

CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

One of the prominent aspects of economic, political and social relations revolves around the issues of inequality based on class, caste, race and gender. In the context of India, caste based politics has always remained in the forefront. But during the last two decades, the assertion of the people from low castes including the Dalits has assumed unprecedented significance. The Dalit question is one of the most important questions in today's political and academic debates in India. Dalit assertion, Dalit leadership and voting pattern of the Dalits etc., are the elements of these debates.

Dalits are underprivileged in all social, economic and political fronts which leads to their misery, discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated society. The theory of the caste system is interlinked with the *varna model* which divided the Hindu society into four orders-the Brahmins, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudras.¹ The first three castes are considered twice born or 'dvija' since the men from these castes were entitled to use the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of Upanayana, which the Sudras were not allowed to perform.² Sudras were the people who cultivated the land, mended the shoes, washed the clothes and did all types of menial works. Members of this caste, however, shared

the stigma of untouchability; they were frequently denied the chance to eat, smoke or even sit with members of the upper castes, and they often must use separate wells from those maintained for the use of others.³

This pitiable condition of Dalits was seen and well addressed by some eminent social and political philosophers like Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar and others and during their long careers they had taken some ameliorative measures in order to raise their social status.

India after gaining independence enacted different social legislations to reform the position of Dalits which included to remove the untouchability and discrimination against them and secondly to elevate their status in such a way that they have an equal status with other segments. The provisions of voting rights, reservation in education and jobs and in the political fields, are the steps which have been in existence since the adoption of the Constitution. Efforts are still going on to remove different discriminatory practices against them. One of the major aspects of the socio-economic status of Dalits is their political consciousness and awareness about various political activities and participation in these activities. The Dalit consciousness about political activities

may contribute in various decisions relating to their rights and privileges. Thus political awareness and participation of the Dalits is an important area of study.

At the outset, it may be pointed out that though the term Dalit signifies a broad canvas, yet it is generally used as an alternative for the Scheduled Castes as recognized in the Indian Constitution.

Punjab is a state where the percentage of the Dalits is the highest in the country. Dalits constitute 28.85 per cent of total population of Punjab. The overall percentage of Dalits in India is 16.23 per cent (census 2001). The proportion of the Scheduled Castes to the total population in Punjab has consistently been rising from 22.5 per cent in 1961 to 24.7 per cent in 1971, 26.8 per cent in 1981, 28.3 per cent in 1991 and 28.85 in 2001. This rate of decadal rise in the Scheduled Caste population has been consistently higher than the rate of rise in the non-SC population since 1951.

However, it is interesting to note that it is not Punjab but Uttar Pradesh where the Dalits (21.1% in the population) are in a position to make a recognizable impact on the politics of the state. The other states like Maharashtra have much lower percentage but

there also the mobilization of the Dalits is more organized as compared to Punjab. The rise and expansion of BSP and Dalit aspirations symbolized by the leadership of Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh is seen as an example of Dalit assertion, but Dalits in Punjab (inspite of the substantial ratio) have not been able to emerge as a political force. To understand this we need proper understanding of the pattern of political participation of Dalits in Punjab.

In political participation, we do not confine ourselves to the act of voting alone, since there are other political activities which are important indicators of political participation. The participation covers a wide range of activities like participation in rallies, becoming members of different political parties or the other pressure groups, forming their own political party or raising issues of political importance through different mediums-radio, television, newspapers etc. or participating in elections at all levels-voting, campaigning or contesting. The political consciousness and level of participation of Dalits in these activities in Punjab has not yet been explored by any of the researchers. Therefore, considering the importance of these facts an attempt has been made to understand and analyse the political participation of Dalits in Punjab.

The present study focuses on the political participation of the Dalits in two important districts of Punjab-namely Nawanshehar [now Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar (SBS Nagar)] and Patiala. The two districts have been selected purely on the basis of the concentration of Dalit population. Whereas Nawanshehar has the highest percentage of Dalit population i.e. 40.46 per cent and has two out of three Assembly seats reserved, Patiala has the lowest percentage of Dalit population 23.05 per cent in the state and has only one seat reserved out of eight Assembly seats.

CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

The two concepts which have been used in the present study are Dalit and political participation. Before presenting the details of the present study, it is pertinent to clarify the above mentioned terms as clearly as possible.

Dalit

In India, Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables, who have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. In many cases, Dalits are easily targeted even now in this independent nation where the constitution guarantees equal rights and privileges to every citizen. Throughout the century they have been victimized religiously, socially, culturally and most of all economically.

Dalit is an expression of the existing contradiction, inequality and exploitation in the Indian hierarchy. In the annals of Indian history, Dalits were referred to with different nomenclatures like- Chandals, Avarnas, Achhuts, Adi-dravidia, depressed classes, oppressed Hindu, Harijan, Scheduled Castes etc. at different points of time.⁴ However, after the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement, they preferred to be called as Dalits.

The word Dalit, should normally refer to all oppressed classes including not only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but also the extremely backward among other backward castes. However there is a general agreement about the fact that the Scheduled Castes form the hard core of Dalits, who face more oppression and social indignities than the OBCs. Our main concern in this work, therefore, is with Scheduled Castes.

Definition of Dalit: The term Dalit is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal* which means burst, split, broken, down trodden. Dalit has become part of the vocabulary of the North-Indian languages. For example, in Punjabi the well-known Punjabi dictionary 'The Mahan Kosh' by Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha defines Dalit as one who belongs to the lowest caste (Hini Jati) and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper castes (Uchi Jati).⁵

The most appropriate definition is given by Professor Gangadhar Pantawane, founder editor of *Amitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity):-

"To me, Dalit is not a caste, he is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of his country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separation, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.⁶

It was used in the new context in Marathi by New Buddhist activists, the followers of B.R. Ambedkar in the early 1970s.⁷ Dalit refers to those who have been broken, grounded down by those above them in a deliberate way, there is in, the word itself, an internal denial-pollution, Karma and justified caste hierarchy.⁸

It was seemingly first used in the context of caste oppression by the great nineteenth century reformer Jyotiba Phule.⁹ It is interesting that the category Dalit was used by Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly *Bahiskruit Bharat*. He defines it comprehensively: Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper

caste Brahminical order.¹⁰ He, however, did not use this category often, preferring to deploy different terms depending upon changing context. For example, when dealing with the Imperial state he used the category of depressed classes and when addressing high caste Hindus he used the category '*bahiskruit*' meaning total out-caste.¹¹

If one takes this view, all the exploited, and the downtrodden producers, who have been deprived from the ownership of the means of production, denied basic rights of a dignified social life and livelihood, discriminated through biased socio-economic and political decisions taken in favour of non-producers and privileged classes and kept deliberately away from the mainstream advantages of progress are to be considered Dalits.¹² It is to be noted that economically, a poor person is different from a Dalit. A poor person may be deprived in the economic sphere, especially of income necessary to participate in the economy. However, he/she may not be necessarily deprived in social and cultural spheres, that is, he/she may not face the same type of exclusion in the social and cultural life of his neighborhood as a Dalit faces.¹³

The recent use of the term Dalit has been developed in the manifesto of Dalit Panther movement in 1973 : "Who is Dalit?" in this regard, this manifesto says members of Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited socially, politically, economically and in the name of religion.¹⁴ So Dalits are exclusively the socially and economically marginalized people of India.

A variety of other names have been used in both English and Indian languages before and after independence to designate these people who are at the lowest rung in the social structure. Besides the term Scheduled Castes and untouchables the term- chandals, Avarnas, depressed classes and Harijan have become well known. James Massey¹⁵ points out that these have been changed occasionally, in most cases, to despise them or to show contempt. Since they were considered outside chaturvarna- the four-caste system, they were labelled out-castes and untouchables and alienated from the main stream of the society.¹⁶ Untouchable is the word used by Ambedkar for those castes who are lowest in the Hindu scale of pollution. It first appeared in 1909. However, the word had now disappeared from ordinary parlance following widespread education and constitutional provisions. Before Independence the Government used the term "depressed classes": this term was replaced by Scheduled Castes in government of India

Act 1935 when these castes were placed on a Schedule as qualifying for special rights. In the arena of competitive politics, Ambedkar also preferred the term Scheduled Castes. It was evident when he used this term for establishing the political party-Scheduled Caste Federation.¹⁷ Although this term has been used as a nomenclature in the present Constitution of India, it is not explicitly defined.

Mahatma Gandhi an ardent champion for removing untouchability within the Hindu-Chaturvarna frame-work called the untouchables as Harijans-men of God.¹⁸ Basically Harijan word was first used by Narsinha Mehta but later propagated by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi himself clarified this in one of the issues of the weekly Harijan. He argued that, 'It is not a name of my coining-some year ago, several untouchable correspondents complained that I used the word *Asprishya* in the pages of Navjivan, 'Asprishya means literally untouchable: I then invited them to suggest a better name, and one of the untouchable correspondents suggested the adoption of the name Harijan, on the strength of its having been used by the first known poet saint of Gujrat.¹⁹ But Ambedkar believed untouchables do not regard Gandhi as being earnest in eradicating untouchability.²⁰ According

to him "Saints never carried on a campaign against caste and untouchability. The saints of the Bhakti sect were not concerned with the struggle between man and man. They were concerned with relation between man and God".²¹ Later, a section of Scheduled Caste leaders rejected the term Harijan considering it an insult rather than an honour.²² The term Dalit, in Gail Omvedt's opinion, provides a militant alternative to the Gandhian term Harijan.²³ All those who have been converted to Buddhism use the term Buddhist and rejected all other nomenclature, including their original caste names.

In the mid 1970s, again, the Dalit leaders coined a new identity in the name of 'Bahujan' with the emergence of Backward And Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF).²⁴ Kanshi Ram used the term Bahujan to encompass Dalits, Adivasees, OBCs, and minorities together for a greater alliance. In recent years the term Dalit has been discarded as a social reactionary category by a section of the community who prefer Bahujan with both the Buddhist as well as Dalit categories.²⁵ Kancha Ilaiah in his book 'why I am not a Hindu' (1996) used the term 'Dalit-Bahujan' to maintain the special identity of Dalits while expressing a broader alliance.

What is most important to emphasize at this point is that Dalit is the term which down-trodden people have given to themselves. This helps to account for the popularity of the term among Dalit people of different protest movements in India. Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for recovery of their past identity.²⁶ They were realized of themselves as Dalits, the very acceptance of the state of Dalitness is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.²⁷

With the trend of Dalit assertions becoming stronger many Dalit organizations have started propagating and popularizing the term Dalit more vigorously. On the other hand the word "Chammar" which is one of the sub-castes in the Dalits has come out openly as a separate entity and formed "All India Maha Chammar Sabha". They put up posters and banners all over the Punjab recently declaring "xoz is dgks ge pekj gSa" (say with pride that we are Chammar).²⁸

Political Participation

As Aristotle said, man is a political animal by nature and his political activity may take place either explicitly or implicitly within his own group. But that state structure has undergone great

transformation from city state to modern democratic nation state, from his time to present. As a result, the nature of political participation of human beings should be qualitatively different from that of Aristotelian times. The political participation in present nation state has to be highly conscious and constant in order to establish democratic institutions which are useful for each and every individual.

In these days everybody accepts the wisdom and need of people's participation in various state activities. People's involvement in setting the goal and implementing the policies is considered highly essential. The necessity or desirability of such participation by the people has thus assumed much importance and with it, political participation which gives the people a chance to shape their destiny, has also become a matter of political importance.

Political participation plays a significant role in the survival of an ongoing democratic political system. Lack of political awareness and passivity of the general masses make the political system irresponsible and ultimately non-functioning. It is political consciousness and political awareness which brings the sense of interest articulation among the general masses. When the interest

is articulated as a result of political consciousness, it leads to interest aggregation. When the interest is aggregated, the resultant is mass mobilization. When the masses are mobilised the outcome is effective participation of the masses in the affairs of the political system.²⁹ In this framework the significance of political participation acquires a paramount importance.

The process of political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society show active interest and play a role in the selection of rulers. It includes voting, seeking information, discussing, attending meetings, contributing financially, and communicating with the representatives, enrolment in a party, canvassing and registering voters and working in campaigns. It is clear that the term political participation draws our attention to political activities rather than attitude and behaviour of private citizen to those who are professionally involved in public affairs.³⁰

Social scientists broadly define political participation as being the process through which an individual plays a role in the political life of his society, has the opportunity to take part in deciding what the common goals of that society are, and the best ways of achieving these goals. Political participation refers to actual

participation in those voluntary activities by which members of a society show interest in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public polity.

To understand the issue involving political participation, firstly, it becomes necessary to discuss what political participation is. Secondly to see what are the factors in making people participate in politics, or what are the different environmental factors that can influence the political behaviour of individuals or groups.

Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may, in some cases, have complete and direct control over these processes - in other cases the control may be partial or indirect. The important thing is that people have constant access to decision making and power participation in this sense is an essential element of human development.³¹

To define political participation is a very complicated problem and to decide what activities constitute political participation is no simple matter, because it is a product of various factors.³² Some people devote their full time and energy in politics, others choose to remain deeply interested as passive spectators. For some, politics is a matter of continuous and responsible attention, for others,

political activity is episodic or emerges only in time of crisis. Thus, the political participation ranges from most passive and sporadic, to the most active and consistent.³³

Political participation is a civil duty and it is a good sign for political health of country. The term political participation has very wide connotation. Political participation can be regarded as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in the democracy and the rulers are made accountable to the ruled.³⁴ Political participation implies participation by the various people in the politics of the country.³⁵ Political participation is a necessary ingredient of every political system.³⁶

Defining political participation Myron Weiner says 'The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods intended in influencing the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs or the choice of political leaders.'³⁷

Dowse and Hughes say that people participate in politics in many different ways, with different degree of emotional involvement and at different levels of the system.³⁸