

India's Roaring Revolution
Dalit Assertion and New Horizons

By
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The emergence of Dalit community as a vibrant and assertive group on the social and political scene of India has been a subject of inquiry for social and political scientists for quite sometime now. In this regard the studies on Dalits and their movements has been of special interest to Sociologists and political analysts in the post Independent India. A host of literature, in India as well as abroad, has appeared dealing with the mobilization and assertion of Dalit community during the last half a century. It is well recognized that the community has had varied fortunes spreading over the centuries. It has come a long way from collective ostracism, deprivation and suffering to political assertion and economic political and social emancipation. The political assertion by the most popular political party of Dalits, Bahujan Samaj Party(BSP), which has been described by Vivek Kumar as 'roaring revolution' merits an in depth and scholarly analysis. *India's Roaring Revolution: Dalit Assertion And New Horizon* by Vivek Kumar is a successful attempt in this direction.

The author claims, with the help of empirical data, that Dalit assertion touched new heights when BSP captured political power for four (and now fifth time) times in most populous state of India, Uttar Pradesh (UP). The party came into power, no doubt, in alliance with other political parties. But the fact remains, as pointed out by the Author that, in contrast to earlier times when Dalits could not even contest a Panchayat election independently, captured power on the basis of their independent political initiative. It is interesting to note that instead of remaining tethered to their exclusive social domain, Dalit political leadership is reaching out to other segments of society by forging new social and political alliances. This is equally helping the grouping to expand its political sphere. Thus, in the recent UP elections BSP fielded Brahmin (an adversary in historical terms) candidates to ensure victory. The BSP fielded Muslim candidates as well in this election. The sphere of this assertion, as announced by BSP leader, Mayawati, is spreading to other parts of the country. It would indeed be a spectacle to watch this pan-India assertion and its social and political ramifications.

The experience reveals that political exclusion and social isolation prods the groups of people towards violence in seeking empowerment and asserting their social and political rights and privileges. The Author places the Dalit assertion within the domain of democratic struggle and maintains that 'Dalit movement has been a democratic movement from its inception'. He reveals that some groups did try to pull them towards violence and armed struggle but these

attempts did not evoke any response from the community. According to the author “ this itself is a commendable contribution of Dalits in the process of nation building and development”. This, in fact, provides a role model for many a social group which is aggrieved and perceive themselves as deprived and excluded. That democratic paradigm holds vast potential of assertion and empowerment is the lesson one may draw from the experience of Dalit assertion in India. The movement had its moments of despair and gloom. However, this state of affairs did not bring a slump in their quest to break new grounds. The sad demise of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was one such moment when it appeared that there was no strong Dalit leader to lead the community. The demise of Dr. Ambedkar had indeed left a void which could not be easily filled. And it took the community almost four decades to evolve a new and successful strategy to reemerge with a strong assertion.

The Author has documented different stages of struggle of Dalits for their human rights which started alongside with the Indian struggle for freedom. According to him, their struggle commenced with the assertion to represent themselves rather than being represented by somebody else. He refers to the attempts by the Congress party in general and Mahatma Gandhi in particular in coming in the way of this independent Dalit initiative. This position, however, remains debatable. Mahatma Gandhi’s position remained that Dalits belonged to the fold of larger ‘Hindu’ family and their grievances had to be addressed within this larger family. However, according to the Author the position taken by Dr. Ambedkar in seeking political rights for Dalits from the British directly and projecting himself as an independent spokesperson of marginalized Dalits “caught the nation’s imagination and thus the Dalit assertion became from silent to roaring depicting a stage in the Dalit movement where Dalits were coming out from isolation and started asserting.” Author maintains that if Dalit leadership had not insisted on their independent and exclusive initiative in seeking their rights and reversing their social status, they would have remained stuck in the web of political ‘cooption’. This tactics, according to him, in post-independent phase of Indian history adopted by Congress Party towards Dalit community was greatly responsible in hampering their growth and development. The author is highly critical of the approach of Congress Party in dealing with Dalit issues. The author equally disapproves the nomenclature ‘Harijan’ which was assigned to Dalits by Mahatma Gandhi. According to him it was the identity ‘Dalit’ which gave the community a pan-Indian and unified identity. He provides convincing arguments to support his thesis.

According to Author, in the second stage of Dalit movement they adopted a confrontationist approach which was demonstrated in Chowdar tank movement, the Kala Ram temple movement, the burning of Manusmriti in which “ Dalits were directly in confrontation with the British government and the Hindu society”. However, the author has glossed over the role of judiciary in restoring some human rights to Dalits during the British rule in India. Moreover, the intervention which Dr. Ambedkar sought from courts in addressing the issues of disability and social exclusion of Dalits is of considerable relevance. The author mentions that the third and significant stage of Dalit movement heralded with the commencement of Indian Constitution which provided a vast space for democratic assertion and recognition. The

democratic paradigm has heightened the Dalit aspirations to a level where “ Dalit politicians are thinking of occupying the chair of Prime Minister”.

The present study provides a coherent and systematic picture of developments of Dalit assertion. This picture provides further scope for re-interpretation and reconstruction of Dalit identity and assertion from a Social Science perspective. The Author has identified four phases of Dalit assertion. He locates the first phase in the medieval period of Indian history when Dalits converted to Islam and Sikhism to escape from the exploitation and harsh treatment inflicted on them by the Hindu Social order. This aspect needs further elaboration in as much as the role of Sufi's and Sanits needs to be discussed. The second phase is located when poets belonging to the Dalit community started projecting the pathetic conditions of the community. It may be mentioned here that some poets and social reformers not belonging to the Dalit community equally projected the hardships of Dalits. The third phase started with the emergence of the leadership of Baba Sahib Ambedkar in 1920. The fourth phase starts with the demise of Dr. Ambedkar which continues until today. The recent public rally held by the new Dalit leader, Mayawati in UP in which one million people participated had huge portraits in which Kanshi Ram, the founder of BSP, stands alongside with Dr. Ambedkar. This deserves further explanation and elucidation. Be that as it is, the Author has discussed every phase in great detail and interestingly reaches to the conclusion that each phase of the struggle of Dalit assertion was marked with different issues and can be assessed in terms of triumphs and failures separately. This discussion is quite valuable from the perspective of political sociology.

The study provides empirical data on the atrocities committed on the Scheduled castes in UP. It also provides a list of measures initiated by the government in preventing these atrocities. However, such a data on the all India basis, which is not provided, would have given a broader picture on the status of effective implementation of laws which have been framed to deal with such cases. Moreover, the general social attitudes and responses on the atrocities committed against Scheduled castes need to be ascertained. This perspective would have broadened the scope of the study.

The study has briefly touched upon the involvement of minorities within the fold of Dalit movement. The Author maintains that BSP has “always included the conventional religious minorities in its definition of *Bahujan* and has always tried to bring them within the fold of the party”. The Author provides details of the initiatives of BSP leader Mayawati in bringing in Muslims within the fold of the party. The important Muslim functionaries of the BSP enlisted by the Author substantiate his claim. Moreover, in the last UP election BSP was able to engage large sections of Muslim community. This direct approach to involve minorities in its march towards assertion indicates a major departure from its earlier strategy to “go alone”. It may be mentioned that Muslim minorities would join hands with this Dalit political formation in a big way in future as long as the formation directly confronts the forces of communalism in the country.

The present study is a valuable contribution in Dalit Studies in India. However, at times the Author appears to be emotional and even subjective. This may be attributed to the fact of his

being an 'insider'. However, he needs to have a critical approach as well. The issue of 'creamy layer' which is being regularly debated across the country is missing in the study. The Author should also deal with new challenges which will come in the way of Dalit assertion in future.

In the revised edition of the study, it is expected that some of these issues would attract the attention of the Author.