

**THE DALIT PANTHERS MOVEMENT
IN MAHARASHTRA: PROBLEMS
AND PROSPECTS**

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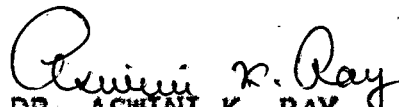
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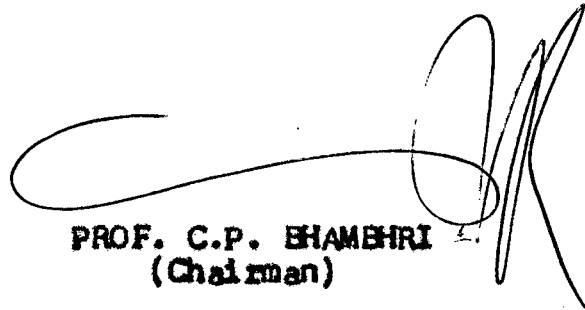
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-- SRIDHAR BALAN

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the Scheduled Castes and the untouchables, in a caste-stratified society like India, is a continuous tale of suffering, exploitation and oppression. Paradoxically, if history can thus be said to be a record of the suffering of the oppressed castes, it is also at the same time a record of tremendous human efforts initiated for the emancipation of the oppressed castes. In this sense, an analysis of the efforts of two historic figures, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, is noteworthy. The differences between the two were not only on account of differing temperaments, but their

sharply divergent approaches in tackling the untouchability problem, were essentially contributed by their different understanding of the problem itself.

Gandhi essentially saw the question of untouchability and casteism on an individual and moral plane.

✓ For him, the caste-structure and the consequent feelings of purity and hierarchy were all located in the minds of men. An appeal to the human mind would mitigate the evils of the caste-system. There is a controversy as to whether Gandhi wanted the removal of the caste-system at all. One point of view states that even if Gandhi did not specifically ask for the abolition of the caste-system, he concentrated his attack on the principal manifestations of the caste-system, which consisted of untouchability, the ritual monopoly and participation in temple rites, the pollution syndrome and the social exclusion it bred.¹ And since the fault for all this could be laid squarely at the door of the upper castes, his appeal to the upper castes was to accept the scheduled

1. Owen Lynch, The Politics of Untouchability, Columbia University Press, 1969.

See also, Eleanor Zelliot, "Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership", an Article in, J. Michael Mahar (ed.), Untouchables in Contemporary India, University of Arizona Press, 1972.

castes as their brethren and remove untouchability. In short, he pleaded for the assimilation of the Scheduled Castes and their meaningful participation in the Hindu social structure with full equality, justice and dignity. Thus, according to this interpretation of Gandhi, though there was no demand for the specific removal of the caste structure, the caste system was automatically to 'withering-away' in the changed values and attitudes. And Gandhi set a pre-eminent personal example. He lived with the untouchables, shared their misery and called them Harijans (the Children of God). His greatest ambition was to wipe the tear from every eye, and he went about the task with a striking degree of sincerity and humility.

✓ The other view of Gandhi is that he wanted the whole question of untouchability and the untouchables to be kept out of politics.² Gandhi accepted the 'Varna-shramdharma' theory of the four Varnas of Hinduism and conceived of the removal of untouchability as the absorption of the untouchables into the fourth, or Shudra Varna. He asked that this be done by repentance and

2. Arun Sedhu, "The Dalits", an Article in Seminar (Issue on Untouchables), May 1974.

self-purification of the upper castes for their unjust and unequal treatment of the untouchables. The well-to-do upper castes were to be the trustees of the poverty-stricken lower castes. This point of view that Gandhi wanted to keep the Hindu social structure intact, absorb the untouchables within the system, by asking the upper castes to extend their hands, is also shared by B.R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar totally opposed Gandhi's philosophy and his programme for the removal of untouchability. He felt that the upper castes had made and kept the untouchables a community separate and unequal from other castes and in reality they were not part of the Hindu community. Ambedkar, to a certain extent, saw the problem of caste in structural terms. He saw the caste system as part of a religious system of Hinduism. The oppressed castes and the untouchables could no longer be equal citizens under Hinduism. Therefore, Ambedkar emphasized on adequate political safeguards for the depressed castes, like separate elections, and at the religious and personal level he advocated their conversion to Buddhism. The full extent of his opposition to Gandhi is borne out in

his "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables".³ He states that the sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of Karma and the senseless law of status by birth - these very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the life of the untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished in the bosom of Gandhism.⁴ The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar came to a head in 1932 when the British announced their Communal Award. According to this, the depressed classes were to have a number of special seats assigned to them for a period of twenty years. Only depressed classes could vote for these seats, although they were also entitled to vote for the general seats. Gandhi rejected the Award and began what is known as his "Epic Fast" against it. With Gandhi near death, a solution was finally reached through what is known as the Poona Pact. According to this, the depressed classes were to be allowed a separate electorate in the primaries but they were to vote in joint electorates in the election itself.

3. B.R. Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables, Thacker & Co. Ltd., Bombay, 1946.

4. Ibid.

However, 18 per cent of the seats in the Central and Provincial Legislatures were to be reserved for depressed class members. The Congress was, therefore, morally and politically committed to this Pact, although it neither accepted nor did it reject it publicly.⁵

Ambedkar, like Gandhi, also did a comparative study of world religions, and selected Buddhism because he felt that its basic tenets and principles gave status and dignity to the human individual and he was attracted by its non-materialism and non-violence.

Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 inspiring about three million people mostly Mahars to get converted.⁶ The course that Ambedkar adopted was that of gaining political rights for he felt that with political power the rest will follow. Later events have, however, proved that political and economic development have to be simultaneous if either is to be effective.

5. Owen Lynch, Op.cit., p.2.

6. See, Y. Dalmia, "Scheduled Castes: A View From Below", an Article in The Times of India, December 15, 1974.

Though Ambedkar made an attempt to see the problem of caste in structural terms, his analysis was clouded by too much emotional fervour. He wanted to abolish caste and he wanted to do it quickly. But he had set out to break practices which had existed for centuries, and which were firmly rooted in class interests. The emphasis on Buddhism, perhaps, blurred some of the real issues.⁷

Ambedkar's work provided two major types of benefits for the untouchables in independent India. Reservation in legislative bodies, in institutions of higher education, and for government employment on the one hand and financial assistance through welfare schemes on the other.

Gandhi's main energies on the other hand were devoted to changing the heart of the Hindus and trying to alleviate the sufferings of the untouchables by sharing their misery. But, it seemed that there was no

7. For Ambedkar's view on caste, see, B.R. Ambedkar, The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables, Anrit Book Company, New Delhi, 1948. Also, B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste, Bharat Bhawan Press, Bombay, 1945.

place in his programme for the educated, politically conscious untouchable fighting for his civil rights.

Ultimately it was Ambedkar's vision of progress through education and politics, rather than the Gandhian vision of a change of heart among caste Hindus, that has come to inspire most of the Scheduled Caste members today.⁸

The inspiration provided by Ambedkar and Gandhi ultimately resulted in two legal measures - the formulation of the Untouchability (Offences) Act, by which untouchability was declared to be a legal offence, and the drawing up of a policy of Protective Discrimination.

The latter took the form of reservation of seats in the legislature, financial support for education through scholarships and quotas in government jobs. The success of both these measures, despite being in force now for almost twenty-five years, is debatable. Most studies in recent years have shown that untouchability is still widely practised in almost all parts of the country.

8. For a comparative analysis of Gandhi and Ambedkar, see, Eleanor Zelliot, "Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership", Op.cit., p.2.

[The picture that Lelah Dushkin paints of the effectiveness of Protective Discrimination is a dismal one.⁹ She finds that the promise held in the dramatic increase in enrolment among untouchables at the elementary education stage has not been carried forward to matriculation or college level. Results, even as measured by literacy alone, are discouraging. She finds that of the 6.6 million untouchables in India (according to 1961 Census) only 10.3% were literate in sharp contrast to the national figure of 24%. The gap widens further at higher levels of education. In so far as education constitutes the major channel for upward mobility in employment, it is not surprising that Lelah Dushkin finds that 2/3rds of the Scheduled Castes were holding menial jobs.¹⁰

[Thus, Protective Discrimination might merely be a way of keeping the weaker sections weak, by making the untouchables who are elected to political offices, pawns of the ruling party, and by keeping the educated out of politics by giving them government employment.¹¹]

9. Lelah Dushkin, "Scheduled Caste Politics", an Article in, J. Michael Mahar (ed.), Untouchables in Contemporary India, Op.cit., p.2.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

Thus, legal measures can merely help to supplement and not substitute for changes that must emerge from society itself.

[And what makes the situation particularly complex is the circular reinforcement of the economic and social variables in the case of the untouchables. The religious sanction given to untouchability is extended further legitimacy ^{by} by the squalor in which most of the untouchables are forced to live. This superimposition of pollution on poverty is further intensified by the cumulative nature of inequality in India and by the overall low level of economic development.¹²]

[Rise and Origin of the Term 'Dalit'

The term 'Dalit' is quite difficult to categorise precisely without reference to the components of the caste structure in Maharashtra. But, at the outset it must be mentioned that the term was originally initiated by Ambedkar.]

12. See, Andre Betelle, "Pollution And Poverty", an Article in, J. Michael Mahar (ed.), The Untouchables in Contemporary India, Op.cit., p.2.

[Though the term 'Dalit' broadly means the 'oppressed' in Marathi, Ambedkar as one of the foremost political activists for the Dalits serves as a constant source of inspiration and reverence for the latter. His rejection of Gandhi and Gandhism, his disillusionment with post-Independence India, his declaration in the last years of his life that the Constitution should be burnt, his embracing of Buddhism and violent criticism of Hindu society, are all the heritage of today's dalit youth, particularly in Maharashtra. In fact, it was Ambedkar, a Mahar, before his conversion to Buddhism, who first began to use the word 'Dalit' in an explicitly caste content. Therefore, initially the term 'Dalit' became applicable to members of the Mahar community in Maharashtra.¹³

Under the inspiration provided by Ambedkar, a large number of Mahars in Maharashtra converted themselves to Buddhism and were termed Neo-Buddhists. It is the Neo-Buddhists who form the bulk of the Dalit Panthers.]

13. Sudhir Sonalkar, "Dalit Panthers: The Voice of the Oppressed", an Article in The Hindustan Times, June 2, 1974.

But, in the light of empirical evidence today, there is a controversy whether the term 'Dalit' can only be applied to the Neo-Buddhists or even to the Mahars in Maharashtra. Though the Neo-Buddhists and Mahars are the most numerous community in Maharashtra today, they enjoy a relatively better position in terms of income, occupation and political representation.¹⁴

Eleanor Zelliot, in her article on the Mahars in Rajni Kothari's book, Caste in Indian Politics, has explicitly stated that the Mahars were one of the foremost among the Scheduled Caste communities, to politi-

14. See G.M. Gare's socio-economic study of the Scheduled Castes in rural Maharashtra, published in ICSSR Research Abstracts Quarterly, January-April 1974, Vol. II, Nos. 2 and 3. Gare states that the rate of literacy for the Mahars and Neo-Buddhists varies from 45 to 50% whereas for the Mangs, Ramoshis, Vaders and Holars, it varies from 20 to 30%. Among the Mahars and Neo-Buddhists, 7 to 10% of families were engaged in Government and private services. Similarly, as far as income is concerned, Holars and Mangs belong to the low-income group while among Mahars and Neo-Buddhists, 60 to 66% of families have an income below Rs.1,000/- annually, while in the case of Bhangis, only 25% had an income below Rs.1,000/-.

See, also Sunanda Patwardhan, Change Among India's Harijans, Longmans, 1973.

cally articulate their grievances through elected representatives.¹⁵ The Mahars have also been accused of caste discrimination towards the Andavans, Somans, Bavanes and Baraks, who are sub-castes among the Mahars.¹⁶

Though the Mahars had early representation in the Indian Army through the formation of the Mahar Battalion, it is not suggested that the Mahars are not a deprived or oppressed community. In fact, the very reverse is true. The conversion of some of the Mahars to Buddhism, has not brought about any perceptible change in their social status; they are still victims of caste discrimination. And further, conversion to Buddhism has further estranged them from the other Scheduled Castes.¹⁷ But, what is merely suggested here is the fact of their relative prosperity, within the overall framework of deprivation and misery.

15. See Eleanor Zelliot, "Learning the Use of political means, The Mahars of Maharashtra", an Article in, Rajni Kothari (ed.), Caste in Indian Politics, Longmans, 1970.

16. See Narendra Gaikwad, "Dalit Panthers: Existence and Expectations", an Article in Janavada, January 26, 1974.

17. See Gare's study, Op.cit., p. 12.

[The Mahars and Neo-Buddhists are relatively better off than the Andavans, Somans, Mangs, Holars, Vadars and Dhors, and the Bhangis, Ramoshis and Chambhars are relatively better off than the Mahars.¹⁸

All this compounds the problem of trying to identify precisely 'who are the Dalits?'. The Dalit Panthers movement which claimed to be representative of all Dalits was itself caught up with the problem of trying to define the Dalits. The differences on this score among the leadership of the Dalit Panthers was one of the reasons responsible for the eventual split in the movement.

Raja Dhale, claiming to carry on his shoulders the heritage of his mentor, Ambedkar, once again tried to limit the term 'Dalit' within the explicit confines of caste. In fact, one of the criticisms voiced against Dhale, a Neo-Buddhist, was that he was trying to limit the Dalit Panthers movement to Neo-Buddhists.¹⁹

18. Ibid.

19. See Arun Sadhu, "Dalit Panthers' Stir Is Fizzling Out", an Article in The Times of India, July 31, 1974.

✓ Under Dhasal's inspiration, and for the first time, an effort was made to define the Dalit by a combination of both caste and class terms. Thus, the Dalit Panthers Manifesto defined the Dalits as members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.²⁰ Dhasal's efforts towards defining the Dalit as any one who is down-trodden, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, broke new grounds.

But, in his attempt towards widening the base of the movement and developing along secular lines, as opposed to caste-sectarianism, perhaps, the definition of the term 'Dalit' became too broad and confusing.²¹

Narendra Gaikwad,* for example, has defined the struggle of the Dalit Panthers as not against any individual but a decisive fight against the system of slavery.


20. See Manifesto of Dalit Panthers, published: Bombay, 1973.

21. See Arun Sadhu's article, op.cit., p. 14.

* A leftist intellectual and editor of the journal, Janavedana.

He defines the Dalit in feudal terms and stresses that in this struggle not merely the Mahars or Neo-Buddhists are involved, but all the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and those economically deprived sections at the bottom of the society, like the agricultural labourers, the landless and all those oppressed due to the system of orthodoxy.²²

For a proper definition of the term 'Dalit', the twin factors of oppression and exploitation must be taken into account. A valid distinction can be drawn between exploitation and oppression, though, in most cases, the two terms coincide. For example, the case of a Negro landlord in the U.S., waiting in his limousine, while collecting rent from his tenants, because if he entered the residences of his white women tenants, he might be accused of molestation, is a case of social oppression and not of exploitation.

Thus, the Dalits have to be defined in caste and class terms. Though, as far as the case of the Scheduled Castes are concerned, there is a superimposition of oppression on exploitation adding upto the cumulative nature of inequality. 

22. See Narendra Gaikwad's article, op.cit., p. 13.

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF THE DALIT PANTHERS

In the various efforts initiated towards the emancipation of the Scheduled Castes, the formation of the Dalit Panthers constitutes yet another significant landmark. The rise of the Dalit Panthers as a movement began under certain basic socio-economic and political conditions.

In this connection, a study conducted by G.M. Gare jointly sponsored by the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, and the Indian Council of

Social Science Research on the living conditions of Scheduled Castes in rural areas of Maharashtra in 1974 is worth recalling.¹

The survey was conducted in eight talukas in eight districts of Maharashtra.² It showed that the rate of literacy among the Scheduled Caste families was 23%. Among males it was 44%, among females it was 8%. 68% of school-age children were not attending schools because their services could be more profitably utilised in labour activities.³

The survey also found that 48.9% of the Scheduled Caste families were engaged in agricultural labour, 27.7% in agriculture, 8.7% in traditional or caste occupations, 8.7% in services and 6% in miscellaneous occupations. 33% of the Scheduled Caste families were in debt.⁴ 67%

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1. See, ICSSR Research Abstracts Quarterly, January-April 1974.
 2. Amravati, Bhil, Kolaba, Dhulia, Jalgaon, Kolhapur, Nasik and Satara.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

among these had borrowed for agricultural purposes or for mere maintenance. 10% had borrowed for social or religious purposes, 5% had borrowed for illness and education and 18% for earlier debts, or to engage in trade and commerce or for the purchase of livestock.⁵

The study also showed that 50% of the families were landless. If families having less than one acre was included, 64% would be landless or marginal owners. Out of every 100 Scheduled Caste families in Maharashtra, 65 were landless, 24 small cultivators, 8 medium cultivators and 3 big cultivators.⁶

The study also proved the widespread prevalence of untouchability and caste discrimination with regard to temple entry, hostels and the use of public services like wells, barbers and washermen.⁷ It showed that 75% of the Scheduled Caste families lived in huts which lacked ventilation and sanitation. Consequently, diseases like malaria, typhoid, dysentery and small-pox were prevalent in every locality.⁸

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

(Surveys like these and similar studies prove that the problems of the Scheduled Castes are real and cannot be wished away.) And that in spite of the many grandiose schemes for their emancipation, they have still a very long way to go.⁹ They show that the solution to the problem of the Scheduled Castes lies in understanding their class position, the fact that they are landless and for the most part agricultural labourers. Their poverty, misery and exploitation lies in their relationship to land and can only be solved by changing this relationship. Caste discrimination and untouchability are two facets of their existential reality, which can only partially be tackled through education, but mainly by a change in the material conditions of the untouchables and other discriminated sections of the society.)

/Today, the status-summatum model of caste, where caste determined class position no longer applies because while this would be typical of feudal society,

9. For a better understanding of the problem of the Untouchables, see, J. Michael Mahar (ed.), The Untouchables in Contemporary India, University of Arizona Press, 1972. Also, Sunanda Patwardhan, (ed.) Change Among India's Harijans, Longmans, 1973.



today land has come to the market, there has been a change in class relationships, and to a very large extent, non-Brahmins own most of the land.¹⁰ The violence and degradation that the untouchables suffer stem from a deep-rooted belief in the legitimacy of caste hierarchy, a belief which the oppressors can effectively translate into action by the power of class advantages that they enjoy.

(To be fair to Ambedkar, he viewed the conversion process only as a means of enhancing the social status of the untouchables. But, religious and caste discrimination continues even in the case of the Neo-Buddhists. But, it is not religion that determines an individual's social position, it is class.)

Atrocities

(The most fundamental and continuous factor for the rise of the Dalit Panthers was, of course, the repression and terror under which the oppressed castes

10. See Andre Betelle, Caste, Class and Power, Longmans, 1970. Diss

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live. In a village called Bawda in the Indapur tehsil of Pune district, in June 1972, a social and economic boycott of the Scheduled Castes by denying them the basic necessities of life, was organized by the members of the upper castes. The reason for this was that a Harijan youth had dared to contest in the elections to the local Zilla Parishad.¹¹

At Brahmengao, two Scheduled Caste women were assaulted by high caste Hindus because they had drawn water from a common well.¹²

At Erangaon, a Harijan, Ramdas Naruavre, was sacrificed by caste Hindus to appease their God.¹³

These are among the many such specific cases of atrocities that contributed to the emergence of the Dalit Panthers.

11. S.D., "Children of God Become Panthers", an Article in Economic and Political Weekly (Special number), August 1973.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

The Political Factor

(The failure of the Republican Party of India was an added cause for the emergence of the Dalit Panthers.) The party had been formed by Ambedkar as a successor to the Independent Labour Party of 1936, and the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation formed at the time of the Cripps Mission. The Republican Party of India actually came into being only after Ambedkar's death.

Though a party of the Scheduled Castes, the Republican Party of India initially devoted much attention to the problems of the landless, among whom untouchables constituted a majority.

Under the leadership of Gaikwad, one of the few leaders of the Republican Party of India to have a peasant base, struggles of landless labourers began in Dhulia, Jalgaon, Nasik and in parts of the Nagpur region. As a part of these struggles, nearly fifty thousand workers went to jail in 1959. Another massive satyagraha was launched by the Republican Party of India

towards the end of 1964 to press the government to distribute fallow and waste land near railway lines and canals among landless peasants.¹⁴

Recognizing the mass base of the Republican Party of India, Maharashtra Congress leaders made overtures to the Republican Party of India and an alliance was worked out between the Congress and the Republican Party of India at the time of the 1967 elections. With this began the decline of the Republican Party of India. The politics of the party thereafter got entangled in one split after another, in jockeying for positions in ministries and in petitioning the ruling Congress party for paltry concessions for the Scheduled Castes.¹⁵

Today, political opportunism has divided the Republican Party of India into three factions, the Khobragade, Kamble and Gavai groups. There are also no prospects for reconciliation in the near future.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

[Inspiration of the Black Panthers ✓

The growing atrocities created the need for a new organization which would effectively fight for the cause of the oppressed. At a meeting organized on 9th July 1972, by Dalit youths at Siddharth Nagar in Bombay, the Dalit Panthers formally came into existence.¹⁶

At this meeting, Raja Dhale was elected President, Nandev Dhasal Defence Minister and J.V. Pawar General Secretary.¹⁷

The term 'Dalit' means 'oppressed' and the 'Panthers' was borrowed from the Black Panthers organization in U.S.A. Most of the Dalit leaders had read the writings of the Black Panther leaders, and were inspired by the struggles they had waged for equality and justice. ✓

16. J.V. Pawar, "Record of History of the Dalit Panther Youths in Bombay", A Pamphlet published by Panther Publications, Bombay, December 6, 1973.

17. Ibid.

But, the Dalit Panthers also appreciated the fact that the social situation in the U.S. and India was not the same. They had to organize their own social revolution, but they could learn from the organizational features, tactics and strategies of the Black Panthers.¹⁸]

Influence of Dalit Literature

Initially, the influence of Dalit literature was paramount. Some of the [Dalit youths with formal education, others without, in late 1969 and early 1970, expressed through poems, articles and short-stories, their misery and oppression at being treated as something less than human beings.¹⁹ This rendering of their existential experiences into print, termed as 'Dalit Literature' was not new in Maharashtrian history.

18. Sudhir Sonalkar, "Dalit Panthers: The Voice Of The Oppressed", an Article in The Hindustan Times, June 2, 1974. The term 'Defence Minister' is borrowed directly from the Black Panthers.

19. Dilip Padgaonkar (ed.), "Dalit Panthers", The Times of India Special Supplement, November 25, 1973.

Dalit literature has a long tradition and its history is co-terminus with the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra.²⁰

[The new crop of Dalit literary writings initially began at Nasik, Aurangabad and Poona, but soon spread to other places in Maharashtra. The literature produced indicated a high level of consciousness achieved by the Dalits. Mutual participation in literary activity enabled them to achieve a sense of self-identification and homogeneity as a group.²¹ Since most of the Dalit Panther leaders first began as writers, Dalit literature can be treated as part of a movement towards realism in Marathi literature. Some of the writers began to be dissatisfied with merely writing about untouchability and other horrors in their lives and decided that they had to do something about the continued degradation of, and atrocities against the Dalit community as a whole.²²

Some others among the same group of writers, such as Daya Pawar, were still sympathetic to the

20. Gail Omvedt, Cultural Revolt In A Colonial Society - The Non-Brahmin Movement In Maharashtra, Scientific Socialist Trust Publications, Bombay, 1976.

21. The Times of India Special Supplement, op.cit., p.26

22. Sudhir Sonalkar's article, Op.cit., p.26.

Republican Party and unwilling to break up their old emotional ties. Dhasal and others, on the other hand, found themselves cramped by the slumbering Republican Party and eventually formed the Dalit Panthers, a movement for the defence of Dalits against the atrocities committed against them.²³

A critic on the subject refers to Dalit literature as having created a new hiatus in Marathi literature.²⁴ The Dalit writers wrote simply yet powerfully about their social experience and social reality. But, a definite purpose could be traced in all their writings. Firstly, they wanted to expose the sham and hypocrisy of a caste-stratified society, where even after a quarter of a century of the country's independence, no major changes had been brought about in their conditions of life. Secondly, by stating this, they were making a case for deep-rooted social change. There was also the realization that the impetus and initiative

23. Sudhir Sonalkar's article, Op.cit., p. 26.

24. G.P. Deshpande in Sathyakatha, December 1975.

for change must come from within themselves and it would be a folly to depend on external factors.²⁵

It was this realization that basically led to the formation of the Dalit Panthers, which has been identified with a strong fist brandished against social, religious and cultural misery.²⁶

A number of Marathi writers have made extensive analysis of Dalit literature. They have in particular examined the connection between Dalit literature and the Dalit Panthers movement specifically the linkage between the literary writings and the growth of political and social consciousness among the Dalits. Some writers have also stressed on the essential links between Dalit literature and the Dalit liberation struggle.²⁷

25. Ibid.

26. See Narendra Gaikwad, "Dalit Panthers: Existence and Expectations", an Article in Janavardana, January 26, 1974.

27. For a representative sample, see Vasant Inglo, "Dalit Literature and the Dalit Liberation Struggle", an Article in Sathyakatha, June 1974. For a perspective on Dalit literature, see an interview with Baburao Bagul, in Mai Marathi, August 1974. Mai Marathi of August 1974 was a special issue on Dalit literature and articles by M.N. Wankhede, Janardhan Wadinare, Nerurkar, Prabhakar Machwe, Arjun Dangle and Pandurang Kadam are particularly relevant. See also, Gangadhar Pantawne's penetrative article in his book Mulyaved, June 1974. For a comprehensive portrayal of Dalit literature with all its ramifications, see numerous articles in Amitadarsh edited by Pantawne, especially Diwali issue, 1970, March 1971, Jan-Feb-March 1973, Jan-Feb-March 1974.

[The first efforts towards forming an organization was in the form of an association called 'Yuvak Aghadi' in 1972. This association was basically reformist in character and did not incorporate a clear line of action. Its only noteworthy achievement was that it organized a 'Dharna' outside the residence of the Maharashtra Chief Minister on 27th June 1972 in protest against the 'Bawda incident'.²⁸]

Aims and Programme of the Dalit Panthers

✓ The aims and programme of action of the Dalit Panthers were formally incorporated into a Manifesto which was published a year after the formation of the Dalit Panthers.²⁹

The Manifesto listed eighteen demands of the Dalits, ranging from the abolition of feudalism, Dalit ownership of the means of production, nationalization

28. The Times of India, June 20, 1972.

29. The Manifesto which became an immediate source of controversy was published in the middle of 1973.

of foreign capital, land allocation to Dalit peasants and the 'true introduction' of socialism in India to the demand that Dalits must live within the village precincts, they must be allowed to draw water from public wells; it demanded free education, medical and housing facilities for Dalits, the banning of religious and casteist literature, the punishment of black-marketeers, money-lenders and hoarders, and a reduction in the prices of essential commodities.³⁰

³⁰ In defining the term 'Dalit', the Manifesto tried to include as broad a category of people as possible. It listed members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.³¹

³¹ In an identification of the friends and enemies of the Dalits, the Manifesto stated that its friends were revolutionary parties which set out to break down

30. The Manifesto was purported to be drafted by Namdev Dhasal. See Arun Sachu, "The Dalits", an Article in Seminar (Issue on Untouchables), May 1974.

31. Ibid.

the caste system and class rule, and all other sections of society that are suffering due to economic and political oppression. It listed its enemies as landlords, capitalists, money-lenders and all those parties which indulged in religious and casteist politics.³²

Elaborating its concept of emancipation for the Dalits, the Manifesto stressed that what was needed was a complete revolution. "We do not want a little place in the Brahmin Alley. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but at a system. Change of heart, liberal education etc. will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution."³³

To implement this radical rhetoric into practice which also contained within it a vision of the future, the Dalits understood that an effective organization, ideological cohesiveness and appropriate lines of action,

32. This section was reproduced by Nandev Dhasal in the Marathi monthly, Mai Marathi, of August 1974, providing further evidence that the Manifesto was penned by Dhasal.

33. Ibid.

were basic pre-requisites. The Manifesto stressed that an organization of workers, Dalits, landless and poor peasants would have to be built in all city factories in all villages.³⁴

To avoid the political isolation of the Dalits within the narrow confines of caste, the Manifesto laid emphasis on the broader ramifications of the problem of untouchability. Truly speaking, the problem of Dalits, or Scheduled Castes and Tribes has become a broad problem; the Dalit is no longer merely an untouchable outside the village walls and the scriptures. He is an untouchable, and he is a Dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian. And unless we strengthen this growing revolutionary unity of the many with all our efforts, our existence has no future. We must understand that the caste nature of the term Dalit is breaking down.

The Dalit must accordingly accept the sections of masses, the other revolutionary forces as part of his own movement. Only then will he be able to fight his enemies effectively.³⁵

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

The Political Situation in India

P. 16 ✓
 The Manifesto stressed that the Congress Party remained in power by using the classical British tactic of 'divide and rule'. It used every tactic to divide the people along religious, caste and other lines. In spite of the fact that it had effectively concentrated State power in its hands, it had not been able to effectively translate its programmes into action. Thus, people's rule, socialism, 'garibi hatao', and green revolution, remained empty slogans, devoid of content. ³⁶

The Manifesto also proclaimed its deep-rooted hostility to Gandhism. According to it, Gandhism meant preservation of religious authority, traditionalism, casteism, preservation of traditional divisions of labour etc. ³⁷

It recognized only the contributions of two leaders - Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. Phule, because he was one of the early social reformers to

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

preach against the evils of casteism, and Ambedkar, because he effectively championed the cause of the Dalits, both from within and outside the government.³⁸ It was Ambedkar who gave the Dalits a basic sense of human dignity.

The Manifesto characterized the struggle for national independence, as a struggle under the leadership of capitalists, landlords and feudals for their own benefit. It was not waged for the benefit of the people.³⁹

In its analysis of other political parties, the Manifesto accused the left parties of bankruptcy and political opportunism. Electoral advantages meant so much to them, that they did not hesitate to join hands with communal parties like the Jan Sangh and the Muslim League. None of the leftist parties, according to the Manifesto, dared to turn revolutionary. The stand taken by the leftist parties prevented the spread

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

of revolutionary ideology among the people.⁴⁰ The Republican Party of India had become a camp-follower of the Congress.⁴¹

Therefore, the Manifesto did not envisage any close collaboration between the Dalits and any political party towards a joint struggle. What it wanted was a struggle waged on new and different lines. Thus it issued a call for all independent leftists, intellectuals and sympathizers, to join the Dalit Panthers and fight for a more just and equal society.⁴²]

Landmarks in the Movement

Immediately after the formation of the Dalit Panthers, it was decided to characterize 15th August 1972 as Black Independence Day. This would serve two purposes. Firstly, it would draw attention to the struggle of the Dalit Panthers, and secondly, it would stress the fact that celebration of Independence had

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

become an elaborate ceremonial ritual, largely meaningless because true equality and justice had not been achieved.

symbolic

Angered by the atrocities committed on the Harijans in the middle of 1972, Raja Dhale wrote a scathing and bitter article in Sadhana, a Marathi monthly. He raised the question if people could not show respect for the bodies of the Dalits (a reference to the two unfortunate Dalit women of Brahmanganon) (why should the Dalits show respect to the national flag?) They would just treat it as an ordinary piece of cloth. ⁴³

(Dhale's article was widely condemned and the Jan Sangh and Shiv Sena) took out marches to the office of Sadhana and threatened to burn copies of the journal. ⁴⁴

Sounding a similar theme, Nandev Dhasal, in an article in Navakal, a Marathi daily, asked whether a national emblem could have any significance, in a society

43. Sadhana, August 1972.

44. S.D., "Children of God Become Panthers", an Article in Economic and Political Weekly, (Special number), August 1973.

riven with division and discrimination such as India? He conceded that nothing would be solved by insulting the national flag, but stressed that the Dalits were bound to lose faith in national symbols, if nothing was done to ameliorate their lot.⁴⁵

A demonstration and a rally organized jointly by the Yuvak Kranti Dal and the Dalit Panthers under the leadership of Namdev Dhasal to protest against the atrocities committed on the Dalits, was held in Bombay on the 14th and 15th August 1972 respectively.⁴⁶

To indicate its deep-rooted hostility to the Hindu social order and the Hindu way of life, a number of copies of Manusmriti were burnt by the Dalit Panthers at a number of public meetings in Bombay.

To illustrate its opposition to Gandhism and to highlight its view that Gandhi had nothing to offer but 'charity' for the Dalits, copies of Gandhi's works were also burnt by the Dalit Panthers at rallies in Bombay.

45. Ibid.

46. Maratha, August 17, 1972. See also, "Record of History of the Dalit Panther Youths in Bombay", Op.cit., p. 25.

On the 14th of August 1973, the Dalit Panthers presented a joint appeal to the Maharashtra Chief Minister and the District Collectors of Maharashtra, seeking immediate and speedy redressal of their grievances. They also cited numerous instances of atrocities committed against the Dalits in Maharashtra, citing reports in Marathi newspapers like Gavkari, Navshakthi, Lokasatta, Shivner, Maratha, etc.⁴⁷

Boycott of Elections

The Dalit Panthers burst on the Indian political scene, albeit in a negative sense by their organized boycott of the Bombay Central (North) Parliamentary Bye-election of January 14, 1974.⁴⁸ A series of public meetings were held earlier explaining its stand. Basically, it was disenchanted with the election system and did not consider that any of the candidates would do anything for the Dalits. It also denied rumours that it supported the Congress candidate.⁴⁹

47. Author not stated. Dalit Panthers' Pamphlet, containing full text of appeal; Panther Publications, Bombay, August 14, 1973.

48. Author not stated. Dalit Panthers' Pamphlet, explaining the boycott; Panther Publications, Bombay, 1974.

49. Ibid.

The Dalits numbered a sizeable section in the constituency, and the boycott call was effective, resulting in extremely poor voting as low as 15 to 20% in some areas.⁵⁰ Mrs. Roza Deshpande (CPI) was declared elected, with 81,653 votes, defeating Dr. Vasant Kumar Pandit of the Jan Sangh who secured 74,677 votes, and Mr. Ramrao Adik of the Congress who secured 70,185 votes.⁵¹ This election disclosed the unholy alliance between the Congress and the Shiv Sena. Mr. Adik was a former member of the Shiv Sena and had Mr. Bal Thackeray's blessings.⁵²

The Dalit Panther leaders later clarified that their boycott of the elections could not be construed as support for the Communist Party of India. A boycott essentially meant a denial of all the candidates and all the political parties contesting the election. There had also been intermittent trouble in the area between the caste Hindus and the Dalits, and the fact that none

50. The Hindustan Times, January 15, 1974.

51. Ibid.

52. Patriot, February 12, 1974.

of the political parties referred to this at the election time angered the Dalit Panthers.⁵³ The elections also proved decisively that the Republican Party of India (which had now split into three factions) no longer enjoyed the confidence of the Dalits.⁵⁴

The Riots at Worli and Nigam Areas

(The intermittent clashes between caste Hindus and Dalits led to open pitched battles on 18th January and 30th January 1974.) On 18th January, police opened fire four times at Worli in which one person was killed and three injured.⁵⁵ On 30th January, at the B.D.D. (Bombay Development Department) Chawls, police fired two rounds to quell heavy stone throwing. According to the police, militant Dalit Panthers attacked them with acid bulbs and fireballs of kerosene-soaked cloth, resulting in injuries to twenty-six police personnel. Sixty persons were taken into custody.⁵⁶

53. The Hindustan Times, January 14, 1974.

54. Ibid.

55. The Hindustan Times, January 19, 1974.

56. The Hindustan Times, January 31, 1974.

The gravity of the situation which led to riots in the Worli and Nalgaum areas in Bombay forced the Maharashtra Chief Minister to appoint a one-man Commission of Enquiry under Justice Ehasine of the Bombay High Court.⁵⁷

The Dalit Panthers in a memorandum submitted to the Maharashtra Chief Minister on 5th February 1974, declared that it did not have any confidence that the Commission of Enquiry would be able to arrive at an objective analysis of what really happened in Worli and Nalgaum. It attributed the riots to hostilities perpetrated against it by members belonging to the Shiv Sena and Jan Sangh. It also accused the policemen of being in close collaboration with the Shiv Sena, and demanded that the Shiv Sena MLA, Pramod Navalkar, should be removed from the police advisory committee of Maharashtra.⁵⁸

Addressing a five thousand strong rally, the Dalit Panther leader, Raja Dhale, threatened to hold

57. The Hindustan Times, February 1, 1974.

58. Patriot, February 6, 1974.

a demonstration outside the Lok Sabha, protesting over the Worli riots, and the official negligence.⁵⁹

The Worli area continued to be the scene of sporadic clashes between the caste Hindus and the Dalit Panthers right up to the middle of April 1974, with curfew being imposed in the area time and again. Firing by the police was also resorted to, and residents of the area submitted evidence before the committee on atrocities committed on them by the police. A number of meetings of the Dalit Panthers in the area was also broken up.⁶⁰

The Commission has since concluded its deliberations and is expected to submit its report to the Maharashtra government shortly. (The incidents at Worli shot the Dalit Panthers into all-India prominence and a number of articles and stories on the Dalit Panthers appeared during this period.

59. Ibid.

60. The Times of India, April 16, 1974. For an account of the incidents at Worli, see Marghar, Bombay, January 27, 1974; and Manasa Chitra Vartha Pustak, Bombay, February 1, 1974.

If the tone of the articles are any indication, the Dalit Panthers seem to have won the sympathy of most of the democratic and leftist intellectual opinion in the country.⁶¹

During this period also, a number of Dalit Panther field offices were opened in most of the districts and the Dalit Panther General Secretary, J.V. Pawar, stated in New Delhi that the Dalit Panthers were soon to become an all-India body.⁶²

The Dalit Panthers publicly supported the anti-Brahmin pronouncements of the Dravida Kazhagam leader, the late E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker. Accordingly, the first convention of the Vidharba unit of the Dalit Panthers invited his widow, Mrs. Maniammal Naicker, to be the chief guest.⁶³

In Tamil Nadu also, support for the Dalit Panthers came from Mrs. Sathyavani Muthu, the Tamil Nadu Harijan Welfare Minister. She wanted the Harijans

61. See "The Dalits", Op.cit., p.31.

62. Patriot, July 13, 1974.

63. The Times of India, February 6, 1974.

of Tamil Nadu to organize a similar movement in the State. She advised Harijan mothers not to practise family planning, as the Harijan community was in need of brave youths to fight for its cause.⁶⁴ Mrs. Sathyavani Muthu was later dismissed from the Ministry for her unorthodox views.⁶⁵

Some Problems

In studying a movement like the Dalit Panthers, some initial problems arise. Firstly, the problem of categorising the Dalit Panthers movement as a 'social movement'.) The problem is simplified if we accept that the main aim of any social movement is to bring about fundamental changes in the social order,⁶⁶ which is also the basic "raison d'etre" of the Dalit Panthers. But, if we try to specify the areas in which these changes are sought, for example, in the basic institutions of property and labour relations, then more problems arise.

64. Statesman, April 15, 1974.

65. The Times of India, May 15, 1974.

66. Rudolf Heberle, Social Movements: An Introduction to Political Sociology, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., New York, 1951, p.6.

(The Dalit Panthers have not had a sound theoretical understanding of property and labour relations. Besides, if ideology is a system of ideas that acts as a guide to action, then the Dalit Panthers certainly had an ideology, which was unequivocally set forth in its Manifesto. But, this ideology itself was still-born, having been repudiated later by a section of the movement. ✓

As far as formal organization is concerned, the Dalit Panthers did initially start with an organization in Bombay. After the pattern of the Shiv Sena, they set up 'chaonis' in the chawls of Bombay, and there was a channel of communication between the various chaonis, with regard to programmes of action. ✓ But, this organization confined itself to Bombay, there was no move to set up formal organizations in rural parts of Maharashtra or even in other parts of India. (There was no clear enunciation of strategies and tactics to be employed with regard to the aspired goals. There were also widespread differences within the movement as to what tactics should be adopted in particular situations.

(The Dalit Panthers remained a social movement in the broad sense of the term.) Though some sections in the movement realized the necessity of political action, there was no move to formally transform itself into a political party)- in the sense of a group of people who propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power.⁶⁷

Initial membership and its strength was confined to the 'lumpen-proletariat' in Bombay, in spite of the fact that later the movement established a mass base among members of the Dalit peasantry in rural parts of Maharashtra. (no serious effort was made to address itself to the problems of rural Dalits.

(The consciousness of the Dalits as a deprived and oppressed group fanned by their literary writings was strong. But, (serious differences cropped up among the members about the reasons for their misery, oppression and poverty.) The differences essentially revolved around the question of the relative primacy of the caste and class factor as the main cause of their poverty. But, no effort was made to dialectically link the two.]

67. Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1942, p.283

CHAPTER III

INTERNAL DISSENSIONS AND THE SPLIT

Though the Dalit Panthers formally decided to become an all-India body in the middle of 1974, and a number of unit offices were opened in some of the States in India, namely, Delhi, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, Bihar, etc., no move was initiated to work together concretely at an all-India level.¹

There was also no effective link between Bombay and the field offices in various parts of Maharashtra. To add to this, there was widespread dis-

1. Patriot, July 13, 1974.

agreement among the leadership with regard to strategy and programme. The differences were both due to personality and ideological factors.

[A movement like the Dalit Panthers had evolved basically in a hostile social atmosphere. To face the combination of hostile social forces ranged against it was suicidal. Raja Dhale initially expelled Nandev Dhasal and some of his supporters for alleged disloyalty to the Panthers, on August 22, 1974.²

From Here

Nandev Dhasal left with his supporters and set up a rival organization. Dhasal's expulsion was formally ratified by the Nagpur Conference of the Dalit Panthers, on October 23, and 24, 1974. The bulk of the organization remained with Raja Dhale.]

Reasons for the Split

The basic reasons for the split can be traced back to the Manifesto itself. Raja Dhale was disturbed

2. Anil Awchat, "The Dalit Panthers", a paper presented at a seminar organized by the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, December 1974.

by the predominantly leftist content of the Manifesto. He viewed Dhasal's friendship with members of the Communist Party of India and suspected the latter's hand in the drafting of the Manifesto.) Namdev Dhasal's public declaration that he was a Communist, after the famous 'Oval handshake' with Dange, did not help matters.³

A series of pamphlets was issued by Raja Dhale prior to the Nagpur Conference of the Dalit Panthers in October 1974, in which Dhale repudiated the Manifesto in toto⁴ and one containing his basic criticisms of Communism.⁵

3. Arun Sadhu, "The Dalits", an Article in Seminar, (Issue on Untouchables), May 1974.

A mammoth rally was held by the Dalit Panthers at the Oval maidan in Bombay. Dange congratulated Dhasal on the success of the rally with a handshake. Most of the Marathi newspapers played up this incident attributing this to CPI influence over Dhasal.

4. Raja Dhale, "Jahirnama Ki Namjahir", 3 pamphlets, Marathwada Dalit Panthers Publications, Marathwada, September 1974.
5. Raja Dhale, "Eknight Ki Communist", Publisher: J.V. Pawar, Bombay, October 1974.

Dhale's Case

In his rejection of the Manifesto, Dhale came out strongly against the leftist content of the Manifesto. The programme advocated by Dhasal was not going to bring about any fundamental changes in the lives of the Dalits. All that it contained was a lot of radical rhetoric, but nothing of pragmatic value. For Dhale, through the Manifesto Dhasal had exposed himself as a Marxist. For him, Ambedkarism and Marxism were basically two incompatible philosophies. He illustrated this with quotations from Ambedkar showing the latter's rejection of Marxism.⁶

Dhale believed in the Buddhist future for the Dalits. He quoted extensively from Dr. Ambedkar's speech at the fourth conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists held at Kathmandu on 20th November, 1956.⁷

Dhale criticised Dhasal for not paying any attention to problems of the rural Dalits in his Mani-

6. "Jahirnana Ki Namjahir", Op.cit., p.30.

7. In his speech, Ambedkar attempted a comparison between the Buddha and Marx, reiterating his belief and faith in Buddhism.

festos. Dhale at the end of the pamphlet, was not even prepared to tolerate the term 'Manifesto', for it raised disturbing visions of the 'Communist Manifesto'. In his analysis of Communism,⁸ Dhale questions the loyalty of Communists both at home and abroad. According to him, Communism may have a very nice economic programme, but in practice it had led to the imposition of a dictatorship. Most Communists, according to his view, were interested in personal aggrandizement of power, and did not have the people's interests at heart.⁹

Dhale accused the Indian Communists of caste prejudices. They had done nothing to break caste barriers and caste discrimination, and instead, had strengthened it by caste considerations during the elections. He contended that Communists had hardly paid any attention to the problem of caste, especially in the rural areas.¹⁰ They believed in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, so much that they concen-

8. "Eknight Ki Communist", Op.cit., p.50.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

trated on working in the urban areas mostly. Thus, according to this view, they were guilty of subsuming caste to the class factor, and having failed to analyse the dimensions of the caste problem, they believed rather that in the class struggle, caste would automatically disappear.¹¹

This pamphlet also tries to show the "unseavoury" role played by the CPI in trying to infiltrate the Dalit Panthers movement, right from 1973. Dhasal was only one of the 'CPI-led Panthers'. The pamphlet ends with recognizing Dhasal's potential for contributing to the Dalit Panthers movement. But it reiterates that Dhasal would have to choose between Marxism and the Dalit movement.¹² He would have to shake off the unholy influence of the CPI, only then could he be taken back into the movement.¹³

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

Dhasal's Case

In his reply, Nandev Dhasal wrote a pamphlet asking Dhale not to turn back the onward march of history.¹⁴ This pamphlet was also reproduced in the Marathi paper Renangal, in a special issue edited by Dhasal.¹⁵

Dhasal reiterated his basic faith both in Marxism and in the Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers. He said that history had vindicated the Marxist approach. He stressed that the broader identification of the Dalits in the Manifesto was correct. He accused Dhale of sectarianism and republicanism by confining the Dalit Panther movement to members of the Mahar community and that to those that had embraced Buddhism.

Dhale was taking Ambedkar's speeches in the literal sense, whereas, according to Dhasal, the correct interpretation would be to take Ambedkar's remarks in a

14. Nandev Dhasal, "Etihasachi Chakra Ulti Firvu Nake Nahi, Tar Khaddyat Jul", a pamphlet, Publisher: Dhasal, Bombay, September 1974

15. Renangal, Bombay, October 26, 1974.

broader and more substantial context. In any case, Dhasal stressed that the emphasis should be on completing the basic tasks left unfinished by Ambedkar, and not waste time on fruitless debate over Ambedkarism and Buddhism.¹⁶

Dhasal appealed to Dhale to snap ties with the Republican Party of India. The Republican Party according to him was a spent force. As far as the rural question was considered, Dhasal mentioned that he, along with some supporters, had embarked on the forcible cultivation of land in Poona district, but the movement had to be stopped, because Dhale made no effort to support his.¹⁷

After the formal split in the movement, Dhale ✓ found that in terms of numerical support, he had the advantage over Dhasal. This was because among the larger masses of the Dalits, Ambedkar was still a symbol of reverence and deep respect. It was for this reason

16. Ibid.

17. "Etihasachi Chakra Ulti Firvu Nake Nahi, Tar Khaddyat Jul", Op.cit., p.54.

that Dhasal could not make any criticism of Ambedkar. Though Dhale's understanding of Marxism was very poor, this was also true of the Dalits in general.¹⁸ Again, the fact that Dhasal did not make any great efforts to explain his position clearly to the Dalit masses, what prevailed was a general state of confusion. Amidst this, it was easy for Dhale and other conservative elements to wrest control over the movement.¹⁹

Also, Communism as such has been looked upon with deep suspicion and hostility by the Dalit masses in Maharashtra. One reason for this is because of the relative lack of Marxist literature in tune with their level of understanding, and the other is because of the record of the Communist movement in Maharashtra which has not been very promising. For this, the Communist parties have only themselves to blame, for not having developed a well-integrated theory of the social situation, and thereby adopting a correct tactical and strategical line.²⁰

18. Raja Dhale, "Dr. Ambedkar and Revolution", a pamphlet, Publisher: J.V. Pawar, Bombay, February 29, 1976.

19. Yashodara Dalmia, "Scheduled Castes: A View From Below", an Article in The Times of India, December 15, 1974.

20. Gail Omvedt, Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society, Scientific Socialist Trust Publications, Bombay, 1976.

Thus, today the Dalit Panthers movement appears to be irrevocably split. The Dhasel group organized a peasant and workers' rally in January 1976, where it publicly announced its support to the Prime Minister's twenty-point economic programme, and called upon all leftist and progressive groups in the country to extend their support.²¹

The Dhale group finds itself politically isolated, reduced to holding meetings on occasions like Buddha Jayanthi etc., where nothing concrete is discussed, nor any action taken. The Dalit Panthers movement mainly exists by name today.

A Brief Analysis of the Split

The split in the Dalit Panthers movement wrecked whatever chances the movement had of developing on secular and non-sectarian lines. The leadership of either faction did not seem at any stage to be conscious of the fact that it was leading a movement with a future.

21. The Times of India, January 6, 1976.

No concrete analysis was made of the magnitude of the tasks facing the movement. No effort was made to strengthen the organization into an effective well-ordered mechanism which could sustain the movement.

Dhale, by his actions, hardly seemed interested in the organization at all. Through his writings, it seems that he wanted to go down in history as one who had resurrected Ambedkar.²²

He engaged in a bitter defence of Ambedkar's position during the Poona Pact. He took pains to prove that Ambedkar was not a capitalist in spite of being the author of the Indian Constitution, which had incorporated the right to property.

He launched an attack against Gandhi and Nehru for being hypocrites and not having embraced Buddhism. Dhale viewed the conversion into Buddhism as an international process, which would take place all over the world. He stressed that true peace and justice

22. "Dr. Ambedkar and Revolution", Op.cit., p.56.

would not reign in India until all of Indian society turned Buddhist.²³

He even went to the extent of defending the violence of the Dalit Panthers despite his support of Buddhism. Though Buddhism laid emphasis on non-violence, its concept of non-violence, was a workable and not an utopian pipe - dream like the Gandhian non-violence.²⁴ What he meant was that Buddhism viewed violence as necessary at certain times. ✓

Dhale was criticised by the Delhi unit of the Dalit Panthers, for having spent most of his time writing and not doing anything concrete to build up the organization. But, Dhale continued to concentrate on writing, and the organization suffered. ✓

Dhaseel had his own limitations as a leader, in spite of some charisma. He was basically a radical poet, but of self-confessed 'lumpen origin'.²⁵ His ✓

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Sudhir Sonalkar, "Dalit Panthers: The Voice of The Oppressed", an Article in The Hindustan Times, June 2, 1974.

acquaintance with Marxism was of recent standing mostly through independent leftist friends.²⁶

From the beginning, he was supported by a minority in the movement. His personal life style was hardly methodical, and could not serve as an example to his supporters. Dhasal's position at the time of the split was hardly understood by the rank and file, with the result that his case largely went by default.²⁷

Thus, after his expulsion, it was easy for conservative elements like Dhale and others to wrest complete control of the movement. Dhale carried a 'perpetual chip on his shoulder' with regard to caste discrimination. He wanted to prove that his personal life-style was equal to that of any upper-caste Hindu. Thus his wedding at Poona was celebrated with great pomp and ostentation the equal of any high-caste wedding.²⁸

26. "Scheduled Castes: A View From Below", Op.cit., p.56.

27. Ibid.

28. Patriot, June 11, 1974.

It is clear that because of lack of proper leadership, the Dalit Panthers movement failed to move in a clear direction. With regard to concrete situations, ambivalent and wavering positions were adopted by the movement, like, for example, the problem of concessions and reservation of seats, etc. The full significance of the boycott of the Bombay Parliamentary Bye-election was not analysed.

No alternative strategy of working outside the Constitutional and Parliamentary framework was worked out. Amidst this 'welter of confusion', infighting, and the split in the Dalit Panther ranks put paid to any chances of the movement developing into a strong, effective and well-ordered organization.

CHAPTER IV

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The Dalit Panthers movement was born under certain basic social conditions. Among these may be listed the rapidly deteriorating living conditions of the Dalits, the increasing wave of atrocities committed on them, the growth of a literary and political consciousness and the search for a new organization, which would effectively translate their struggle for emancipation into practice.

Organizational Problems

In spite of the fact that the Dalit Panthers declared itself to be an all-India body towards the

middle of 1974, and Dalit Panther offices were opened in a number of States, the organization just failed to get off the ground. No efforts were initiated towards coordination, so that joint programmes of action could be launched at a national level.)

This almost gave the impression as if the problems that the Dalits were confronted with in Maharashtra were special to the region and bore no resemblance to problems faced by Dalits in other parts of the country.

The Delhi Dalit Panthers President, Bapurao Pakhiddey, for example, did make efforts towards achieving all-India coordination. He had even suggested the incorporation of some of the Dalits from other parts of the country into the all-India executive committee.¹ This was viewed by the Mahar Dalit leadership in Bombay with alarm, and they saw it as a threat to their own position.

1. The Delhi Dalit Panthers Resolutions, published in Hindi, Delhi, August 1974.

Within Maharashtra itself, there has been an over-centralising tendency in the movement. Most of the decisions were taken by the leaders in Bombay. On numerous occasions, Dalits from Osmanabad, Nasik, etc. were called to Bombay and then told what to do. There were no efforts initiated to create leadership from the rural districts of Maharashtra and allowing them to take decisions on local issues.

If particular Dalits showed initiative and enterprise, this was viewed as a potential threat by the leadership vested in Bombay. Raja Dhale has so far been pre-eminently successful in isolating and thwarting all challenges to his leadership.²

The conflict between him and Dhasal was more ideological, prompted by a complete difference in their analysis of the Dalit problem. But when Dhasal had to leave the movement, a part of the organization also went with him. But when Dhale expelled Dhasal

2. Dhale's expulsion of Dhasal, Mahatekar and Sangare bears testimony to his shrewd leadership.

Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar, two Dalit leaders from Bombay, they were completely isolated, and their expulsion made no viable impact on the movement. This was because both Sangare and Mahatekar were only opposed to Dhale's style of leadership, which they termed 'undemocratic'.³

Religious Obacurantism and Sectarianism

(The Dalit Panthers which had to wage pitched battles against the Shiv Sena in the streets of Bombay, also borrowed the tactics and organizational features of the Shiv Sena.) Like the Shiv Sena with its areawise shakhas, the Panthers organized themselves into area-wise chains. In Bombay, at one time, there were hundred and sixteen chains, each comprising of two hundred workers.⁴

3. See, Vivek Karekatte, "What's Happened to Dalit Panthers", an Article in Youth Times, February 6, 1976.

4. Ibid.

(The Dalit Panthers also suffered from lack of funds which is necessary to build an effective organization.⁵ The conflict between Dhale and Dhasal split the movement, and coherent ideology became a casualty.)

Dhasal in the Manifesto had adequately defined the term 'Dalit'. He understood that the combination of social forces in opposition to the Dalits was formidable and that the Dalits would have to make common cause with other exploited and oppressed sections in the country, in order to achieve its aims.

But, Dhale wanted to confine the movement to the Mahars and that too among the Neo-Buddhists. Being a Buddhist, he believed in the Buddhist vision of society and thought that he was faithfully following Ambedkar's example. This isolationist and sectarian attitude, alienated the Dalit Panthers from other Dalits in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Those of the Mahars who

5. Y. Dalmia, "Scheduled Castes: A View From Below", an Article in The Times of India, December 15, 1974.

had not been converted, the Mangs, Chambhars, Dhors, Bhangis, Vadars, Holars and Ramoshis, but formed a sizeable section of the Dalit population in rural Maharashtra, viewed the Dalit Panthers with deep suspicion and distrust.

(The Dalit Panthers had also a mass-base among the landless Dalits and Dalit agricultural labourers in rural Maharashtra. But, no efforts were made by the Panthers to understand the rural position of the Dalits especially the Dalits' relationship to land.) ✓

Only under Dhasal's leadership, a movement was launched in the rural areas for abolishing rural indebtedness, distribution of land to the landless and forcible cultivation of land expropriated by caste-Hindus. But, this movement did not receive support from other sections of the Panthers and soon fizzled out.

Dhasal also failed to explain his theoretical position in concise and clear terms to his followers in the movement. His problem was compounded by the fact that in Maharashtra, there is a complete inade-

quacy of Marxist literature for the Dalits to read and improve their theoretical and objective understanding.

Consequently, in the context of the limited understanding of the average Dalit, a lot of importance is attached to 'labels'. Dhale's accusation and consequent labelling of Dhasal as a Marxist was enough to arouse suspicion and hostility. This is because the Communist parties in all their years of working in Maharashtra have not always played a considerably progressive role and the Dalit does not feel that they have done anything concrete to improve his living conditions.⁶

The reverence and deep respect that Ambedkar's name evokes among the Dalits in Maharashtra is also a factor that has to be taken into account. Fundamentally, the Dalits consider Ambedkar to have given them a basic sense of self-respect and dignity. This even Dhasal

6. See, Gail Omvedt, Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Maharashtra, Scientific Socialist Trust Publications, Bombay, 1976.

realized, and consequently, was careful to avoid any overt and explicit criticism of Ambedkar. But, Dhale's charge that Dhasal was selling 'Marxism' in the guise of 'Ambedkarism', was to the Dalit evidence of the deepest treachery. There was no effort made to understand the full significance of some of the larger issues involved, and none to explain it.

Dhale proved his bonafides by writing eulogies of Ambedkar and exhorting all the Dalits to convert themselves to Buddhism! The movement increasingly became sectarian, conservative and obscurantist.

The fact that no effort was made to understand or solve the rural problem confined the Dalit Panthers movement to Bombay. It became urban-centred, and the fact that in Bombay, most of its members belonged to the 'lumpen proletariat' increasingly alienated it from its rural base.

Social Realities

(In Maharashtra, as in most parts of rural India, caste is the existential reality. It is caste discrim-

mination that is empirically and immediately discernible. And it is against this discrimination that an individual is often tempted to react instinctively.

But, the Dalit Panthers' was a social movement trying to organize a struggle to bring about a situation in which there would be no discrimination and no inequality. The task that the Dalit Panthers set themselves was formidable. Hence the need for a correct theoretical understanding of the nature of the social situation, a need to which only perfunctory attention seems to have been given by the Dalit Panther leadership. ✓

For such a theoretical understanding, an understanding of the class situation prevailing in Maharashtra is necessary. Class is the basic reality though its nature is not readily discernible. Caste, on its own, is certainly worthy of social analysis, but to scientifically understand the phenomenon, it must be linked to class. If a number of apparently ✓

caste conflicts are carefully analysed, it will be found that class is the underlying factor.⁷

On the other hand, for any one to think that the factor of caste is not important, and that it will automatically disappear in the context of a class struggle, is illogical. And it is true that the Communist parties in India have yet to arrive at an adequate caste-class analysis of Indian social reality. We are not suggesting that Scheduled Castes are classes by any means, but what we are stressing is that their problems cannot be understood without understanding their basic class dimensions, and they cannot be solved unless the basic class inequalities are removed.

Local Problems and Larger Issues

(In Maharashtra, the Dalit Panthers had to face a host of social and political forces ranged against it, amongst whom mention may be made of the ruling party,

7. See, Chandrasekhar, "Caste War has become a Class War", an Article in Netherland, June 23, 1975.

the representatives of law and order and the formidable Jan Sangh - Shiv Sena alliance. It also had to initially contend with an indifferent Press, sometimes bordering on outright hostility which did not even care to establish a distinction between the Shiv Sena and the Dalit Panthers.⁸)

(To a very large extent, the Dalit Panthers' denigration of the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon, their decisive pronouncements against some aspects of Hinduism, and their public bonfires of what many consider to be the Hindu scriptures, alienated them from liberal minded upper-caste Hindus who were otherwise inclined to be sympathetic to their cause.)

(Their militant tactics have also come in for a lot of criticism.) While it is unfair in this context to take an abstract, ethical or generalized view of violence, the position of the Dalit Panthers would be better appreciated, if the temper and context of the special situation in which they operated is taken into

8. See for instance, The Hindustan Times, January 19, 1974.

account. Surely, the atrocities perpetrated on the Harijans in rural Maharashtra and the tactics of the Shiv Sena in Bombay, would earn the label of violence?

Perhaps, the whole approach to the problem of the Scheduled Castes in India, including the understanding of the dominant Dalit faction, has been lopsided and wrong. Concessions and privileges, though they matter to some extent, will never achieve true equality, or a synthesis between the oppressed and upper castes.

(The concessions have always remained less than the demand. The Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes presenting the 22nd report to the President of India observed that there is a gap between what we profess and what we practice. Steps already taken have their own limitations. Various agencies set up by the government for programme implementation suffer from lack of funds. He doubted the sincerity and commitment of the leadership at the lower levels.⁹

9. Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Government of India, May 1976, 370 pages.

There is much that can be done at an official level. But, to achieve a truly equal and just society, the class dimensions and revolutionary potential of both the Scheduled Castes and other exploited groups in the country will have to be tapped.

(Basically, the conditions that gave rise to the Dalit Panthers still remain, and the means and tactics of struggle for a just society are dictated essentially by the nature of struggle one is engaged in. The Dalit Panthers live in a violent society; day in and day out, they have been the victims of violence. They are basically committed to organize and prepare for a situation in which violence will no longer be the rule. This is a stupendous task, and the magnitude of this can only be fully realized by those engaged in the task.)

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