



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Changing Dynamics Of Dalit Movement In Karnataka: A Study

Shantappa Pandit Hebali
Research Scholar,
Dept of Political Science,
Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi.

Dr. Chandrakant M. Yatanoor,
Senior Professor & Chairman
Dept of Political Science,
Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi

Abstract

The paper analyses the various stages of the Dalit movement in Karnataka According to the author, though the Dalit movement in Karnataka is as old as the Veerashaiva movement the Dalit concern received very little attention in the context of the Non-Brahmin movement in the princely state of Mysore. The real Dalit movement in Karnataka started with the Bhusa Uproar of B. Basavalingappa. In the process the rise of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti proved to be a non-parallel event in the history of the Dalit movement in Karnataka but this movement suffered from too many lacunas. The movement in Karnataka did not base its activities on a definite ideological stance the lack of ideological commitment in turn did not allow it to emerge as a 'self-help movement'. As the Dalits continued to fight for cursor? Benefits they lacked themselves into the captivity of concessions like reservations. Besides, they took their 'Dalit world' too much for granted. Which ultimately kept them bound by chains of submission to exploitative Hinduism? Strangely, in the process. The Dalits succumbed to the same evils against which they had been lighting. Also the lack of social cohesion and unity left the various Dalit organizations politically distorted.

Key words: Dalit, Movement: DSS, Caste, Karnataka, Committee, Social, Bhusa uproar etc.

Introduction

Dalit movement in Karnataka, emerging in the early 1970s, is a classic case of a successful social movement in India. This movement for self-dignity has had a far-reaching impact on the Dalits in the state of Karnataka. 'It played a decisive role', in awakening the Dalits in Karnataka¹ But it also shook the rigid, irresponsible Hindu conscience... It really hailed a new era of hope for Dalits in Karnataka. The impact of Karnataka's Dalit Movement can be seen in other parts of the country as well. In fact,

Davidappa and Shivanna rightly observe, 'the Movement ushered in a new vision of civil rights across India' ². Central to Karnataka's Dalit movement is Dalit Sangharsh Samiti(DSS) (Dalit Struggle Committee). And, over the years, 'the DSS went on to become the organizationally strongest and long lasting Dalit movement in the country' ³. Nevertheless, the DSS is grappling with several critical issues currently. And, its nature of response would determine the future course of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. This paper makes an attempt to engage with the challenges and the intersectional aspects of the Dalit movement in Karnataka in the contemporary times. The article is based on the findings of a research project funded by the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bengaluru. The project was completed in 2020 and the final project report was submitted in 2021. It first provides literature review in brief and indicates the methodology used. It offers then a discussion of the historical trajectory of the Dalit movement in Karnataka and the factors responsible for emergence of the DSS. The following section takes up the major interventions of the DSS since its genesis.

The paper then discusses the emergence of internal complexity in the DSS and the subsequent challenges for the Dalit movement in Karnataka. It analyses the significance of the question of intersection of caste and gender for the DSS and the movement in general. The concluding section underlines the emerging signs pertaining to revitalization of the DSS in recent times.

Objectives of the study :

The Following objectives have been set for the present study. They are to :

- 1) Trace out and throw a light on the history of dalit Movement in India in general and Karnataka State in particular.
- 2) Assess and portray the contribution of Dalit Movement for the promotion and emancipation of Dalits in Karnataka.
- 3) Find out the weaknesses, Challenges and prospects of Dalit movement in Karnataka for the promotion of Dalits in Karnataka.

Methodology :

The present study is analytical in nature and it is based on doctrinal research. Researcher used secondary data to some books of eminent writers, articles, websites etc. Related to this topic were studied. Researcher further screened the gathered information and selected the effective information that can be added in paper.

A Historical Account of the Dalit Movement In Karnataka

The Dalit movement emerged in Karnataka in the 1970s. However, seen from a historical perspective the roots of the movement go back to the earlier times in Karnataka and other southern states when challenges were made to the dominant Brahminic ideas under Buddhist influence. 'Sharana Sanskriti, drawn from the Buddhist cultural movement,' argues Yadav, 'operated as the linking line of articulation and assertion for non-Brahmin movements in these states'⁴. In this regard, the earliest known personality is Basaveshwara who is considered as the founder of the Lingayat religion. He was a major advocate of the values of the Sharana tradition. Based on the Buddhist ethical values, he organized people in the state against inequality and oppression associated with the priestly tradition in Brahminism. It was found quite appealing by the untouchables. Basaveshwara's movement had the objective 'to establish a right relationship between man and man, God and religion such that universal values of love, compassion and brotherhood became fundamentals of life. Basaveshwara revived Buddhism in the form of Lingayatism that challenged the oppressive aspects of Hinduism. indeed, the essence of the struggle between Brahminism and Buddhism is the driving spirit of the Dalit movement in Karnataka.

Thus, Buddha and Basaveshwara (along with Ambedkar) have become the ideological symbols for the Dalit movement in Karnataka. Then, there was non-Brahmin and Dalit awakening and mobilization in Mysore state during the colonial period. It is important to note Dalit consciousness in the kingdom of Mysore during Tipu Sultan's rule. Kudmul Ranga Rao, a social reformer in the second half of the 19th century, played a significant role with respect to eradication of untouchability in South Kanara region. He is considered as one of the pioneers of depressed classes movements in Southern India for providing education, better housing, employment and empowering the depressed classes socially by guarding them against exploitation by upper classes. Several non-Brahmin castes organized themselves for self-assertion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's under the influence of earlier Basaveshwara's philosophy, and reform movements such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission. Yadav argues, 'castes like the Lingayats rejected Hindu framework and attempted to attain social prestige and status within the Lingayat framework'⁵.

The Lingayats and Vokkaligas set up their caste associations and confronted the Brahminic domination in the public services. In 1917, Praja Mitra Mandali was founded by C. R. Reddy following the ideas of Jyotiba Phule. This was an attempt by Reddy to unite all the Non-Brahmin groups and, thus, strengthen the movement against Brahmin domination. Ambedkar's ideas and initiatives had the strongest impact on the rise of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar's influence was strongly felt in the Hyderabad and Bombay regions of the state. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar organized the first convention of untouchables in 1920 in Mangaon, which is very close to the Belgaum district of Karnataka. He was invited to address several gatherings of the Dalits in Belgaum. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar's

Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha, founded in 1924, set up hostels for the students of the depressed classes in Sholapur district of Maharashtra and Belgaum. He inaugurated the Machagar Mahasanghin Dharwad in Karnataka in 1927 through which Chamars were mobilized. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar's influence was so strong that 'when he rose to the national fame Even the Princely state of Mysore, which had a Gandhi leaning, changed its attitude towards Dr.B.R. Ambedkar. He received land from the Prince of Mysore to start a Buddhist monastery and educational institutions. Further, 'the conversion to Buddhism took place at Kolar Gold Field even before the historic mass conversion to Buddhism at Nagpur in 1956. Ambedkar's contemporaries organized self-respect movement for the Dalits in Belgaum district of northern Karnataka.⁶

The movement was quite a radical one focusing on identity aspect of the Dalits and appealing them for change of name as well. After Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, three major developments took place that have significant bearing for the Dalit movement in Karnataka. First, Shyam Sunder, a strong follower of Ambedkar's ideas, organized Dalits especially in southern Karnataka. Sunder was a law graduate from Hyderabad Karnataka region, external affairs Minister in the Nizam government, and first Dalit Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from his constituency. He set up Bhim Sena in 1968 and set forth four important demands: 'surrender of 25% of villages in every taluk, a separate electorate, a separate Scheduled Caste University in each state and a strong political organization for untouchables. He was extremely radical in his approach, and spoke vociferously on caste atrocities and the land issue. He demanded hostels and scholarship for both Dalit as well as tribal students. He was well aware about discrimination and marginalization faced by both Dalit and tribal students. The second development is related to another strong Ambedkarite, B. Basavalingappa. Unlike the militancy of the Bhim Sena, Basavalingappa worked towards revival of Buddhism as envisaged by Dr.B.R. Ambedkar. And, the third development has to do with the formation of the DSS in the early 1970s. During the Chief Ministership of Devraj Urs, three Dalit Cabinet Ministers - Basavalingappa, Rachaiah and Ranganath 'who had the courage to give voice to the Dalit communities and they ably used the government machinery to tackle the rising atrocities in the villages against the Dalits. supported that made progressive intellectuals come together and dream of a platform like the DSS'⁷.

It was juncture that Basavalingappa criticized the entire Kannada literature as Boosa (cattle fodder) having nothing for the Dalits, which led to bitter controversy and strong uproar in the state. This incident acted as the triggering factor for the formation of the DSS. Before we turn to the interventions of the DSS over last few decades, let us have a look at the nature of caste conflict in rural areas of Karnataka. Muzzafar Assadi argues that the changing nature of caste conflict or contradiction has to be seen in three major phases (1997). In the pre-1970 period, rural conflict was between upper castes and dominant castes. Then the second phase began when 'dominant castes occupied

the space left by the upper castes; leading to new forms of contradictions between dalits and dominant castes⁸. The next shift started towards the end of 1980s that witnessed conflict between Dalits and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In this context, Assadi cites the example of attack on the Dalits by the Nayak community in Udbhur village near Mysore on July 8, 1997.⁸

Major Interventions by the DSS :

After formation in the 1970s, the DSS has made a significant impact on the Dalits in Karnataka. DSS founded itself on the concept of attaining an entity of wholeness where art, culture, science and activism operate together, with the spirit of both reason and emotion to wage war on the established notions of exploitative relationships functioning in the society of Karnataka. Under the banner of the DSS, a united front of Dalit artists, writers, poets, thinkers, and activists was created. Innovative methods and techniques such as workshops, discourses, cultural programs, and cadre camps were used by the DSS to educate and organize people. Major rallies and protest events were organized in different parts of the state.⁹ Thus, within a decade DSS could make its impact felt across the state. DSS took up several critical issues affecting the Dalits. First of all, it was the practice of untouchability and atrocities on the Dalits. Soon after the formation of the DSS, a violent incident took place in the district of Kolar in 1974. Killing of a Dalit student by people from the Vokkaliga caste led to stir among the Dalit youth and, later, Dalit masses. A district unit of the DSS was set up in Kolar. Another violent incident took place in 1978 with regard to the electoral contest by a Dalit candidate with a Vokkaliga candidate in Chinthamani Assembly constituency. People from the dominant caste forcibly entered the locality of the Dalit candidate and resorted to violence. Agitations by the DSS resulted in arrest of the culprits. Similarly, the DSS had active intervention in the violence against Dalits by the dominant caste Vokkaligas in Billandla Halli village in late 90s and Kamblapalli village in 2000. Second, the DSS took up the issue of grant of land in several villages across Karnataka from 1975 onwards.¹⁰ In fact, 'each district unit of the DSS planned the land struggle even though it did not achieve much.

The Sidlipura land struggle was the first of its sort and was followed by similar struggles in Chandagodu, Bidrekavalu, Kalasankoppa and others. DSS looked into the auctioning of land of a Dalit through fraudulent means in Kolar district in 1978. A list of demands was presented to the state government and distributed among the people by the DSS. Demands included implementation of the Land Reform Act, 1978 with immediate effect, immediate settlement of all the pending cases of the Dalits in the taluk courts by the district collector, grant of minimum of five acres of land to all the landless Dalits in Kolar district, and others. Then comes land struggle in Nagasandra village in the same district in the early 80s. A strong agitation was led by the DSS with the slogan "Not Toddy but

Education". It can be said that 'even today the land struggle has remained an important issue to the fragmented DSS units in the state'¹¹.

Therefore, the emergence of DSS raised 'the aspirations for self-determination of the toiling lower caste communities across the state of Karnataka' (Davidappa and Shivanna 2012; 8). This takes us to the next point. Third, closely associated with the earlier two types of interventions is the self-respect aspect of the Dalits. In its caste as well as land struggles, DSS had self-assertion and self respect of the Dalits uppermost in mind. DSS used handbills, posters, rallies, Dharnas, picketing government offices, marches, Padayathras, cadre building trainings, workshops, conventions, street theatre, songs of awareness building and others to drive home the single agenda that untouchability is un-constitutional and "lower castes" too had equal rights and opportunities to lead dignified life. The slogan of the DSS, "educate, organize, and agitate", aimed at securing life with dignity and self-confidence for Dalit community¹².

In this light, the huge gathering of Dalits in Bengaluru on April 14, 1986 (Ambedkar Jayanti Day) for the launch of the 'Self-Respect' Movement needs to be seen. Constitution and flag for DSS were released during the Swabhimana Samavesh (self-respect conclave). In this context, it becomes important to see the ideological influence over the DSS coming from Buddha, Basaveshwara, Ambedkar, Lohia, and Periyar. While local cultural figures were also used as symbols, Ambedkar remained the central symbol for the DSS while organizing the Dalits. And Ambedkar's ideas on restoring dignity of the Dalits were frequently invoked by the DSS in its struggles. Finally, let us look at the ways the DSS attempted to grapple with the intersection between caste and gender. The issue of Devadasi was taken up by the DSS. Devadasi was a religious practice in which young Dalit women remained devoted throughout their life to Goddess Yellamma. They were sexually harassed by the rich upper caste men in their villages. DSS politicized this issue and organized a huge procession in Soudatti, where Yellamma's temple is located, in 1985.

DSS also raised the issue of traditional practice of nude worship of Goddess Yellamma. Then, the matter of violence against Dalit women caught the attention of the DSS. One of the earliest cases of caste based gender violence was the gang rape and murder of Chinnamma by Vokkaligas in Doddi Halli village in late 1970s. DSS organized the Dalits and led agitations against these barbaric acts of the dominant caste men. In 1979, another such unfortunate incident took place. Anasuyamma, a widow aged nineteen, was gang raped by the Vokkaliga caste men in Hunasi Kote village in Malur Taluk. DSS, beginning with the Taluk unit, made active intervention. Police complaint was lodged, two day camp was organised, and lamp of Anasuyamma's father was taken by the DSS cadres from his grave in the village to Karnataka Legislative Assembly in Bengaluru by padayathra. In the padayathra, DSS used several symbols and spectacles such as singing songs, performing street theatre and distributing pamphlets to reach out the wider public and mass

media. Davidappa and Shivanna describe: 'the three day protest march from Hunasi Kote to Bangalore and the latti-charge finally resulted in wide awakening of the lower castes across the state... The song that was written in the name of Anasuyamma is sung by the DSS cadre even today. Further, when the heinous act of parading a Dalit woman naked was done on the streets in Bidaroli village of Belgaum district in 1986, DSS organized a massive rally in Bengaluru condemning such incidents. DSS got the culprits punished as well through the follow up measures. The irony is that around this time, the DSS started facing crises that we will discuss in the next section¹³.

Complexity, Challenges, and Inter sectionality :

It was the year 1986 when a new critical turn came in the trajectory of the DSS. It began with the issue of leadership of the DSS. Yadav explains: 'till 1986 the DSS functioned with full measure of its completeness. There was perfect harmony, from top to the bottom level, between all the wings of DSS. The leadership so far was natural and grounded on common consent. B. Krishnappa was the DSS convener till 1986. In the DSS meeting in Dharwad in 1986, a decision was taken that DSS conveners would be democratically elected. It was decided that state convener would be elected by the district conveners. A prominent Kannada personality Devanoor Mahadev was elected as the state convener. In the same meeting, the matter of the DSS symbol was also discussed that resulted in a bitter controversy without any final agreement. These developments point to the appearance of internal divisions and factions in DSS. Widespread scepticism grew that the era of collective and spontaneous leadership in DSS got over with election and acute disagreement. Internal divisions in the DSS after 1986 indicate five major factions. One faction was led by Devanoor Mahadev, the new state convener of the DSS. Second DSS faction was that of the Gandhians. Socialists later joined this faction¹⁴.

Third major faction was constituted by the Marxists. There were ideological clashes between the Gandhians and Marxists. During these ideological clashes, fourth faction emerged consisting of the Ambedkarites. There was a clear influence of Maharashtra Dalit movement and Marathi writers on this group of Ambedkarites. In this connection, Dalit Students Federation in Kolar needs to be seen. Naxalites on the Andhra side can be considered as the fifth group. Gandhians and socialists within the DSS fold came together due to Prof Ananthamurthy's key mediating role. They remained in contact with the state government led by Ramakrishna Hegde during that time. The repercussions of these events were felt in the following years. The democratically elected leadership could not keep the DSS united. Some eminent persons moved away from the DSS. A clear split in the DSS became explicit with the setting up of another DSS in the state. The split was seen even at the smallest level of hamlets. Gradually, further splits took place and many more DSS were set up. Thus, it became difficult for people to figure out the original DSS. Regional diversities, earlier accommodated within the structure of the DSS, took the form of new organizations. Organizations

in northern part of the state are good instances in this regard. Caste organizations like the Machagar Mahasangh got revived as separate entities. Faction groups, instead of building up of the organization, started pursuing quick benefits by developing close connection with political parties, administrative and police wings of the state. Similarly, cadres also became self-seeking in the absence of unified visionary leadership. DSS further got weakened with clear internal division based on sub-caste identity especially on the issue of reservation. It was between Madigas (left-hand Dalits) and Holeyas (right-hand Dalits). Madigas organized several demonstrations demanding separate quota in reservations in employment.¹⁵

A fundamental weakness of the DSS was the lack of inadequate attention given to the intersection of caste and gender. In general, Gopal Guru aptly points out the patriarchal nature of Dalit movements since they reproduce the mechanism against Dalit women that 'the upper caste men use against women' (1995). Although the issues of Devadasi practice and gender violence were taken up, DSS could not systematically and strategically address the dynamics of Dalit women causing the situation of double injustice for them. This could be seen as a major enabling condition for the emergence of 'Dalit feminism' and Dalit feminist writings in contemporary Karnataka. Further, the lack of women's leadership in the DSS adversely affected women's participation in its activities. This gradually alienated the Dalit women from the DSS. In this connection, it is useful to note that increasing attention given to gender dynamics by several Dalit leaders in the movement in recent times is a welcome step¹⁶.

Conclusion:

The Dalit Movement in Karnataka could not provide sufficient attention to intersection of caste and gender in the past. It certainly took up the issues such as the practice of Devadasi and violence against Dalit women by the dominant caste men. The movement even succeeded to a great extent in this regard. The movement could raise the consciousness among Dalit men and women about their identity. However, the movement is found having several weaknesses seen from the perspective of the intersectionality. First, while inter-equality between Dalits and upper or dominant caste was highlighted by the movement, intra-equality between Dalit men and Dalit women was not taken up seriously on its agenda. Second, resulting from the first point, the movement could not articulate a systematic strategy to deal with the gender aspect of caste or double oppression.

Thus, the Movement neglected the issues that Dalit women face in their day-to-day life. Finally, leadership of the movement remained gendered. Dalit movement could not conceive of recruiting and training women for leadership roles on a proper systematic basis. Importantly, several respondents acknowledged the point of intersectionality that intersecting identities need due consideration within the movement. It indicates that there is a greater appreciation of intersectional's values

now within the movement. This is not to downplay the role of diverse activities undertaken by the movement or the DSS in the state so far.

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