

## **From Stigmatized Dalit Identity to an Egalitarian, Autonomous and Emancipatory Identity: Issues and Concerns**

by

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### **Abstract**

Dalits, otherwise known as the ‘lower castes’, ‘Untouchables’ or the ‘Scheduled Castes’, have been suppressed and oppressed for centuries just because they come under the grip of ‘Dalit identity.’ In fact, the newfound nomenclature/identity called ‘Dalit’ is a clear witness to explain their condition - socially, economically, and politically which means ‘torn apart’, ‘smashed’ and ‘grounded into pieces’. Dalits, with their given identity of untouchability, segregation, poverty, helplessness, exclusion, and seclusion are, off-shoots of the age-old caste system that thrives on the purity-pollution syndrome, borrowing sometimes from the racial theories and rationalizing too often from the orthodoxy of Hindu religion and its spurious theological doctrines. It has gone to such an extent that a group of people to be tagged as ‘Dalits’ have been reduced to be mere secondary citizens and less than humans. The very tag of ‘Dalitness’ accruing to an individual means very low and humiliating in Indian society. And the situation becomes more sordid when such an insulting, humiliating identity is attached with their apparent economic inequalities and political powerlessness. It is against such a backdrop that the alienated Dalits are understood to have emerged with a sense of newfound consciousness, which is increasingly said to be the extended agenda of the Dalit movement. As far as Dalit consciousness is concerned, it has emanated from the ongoing social, economic, political, and cultural disorders and attempts to restructure and reorganize them. Factors that have contributed to the emergence of Dalit consciousness are much deeper and have their roots not only in their material deprivation, but also in social degradation, humiliation, discrimination, oppression, and suppression, and cumulative deprivation. With the newfound consciousness, an invaluable product of radical and powerful Dalit writings, the agenda of the Dalit movement has gone a step further. Not only are they dissatisfied with the progress, achievements, and developments in terms of the economic and political power structure, but also it has been extended so as to do away with their marginalized self and stigmatized identity. In fact, the different strands of the Dalit movements, broadly speaking, are not only about economic empowerment, political representation, democratization, and cultural recognition, and assertion but also for claiming an autonomous, egalitarian and emancipatory identity.

**Keywords:** Dalit, the Dalit movement, Dalit community, Dalit identity, Dalitness, stigma, modernity, self-identity, etc.

## Introduction and Background:

Identity as a phenomenon and as a process has been a prominent theme in sociology - beginning from the psycho-dynamic tradition of Freud (1929) to the symbolic interactionism of James (1890) and Mead (1962) and the most recent trend of post-modern post-structural discursive identities of Goffman (1963), Foucault (1975, 1976), Preez (1980) and Giddens (1991) in which the quest for identity or the breaking down of the self are primary themes.<sup>1</sup> Seen from a perspective, the debates and discussions going on in the discourse of 'Dalit identity' are equally sensitive for a sociological reading. It may be taken into consideration, as a preliminary understanding, how *Dalits* of today are forging for equality and humanity.<sup>22</sup> They have, by now, extended their agenda by means of the *Dalit* movement (in a pan-Indian sense), which goes a step further, from attaining socio-economic equality to secure an autonomous emancipatory identity. As can be recalled, the status and identity of *Dalits* in the traditional Hindu social order have put them in the lowest order. However, the project of emancipation carried out by the enlightened *Dalits* looks for 'alternatives' (Omvedt, 2000)<sup>3</sup> which would undo their stigmatized past and give them a sense of 'autonomy' in the analysis of their self/identity.

Here, it is worth noting that, identity as a process has two dimensions - one, identification by others, and second, self-identification. In caste-ridden India, the first stigmatizes the *Dalits*; the second, its internalization, creates an inferiority complex in them. Put together, they result in interminable oppression of the human species.<sup>4</sup> Here we are concerned with the identity understood in terms of maintaining and imposing an 'identity system' for which *Dalits* to be particular and various oppressed communities the world over, had to live a life of slavery — physically as well as mentally. Being concerned with such a 'consolidation' of interlocking values and symbols, we find it to be nothing but a politics of identity."<sup>5</sup> A person, like a class or a nation, has a self, history, and autonomy. But *Dalit* identity, which is precariously maintained, falls within the frame of 'identity trap',<sup>6</sup> which is rooted, in the very base of Hinduism perpetuated by its prime

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<sup>1</sup>For a synoptic view, see Marshall (1998). For greater details, reference may be made to Freud (1929), Brill (1928), Mead (1962), James (1890), Goffman (1959 & 1963), Foucault (1975 & 1976), Preez (1980) and Giddens (1991).

<sup>2</sup>It is true that *Dalits* as a people do not form a homogeneous category—neither socio-culturally nor economically. There are hundreds of sub-castes and sub-sub-castes manifested in the intra-caste hierarchy as regards restrictions in terms of commensality, matrimonial alliance, and even untouchability. However, this does not suggest that such a principle of hierarchy is subscribed to in the pre-Vedic/pre-*Dalit*ized version. Rather, the assertion that *Dalits* as well share a "consensus" in the line of homo hierarchicus can be seen, very much as a fallout of Brahmanic hegemony which has spread the venom of Vedic social disorder and dogmatic Hindu beliefs. Needless to mention, however, the *Dalits* of today have realized this treachery and thus, struggling and forging for equality of *Dalits* as a community and their basic Human Rights.

<sup>3</sup>She gives five alternative agendas for *Dalits* about the kind of society they want to have and how do they propose to carry on with it. As she points out, *Dalits*' vision, should be first to get out of the Brahminic version of Indian tradition and then to establish 'alternatives' in terms of enlightenment, spirituality, nationalism, social identity, and socio-cultural values.

<sup>4</sup>The phenomenon, causes, and consequences of such an identity formation is lucidly explained, though pathetic to read, by Nayak (2000).

<sup>5</sup>For details, refer to Kumar, Tila, "Cultural Politics in Hindu Society and Identity Crisis Among Educated *Dalits*", *Mainstream*, New Delhi, April 17, 1999.

<sup>6</sup>The 'identity trap' is a political problem in which we are mobilized as collective agents with a common (derogatory/stigmatized) identity. There are differences in the degree to which identity is 'trapped' which is structured on the basis of fragmentation of roles, information control, indoctrination, and various other factors contributing to such a reductionism. A timely rejoinder to such a scheme is Preez's work (1980), where politics is seen as the art of

objective - the culture of politics since so-called Aryans invaded the land. The concern for such a politics is about its consequences by which, first, there are identities which are more privileged, profiteering, and honorable from the day of their birth in relation to others and second, there is the consolidation of an identity system, which is derogatory and stigmatized -- unchanging and 'given' forever.

The point to make here is that *Dalits* have been suppressed and oppressed for centuries just because they come under the grip of 'Dalit identity'. In fact, the newfound nomenclature/identity called 'Dalit' is a clear witness to explain their condition - socially, economically, and politically which means 'torn apart', 'smashed' and 'grounded into pieces' (Kumar, 1995; Zelliott, 1992) *Dalits*, with their given identity of untouchability, segregation, poverty, helplessness, exclusion, and seclusion are, off-shoots of the age-old caste system that thrives on the purity-pollution syndrome, borrowing sometimes from the racial theories and rationalizing too often from the divine prescriptions of spurious theological doctrines. It has gone to such an extent that a group of people to be tagged as 'Dalits' have been reduced to be mere secondary citizens and less than humans.<sup>7</sup> As Nayak (2000, p. 1) takes the account:

"He (a Dalit) may be a beggar near a temple or a church, a paramount squatter, a pre-maturely old in his forties, a child worker in factory, a pauper in a village, a child domestic help, a porter at a railway station, a rickshaw - puller in a city, a bonded labourer.... A Dalit woman would be ill-clad, a bag of bones, often with a mal-nourished child in her arms, a temple Deva Dasi, a sex-worker in a brothel."

As against this, *Dalits* are also bestowed with another identity, which, though unpopular, takes us to another part of the story. To quote Nayak (ibid.) again:

"Even in the absence of a well-researched systematic social or subaltern history in India, the political and economic history as well as archaeology and excavations reveal that the Dalits are the first nation, the oldest civilization, the aboriginal (though oppressed citizens), the Adi-Dravidas (though Ati-Shudras) and the legitimate children of the Indian soil..."

However, it is unforgettable to see that *Dalits* live amidst contrasting situations, paradoxical value systems, opportunistic politics, and distorted perceptions. The privileges conferred to a particular group (oppressor) and the interests served in a political consolidation of identities are often quite clear. It usually goes bypassed when the vision of social regularity is maintained and the man-to-man relation is kept within a limit. It makes sense if the best jobs with high qualifications and higher salaries will enjoy higher prestige giving an identity differentiating all others. But if such an identity is 'reserved perennially for a particular group and is followed in exclusion of others, the excluded classes/castes become alienated and marginalized. The society produces a wide variety of goods and services to satisfy its constituent members. People are divided by their 'life chances' and the capability to sustain their membership in a given society. It is also worth noting that any transaction in which something is gained - a medal, a citation, an

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preventing people from interfering in matters that concern them and forge constructing images, situations and policies for an idealized inter-human relation.

<sup>7</sup>It can be seen that the so-called *Dharmatma* Hindus whose gates are planked with 'Beware of Dogs' might be spending thousands of rupees per day for their pussycats and Alsatian dogs. They would be eating and sleeping together with these fortunate creatures but when a *Dalit* comes in front of them, they slash their doors and demarcate the boundary where and when to see them and meet them, usually at the extreme corners of their backyards.

occupation with a high salary, a larger carpet for one's house, an appreciation for one's good work, or praise for one's beauty adds to the erstwhile identity.

But this is not the case with the *Dalits*, particularly as long as Hinduism and the caste system are prevalent in Indian society. Here, the elaborative mechanism<sup>8</sup> takes us to the methodology of identity-formation vis-à-vis allocation of opportunities where Brahmins at the peak and *Dalits* at the bottom are set up, polar opposites as 'permanent' categories. The principle of 'exclusivism' which also creates exclusive identities not only searches for material benefits but goes beyond the irrational interests of immoral and inhumane insights so that *Dalits* would hope for presenting their selves in a free and fair manner guaranteeing due recognition. In this context, the core of the issue becomes 'choice identity' and the system of relation on one's which, in the case of *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* stand as a binary opposition. As can be assessed, a society, which recognizes "choice of identity" as a principle, also recognizes the universalistic -achievement pattern as against ascription pattern in social relations (Parsons, 1951).<sup>9</sup> Consequent upon this, the identity frame available for *Dalits* is fixed, limited, and given. Not only this but the worst part of the story is the characteristics attached to it i.e., untouchability, unsociability, unwantedness, segregation, condemnation, and discrimination. As a whole, the very tag of '*Dalitness*' accruing to an individual means very low and humiliating in Indian society. And the situation becomes more sordid when such an insulting, humiliating identity is attached with their apparent economic inequalities.

Here we have to see the caste-class nexus, which presents another formidable formation against the *Dalits*, where wealth and affluence go with caste and the "caste" monster becomes "class" oppressive. Although caste structure and class system are seemingly two distinct phenomena, in the case of India, one subsumes the other and both stand in identical terms in the stratification system. In the strict Marxian sense, "class" need not be "caste", but as Weber sees (1978), in India, caste and class go together as unilineal status groups. Classes are open, but caste with its inherent symptom closes upward mobility. Thus, in the case of identity formation, even if we bring a caste-class framework what we get is an 'exclusive identity.'<sup>10</sup> Brahmins enjoying their supremacy and *Dalits* being put at the receiving end. The plight of *Dalits*, in such a background, becomes grievous and more severe. Forty-five percent of them still live below the poverty line, the majority of whom are engaged in obnoxious and degraded occupations like sweeping and

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<sup>8</sup>Here I have in mind the principle of *Varna* and *Karma*, which are the hallmarks of social relations in Hinduism. Documented systematically in the dogmatic scriptures of *Manu Samhita*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Vedas*, and *Upanishads*, the conscience keepers of Aryan Hindus have prescribed /proscribed occupational status to each social category. They warn, if one is Shudra or poor, it is because of his Karma. He/she should not breach the Dharma. Just accept one's slavery and fulfill your duty as an obedient good boy (unquestionably) and you will be born in a higher caste (after waiting for a generation) in the next birth!!!

<sup>9</sup>The universalistic achievement pattern is a type of structure of the social system in which value orientations in terms of role allocation are guided by an achievement based on legal-rational methods among members of society. It exemplifies such values as equality of opportunity, freedom to enterprise, rational management, and democracy. The caste system in India does not follow this rather it is guided by the norms of birth and kinship which goes on by the principle of 'hereditary hierarchy.'

<sup>10</sup>I do recognize the fact that even within the *Dalits*, a mini group has come up economically, in terms of education, occupation, and urbanization. But this does not mean that these bourgeois *Dalits* have got to escape from the humiliation and derogatory practice of casteism. There are various incidences where even fourth-grade upper-caste karmacharis have humiliated their Big Boss who happened to be *Dalits*. It is so irreconcilable to see how "ritual" status supersedes "secular" status (read, economic status) even in so-called modern India.

scavenging. Although they have been serving society in various ways, they pull on their lives only in the name of poverty, misery, and slavery.

Thus, *Dalits* as a community have been victims of cultural politics (Kumar, 1999) in the hands of Vedic Brahmins and have remained, for millennia, on the piked periphery of the social order. Economically, they are found to live a life of want, penury, and misery; politically they are fragmented and disorganized; and administratively, they do become the preferred objects of public policy, but in reality, they receive only the left-overs of developmental benefits (Roy, 1999).<sup>11</sup> Caught between fate and the uncaring world, *Dalits* continue their life with derogatory humiliations for just being ‘*Dalits*’. Long promises by reformers, legislators, and administrators to bring them within the charmed circle of those who are blessed by the Lord have succeeded only marginally (Kumar, 1998). Their existence (as a human being and as a full-fledged citizen of the country) is though apparent, their situation could not be mended to a satisfactory level till recently. This is due to the fact that those who are at the helm of affairs, form part of the status-quo establishment (though economically and politically they do compromise) and put the *Dalit*-non-*Dalit* dichotomy in their closed heart and blind eyes.

### **Psycho-Social Relations between *Dalits* and Non-*Dalits***

There are already well-established accounts on the socio-economic profile of *Dalits* and the power relation between *Dalits* and their non-*Dalit* counterparts, which will not be discussed in this present paper. Rather, what I focus upon is the very process of identity formation and its being problematic—the way it becomes pertinent now, to see how do they feel about and where do they stand as regards their psycho-social relations as they encounter their ‘significant others’ in their everyday lives. The most intriguing question in sociology takes into concern the relationship between individual members in a society. As Mclver and Page (1959, p. 5) feel:

“Men as social beings, express their nature by creating and recreating an organization, which guides and controls their behaviour in myriad ways. This organization, society, liberates and limits the activities of men, sets up standards for them to follow and maintain..., it is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behaviour and of life flies. This ever-changing complex system of society is a ‘web of social relationships.’”

Putting caste-ridden Indian society in such a framework, what we come to realize is that the man-to-man relation, particularly psycho-social relation, reflects which is entirely guided by the beliefs and value systems of Hinduism.<sup>12</sup> The self-images produced in Hinduism/caste system, therefore, follow an entire gamut of scriptural prescriptions/proscriptions, especially the idea of

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<sup>11</sup>Quantitatively as well as qualitatively, the situation of *Dalits* even in free India is not satisfactory. Their identity in terms of the economic, political, and social category is succinctly illustrated by Roy (1999).

<sup>12</sup>Here it may be noted that in India, caste is a grand reality and one becomes a part of it disregarding the fact that one believes in Christianity or Islam. Caste as a problem cuts across religion. Practically it portends tremendous consequences in daily life and man-to-man relation. It is so strong an institution that even educated Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), despite their globetrotting mobility cannot escape from the grip of caste mischief. In fact, caste has become a world problem. It is high time; United Nations should not only include it within its agenda on Discrimination and Xenophobia but also work out the Action Plan so as to do away with such a malady and safeguard our humanity.



*Varna*<sup>13</sup> and *Karma*<sup>14</sup> relating social groupings and functional specification. The institution of caste is a very complex phenomenon. In the first place, it divides society into extremely polarized groups. Secondly, it follows the principle of hereditary hierarchy, which does embark on the relationships between various caste groups. The role and status distributed in such a framework then put *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* in a scale, which can be understood only with what Osgood calls semantic differentials (1965) or “social distance” scale<sup>15</sup> pioneered by Emory S. Bogardus. Although I have not used these two techniques in my present analysis, I would be dwelling upon some of the basic observations made by sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists who have probed into various dimensions related to *Dalit* and Non-*Dalit* encounters and interactions in their everyday life.

To begin with, I have in mind the traditional features of the caste system, which define and regulate psycho-social relations between *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*. These are (1) Endogamy, (2) Hierarchy (3) Restrictions on choice of occupation, (4) Restrictions on commonality, (5) Civil and religious disabilities for some groups vis-à-vis privileges for certain other groups, and (6) untouchability. Endogamy refers to the traditional custom whereby members of a caste marry among themselves and marriage outside caste is tabooed. Karve defines caste as ‘an extended kinship group in which every member is either an actual or potential kin of another’ (1958, p. 133). In her field studies (1958 & 1959) she traced the actual kin relations among many individuals in a caste on a genealogical chart. These kinship groups called *jatis* may be composed of anywhere up to 2,000,00 members. Some groups like Rajputs in Rajasthan and Marathas in Maharashtra may even cover as many as 5,000,000 members. Some endogamous *jati* groups may be clustered into occupational groups like the *Lohar* (iron-smith) or *Sutar* (carpenter) etc. and form still wider groups called the *Varna* categories like *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. Karve believes that of all the characteristics, endogamy is characteristic, which has resisted change more than any other in the caste system (1958, p. 885). Quoting from a survey of marriages registered in Poona city during 1955-56, Karve (1958 & 1959) shows that out of a total of 5,895 Hindu marriages registered during that year, only 126 (2 percent) were across the traditional endogamous *jatis* and still within caste clusters. Only 41 marriages were across caste clusters, not all of them, however, across *varnas*. And other marriages were strictly followed by endogamous caste rules. Patterson (1958) also makes similar observations about inter-caste marriages in Maharashtra. It is, therefore,

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<sup>13</sup>‘*Varna*’ literally means color. However, the meaning is extended further to understand the social division that cropped up in the Indian subcontinent after the Aryan-Brahmins invaded the land and subjugated the aboriginal Dravidas. It is believed that so as to maintain their monopoly and keep their supremacy over the vanquished Dravidas, they coined the theory of racial superiority in terms of ‘purity of blood and culture’. They structured the society in a fashion of *trivarnic* and *chaturvarnic* divisions. In fact, we come to see that there are five major *varnas* because untouchables and *panchamas* are seen to be out of the *Varna* system although they come within the framework of Hinduism. Thus, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and Ati-Shudras constitute the Hindu social order.

<sup>14</sup>*Karma* theory in Hinduism prescribes a particular function (*karma*) for each social group—Brahmins to be teacher, Kshatriyas to be ruler, Vaishyas to be landlord, and Shudras and untouchables to take care of all others. Further, it warns that never try to breach the *varnadharma* (even though capable and meritorious do not think of upward mobility in occupation). One who dutifully (unquestioningly) goes on with the order gets a berth in the *swarga* (heaven). What a treacherous game plan!!!

<sup>15</sup>The social distance scale as a technique usually applies to the study of ethnic relations, social classes, and social values. The scale attempts to measure respondents’ degree of warmth, intimacy, indifference, or hostility to particular social relationships, by having them indicate agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about particular social groups.

that Ambedkar (1997)<sup>16</sup> was right when he regarded endogamy as a key to the mystery of the caste system. It is certain that the caste system would not dissolve unless inter-caste marriages become common. But it is seen that even educated (but not enlightened) youths of the 21st century are bound by traditional caste norms in the matter of their marriages. It is pity that in spite of education and modernization, the rules of Manu are still very strong.<sup>17</sup>

The second feature of the caste system is the hierarchical arrangement of endogamous groups. Hierarchy implies an ordering from top to bottom in which the criterion for grading is status. Krech et al. (1962)<sup>18</sup> define “status” as ‘the rank or position of an individual in the prestige hierarchy of a group or community. Every society has a system of grading social prestige, which is attached to the possession of wealth, education, public office, and so on. But in India status is ‘given’ by birth. Stevenson (1954) speaks of this as “ritual status”, which characterizes status grading in caste-ridden India on the basis of ascriptive pattern as against “secular status” which goes with achievement pattern. The demerit of such a scheme negates the idea of the rational-legal status of individuals and gives too much emphasis on ritual status which believes in the purity and/or impurity of certain castes and people which cannot be changed forever. Generally, pollution and purity are attached to birth, death, menstruation, etc. But what an irony that (by the vice of Hinduism), *Dalits* by their very name, are “impure” while an ill-clad dirty Brahmin supposedly worshipping in a temple is “pure” and sublime!!!

Another feature relating to inter-caste relation is commonsality. By and large, the rule prescribes that the upper caste should not share food with the lower castes. Even within a particular *Varna*, there is categorization -- upper and lower, varying from region to region, who have to “maintain” their purity by following commensality. The commensal rules are accordingly defined such as who can share cooked (*pucca*) food and with whom uncooked (*kacha*) food. Such ritual rules are supported by public opinion so as to control the behavior of individuals and groups set in patterns. In fact, the range of commensality is complicated and it was Mahar who constructed a ritual distance scale on the line of Bogardus’ social distance scale while studying commensality in Uttar Pradesh (Mahar, 1959). As has been noted earlier, even in the times of life and death and that too during devastating natural disasters and various calamities, the traditional and conservative upper castes are hesitant to compromise the norms of caste rules with regard to commensality as illustrated on the occasions of Orissa super-cyclone (1999), Gujarat earthquake (2001) and also during corona pandemic (2019-2021). Or if at all they had to take it accidentally, as soon as they

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<sup>16</sup>Ambedkar’s critical evaluation of various characteristics of caste leaves no doubt that prohibition in marriage in terms of endogamy is the only one that can be called the ‘essence’ of caste. He knew that some may deny this on abstract grounds of Anthropology, for there exist endogamous groups without giving rise to the problem of caste, say, for example, the Negroes and the Whites and various tribal groups are known as American Indians in the United States. But the situation in India is different. The peoples of India, having more or less fused into one another, form a cultural whole. However, caste in the form of endogamy divides the population into fixed and definite units, thus making it peculiar only to caste.

<sup>17</sup>Here comes to my mind matrimonial advertisements in almost every newspaper, particularly Sunday specials. The columns are so systematically ordered in terms of caste and even sub-castes. Not only this, even in the columns mentioned as ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘professional’, the element of caste is tactically mentioned so that they are “bound by tradition”. However, the idea of ‘caste no bar’ can be seen only when there are some unavoidable defects (handicap, not beautiful, widow, or beyond the marriageable age calling for “unsuitable rejection” if followed in the due normal course). Add to it, there is the caste-class conundrum of so-called Marxists in India. The majority come from bourgeoisie Brahmin families, they preach proletarian ideas. But in their own life, they never practice it; forget about forgetting caste tradition in their own marriages and that of their children.

<sup>18</sup>The authors provide an in-depth analysis with logical reasoning for social ordering and the regulatory mechanism.

realize it, they ‘purify’ themselves through performing rituals lest they should be turned outcasts by fellow caste-men. Nowadays, due to education, urbanization, and mobility in various contexts, the restriction of rigid commensality has come down. But it does not mean that it has vanished as a phenomenon.

Another crucial sphere to understand psycho-social relation between *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* is associated with caste and occupation. As has been mentioned, Hinduism prescribes various caste groups with certain occupations. Many castes are actually known by the name of the occupation they are supposed to follow, such as *Lohar* (iron-smith), *Sonar* (goldsmith), *Chamar* (shoe-maker), and so on. Thus, in such a framework, each caste has a hereditary occupation by tradition. This means that the status of individuals is fixed by birth and the relation between one another has to be carried on in the line of caste. This is well established in a system called *Jajmani*<sup>19</sup> in North India and *Baluta* etc., in some other parts of the country Wisner (1936), Raheja (1988), Pocock (1962), Kumar (1999 & 2000).

In the pre-British period, the traditional craft and technology to each occupation were taught in families from generation to generation. There was little innovation by individuals because of their limited occupation. However, with the advent of British rule, changes in transportation and communication, monetization, urbanization, etc. Changed the situation. While *jajmani* relation has been liquidating gradually, educated *Dalits* are intruding into non-traditional services. Add to it, changes in technology and economy new occupational patterns are created loosening traditional caste rules. But it is a fact that a phenomenon called ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1985; Putnam, 1993 & 1995; Jacobs, 1961; Coleman, 1987; World Bank, 1999; Cohen and Prusak, 2001)<sup>20</sup> is inherited by offspring, which determines how to enter into the changing scenario. Despite special provisions in independent India,<sup>21</sup> the traditional association between caste and occupation is far

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<sup>19</sup>*Jajmani* is a comprehensive plan where a *Jajman* (the Lord) and *Kamin* (the worker/ servant) are related by mutually required service. They are generally family-based and go on from one generation to another. A barber, a priest, or a blacksmith might be attached to particular families. While the *Jajman* did not have to search for laborers in the market, the *Kamin* got his service reserved till he is dead. But the problematic part of the attachment is that it goes with exploitation in terms of material, mental and moral aspects and the life of *Kamin* is nothing but that of slavery.

<sup>20</sup>The notion of “social capital” is said to have first appeared in Lyda Judson Hanifan’s discussions of rural school community centers (1916, 1920) Basically, he used the term to describe ‘those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people and was concerned particularly with the cultivation of goodwill, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among those that think up as a ‘social unit’. However, the widespread usage of the term in the modern sense is rooted in the historical contributions of Putnam (1993 & 1995), Jacobs (1961), Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1987), World Bank (1999) and Cohen & Prusak (2001) which have offered us the way ‘social and cultural capital’ is critical for societies to prosper economically and more so for attaining ‘sustainable development.’ What is worth noting here is that whereas ‘physical capital’ refers to physical objects and ‘human capital refers to the physical and mental qualities of individuals, ‘social and cultural capital’ refers to the connections among individuals, i.e., social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Thus, while communities with a ‘good/strong’ stock of social capital are warranted and more likely to ‘benefit’ from say, better health, higher educational achievement, productivity, and efficiency, communities that lack such networks and interaction are generally at a disadvantageous position, leading to a vicious cycle of ‘weak’ life chances and ‘weak’ life pattern. The criticality of this problem could be more so, therefore, for categories such as ‘*Dalits*’, so that their collective problems could be taken care of by strengthening their social and cultural capital in a more significant way. This would allow them not only to resolve their community problems more easily, but it would also grease the wheels of their movement against their enemies so that they could advance.

<sup>21</sup>A kind of special provision in the name of ‘reservation’, protective discrimination, and preferential treatments is included in the constitution so as to ‘level’ the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed groups. It aims at giving



from dissolved. A section of *Dalits* has gone through the process of 'embourgeoisement' via their educational and economic improvement. Today, we can see a number of 'Dalit Millionnaires' not only paving their business enterprises in many parts of India and leading the 'Dalit Chambers of Commerce' but there are as well a number of them prominent all over the globe including in England, America, and Canada. But it does not reflect their transformations in the real sense of the term when we look at the socio-cultural milieu they have been living in and struggling with whether in India or amidst their South Asian diasporic counterparts. They are still victimized as illustrated by the cases of persons of eminence including Baboo Jagjivan Ram and Baba Saheb Ambedkar.<sup>22</sup> Non-*Dalits* are not ready to share with their social position, even though they can have an alliance with *Dalits* in the case of economic and political matters. According to them, they are 'born to rule' over *Dalits*, if not otherwise, at least socio-culturally.<sup>23</sup> It is high time to see that occupational mobility changes the structure of the social system which will reduce the hazards of the caste system.

The pathology of the caste system becomes overburdened with another belief in the concept of purity and pollution. According to the Hindu doctrine of 'Karma' each individual reaps the cumulative fruit of his/her good and evil deeds through a long succession of births and rebirths. They believe that birth in the so-called upper caste is due to one's good deeds in the past whereas evil deeds are appropriate for a lower birth. Psychologically, it has a great impact. Those who subscribe to it just take it for granted and fall into the trap of "casteism"-laying in the peaceful graveyard. The relation between one another is thus "maintained" and the agenda for a "change" is pushed back into oblivion. As Damle (1956) observes, these concepts reinforce each other and the caste system. It was his impression from a field study that those who no longer believed in the concepts of 'rebirth' and 'karma' were also the people who did not conform to caste practices or did so only under compulsion. In a globalizing world order, when we are talking about "global citizenship", it becomes a pre-requisite to break the barriers of traditionalism and embrace the *Dalits* as equal to every other human being (Oommen, 2002).<sup>24</sup> Only then we can ensure the progress of humanity and the larger good of society.

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due representation to *Dalits* and other backward groups who have historically been neglected in the power structure. It is applied in the admission to educational institutions, reservation in government services, and political representation.

<sup>22</sup>It is worth noting that even though Baboo Jagjivan Ram was a Union Minister in the Government of India, he was not allowed to enter into a temple in Varanasi. The case of Ambedkar is more pathetic. Even though having achieved a prestigious Doctorate from the University of Columbia and working as an Advocate to the Dewan of Baroda; he could not quench his thirst with a glass of water from the pitcher kept nearby, lest he would defile it!!!

<sup>23</sup>This is not to deny the fact that politically and economically they are not ruling the *Dalits*. Wherever one goes, in India, it is caste-ridden. As the tables mentioned in chapter III show, the service sector is almost filled up by the upper caste elites and is only in the lowest rung of the ladder that a few educated *Dalits* have been able to enter into. The irony is that today India has already got not one but two of her first citizens to be coming from the *Dalit* community- President KR. Narayanan (1997-2002) and President Ramnath Kovind (continuing since 2017). But as Narayanan himself has spelled out: 'in a caste-ridden society, all you can get is a caste-ridden democracy or caste-ridden socialism.... (Baisantry, 1991, p.79). The Brahminic hegemony still has a consolidated presence whether we look at economy, polity, or administration in India.

<sup>24</sup>In its essence, the question of citizenship is closely related to that of equality in participation in the political, economic, cultural, and social fields. As Oommen (2002:147) asserts, "the idea of citizenship is hinged on the notions of individual equality and participation." Further, he goes on to add that although it is evident even in contemporary industrialized societies that the young, the lower class, and women are not equal citizens in the context of public participation, those categories whose internality to the society/system is not contested, have the potentiality to achieve

Related to the idea of purity-pollution is the concept of ‘untouchability’. Certain castes were supposed to be so polluted that even their touch would invite elaborate purificatory rituals for members of the so-called upper castes. The idea of untouchability was carried to such an extent that even the shadow of an untouchable would be polluting. During the Peshwa period in the history of Maharashtra, the practice of untouchability<sup>25</sup> was probably carried to its worst extreme, (Ghurye, 1961, p. 11) although it was practiced all over the country in one form or the other. After independence, the Indian Constitution outlawed the practice by the untouchability Offence Act, 1955. But state ways have not completely changed folkways and despite the legal provisions against discrimination on the basis of caste and practice of untouchability our newspapers every morning bring us the news how it is still rampant in various parts of the country. The very idea that one is regarded as untouchable, unapproachable, and unseeable by mere accident of birth is really perplexing, and psychologically disturbing, at least to the modern minds.

Taking it further, when we probe into the psychological consequences, it ascribes low social status on the personality of the victims of untouchability, which goes very deep. A parallel case comparable to India’s untouchables is the Negroes in the United States. Social psychologists of America have studied the personality syndrome caused by such an ascribed low status among the Negroes (Aliport, 1958; Davis and Dollard, 1940; Kadiner and Oversey, 1951; Pettigrew, 1958; Rohrer and Edmonson, 1960; Paranjpe, 1970.).<sup>26</sup> They found out that there was a syndrome called ‘traits due to victimization’. It implies that due to low social status (imposed or given by others), it results in lowered self-esteem, confusion of self-identity, self-hate, perception of the world as a hostile place, hypertension, and neuroticism. Comparing such a situation between American Negroes and Indian *Dalits*, one may surmise that a similar syndrome may be observed among the ex-untouchables of India. As Jiloha (1995, p. 135)<sup>27</sup> probes into casteism, he finds out that:

“A child during infancy and early childhood may not know the caste he/she belongs to. But it is not far from truth that he/she experiences poverty and deprivation more in comparison to a caste-Hindu child. During this period there is greatly heightened susceptibility to specific experiences. He soon comes to realize that his status in the society is different in comparison to other children. Between the age of 3-6 years, the child develops awareness of his social groups and the behavioural manifestations of caste-awareness and incipient attitudes... which get correctly categorized around eight years of age... having great potency with long lasting effects....”

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“full citizenship” within the existing socio-political framework. If certain collectivities (such as *Dalits*) were believed to be, objectively or subjectively, “external” to the society in question, they would have to break the basic structural barriers before they can achieve equality in citizenship. It is, therefore, the disjunction between citizenship and collective identity (such as that of *Dalits*) should be seen, essentially, in terms of the relationship between equality and identity.

<sup>25</sup>*Mahars*, the people belonging to a *Dalit* caste in Maharashtra, were asked to tie a broom in their hip so that it would wash away their footprints while walking on the road. They were also asked to put a pot on their neck so that their sputum would not defile others. And worst, they were prescribed a time period to walk out on the road, particularly afternoon when the sunrays will be at the peak and there will be the shortest shadow. In addition to this, they had to declare loudly that they are passing through the road so that upper castes will be conscious enough not to get “polluted” by coming in their contact.

<sup>26</sup>In the context of India, Paranjpe (1970) has done a tremendous task of putting caste prejudice and the individual-psychosocial analysis of caste-attitudes, self-images, inter-caste relations, and prejudices. Indeed, it gave me new sights into the problems and prospects of identity as regards *Dalits* in Indian society.

<sup>27</sup>Professionally related to mending mental disorders, Jiloha has been involved in ‘ordering’ society, especially caste-ridden Indian society. His attitude towards the study of psycho-social ailments has been of immense help when he searches for a proper perspective of the disprivileged natives of Indian society. Delving deep into the phenomenon of caste, he has thrown new lights into the fossilized attitudes of traditional Indians.

Given such a background, even the educated *Dalits* undergo the ordeal of ‘test of his/her ability’ and becomes victims of ‘social evaluation anxiety’. It results in their distress, discomfort, fear and lack of confidence so as to face the situation. This leads to deliberate avoidance of ‘taking risks’ in a set-up where non-*Dalits* have been adamant in asserting their supremacy. Being fearful, ashamed, and guilty under the attack of hegemonic Brahmins and other upper castes, their potential becomes an endangered species. Such a wounded psyche of *Dalits*, make them extremely shy, highly sensitive, profoundly insecure, prone to isolation, self-depreciation and mars the full-fledged development of their personality.

### **Alienated *Dalits* and Their Emerging Consciousness**

Having taken stock of the *Dalit* situation in terms of property, power, and prestige,<sup>28</sup> we come to realize that *Dalits* have been divided, differentiated and discriminated, (Kumar, n. d.) in more than one way, over centuries under the treacherous social stratification system of India. Add to it, the sense of ‘stigmatized identity’ that perpetuates *Dalit*-psyche day in and day out. With the continuing arrogance of the oppressor, the mental faculties, moral attitudes, and physical abilities of *Dalits* have been conditioned by the existential environment, which is nothing but oppressive. *Dalits* have been subjugated in a cumulative dominating system, which has created a sense of alienation<sup>29</sup> among them. The trauma, which is a result of age-old hostile attitude, continuous discrimination, and physical and social violence, has left them living dead and devoid of the fullness of life. With the continuing poverty and socio-cultural deprivation, their worldview and perceptions are reduced to mere ‘yes-bossism’ while struggling for survival under the overlordship of hegemonic Brahmins and other upper castes, thus, they themselves quite often become constraints to their development. These phenomena further accentuate their alienation from the economic affluence to social progress in a modernizing-globalizing Indian society (Oommen, 1999; Kumar, 2000).<sup>30</sup>

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the German philosopher, popularly known as the ‘father of Phenomenology’, who was busy with understanding the basic question of ‘life-world’ and human affairs found out that all notions of an external world, ‘out there are mediated through the senses and can only be known through ‘consciousness’ (Husserl, 1936 & 2012; Phenomenology, 1929; Gurwitsch, 1962). This consciousness, in which humans sense to exist, is composed of the objects, people, places, ideas, and other things that people see and perceive as setting the parameters for their existence, for their activities, and for their pursuits.

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<sup>28</sup>An individual’s position in society is counted on the basis of property, power, and prestige, which reflect one’s economic standard, political base, and social status (recall Weber’s approach to stratification in *Economy and Society*, (1922). In the case of *Dalits* in India, if we take a holistic approach, we come to see that all the good things of life have been monopolized by hegemonic Brahmins and other upper castes. The power structure remaining consolidated in a few hands at the negligence of the majority brings within them a sense of a “marginalized” community.

<sup>29</sup>Associated with Hegelian and Marxist theories, alienation means loss or estrangement either from one’s self or from society or from control over social and economic processes. It is held that human beings cannot be free if they are subject to forces that determine their thoughts, ideas, and their very nature as human beings. Putting *Dalits* in such a framework, it is seen that there is a life dictated by Brahminic scriptures including an imposed identity. Whatever they do, think, and perceive is guided by doctrines and dogmas of Hinduism bringing, therefore, a sense of alienation.

<sup>30</sup>When we situate *Dalits* in the era of globalization, the situation is not so different, As has been pointed out by Oommen, the process of globalization in India is creating two parallel groups — the ‘isolated many’ and the ‘connected few’. *Dalits* being underprivileged historically, they are unable to catch up with the competitive global market running in a supra-high way. Due to the lack of capital (more social than economic) required for exploiting opportunities, they are unable to gain from the process.

It is at this backdrop that the alienated *Dalits* are understood to have emerged with a sense of consciousness, which is increasingly said to be the extended agenda of the *Dalit* movement. As far as *Dalit* consciousness is concerned, it has emanated from the ongoing social, economic, political, and cultural order. Factors that contributed to the emergence of *Dalit* consciousness are much deeper and have their roots not only in their material deprivation, but also in social degradation, humiliation, discrimination, oppression, and suppression, and cumulative deprivation. As Jogdand, in his comprehensive study of the *Dalit* Movement in Maharashtra (1991, p. 2) realizes:

“Enraged over this, these people, suppressed and oppressed for centuries together, have now come to the forefront with a new awakening and consciousness. They have presently become increasingly militant in demanding their rights and are inclined to a revolutionary path for amelioration. The Dalits... have launched various types of protest movements all over the country.”

Thus, there is a marked difference between the *Dalits* of the past and the *Dalits* of today. As editor of a journal catering to *Dalits* (Bharti, 1999, p. 1-83) feel:<sup>31</sup>

“The old Dalit was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. He has been a stock figure perpetuated as a historical fiction, partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly deliberate reactionism... The new Dalits imbued with consciousness do not accept present history; they raise questions over the sincerity of historian. For them, present sociology or other social sciences is nothing but to degrade them...”

As Ambedkar observed while giving evidence before the South Borough Committee on Franchise, (Ambedkar, 1991) *Dalits* are usually regarded as ‘objects of pity’ but they are ignored in any political scheme on the score that they have no interests to protect. And yet, their interests are the greatest: not that they have a large property to protect from confiscation, but they have their very ‘persona’ confiscated. The socio-religious disabilities have de-humanized the *Dalits* and their interests at stake are, therefore, the interests of humanity. The social arrangement must secure free initiatives and opportunities for every individual to assume any role he/she is capable of assuming, provided it is socially desirable.

The psycho-social tensions *Dalits* have undergone for so many centuries and still undergo in so many ways in their everyday lives, have, in the meantime, resulting in the emergence of a new kind of consciousness. Whereas the historical mooring of such a consciousness goes back to the root of the puranic times and more so the period of Bhakti movements of Ravi Das and Kabir Das, it could be said to have erupted and taken a radical turn with the critical contributions of Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Sri Narayana Guru, E.V. Ramaswami Periyar Iyothee Thassar, and especially with that of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. For the lack of space, I’m not able to discuss these movements here, which in themselves have been the subject matter of so many volumes. The *Dalits* today have come to realize that it is too much to continue living under slavery—both physical and mental—under the shadow of Brahmanic hegemony. They have started, rather rejuvenated their understanding of self-worth and dignity of a human being. They are conscious about their liberation i. e. getting rid of casteism. In a society where caste had gradually come to be looked upon as a divine dispensation, as it were and an entire system of ethics and beliefs had been built, *Dalits* today have directed their revolt against Brahminism, rituals, priesthood, caste,

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<sup>31</sup>The reference here is to Ashok Kumar Bharti, editing a journal called *Abhimooknayak*, coming from Delhi. A systematic analysis about *Dalit* consciousness is given by Bharti, which dissects all the basic foundation of the idea called consciousness to what prompted *Dalits* of today to emerge as a conscious community.

untouchability, inequality and all other forms of disabilities in their writings, discourses, and disputations. They are carrying out protest campaigns to protect themselves from injustice, exploitation, and deprivation. A sense of self-respect and dignity for *Dalit*ness has been seen as a growing phenomenon in which terms like “*Dalit* culture”, “*Dalit* literature” “*Dalit* history” “*Dalit* identity” and “*Dalit* politics” have become more and more vociferous. The fact of the matter is that with the progress and evolution of time, self-awareness is created among *Dalits*, who have so long tolerated the oppression of the vested interests in mute silence; for a consciousness of renewed faith has blossomed forth. Theirs is an attempt to regain their past glory and break the ‘culture of silence’. The consciousness among *Dalits*, in the first instance, can be seen how the leaders of the *Dalit*- Bahujan have risen to question and contest the Brahmanic overlordship.

### ***Dalit* Vision: Towards an Egalitarian, Autonomous and Emancipatory Identity**

As we see today, there is also a proliferation of *Dalit* literature in various forms and genres all over the country and also the world over by the *Dalit* diaspora. Due to lack of space, I will not be discussing the crucial role played by *Dalit* writers and their radical *Dalit* literature, which has taken the *Dalit* movement to newer heights over the last few decades, and which in itself, can be discussed in a book-length paper. However, it may be mentioned here how with the newfound consciousness, an invaluable product of the powerful *Dalit* writings, the agenda of the *Dalit* movement has gone a step further. Not only are they dissatisfied with the achievements in terms of the economic and political power structure, but also it has been extended so as to include the apprehensions about their marginalized self and stigmatized identity. In fact, the different strands of the *Dalit* movement, broadly speaking, are about economic exploitation and cultural oppression. *Dalit* vision in terms of emancipatory identity thus forms the core of the issue relating to cultural power and social status. While exploring and critiquing the sensibility which equates Indian tradition with Hinduism, and Hinduism with Brahmanism, Omvedt (1995)<sup>32</sup> shows how different phases of the *Dalit* movement opened up new ways of looking at the structures of their oppression and the premises of their emancipation. As is evident from our analysis, the champions of the *Dalit* movement including Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar found the caste system as the essence of Hinduism and sought to unmask the ‘culture of oppression’ that it sustained and the brutal slavery that is sanctified. According to them, the Aryan-Brahmins emerge as cruel and violent invaders who subjugated an egalitarian social order and imposed a hierarchical and exploitative dominance with religious scriptures as its legitimizing tool. The prevalence of oppression and prejudice, the sad memories of exploitation and extermination, and the ideas of the common history of long-suffering under Brahminic hegemony and shared poverty have thus brought among *Dalits* a sense of unity, thus forging a common identity. They have, under the auspices of “Ambedkarism”

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<sup>32</sup>Equating Indian tradition with Hinduism, and Brahminism, the Vedic tradition is taken as the essence of Indian civilization. She tries to show that even secular minds have remained within this Brahminical vision and looks at alternative visions, nurtured within the *Dalit* movements which question the society, culture, history, and identity given by Vedic Brahmins.



(Prasad, 1993)<sup>33</sup> transformed themselves from a ‘caste in itself to ‘caste for itself.’<sup>34</sup> Today they have started taking pride in their distinct cultural heritage,<sup>35</sup> which differentiates them from the non-*Dalits*. Although they constitute a varying complex of cultural conditions, they are likely to respond to different natural and social environments, in a unified manner, at least, as against non-*Dalits*. Not only this but the *Dalits* have been believed, to have a distinct identity of their own. Such an identity that has been lapsed and lost in the streams of so-called ‘great tradition’<sup>36</sup> is supposedly revealing its rejuvenated position in various walks of life. It is not uncommon to see *Dalits* forging a new identity or at least having a vision for an identity, which will guarantee humanity and self-respect to them. The coming together of enlightened *Dalits* for such an endeavor can be seen in the form of Satya Shodhak Samaj, Independent Labour Party, *Dalit* Panthers, Bahujan Samaj Party, and innumerable associations like United *Dalit* Students Forum, Enlightened Teachers Front, *Dalit* Intellectuals Collective (Krishnan, 1999)<sup>37</sup> etc. Further, they have been expanding their nomenclature from *Vidrohi Dalit* to *Sah-Dalit* to *Vishal-Dalit*<sup>38</sup> (Guru

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<sup>33</sup>It is very difficult to trace the origin of the term ‘Ambedkarism’ and to find out its first usage in *Dalit* literature. However, it essentially refers to the worldview, philosophy, and ideology of B.R. Ambedkar — a *Dalit* leader whom *Dalits* waited for three thousand years to be born in India. As has been noted above, *Dalits* of India have been victims of Hindu politics, which have put them in slavery for over centuries. When Ambedkar came to realize this, he championed the cause of the *Dalits* and fought throughout his life, relentlessly to ensure equality, social justice, and representative Democracy. Like any other ideology, Ambedkarism is also an ideology under the umbrella of which all the *Dalits* find their ncf redress their grievances.

<sup>34</sup>Here what I mean to say is that *Dalits* as a victimized group of people have forged a commonality to fight against the caste system and Brahminism. This implies that they have got the consciousness of having a common agenda to which Ambedkarism binds them together. They are now active participants of the movement for the liberation of *Dalits* from the clutch of Brahminic hegemony.

<sup>35</sup>It is not to deny the fact that there is a section of Pseudo-*Dalits* who do not wish to be identified as *Dalits*. Particularly for those who have been products of embourgeoisement and Sanskritization, it is useless to be identified publicly as “*Dalits*”, although they do not hesitate to enter into echelons of a high order by taking the help of reservation policy in the caste name. Such an identity crisis weakens the *Dalit* movement from becoming strong and effective. For an elaboration, refer to Kumar (April, 1999).

<sup>36</sup>Redfield (1955) pioneered and used the approach of “little and great traditions” to analyze changing patterns of human communities in Mexican villages. But in the case of India, the dichotomy of little tradition vis-à-vis great tradition is baffling and suffers from a number of biases. It is really perplexing to see why the culture of a minority — that of Vedic Brahmins should be called ‘great’ tradition while that of the majority of the *Dalit*-Bahujans will be marginalized and put under ‘little’ tradition???. Such a conundrum, I believe, is due to the social context of our sociology (read sociologists and anthropologists), which have, until recently, been at the hands of the dominant castes and classes whose main concern lies in protecting as well as promoting the status quo and “maintaining” the customs and traditions of Brahmanic Hindus and their dominant establishments.

<sup>37</sup>These terms are not only for semantic use but give vital dues to the identity formation of *Dalits* in a modern/broader perspective. Reflecting their sentiments, they have chosen these names for themselves. *Vidrohi-Dalit* means the oppressed in revolt; *Sah-Dalit* means co-oppressed and *Vishal-Dalit* means the oppressed in the wider sense of the term.

<sup>38</sup>It is interesting to note that these days the struggle for *Dalit*-Bahujans is marked by growing intellectual activities. And these activities seem to be taking place even outside the formal educational sites in which such endeavors usually flourish. As Guru and Geetha (2000) explore, these endeavors seek to create an intellectual base for taking on the Hindutvawadi forces whose project has been to distort and destroy the *Dalit* movement. Besides, the *Dalit*-Bahujan scholars seek to establish their claims to intellectual representation away from the bourgeois Brahmin Marxists who are often accused of driving *Dalits* away from Ambedkar and Ambedkarism while hijacking the agenda of *Dalits* and *Dalit* intellectuals. However, in addition to the aforementioned activities, they seek not only to audit the external adversaries of the *Dalits* but also want to go in for an audit of the *Dalits* themselves, which creates an internal hierarchy. Of particular significance is a forum like that of *Dalit* Intellectuals Collective (DIC), which wants the dichotomy between “theoretical Brahmins” and “empirical *Dalits*” done away with. Interestingly, they want to enable

and Geetha, 2000) in the wider perspective of their concern. As equals to any other human being, *Dalits* are asserting, having been alienated for centuries, for a project of ‘emancipatory identity’<sup>39</sup> As the various sections of the *Dalit* movement show, it is an agenda against Brahminic hegemony. Thus, in the process of identity-formation, we can ascertain two phases--first ‘deconstructing’ the stigmatized identity given by the ruling elites; and second, ‘reconstructing’ an identity, which will guarantee their emancipation assuring equality and humanity.

### **Educated-Enlightened *Dalits* forging a New *Dalit* Identity**

Identity as a concept of ‘self is an important aspect of one’s personality, which one has to enhance and defend. It is subject to change and modifications throughout one’s life. It changes with whom one does identify as a point of reference. Generally, once established, it apparently provides a sense of personal continuity over space and time and is defended against alteration and insult. This self-image or identity of a person or a community embodies those characteristics which are identified as being like or unlike of other persons and communities. A man’s ‘self-concept’ determines what he/she will act in terms of a given situation or in making a particular decision.<sup>40</sup> for the most part of one’s life, a person seeks to achieve personal and social identities, which should favorably be recognized by others in his immediate area of interaction. The manner in which someone (the significant others) evaluates his/her identity, as a person who must achieve or not achieve certain goals<sup>41</sup> may be considered as his/her level of self-esteem in terms of praise or shame.

Locating *Dalits* in such a situation, we have to see how the newfound identity and self-image can be effectively realized. *Dalits*, by their traditional identity, are known for apathy, powerlessness, and lack of confidence. They are now being modified under consciously created new self-image, which provides a new sense of personal worth and progressive community. However, there are possibilities when they might be torn between old and new images. Especially, in the case of an educated *Dalit*, the newly acquired self-concept is not in consonance with the illiterate-traditionally humble parents. Here, either he/she succumbs to the pressure of parents or completely dissociates himself/herself from them. It is not to deny the fact that they tend to wipe

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the *Dalits* and others to visualize an intellectual journey from the immediate to the abstract, from the familiar to the universal, and from empirical to the theoretical.

<sup>39</sup>Of interest may be Aloysius (1998) particularly, chapter Seven, 151- 176 and Conclusion, pp. 177-194. Taking Tamil Buddhism as an organization, he probes into socio-religious movements of the subordinated groups, the *Dalits*, which he sees as an alternative and emancipatory proposal for socio-cultural renewal and societal reconstruction. Such an emancipatory project, as has been articulated, basically revolves around the identity formation of sub-alterns castes and communities.

<sup>40</sup>Here comes to my mind Giddens (1991) particularly when he shows that identification and projection form major means whereby potential spirals of anxiety and hostility are avoided. As he realizes, identification is partial and contextual—the taking over of traits or patterns of behavior of the other which are relevant to the resolution or diminishing of anxiety-creating patterns. It is always a cumbersome affair, because it is partial, because mechanisms of projection are involved, and because it is fundamentally a defensive reaction to potential anxiety. It is, therefore, that practical consciousness of the “self and the “other” is the cognitive and emotive anchor of the feelings of ontological security characteristic of large segments of human activity in all societies and cultures.

<sup>41</sup>It is not uncommon to see how non-Dalits react to any sort of achievement that comes to Dalits. If a Dalit boy outscores others, the castist-conservative teacher wonders how can a Dalit top the Class? Is it so that only the Brahmins/non-Dalits are entitled to secure it? When they see a beautiful Dalit girl, people wonder, if she can really be a Dalit. And when Vinod Kambli, a Dalit cricketer becomes the ‘Man of the Match’, people wonder why it was not Sachin Tendulkar or Saurav Ganguly (coming from so-called upper castes and classes) ???.

out their past by isolating themselves from their own community, severing fellow feelings with their less-fortunate brethren, even aggrandizing them in their presence and evading their origin before their upper-caste friends. They stand between two worlds-between old *Dalits* and the neo-Brahmins. They are confused whether they go for social integration or keep isolation from the non-*Dalits*. They are not clear whether caste should be abolished or market should be liberalized or socialism should be brought back. This ambivalence can be attributed to their past history and aspirations to mingle in the mainstream. One way they cannot forego their age-old *Dalit* identity, on the other hand, they cannot be fully accepted and recognized by their ‘significant others’, the non-*Dalits*.

In such a situation, legitimization of the newfound identity has to be worked out by negotiating with the significant others. *Dalits* may change their behavior pattern and lead a common living, but they must be accepted and treated accordingly by the dominant caste Hindus in a manner, which recognizes their equality and dignity in true spirit. Attempts to play new roles need a radical attitudinal change in the minds of those who are generally at the helm of affairs. Identity is multi-faceted. Understanding the identities of each other and giving due recognition is a primary prerequisite for the smooth functioning of a society. And in an era of globalization and modernization, where the possibilities of experiencing alterity (Welz, 2000)<sup>42</sup> are the order of the day, the stigmatized *Dalit* identity given in the backdrop of cultural politics must be taken due notice. Otherwise, it not only puts a scar on *Dalits* as a community and cultural fabric of Indian society but the very essence of Humankind is put at stake. It is high time, those who have roles to play in such a juncture must come forward to put their heads and hearts in pursuit of such a greater cause.

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<sup>42</sup>Contrasting different approaches to identity — from phenomenological theory to symbolic interactionism and systems theory — he comes to realize that in an era of globalization and modernization, when man is struggling for his survival amidst mass society, he/she cannot be deployed with a single given identity. This calls for ‘choice of identities’ and flexibility in identity formation which must be recognized irrespective of caste, class, race, gender, nation and ethnicity.

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