

# Rise of the 'Dalit Millionaire'

## A Low Intensity Spectacle

GOPAL GURU

Dalit efforts to move from the ordinary and explode into the extraordinary as millionaires may look spectacular, particularly when they do not have a known history of capital accumulation. But what does this sudden rise of a few dalits to the position of millionaires signify? Using Debord's framework of the ideology of spectacle as false consciousness, which forges a fake association between a person or a social collectivity and the spectacle, this essay analyses the dalit millionaire as a spectacle within the context of caste, the corporate sector and the state.

In contemporary times, one often hears either the exclamatory, "capitalism from below is a 21st century wonder", or the interrogatory, "[can the subaltern accumulate?](#)". Both expressions, though seemingly different, essentially, uniformly designate triumphalism to the ideology of [neo-liberalism](#).<sup>1</sup> One might also see the rise of a few dalits as millionaires as an affirmation of this triumphalism. Moreover, some of the dalits themselves have welcomed such a development within the dalit community as a spectacular achievement.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, it is interesting to note that some of the top corporate houses have endorsed the arrival of dalits as millionaires. Corporate magnates are reported to have extended their support and joined dalits in publicly celebrating this development. One can thus register the corporate support that was extended to dalit millionaires who organised "Udyog Mela" (a meet of dalit millionaires) in Indian metros like Pune and Mumbai (Teltumbde 2011).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, public announcement of this arrival has been amplified through both print<sup>4</sup> and electronic media.<sup>5</sup> Some of the regional and national television channels have been quite enthusiastic in exploding the image of the dalit millionaire to some degree of visibility and prominence. It is even more interesting to note that some of the more notable social scientists, from the dalit community<sup>6</sup> as well as non-dalits (Kapur et al 2010), are taking a consistently positive stand towards these dalit millionaires.

Dalit efforts to move from the ordinary and explode into the extraordinary (millionaire) may indeed look spectacular, [particularly when dalits do not have a known history of capital accumulation](#). But does this sudden rise of dalits to the position of millionaires constitute a spectacle? What is a spectacle and within what kind of a spectacle do these dalit millionaires fit? Let us address these interrelated questions in the following sections.

### 1 What Is the Spectacle?

For addressing these questions, I find the work of Guy Debord, one of the leading theorists of the spectacle, as a most useful starting point for working out my own position vis-à-vis the emergence of the dalit millionaire as spectacle. Debord, in his seminal work on the spectacle of society, argues that the spectacle presents itself both as an instrument of unification of society and as providing common ground for the deceived gaze and false consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in Debord's framework, the spectacle is an ideology, which, as false consciousness, necessarily forges a fake association between a person or a social collectivity, and the spectacle.



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In societies like India, caste consciousness as a subjective resource is constitutive of spectacle as an ideology. In fact, as I will argue in the rest of this essay, spectacle as an ideology is less likely to gain salience on its own, particularly outside the subjective framework of caste consciousness. That is to say, in societies like India, where social constituencies are yet to develop a full-fledged consumerist consciousness and there is still a premodern lag in their cultural consciousness, a spectacle of general nature would, in such a context, find it difficult to become ideologically attractive to the cross section of the population. Hence, the corporate capital may require a spectacle, which will act as a buffer for creating an ideological impact through arranging the spectacles in a synchronising manner, thus making some spectacles auxiliary in nature impact social groups with uneven levels of cultural consciousness. It is in this sense that one can understand the emergence of the dalit millionaire as a spectacle.

I will argue in the rest of this essay, that in the Indian context, since the spectacles of the corporate class lack power to act as a self-sufficient ideological category, it requires other spectacles that can carry forward its ideological agenda. To put it differently, in the public domain, where caste still continues to have formative impact on the cultural consciousness of people, no spectacle can claim that, in such a social context, its demonstrative presence is independently attractive. On the contrary, it has to promote itself through the mediation of another spectacle that would create grounds for making the former attractive.

These cultural compulsions force the corporate class to assign a hegemonic orientation to its spectacle. In its need to remain effective and powerful, it has to allow such spectacles as can express themselves with different degrees of intensity. I am going to argue that the dalit millionaire as spectacle operates with low intensity. Taking our cue once again from Debord, it could further be argued that the hegemonic spectacle is a parasitic category inasmuch as it requires either a non-spectacle or a non-competitive variety of spectacle as the defining condition of its own existence. Therefore, it is in this connection that it would be worthwhile to understand the corporate endorsement of dalit millionaires as a spectacle.

It would be equally interesting to evaluate the spectacle of the dalit millionaire particularly in terms of its subsidiary role in sustaining the high intensity or the hegemonic spectacle as represented by the Indian corporate class. Extending Debord's definition a little further, one could also define spectacle in its hegemonic form, which, while generating ideological impact with high intensity, also accommodates within it a low intensity spectacle. In the following section, I therefore argue that dalit millionaires represent the low intensity spectacle.

## 2 The Dalit Millionaire: A Low Intensity Spectacle

Why is the emergence of the dalit millionaire a low intensity spectacle? Let me address this question in terms of the asymmetrical relationship between the low intensity and high intensity spectacles. The arrival of the dalit as millionaire could be characterised as a low intensity spectacle for the following reasons:

### 2.1 Averse to the Capitalist, But Not against Cash

First, dalit millionaires have certain structural limitations that prevent them from becoming a high intensity spectacle, as outlined in Section 1. They have not, for example, acquired the enormous material and cultural power that would help them stamp their signature all over the globe. Although they share the larger ideological space with the hegemonic spectacle, their sphere of ideological influence remains confined to a small constituency of dalits. Their ideological mediation, thus, has limitations.

Within the logic of low intensity, dalit millionaires are supposed to project themselves as role models that work out for the cultural consumption of dalit masses. In other words, dalit millionaires are not supposed to focus on the non-dalits, who, in any case, feel much more mesmerised by the public presence of high intensity spectacles, which are globally available, and in plenty. Interestingly, the dalit millionaire as a low intensity spectacle is much more desi than a high intensity one, which is arguably more derivative. These are derivative inasmuch as they are accessed by Indians from outside.

One can argue that showcasing the dalit millionaire, thus, has been motivated by the ideological need to induce in common dalits a feeling of pacification, which in effect will neutralise their anti-corporate stance. The evidence of such pacification is already available in the expression of some of the common dalits who seem to be holding the following view: they may be averse to the capitalist, but they are not against cash.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that one can make sense of the "resigned attitude" of the Indian corporate class, which may not be too keen to create among the common dalit a high profile consumerist consciousness. In this regard, it is necessary to keep in view the grudging (Nilekani 2008: 330) willingness of corporates to help the government devise and implement various welfare schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to make cash available to the toiling dalit in rural India. The corporates might even fund dalit non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to propagate the importance of cash transfers to poor dalits.

Thus, neutralising the radical consciousness is not a small gain for the corporate class. Promoting the dalit millionaire with the specific purpose of making ideological inroads into the dalit community is quite indicative of the fact that corporates still strategise within the framework of caste, even if such strategic thinking goes against the oft-repeated claim of seamless social order.

### 2.2 The Constraining Collectivity

Second, dalit millionaires can be defined as low intensity spectacles because they have limited cultural power of dispersion of the local images of such moneybags. At the other end of the spectrum, the high intensity spectacle could be present at several places at the same time and could, thus, be taken around the globe. This multiple dispersion of animated images has become a possibility, primarily because the non-dalit millionaires, arguably, got themselves entangled into atomised individuality. It is the powerful individual, rather than the

structures (IT industry), who is projected with much more intensity across time and space. However, for Indian academic devotees, scholars from the west also become spectacles when the latter reach India. Dalit millionaires are yet to completely walk out of their “constraining collectivity” and become individuals. The very tag of “dalit” being attached to their millionaire status denies them individuality, which, in some sense, is necessary in order to explode oneself into a spectacle. The caste of the dalit millionaires, therefore, sets limits to the full explosion of their spectacle.

Even the support that is extended by the corporates to dalit millionaires is limited, ranging from a symbolic handshake with the dalit millionaire, to fragile hand-holding in terms of providing clientele to him/her.<sup>9</sup> The corporate support that these dalit millionaires have received from their corporate patrons for the purpose of organising *Udyog Melas* under the banner of the Dalit Indian Industry of Chambers and Commerce (DICC) (Teltumbde 2011) has been much more moderate as compared to the massive corporate support that was made available for organising a beauty pageant in Bangalore some years ago.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.3 The ‘Embarrassing’ Unaesthetic

Third, aesthetic taste, interestingly, provides a measure to decide the high intensity of the spectacle of the corporate class. Ironically, the aesthetic sense of the high intensity spectacle makes it necessary on the part of the corporates to keep the below poverty line dalit out of their sight. Let me offer another illustration that would explain this expansive aesthetic taste of the Indian corporate. For example, the spectacle of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi literally covered jhuggis (shanty slums) with oversized hoardings carrying the message of globality.<sup>11</sup> Globality, thus, redefines the cultural relationship projecting the spectacle (glassy corporate offices) as the marker of beauty and the non-spectacle (slums) as the sign of “dirt” and stigma. The relationship between the spectacle and non-spectacle is not just of scale, but of quality as well. The awesome urban presence of the high intensity spectacle seeks to not only overshadow, but also make invisible what could be called the non-spectacle.

Meanwhile, the poor dalit becomes the logical condition for the very existence of the low intensity spectacle. The relationship between the dalit millionaire and the common dalit is similar to the constitutive relationship between a lotus and the huge mass of mud on which it grows. Just as the lotus requires mud for its growth, dalit millionaires require the mass of the dalit poor in order to become a spectacle. Logically, the “wretched” of the dalits provide this condition to the dalit millionaire for acquiring the status of a spectacle even at a low intensity.

Dalit millionaires are the non-spectacle of the genuine spectacle, and ragpickers and scavengers in the withered-down jhuggis of dalits are the non-spectacle of the low intensity spectacle. The only difference that one can find between the high and low intensity spectacles is that while the former desires to avoid the very sight of a common dalit, the latter is

ontologically chained to the identity of these dalits. The dalit millionaires’ existence as spectacle depends on the negative essence of the outcastes. They have to remain in touch with the wretched, howsoever “embarrassing” the latter may be. In the Indian context, spectacles operate on a conundrum. The Indian corporates, in association with the state, require dalit millionaires who, in turn, require millions of outcastes. Dalit millionaires are low intensity spectacles because they are not universally more attractive.

### 2.4 Keeping a Low Profile

Fourth, dalit millionaires also operate at the level of low intensity, particularly in the world of publicity or in the cultural life of capital. They tend to make only occasional appearances in the world of publicity. Thus, aggressive advertisement by the dalit millionaire is completely ruled out. However, one cannot expect such adventurousness from dalit millionaires as they are newcomers to the field of capitalism. Capitalism not just from below but from outside the pale of Hinduism at the present juncture, does not lead to complete transgression of economic boundaries. In some sense, the limits of dalit millionaires in expanding beyond a certain stage could be understood in terms of the historically accumulated limits of their social background.

Even today, as the spectacle of dalit millionaires gets haunted by the spectre of caste, they prefer to remain chained to their identity. They, like the Nadars of Chennai (Damodaran 2008: 316) and the Gounders of Tripur (Chari 2004), have not been able to infuse universal content into their social identity, thus, making it an inversion category. Although, they, in their self-perception, might claim that they can now respectfully appear in the public domain, even with their social identity.

On the other hand, the Indian corporate class does not require making such an announcement. The high intensity spectacle keeps happening continuously, and hence its reception does not come as a sudden surprise to the world. It is not a wonder for many. Most of these dalit millionaires are structurally compelled to keep a low profile. They realise that as long as they remain confined within the permissible limits of production and distribution, they would continue to receive the patronage of corporate magnates as well as political parties.

### 2.5 The Latecomers

Fifth, I would like to argue that it was state and political patronage, rather than the free and competitive context of market, that provided an initial condition for the mobility of the dalit millionaire in India. Capitalist patronage came into the picture only at a later stage, which had already been set up by state patronage. In fact, the capitalist in the Indian context continues to remain the beneficiary of the Indian state (Kaviraj 2006: 158).

The role that politics, both of political parties and state patronage, plays in providing necessary conditions for the mobility of dalit millionaires becomes crucial in the context of their being historically deprived of the resources (Damodaran 2008) that are necessary for such an emergence. Since the

caste system by and large deprived dalits of material resources, and the postcolonial state offered marginal benefits to some dalits through redistributive policies, they seem to have looked at different avenues for their progress. The state and party politics, therefore, open up some space for dalits to enjoy some degree of economic freedom, which is contingent upon political opportunities.

Dalit millionaires are latecomers to the process that makes the emergence of millionaires possible. Dalits have historically existed outside the opportunity structures of both institutional and community networks. Even if they historically had impressive material assets enough to become millionaires, they could not consolidate and build on these resources. This was because they lacked the opportunity structures. However, in independent India, particularly in recent times when electoral politics have become much more competitive and where the support of a small community becomes crucial to win elections, political parties with heavy bourgeoisie backing had to support not only candidates, but also entrepreneurs from among dalits.

It is interesting to record here that majority of dalit millionaires are the major beneficiaries of political patrons, and also the corporates, who, due to party affiliations, support dalits. Do not forget, for instance, the support that Birla gave to Gandhi for carrying out the "Harijan" welfare programme before independence. However, in the trade off, the party bosses and the capitalist always enjoyed dominance, which in turn put

constraints on the power of assertion of the dalits. They had to remain grateful to both the party as well as the corporate bosses. This did not give the decisive power to the dalits, with which they could dictate terms to the political bosses. They have always had to remain subdued. It is this dependence on patronages that makes them a low intensity spectacle.

Formal electoral politics was an option that some of them used effectively to achieve "phenomenal" individual progress through consumption (dalit politicians are known to buy costly diamond sets), while others sought to patronise political networks in order to get footholds even on the manufacturing side of the market.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is political freedom that seems to have helped dalits gain economic freedom. Dalit experience with constitutional provisions and the resultant state intervention would seek to reverse the Friedmanian order and make political freedom a necessary condition for economic freedom. Friedman, in his book on *Capitalism and Freedom*, says that

...while economic freedom is a necessary condition for civil and political freedom, political freedom, desirable though it may be, is not a necessary condition for economic and civil freedom (Friedman 2002: ix (preface)).

Friedman further argues that capitalism does try and eliminate constraining conditions like the medieval guilds in Europe and the caste system in India, so that people can enjoy and redeem economic freedom. For example, dalit political leaders,

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both male and female, who did not inherit anything substantial from the past except a socially degrading background, have now been able to accumulate some degree of capital by investing in smaller enterprises like textile production, shipping, manufacturing and catering.<sup>13</sup> Some of them invested in educational institutions and yielded accumulation of capital.<sup>14</sup> Others who also benefited from political patronage did not invest in production, but are reported to have invested in real estate.<sup>15</sup> This rise, in relative terms, has become possible only after the dalits have gotten an influential political position through an affirmative programme. But this investment still does not make them a high intensity spectacle. They still remain upstarts in the sphere of capitalism. One could attribute this “classic character” of the mainstream corporate to the historically structuralised process of accumulation of capital and the favourable social conditions of its expansion, both in terms of time and space. It is expansive in terms of social consumption of its products and also in terms of institutional credit. Dalit capital has so far remained confined to a specific location (Damodaran 2008: 316). To put it differently, historically inherited wealth tends to naturalise, even for the poor, the claim of being affluent.

On the contrary, the historical inability to convert traditional sources of wealth into modern forms of capital (Moon 2009: 4-5) makes the emergence of dalit millionaires incredible, and hence a socially produced “wonder”. Their arrival is sudden because they have no known history of successful accumulation. Also, dalit capital can accumulate, but with an arresting sense of accumulation. It is in this historical sense that one can define the low intensity spectacle as represented by the dalit millionaire.

## 2.6 The Static Spectacle

Sixth, the dalit spectacle is low intensity because it lacks social dynamism. This lack of dynamism is evident in its incapacity to showcase itself for wider appreciation of its performance. It is not interested in multiplying accumulation through trans-local expansion of capital. It is low intensity as it draws subsidised satisfaction in whatever it accumulates through producing spectacles that are static, and hence devoid of dynamism. Similarly, dalit millionaires do not have a substantive relationship with the world of advertising, but are rhetorically showcased only occasionally. Their market depends on patronage as provided by the corporates on the one hand, and the state and political parties on the other.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the high intensity spectacle keeps occurring through the production of multiple images, whose job is to induce more amusement in the consumer. The operational aspects of the hegemonic spectacle, particularly in the age of globalisation, suggest seamlessness to the extent that it exists outside the formal national boundaries and tends to stamp its signature on the global cultural landscape. That is to say, it is everywhere in the global society. It incarnates itself through speed and size. It is thus in gigantic airports, the expanding and ever extending metro flyovers superimposed over the shanty slums, the glamorous shopping malls and the intense international migration.

## 2.7 Self-inflicted Exploitation

Seventh, dalit millionaires could be characterised as low intensity because of the nature of exploitation and strategies of manipulation that they are associated with. Dalit millionaires are associated with exploitation, but at different levels. Initially, some of them have themselves been the victims of exploitation by others. Once they acquire their limited power, they exploit others, and most of the time their own people. Their exploitation is of a specific type, and hence, it is non-standardised.

Ultimately, they become the sources of their own moral exploitation. This self-inflicted exploitation is moral in the sense that it involves self-depreciation. Development that is based on an element of patronage does involve compromise in order to adjust with the dominant partner, whose self-recognition is based on somebody's moral degradation. On the other hand, the corporate class acquires high intensity for its spectacle precisely because it engages in the exploitation of humanity. It adopts forms of exploitation that are standardised, as existing across time and space. The ruthless exploitation of natural resources is one such form that exploits humanity in its entirety.

Finally, one needs to explain the low intensity nature of the spectacle, particularly in terms of the unique cultural resources that would otherwise help them become a part of the national spectacle. Interestingly, corporates objectively participate in the national spectacle. On 26 January one can notice the military vehicles produced by the corporate sector in the Republic Day parade. Dalits do have the Mahar regiment at Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, but one does not remember it being a part of the parade. In the absence of dalit participation in such a national spectacle, some dalits might justify being a part even of a low intensity spectacle as provided by the capitalism. But should one draw such subsidised satisfaction from this low intensity? The feeling of subsidised satisfaction, if entertained, may have the following implications for the notion of freedom.

## 3 Critiquing the Low Intensity Spectacle

Folding the image of a dalit into a spectacle is not without problems. My critique is a continuation of the dalit critique of the phenomenon of the dalit millionaire. A certain understanding of the spectacle seeks to render affirmation of the dalit millionaire as deeply problematic on several counts.

### 3.1 No Moral Autonomy

First, the idea of the dalit millionaire spectacle does not enable the dalit in question to acquire moral autonomy that is so necessary to tell the truth. One of the ways to define truth is by relating it to an honest conversation with the common dalit, by telling the latter that the free market can help only a few dalits become millionaires, but that it has no capacity to make “a decent life” a lived experience for the totality of millions of dalits. This realisation, from the participation in an honest conversation with common dalits, offers a bright chance to expose the rhetorical relation that both low and high intensity spectacles tend to establish with the non-spectacle (dalits with disparate poverty), an ideological need rather than a substantive

identification with the latter. Telling the truth through honest conversation and acting accordingly would, thus, prevent the lie from fragmenting solidarities that necessarily result from honest and continuous conversation. Solidarities would impose moral restriction on the ambition of the ordinary to become the extraordinary, or the spectacle.

Prescription of capitalism as the ideal social order, in effect, seriously and continuously misleads people into ignoring the inconsistency between the new truth (dalit millionaires) and the ontological truth that reflects perpetuation and deepening of wretchedness among dalits. The protagonists of the new truth, thus, hold belief in the fragmentary atomistic approach to reality. They think and perceive their progress more in terms of a fragmentary self-world view that necessarily compels a person to gloss over a larger part of the truth. People do not see any inconsistency between this truth and the truth of the community. This search for the new truth, which assumes only a narrow social base, has been aptly discarded by none other than Babasaheb Ambedkar himself. Ambedkar (1979: 228(2)) says

Individual mobility, success and performance are worthy of respect, but most of the time cannot be worthy of imitation. Collective success is much superior to individual success. Individual success may have achieved a Himalayan height, and yet is dwarfed in front of the collective success (translated from Marathi).

Choosing to ignore the inconsistency between the two truths also leads us to believe that being identified with the common dalit is not a sufficient condition to remain truthful to

oneself. That is to say, being born in a social situation does not make one automatically morally infallible as to being truthful. To put it differently, moral commitment to remain truthful to the community does not depend on the sociological identification of that community. For example, it is not enough to pragmatically identify oneself with the dalit community. Mere sociological identification with the dalit community does not guarantee virtue that, in turn, makes moral demands on a person to remain truthful to one's own community. The narrow politics of identity necessarily puncture this possibility of being truthful to one's own community. Dalit millionaires' notion of self-development has, therefore, to be understood in terms of the untruth that they practice, in relation to larger social concerns of their community.

### 3.2 Perpetuating Casteism

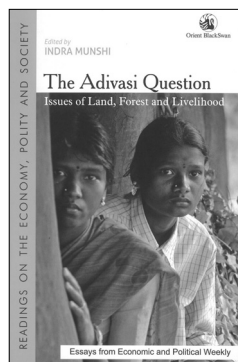
Second, globalisation and the free market have not been able to minimise the presence of caste in the sphere of governance in cities. In fact, it has perpetuated casteism in new forms, making dalits participate in the perpetuation of casteism. The state's practice of outsourcing the management of urban governance or maintenance of sanitation has, in effect, created a set of "garbage managers", contractors from within the dalit community. These new jobbers are said to be indulging in the worst kind of exploitation of ragpickers.<sup>17</sup> Thus, globalisation has somehow led to the localisation of exploitation, which operates within the dalit community. Dalit ragpickers now have exploiters both from within and outside the community.

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## The Adivasi Question

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Depletion and destruction of forests have eroded the already fragile survival base of adivasis across the country, displacing an alarmingly large number of adivasis to make way for development projects. Many have been forced to migrate to other rural areas or cities in search of work, leading to systematic alienation.

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The unresolvable paradox that dalit millionaires therefore face is this: while they require a larger dalit identity as a negative reference point for their individual promotion, at the same time they seek to fictionalise the larger truth that tends to keep a vast mass of destitute dalits in disparate poverty. The rise of the non-dalit millionaire as a spectacle thus deceives Milton Friedman's thesis, which, as seen earlier, suggested that the free market and economic freedom would eliminate the predatory mode of accumulation. The rise of the dalit millionaire as a spectacle has not been able to stamp out the traces of caste. Capitalism has not triumphed over casteism. In view of the growing wretchedness of dalits, it would be an "incredible idea" to conclude that casteism is a one-time social problem, which, therefore, could be solved once "genuine" capitalism begins to regulate market transactions on universal grounds.

### 3.3 The Historical Truth

Third, prescriptions for becoming millionaires rob the historical truth of its essence, which is necessary for organising thought and action for emancipatory purposes. Therefore, it is necessary to tell dalits the historical truth as well. They need to be told that becoming millionaires has never formed part of dalit historical imagination and material ambition. In this regard, the reference to the ideas of Jyotirao Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar can morally empower dalits to engage in an honest conversation. For example, Ambedkar never preached to dalits that they should become millionaires. The idea of being a millionaire looks spectacular precisely because it does not have a history either in dalit historical imagination or the accumulation of capital. In the history of ideas, we do not have any concrete evidence from any dalit thinker suggesting accumulation. This point has been indirectly confirmed by some of the scholars who choose to read such imagination in Ambedkar (Omvedt 2004: 11).

This particular intellectually subversive background to prescribing the idea of being a millionaire to the dalits would seem necessary to identify such a prescription as an incredible idea fixed in a bundle of contradictions, rather than an idea portraying a spectacular picture of dalits. Thus, the rise of the dalit millionaire as a spectacle does not remain attractive at the social level as it fails to alter the social relation between dirty jobs and destitute dalits. It fails to realise that it does not have the freedom and capacity to achieve these radical alterations in the life of common dalits.

### 4 Limited Freedom for the Dalit Millionaire

It is possible to argue that a spectacle of any intensity is bound to produce a limiting notion of freedom among dalits. Much against the Friedmanian idea of freedom, dalit millionaires cannot enjoy an experience of freedom. They can only enjoy partial freedom. They can rightfully argue that the free market and the structures of patronage do help and have indeed helped them enter new and clean vocations. It is also true that they could feel free to have been liberated from their traditional jobs that were considered filthy and obnoxious.

However, their sphere of freedom is not only limited, it is actually truncated. Dalit millionaires are no doubt part of the

objective fact that they have become millionaires, but they are yet to become part of the universal truth as embodied in the expanding material presence of the corporate class. The universal truth is expressed through competition of individuals, individual families and monopolies at its best, and through standardised exploitation and environmental degradation at its worst. Dalit millionaires strive on patronage and are confined to a limited sphere of transactions. Even though their fondest hope is to become a part of this larger truth, however, at the moment, they can only desire it as a dream so that they can get some sound sleep.

The dalit question, more than any other question, is relatively more prone to generate this differentiation within the dalit social world. On the other hand, an excessive dependence on patronage can explain the nature of dalit morality. The moral attitude that a dalit millionaire acquires is replete with being grateful to the corporates. Dalit entrepreneurs would feel completely elevated at both the gestures of hand-holding by the state and even a dry or symbolic handshake with industrial magnates. Thus, the dalit millionaire provides the cultural condition for the corporate to remain morally relevant in the public sphere.

Social transition from "being" a dalit to "becoming" an authentic corporate, and hence a universal spectacle, however, remains a dream which can then work as a desire to get some sound sleep. He or she continues to remain a dalit despite having made some tangible transgression in social terms. Socially hostile conditions which keep haunting the caste of the dalit millionaires tragically compel them to declare that they are dalit or even untouchable. It is said that a United Kingdom-based dalit millionaire was compelled to sport his caste on his shoulders. Such a case shows the predicament of a dalit entrepreneur.

On the other side of the spectre of collective unfreedom (Alam 2005: 45-48), dalit millionaires are willing to, but are unable to, separate themselves from this unfreedom. A huge majority of dalits are stuck in disparate poverty and are continuously pushed to do the most obnoxious and filthy, and hence the most hazardous jobs, like scavenging and garbage collection in the most shining and *sundar* (beautiful) of Indian metros. Every year, poisonous gases stored in sewage chambers kill several dalit workers who are forced to enter these manholes without any protection, while the practice of manual scavenging forces thousands of dalit women to lose their morally integrated personality. The lack of decent alternate jobs forces these dalits to walk into the manhole, an urban man-eater. This sewage man-eater is, thus, analogous to the natural one who also eats every year quite a few poor honey collectors in the Sundarbans (Sen 1999: 29). The collective unfreedom as lived experience thus entails an unresolvable paradox: The Sundarbans (literally, beautiful forest) remain both, *sundar* and ugly at the same time. While it is naturally *sundar*, it is also a zone of death. Similarly, urban metros are *sundar*, but at the same time they are zones of death as far as dalits are concerned.

The tragedy is that while the dalit makes this ugly-looking concrete jungle *sundar* by draining out and detoxifying the dirt from the metros, he/she continues to remain the recipient of the stigmatised social and moral gaze of the urban elite.

This paradox is well-represented by the “philanthropic” efforts made by some. In this context, the efforts to re-signify by taking abroad a few Valmiki women to participate in beauty pageants look not only paradoxical, but morally deeply obnoxious. Making dalit women a part of the temporal spectacle is illusionary, and therefore absurd.

The limited notion of freedom, as associated with the dalit millionaire, also brings forth the tension that is internal to the moral concept of self-esteem. In a free-market-driven society based on the logic of competition, the capacity and will to take risks provides moral background for achieving self-esteem. Self-esteem is a feeling of being positive, worthy and heroic about oneself. Thus, those with moral capacity, who are willing to take risks in terms of taming the vagaries of the market, are supposed to enjoy high self-esteem. In such risk-taking, even their failure would enhance their self-esteem. In such a competitive context, one wonders how much risk dalit millionaires are taking. This question becomes relevant in a context where their enterprise is sustained by the structures of patronage. In such a convenient context, they do not need to take an extraordinary risk. One might also argue that non-dalits also do not take extraordinary risks as they are well-protected by several hidden and not-so-hidden structures of leverages.

The notion of self-respect gained through the market does not have moral significance. It lacks such significance because the dalit millionaire thrives on whatever degree of freedom he/she does, not because he/she has won it by making singular efforts, but because of the cost paid by the larger dalit community. In fact, these millionaires in question further slide on perhaps much more morally slippery ground. They feed on the grave risks taken by the common dalits. Their identity as dalits is based on the corresponding identity that the common dalits are forced to sustain through the stigmatised jobs they later are continuously pushed into. The dalit millionaire's freedom is a kind of reward given to a “free rider” who is compensated by the grave risk that poor dalits take by doing the most dangerous jobs. The common dalits provide the former the advantage of a dalit identity by taking up the dirty jobs of ragpicking, scavenging, and even undergoing atrocities.

In this regard, it could further be argued that poor dalits pay the price by experiencing inequality, indignity and humiliation, for the benefits reaped by the dalit millionaire. Taking a cue from Stiglitz (2012: 91), it could therefore be argued that dalit millionaires are no different from genuine corporates, who also benefit from the costs imposed on the bottom layers of the society. In their existence, the dalit corporates are different from the “real” corporates, but in essence, they share the same morally problematic ground with them.

### 5 The Category of Dalit and Its Adversaries

In globalising times, this term has been receiving maltreatment from certain dalits and their supporters. Hence, it is both academically and politically necessary to disabuse them of such maltreatment of this term and restore its capacity to assign credence to transformative dalit politics. Let me argue here that there is arbitrariness in the usage of this term. The

recent invocation of the term dalit by certain proponents of neo-liberalism from within the dalit community has put this category into serious abuse. The question that one needs to ask is whether this category is available to these adversaries. The answer is categorically “no”.

As the genealogy of this term suggests, this category has come up as a part of the emancipatory struggle of the erstwhile untouchables. It is a struggle concept, and hence oppositional in its essence and political in its expression. Since it is oppositional in its essence, its transcendence is inbuilt. In the history of its radical unfolding, the dalit category has lent political credence to the struggle launched by dalits against the ideology of possessive individualism.

As mentioned, dalit symbolises struggle as it is produced by the struggling masses in opposition to both the state and state-driven capitalism, and the free market. Moreover, it is an expansive concept and is not limited to mere social discrimination. Its historical role is to interrogate the structures of patriarchal domination (women), social oppression (untouchables), economic exploitation (labourers), and constraining isolation and subversion (tribals). It does not entail a sense of victimhood as has been suggested by many scholars who take their cue from one of the leading historians of the dalit movement (Zelliot 1997).

The category of dalit on the contrary, is an assertion and, hence, is agential. Since it is agential, it is fundamentally critical of the idea of victimhood. To put it differently, its agential qualities seek to resist the reification of the idea of victimhood. Its subversive essence makes it stand on its own without any suffix attached to it. It is, therefore, defined in terms of its autonomous ontological status. This has been the most radical meaning embedded in the conception of the category of dalit. Dalit as a struggle concept has been sociologically constituted, historically arrived at and politically articulated. This, by definition, would avoid any association with capitalism and the coercive state, and other patronising vocabulary produced by Gandhi or by the welfare state. Dalit is not a caste term at all.

### 6 Conclusions

At the analytical level, the specific context of caste in India tends to produce different levels of the spectacle with high and low intensities. The divide between the high and the low is

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enduring, thus suggesting the impossibility of a dalit becoming a capitalist of the top order. The relative gap between the two gets sustained by the structures of patronage controlled by the corporate class and the Indian government. The Indian corporate class has offered some fringe benefits to the underprivileged sections as part of their corporate social responsibility to the latter, whereas the Indian government has adopted certain welfare policies for these sections from time to time. Moreover, the impossibility, for dalit millionaires, of disentangling themselves from caste has to be understood in terms of the ideological need of the corporate to use the dalit for legitimisation purposes.

The emergence of the dalit as millionaire could be part of the truth, and yet the meaning that results from this truth is justificatory to the extent that it treats the ideology of neo-liberalism with liberatory potential. This in turn forces the dalit millionaire to provide justification for neo-liberalism. Dalit millionaires, though as a low intensity spectacle, do collaborate with the Indian corporate class with the purpose to create a unified ideological impact on socially discreet groups. Dalits also participate in this ideological game because they have, for personal reasons, stopped listening to the call of history. They are no more interested in listening to Phule and Ambedkar who recognised the historical truth and shared it with the common dalits, and with full honesty. However, dalit millionaires are yet to gain larger visibility

and recognition in the real life of the corporate class. Extending ideological influence by making certain rhetorical concessions to dalit millionaires (remember the handshake of the corporate with the dalit millionaire) does not seem to be yielding spectacular results for the corporates. Many common dalits have stayed away from the event organised by DICCI (Teltumbde 2011).

To the majority of common dalits across the region, the dalit millionaire (spectacle) looks too small in front of the *yug purush* (giant of the millennium) Babasaheb Ambedkar. These common dalits have a parallel notion of the spectacle, i.e., the *yug purush* image of Babasaheb. They mediated this image through a currency note of Rs 5,000. This particular symbolic elevation of Ambedkar is produced by dalits and not by the Government of India, and carries on it the majestic image of Babasaheb.<sup>18</sup> This spectacle sought to portray Gandhi as the inferior spectacle. Gandhi's spectacle, though small in its content as compared to the Rs 5,000 currency note, however, is real as it enjoys the lived life of currency. Paradoxically, this notion of spectacle collapses the dalit millionaire into Gandhi and makes both share common ground entailing the underprivileged spectacle. It is in this sense again that dalits need to seek advancement in their position and make continuous efforts to remain aloof from the romanticisation of individual success, which as mentioned earlier, did not fascinate Babasaheb Ambedkar in his public life.

## NOTES

- 1 Neo-liberalism could be defined in terms of what could be called the screening out of the essence of the state. Neo-liberalism seeks to empty the state of its essence, which gets facilitated through state intervention. To put it differently, neo-liberalism seeks to limit the state's spheres of influence at its best, and make it surrogate at its worst. Neo-liberalism tends to expand the social basis of the surrogate state. It creates in dalits for the first time the desire to become a part of this surrogacy. Are not mobile dalit intellectuals and the NGOs contributing to the expansion of global capital helping the state? Neo-liberalism also affects rather adversely the idea of equality. Neo-liberalism intensifies an un-dissolvable paradox. On the one hand, it proposes only sectoral equality and not the generic idea of equality, and on the other, it also propagates abstract equality in the sense that it creates unified spheres of cultural consumption. It insists on the promotion of only the principle of equality of opportunity, and not equality of outcome. It discourages people from overburdening the state with the flow of demands. While it promotes the idea of a global civil society, at the same time it creates, at the social/cultural level, mutually insulated and indifferent spheres of social life, with the primacy of market-based equality.
- 2 This is expressed by one of the important dalit ideologues, in *Loksatta*, a Marathi daily, published from Pune (5 September 2010).
- 3 Dalit millionaires, with the help of Indian corporates, organised these events at Pune and Mumbai.
- 4 National TV channels like NDTV have been conducting debates on dalit capitalists.

- 5 IBN Lokmat, a Marathi channel in Maharashtra, telecast the "Dalit Millionaire" in its programme "Great Bhet".
- 6 One comes across such dalit scholars at different places, for example, in TISS, Mumbai.
- 7 Debord, Guy, Urls: [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm), accessed on 7 September 2012.
- 8 This observation has been expressed by Ramaiah, faculty at TISS.
- 9 This is an example of a dalit caterer who is reported to have been supported with clientele by one of the leading IT companies in India.
- 10 In 2000, civil society protested against the beauty pageant organised in Bangalore.
- 11 The Delhi government covered the slum near Jawaharlal Nehru University with a big wall of hoardings during the 2010 Commonwealth Games.
- 12 It is invariably true that almost all known dalit millionaires are thickly related to leading political parties in India.
- 13 This is a case of a dalit woman who is known for being the most successful millionaire. She runs a manufacturing unit in Mumbai.
- 14 The most successful dalit millionaires from the education sector are singularly from the state of Karnataka.
- 15 This dalit millionaire is from the state of Uttar Pradesh.
- 16 An interview with Laxmanan, MIDS, Chennai, December 2010.
- 17 Interview with Shailesh Darokar, faculty at TISS, on 10 August 2012.
- 18 This particular hoarding with Ambedkar's picture on a symbolic Rs 5,000 currency note was put up at Chembur Check Post in Mumbai, I noticed it on 30 July 2012.

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