural relationships of Indian society. Buddhism, at the first stage, would de-caste the dalits from their primordial caste identity and in the progressive run to "establish the kingdom of righteousness" would counter the orthodox religiosity of Hinduism. In the battle between the scientific temperament of Buddhism and the irrational doctrine of brahmanism, the destruction of Hinduism is inevitable. Thus, Ambedkar's conversion movement idealised a peaceful functioning of social transformation along with the progress of the modern nation state.

Limits of Nominal Instrumentality

The contemporary subaltern politics throughout the country has employed caste as an ideological benchmark for political mobilisations, in forging alliances and in the end to capture state power. The politics of caste challenges the domination of one group of castes to exchange it with the other and thus establishes the primacy of caste identity in the public discourse. Caste identity when operating in public, does so with a grand baggage of a social, cultural and historic past. If the bearers of this baggage do not have an equal status, sense of fraternity and moral courage, then those who occupy the positions of superior social status will dominate them. Thus, such nominal instrumentality can replace the political elites but it does not have the capability to bring about social and cultural equality in the society. Brahmanism as a social ideology will remain functional if the caste identities are operating in public with the notion of purity and impurity. BSP, under the leadership of dalits, is controlling the apparatus of state power and has succeeded in replacing one set of political elites. The real struggle of BSP furthermore lies in transforming the social, cultural and economic status of the dalits.

The dalit masses respect the political churning of BSP as an integral part of a large social movement. They believe that the controllers of political power have the legitimate authority to bring revolutionary changes in society. BSP using this metaphor mobilises the dalit masses for its support. Moreover to capture power it forms tactical alliances with other caste groups, which traditionally are against the whole ethos of dalit assertion. Such grand alliances, once they come to power, will not be under the authority of one caste group but will be under the scrutiny of many additional power blocs with a capacity of bargain. For Mayawati, the chief minister, bringing social change in this political situation will be a tough task. Even if she succeeds in bringing a consensus for any of her radical policy, it will be difficult for her to implement it in a society, which is ridden by regressive, conservative and orthodox social practices, including untouchability. Thus, political power will face a strong challenge from "civil society" in its pursuit of establishing an ideal social order. The recent uproar of the upper caste elites over the 27 per cent reservation for the OBCs in central educational institutions is an eye-opener about the society in which we are living.

Social, economic and political domains are interconnected public paradigms. In a democratic space they interact with each other to produce consistent change. In the contemporary world, the traditional societal values are in constant flux and the modern state is at the forefront to legitimise the growing demands of society. The interest aggregation of a communitarian good is usually asserted and demanded by their respective leaders, organisations and mass movements. Such political socialisation within society is the first step, which gives necessary input to the state to understand the needs of society. The state prior to this, as an outsider, only promotes basic human rights under which every individual should get equal liberty to deliberate upon his/her situation in the larger community.

But in contrast, when the state imposes its own ideals of "good" over the public without a proper political socialisation, it faces fierce opposition from the conservative blocs of society. In social sciences, many scholars evaluate this debate under the rubric of "tradition versus modernity".[8] The hypothesis that they propose is an important one: western modernity imposes certain alien standards on the indigenous civilisation, which results in growing intolerance and fundamentalism in the society [Joseph 2006]. The modern nation state generated a hope that with a moral constitutional system it will bring social and economic change, curtailing the degraded, unequal and inhuman ruminants of past civilisation. This hope has never materialised in the Indian context. Firstly those who believe in the power and commitment of the state as an ideal and moral reformer, underestimate the control of conservatism over the societal order. Secondly, they are neglecting the limitations of democratic polity in bringing radical social change, and thirdly, they undermine the capacity and capability of progressive social movements to articulate and aggregate genuine demands of public interest to the modern state.

Ambedkarite Dynamics

Ambedkar was well aware about these contradictions between the virtues of modernity and the explicit autonomy of conservative values persisting in society. Therefore he proposed two dynamic strategies to counter this challenge. A religious conversion movement will challenge the hegemony of the social elites, by establishing a secular fraternity. Secondly in the pursuit to control political power, the dalits will forge an alliance with the other marginalised sections and if they succeed, this will establish the order of social justice. Only a fraternal social system is conducive to bear the fruits of social justice.

> Democracy is quite different from republic as well as from parliamentary government. The roots of democracy lie not in form of government, parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of government. A democracy is a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in social relationship, in terms of associated life between the people who form the society.[9]

The Buddhist conversion movement as a substitute to Hindus' social hierarchy argues for the annihilation of the caste-based social system and upholds an ideology based on social justice and equal opportunities. It represents a new moral self for the individual citizen in public to claim the benefits of liberal democracy. It constructs a positive collective culture of people based on a fraternal and rational ethos and finally it symbolises a vision for the reconstruction of society by bringing the issue of "social democracy" into the mainstream debates of political development. The conversion movement further aspired to change the discourse from "politics of caste" to a moral domain of "public

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religion". It critically diminished the primacy of caste in mainstream discourse with a secular perspective, and necessitates a need of a moral religion in the public domain. In the recent history of the dalit movement such grand idealisations of the Buddhist movement were compromised, ridiculed and even challenged in some quarters. In Maharashtra only the mahar and mang castes among the dalits have somehow succeeded in making a concrete sense of the Buddhist conversion movement in the recent past, but have left many other dalit castes out of this purview. This success is nominal as it has failed to carry forward this movement in other parts of the country but it does not mean that the cherished moral and ethical values have met a sorry end.

Conclusions

The post-Ambedkar dalit movements by not giving the needed importance to the socio-political and cultural notions of Buddhism have developed a strategy that is limited to the issues of political democracy. They aggregate the issue of representation of the identity as the main agenda and neglect the struggle of alienation of caste system. Thus, the agenda of social democracy is sidelined under the larger consensus on political democracy. Modern democracy in India therfore reflects the following three important characteristics concerning the nature of dalit politics. First, it has a blurred, narrow and a power-centric perspective having limited effects on socio, cultural and economic status of the community. Secondly, being the representative of particular caste/castes in politics it operates in the circle of hierarchal relationships without actually breaking the permanent pure-impure dichotomy. Finally, it upholds a strict and non-compromising attitude over the issues of leadership and over the question of participation in the broader struggles of social change. The characteristics presented here are the reflections of a fundamentally caste-ordained political psychology of dalit politics, which has failed to articulate another dimension of Ambedkar's vision based on the philosophy of Buddhist conversion movement. This religious movement lacks dynamism to become a political movement of the whole deprived classes, but it carries the potential ingredients to challenge the social control of brahmanical elites. This is an appropriate time for the intellectuals of the dalit-bahujan masses to deliberate on these issues in order to develop a better synthesis out of this imaginary dialectics.

NOTES

1 More than one million people gathered at Mumbai on May 27, 2007, where dalits and tribals embraced the Buddhist religion *(Times of India*, New Delhi, One Lakh People Convert to Buddhism). At Kendrapara in Orissa on February 16, 1000 dalits converted to Buddhism. Also see, Political Conversion, *Frontline*, June 2-15, 2007.

2 Valerian Rodriguez, 'Dalit-Bahujan Discourse in Modern India' in V R Mehta and Thomas Panthan (eds), *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Exploration*, PHISPC (Vol X, Part 7), Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006.

3 'Constituent Assembly Debates', Vol X, Official Report, New Delhi, 1989, p 979.

4 Ambedkar himself called it 'Navayana', to mark its distinction from the three accepted "ways" of Buddhism: Hinyana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. This aspect is illustrated in length in Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2003.

5 See the Constitutions of Bahishkrit Hitkarani Sabha, Independent Labour Party, All India Scheduled Castes Federation in Hari Narake (ed), BAWS, Vol 17 (Part Two), Education Dept, government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2003, pp 395-478.

6 B R Ambedkar, *Untouchables Must have Political Power* in Hari Narke (ed), BAWS, Vol 17 (Part Three), Education Dept, government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2003, p 79.

7 Ibid, p 143.

8 Ashish Nandy, T N Madan and Partha Chatterjee are three important critiques of western modernity in the recent times. They have developed an academic debate over the relationship of modernity and indigenous civilisation in the postcolonial India.

9 B R Ambedkar, *Prospects of Democracy in India,* in Hari Narke (ed), BAWS, Vol 17 (Part Three), Education Dept, government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2003, p 519.

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