

Dalit Identity Formation: Intersections of History, Politics, Social Realities

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Abstract

The title, "Dalit Identity Formation: Intersections of Politics, History and Social Realities" encapsulates the focus of this article that explores how the identity of Dalits, historically marginalized communities in India, is shaped by a complex interplay of politics, history and the societal factors. The aim of this article is to focus on the process through which individuals within the Dalit community construct and perceive their identities. It includes aspects such as historical, cultural, social, and economic factors that contribute to the formation of Dalit identity. The involvement of political ideologies, movements, policies, and power dynamics influences the construction and representation of Dalit identity. Political factors may include affirmative action policies, representation in government, activism, and political mobilization among Dalit communities. This article explores into the Social structures, norms, traditions, caste dynamics, economic conditions, and cultural influences that impact the identity formation process of Dalits. This also involves examining discrimination, inequality, and social hierarchies prevalent in Indian society and how they affect Dalit identity. This research paper analyses how the identity of Dalits in India is not just a product of internal factors but is profoundly influenced by the interconnections between politics and the diverse social realities prevalent in the country. The research aims to explore these nuanced interactions to better understand the complexity of Dalit identity formation in the Indian context.

Keywords: Social realities, Dalit, Identity, Intersections, Indian Context.

Assigning a community a specific label is a political action that involves the social process of including or excluding a community and attributing privileges, rights, and disadvantages within a particular ideology framework. In India, the caste system, known as Manudharma, structured communities within a hierarchical caste system and marginalized Dalits, depriving them of wealth and social recognition. Since ancient times, Dalits have contested these designations, with their struggle intensifying during the British rule when they began gaining benefits through reservation policies. By the 1980s, Dalits broadened their movement to include Sudras, forming a united front against casteism under the banner of Bahujan identity. They demanded an equitable share in various domains. Presently, identity politics has become a significant area of interest among students, social scientists, and policymakers in India.

Histories of modern India written about a generation ago overlooked the Dalit movement, not giving it the attention it deserved. Dalits were often ignored, portrayed without their own historical story, or seen as passive figures within the larger national history. Though Edwards Thompson and G.

T. Garrett mentioned the Dalit movement at times in their Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India, they didn't provide a thorough description of it (1962: 623, 631, 650). Percival Spear who tried to show that the roots of Indian backwardness and all their political, social and economic problems must be traced to India's past and not to British practices, referred to Gandhi as the leader of a movement to uplift the oppressed classes, acknowledging Ambedkar only as a 'Harijan leader' of 'exceptional courage and ability' (1958: 652-53; 1961: 835).

Indian historians too, while writing about modern India, haven't given much attention to the Dalit movement. Usually, they mention Dalits in sections related to social reform and present them as passive recipients of aid, rather than active participants in their struggles. For example, R. C. Majumdar briefly refers to Dalits as beneficiaries of charitable work done by others. R. R. Sethi only brings up Dalits concerning the 1932 Communal Award and as subjects of 'uplift' efforts. Later, Majumdar acknowledges Ambedkar and the Dalits' involvement in the political discussions of the 1930s and 40s leading to India's independence. However, in a more detailed account in his book, Majumdar primarily emphasizes Gandhi, social reformers, and the Congress, casting Ambedkar as a perceptive critic rather than a central figure. Bipan Chandra's coverage of Dalits is limited to a brief three-page section on 'the struggle against caste' in his textbook (1971: 231-33), although he attributes a more active role to them compared to earlier historians. However, his more recent work only mentions Gandhi's 'Harijan Uplift Movement' (1989: 291-295). Lastly, Sumit Sarkar briefly discusses the Mahar movement, but in the context of the 1930s, he primarily highlights Gandhi's Harijan campaign (1983: 56, 243, 328-30).

It is always seen that history significantly influences the way people perceive Dalits. Historical events, social structures, and past treatment of Dalits shape how individuals view and understand the status, identity, and struggles of the Dalit community. For instance, Understanding how discrimination and the caste system operate in India affects how people view Dalits. Historical stories, whether positive or negative, shape these perceptions, impacting support for change or reinforcing biases against the Dalit community. The historical writings about Dalit movements and Dalit identity in India have predominantly overlooked or downplayed the agency and active participation of Dalits themselves. These narratives, particularly those by earlier British and Indian historians, tended to portray Dalits as passive recipients of aid or beneficiaries of charitable work by others rather than recognizing their active involvement in their struggles.

"Emerging from the Shadows: A Journey to Acknowledgment"

It's important to acknowledge the evolving perspectives on the historical agency of Dalits in India. The conventional narrative often marginalized or underestimated the role of Dalits in initiating social and political change. However, as highlighted in the historical studies, there is now a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the active participation of Dalits in shaping their own destinies. J. R. Kamble's work, "Pursuit of Equality in Indian History," provides a more comprehensive overview that sheds light on Dalit endeavors for political representation. The period from the Montagu Declaration in 1917 to the Poona Pact in 1932 is particularly significant in this context. The historical narrative emphasizes the existence of a vibrant Dalit movement before the enactment of the 1919 Constitution, which continued to gain momentum and political significance throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

While Dalits may not have had a single unified organization comparable to some other political entities, they established grassroots organizations. Notably, these organizations had recognized leaders, with B. R. Ambedkar being a prominent figure among them. The shared aspirations of Dalits included political recognition, representation, dignity, equality, and justice. These

aspirations found expression in the drafting of the 1950 Constitution, where B. R. Ambedkar played a crucial role. This evolving narrative challenges the earlier exclusivist and patronizing views regarding Dalits, highlighting their agency and contributions to the social and political fabric of India. It underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse historical experiences and struggles of marginalized communities in shaping the nation's history.

The transformation of Dalits, from a group disengaged from politics and facing marginalization and poverty, into a significant force in Indian politics can be traced from the late 1800s to the Government of India Act of 1935. This act marked a significant step for Dalits, laying the groundwork for their role in shaping the Constitution of independent India. The British administration in India categorized Dalits as depressed classes, exterior castes, and Scheduled castes in order to grant them specific concessions that aligned with “their” political interests. In the 1920s, Dalits were identified as “Depressed” classes. The British Government aimed to designate Dalits in order to provide them with certain benefits in various areas. In 1906, Muslims were granted separate electorates, and this set a precedent for other communities to demand similar treatment, claiming they were disadvantaged.

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, also known as the Government of India Act 1919, marked a significant step in the constitutional evolution of British India. The reforms were introduced as a response to the demands for constitutional reforms and self-governance in India. The appointment of depressed class representatives to the legislature was one of the measures taken to address the social and political concerns of marginalized communities. The reforms aimed to include Indian representatives in the legislative process, and seats were reserved for depressed classes (later known as Scheduled Castes) in the provincial legislatures. This provision was seen as a sympathetic gesture to ensure their participation in the political process during the transitional period of power transfer from Britain to India. It's worth noting that the legitimacy of British rule in India was a complex and multifaceted issue. While some measures were taken with an intention to address social concerns and include diverse voices in the political process, the overall relationship between the British colonial administration and various Indian communities was characterized by a complex interplay of power dynamics, exploitation, and resistance. This led to the definition of the depressed castes as Scheduled castes, along with determining their population, a move that was done to legitimize British rule in India (Lalah Dushkin, 1967, p.629). The period from 1927 to 1937 becomes more detailed and comprehensive in understanding this transformation.

The Poona Pact of 1932 was a significant agreement between Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, representing the Dalit community, and Mahatma Gandhi, representing the upper-caste Hindu leaders. This pact had profound effects on Indian politics and the Dalit community's identity. The pact ensured reserved seats for the Dalits within the general electorate, maintaining a certain level of representation for them. This reshaped the political landscape by integrating Dalits into the broader electoral framework, influencing their participation in governance and politics.

It marked a compromise where Dalits gained reserved seats but lost the prospect of separate electorates. It reinforced the idea of Dalits as an integral part of Hindu society while ensuring a voice for them within the larger political structure. This had a lasting impact on how Dalits perceived their identity within the societal and political context. It influenced subsequent policies, the formation of political strategies, and debates around reservation policies and social justice. It significantly shaped the trajectory of Dalit political aspirations and movements in the post-independence era. Mr. M.K. Gandhi coined the term "Harijans" for untouchables during the 1930s to align with his political motives. However, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had earlier demanded separate recognition and representation

for Dalits, seeking communal representation in 1919. Despite this, Gandhi opposed their separate identity and named them "Harijans" as part of his political strategy to empower Hindus and increase their political dominance. Dalits turned down the Harijan label following Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's influence, they found the term Harijan to be indicative of pity, something they found unacceptable.

Top of Form

In defining the figures of depressed classes, the census of India, 1931 considered the following tests (1) whether the caste or class in question can be served by clean Brahamins or not (2) whether the caste or class in question can be served by the barbers, water carriers, tailors etc., who serve the caste Hindus, (3) whether caste in question pollutes a high caste Hindu by contact or by proximity, (4) whether the caste or class in question is one from whose hands a caste Hindu can take water, (5) whether the caste or class in question is debarred from using public conveniences, such as roads, ferries, wells or schools, (6) whether the caste or class in question is debarred from use of Hindu temples, (7) whether in ordinary social hate of the caste or class in question will be treated as an equal by high caste men of the same educational qualifications, (8) whether the caste or class in question is merely depressed on account of its own ignorance, illiteracy or poverty and but for that would be subject to no disability, (9) whether it is depressed on account of the occupation followed and whether but for that occupation it would be subjected to no social disability. (Census of India, 1931, p. 472). the British rulers introduced an democratic ideology of social justice through compensatory measures for the depressed classes, reducing the upper castes' monopoly on benefits and starting the decline of their dominance in various areas.

The depressed classes were aware of their political significance based on their numbers. The census report revealed that in Punjab, the All India Shradhananda Depressed Classes Mission urged their members, typically classified as exterior (Depressed) castes, to identify themselves as Aryan Hindus instead of Achuts or Dalits in the census records. Meanwhile, leaders of the exterior castes were advocating for their followers to identify as Adi-Dharmi by religion and not as Hindus at all. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opposed including Dalits within the Hindu category in the census and sought separate recognition for them. During the 1931 Round Table Conference, he suggested that untouchables should be termed as Protestant Hindus or Non-conformist Hindus. His objective was to maintain a distinct identity for securing special protection for the rights of depressed classes, independent of the Hindu majority. There were four distinct identity trends in Indian politics during the 1920s and 1930s: the British rule wanted to keep Depressed Class Christians separate from Hindus, various caste and social organizations aimed for a separate identity like Adi-Dharmis or Adi-Hindus, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha wanted a common Hindu identity, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar desired an identity as protestant-Hindus, advocating for a separate identity from Hindus.

Their demands for recognition, representation, and distinct identity added complexity to the broader political landscape of pre-independence India. The views and actions of Gandhi, the Congress party, and Hindu religious groups played a role in shaping Dalit identity. While some, like Gandhi, advocated for the assimilation of Dalits into Hindu society, others, like the Congress, collaborated with Dalit leaders to address their issues within the framework of the nationalist movement.

The Untouchable Mahars, initially marginalized within Hindu society, developed an autonomous political movement for their advancement and emancipation. The movement progressed through distinct phases: an era of self-reform from 1890-1930 emphasizing social uplift within the Hindu social order; a phase centered on politics from the First Round Table Conference until the mid-1950s; a transition phase following the Republican Party's electoral defeat in 1952 and the mass

conversion of Mahars to Buddhism; and a subsequent phase marked by the rise of the Dalit Panthers. The Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra, originating in the 1970s, popularized the term "Dalit." The movement symbolized the forceful assertion of Dalits for equal identity and rights. Notably, the class-oriented perspective of the Dalit Panthers allowed for the inclusion of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes within the Dalit category, contrary to the fundamental exclusionary nature of the caste system.

In the context of Mahar history, the community experienced shifts between the class and caste models throughout their trajectory. This toggling between the two models reflects the varying approaches employed by the Mahars in addressing untouchability and devising strategies for their emancipation. There is an internal divide within the Mahar community itself. This divide emerged between the urban, middle-class elite, who had benefited from reservations or concessions, and the rural masses, who had not reaped similar advantages.

The Bahujan Samaj Party's push for proportional representation in politics has bolstered individual caste or sub-caste movements, seeking distinct recognition and dedicated quotas in various domains proportional to their population. Identifiable single caste groups like Chamar, Madiga, Mahar, and Mala resonate more strongly with the masses, effectively mobilizing them in the struggle for their rights. Movements like the Chamar Movement in Uttar Pradesh, the Dandor Movement among Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, and the Mahar Movement in Maharashtra have successfully rallied large numbers, functioning as sub-caste movements challenging dominant castes. Therefore, terms such as Dalit and Bahujan should not merely represent multiple identities but should evolve into ideologies, particularly in the context of the burgeoning sub-caste identities.

The deeper sense of Dalit consciousness and identity exists within a select group of Dalit leaders, the media, and some users. This deeper consciousness is merged with multiple identities found among Dalits across the country, like Mahars, Mangs Buddhists, Charmakars, and Dalits in Maharashtra. Similarly, in Karnataka, there's Dalit literature and political movements, but socially, they identify as Adi-Karnataka or Adi-Dravida, and sometimes as Adi-Dharmis. In Andhra Pradesh, Dalits engage in the political discourse led by Dalit leaders but retain strong identities as Malas or Madigas socially. In Odisha's 'Kandahmal,' clashes between converted 'Dalit panas' and Dalit 'tribes' indicate rivalries and multiple identities, hindering the formation of a unified Dalit identity. Despite these diverse identities, they share a common aim of creating a society free from oppression, exploitation, and dehumanization. Therefore, despite apparent differences like 'Buddhist' or 'Marxist,' all these identities strive for restoring a fair social order. The Dalit identity encompasses both negation and the connection of categories from the same logical class.

The assertion for an identity like Dalit focuses on both individual and collective rights, striving for respect, social justice, equality, and empowerment in society. The term Dalit has evolved intellectually and politically, suggesting a complex conceptual hierarchy in its identity and usage. Despite diverse identities, they share socio-political meanings and functions. Dalit identity should be distinguished from the terms 'backward' and 'forward'. It's not merely a construct of the middle class, as argued by Ashis Nandy, but represents a unified vision and values shared by Dalits across India. Gail Omvedt and S.M. Michael's views align with this continuity in the Dalit identity, which is both constructive and dynamic. Nandy overlooks its roots in critical cultural traditions like Lokayat, Buddhism, Warkari, and Kabir, which form the basis of Dalit identity, making it multidimensional and sensitive to various cultural anchors. Fragmented identities hold the potential to mobilize the masses for radical political change, challenging prevailing hegemonic forces. Dalit identity not only negates

established categories but also allows the merging of categories belonging to the same logical class, such as Buddhism and Bahujan.

Dr. Ambedkar attempted to shape the Dalit identity by emphasizing both the shared experience of exploitation across India and a collective ethnic identity based on common descent. The identity of Dalits undergoes shifts and variations, integral to its contested nature, alongside affiliations with caste and religious identities driven by political motives. The term 'Dalit' carries multiple values culturally and hermeneutically, presenting an alternative worldview against the dominant Brahminic-Hindu ideology. Historically constructed, it aligns with Ambedkar's view of history as a cycle of revolution and counter-revolution. However, conversion and upward mobility offer only limited aspects to the Dalit identity, while grassroots movements, democratic practices, and competitive elections play crucial roles in its formation. The development of the larger identity is still an ongoing process, subject to the perspectives of its users.

The Dalit community's aspirations and tactics are crafted to confront the dominant castes through education, employment, and the pursuit of special rights. Essentially, their struggle targets the systemic injustices within society. Labels such as Scheduled Castes, Dalits, Bahujan or vanchit are crafted by elites with their own political agendas but remain distant from the everyday people. Despite being perceived as democratic by the elite and activists. Reservations broke monopoly of one or two castes in various fields but preserving caste identities. Caste based constitutional rights of Dalits must be provided to all Dalits, irrespective of their religion and region as long as they are discriminated in society on basis of caste. Dalit Christian rights have to be protected on lines of Scheduled Castes and Neo-Budhists as they are suffering all forms of caste discrimination due to their Dalit origin.

It's important to enhance the intellectual, financial, and social status of individual caste and sub-caste identities and eliminate the stigma associated with castes. These identities are crucial for the dignity and respectability of each caste and are linked to reservations. Mobilization of Dalits to fight for their human rights, caste based reservation, and Dalit human rights movements made caste annihilation a remote possibility. In this unavoidable circumstance, it's necessary to strengthen individual caste or sub-caste identities and ensure their fair representation to enable the democratization of Indian society. The terms, Dalit and Bahujan should not merely be multiple identity but they should be made ideologies in context of growing sub-caste identity, not merely to be made ideologies. Amidst the rise of sub-caste identity movements, there is a need to foster Dalit and Bahujan ideologies that safeguard the interests of the weaker castes within Dalits and OBCs, and to democratize the Dalit and Bahujan movements.

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