

The politics of naming

GOPAL GURU



CATEGORIES in political explanation enjoy a lifespan of their own. They travel alone along a path strewn with challenges and counter challenges, contradictions and their transcendence. That is why these categories and their labelling (naming) change meaning, connotation and significance over time and over space, depending on the politics of the users who create these categories. In other words, in the domain of politics, these categories do not acquire an arbitrary character. They are not aimless or passive representations of the world out there, but conscious constructions encoding either a positive or negative agenda.

The current debate about categories, particularly one like dalit, undoubtedly signifies the suppressed and the exploited groups in various social formations. But it also hinges upon whether a given category represents a monolithic historical reality or whether it refers to the multiple, polycentric, polyphonic and dynamic relations of life.

In contemporary politics, most explanations indicate a hierarchical use of categories – the assumption being that the conceptual space may only be occupied by a single dominant category or one set of categories. Such essentializing or freezing of categories creates a sort of ‘patent’, making a particular category an individual’s property. This process of monopolization or commodification tends to locate these categories within the realm of the intentionality of any group or person, or their enemies. This freezing of categories, thus, tends to artificially place people in a box as a given category.

Moreover, this attempt at freezing a framework suggests that the categorization of a particular collectivity does not depend upon the concrete historical material role played by any relevant entity while taking on the forces of domination and hegemony.

The dalit political discourse in our country is marked by a contestation of categories that engaged dalit leaders who tried to float different political categories, either for radicalizing dalit politics or for countering the radical politics of the dalits. The category dalit, which has become a part of academic discourse both abroad and in the country, has also found expression across the socio-cultural spectrum.¹ However, it has come to be keenly debated, politicized, even condemned in certain quarters of the dalit community.

For example, the category dalit has faced criticism, particularly by the urban, educated middle class dalits, as socially regressive, derogatory and hence undesirable.² These middle class dalits argue that this category forces dalits to carry the load of their historical past³ and hence offers a socially reactionary agenda.⁴ There are others who argue that the category shares

the same reactionary agenda as the one invoked by Manu, the Hindu law giver.⁵ These opponents argue that the *ontological basis* of the category of dalit is class, which is undesirable.⁶ Instead, they prefer to define the category on an individualistic basis and foreground the category Buddhist.⁷ Ultimately, these attempts posit the category dalit in opposition to the category Buddhist.

In recent years the term dalit has been discarded as a socially reactionary category by a section of the community who prefer *bahujan* over both the Buddhist as well as dalit categories.⁸ There are other efforts which do not run down the category as Buddhists and the bahujans do. Instead, they seek to define it primarily in terms of caste exploitation. For example, they define dalits as representing those who have been ground down by those above them in a deliberate manner.⁹ This mode of understanding dalits also assumes that the category dalit implies an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution within the framework of a theory of *karma*, justifying hierarchy.¹⁰ All these attempts seek to define the dalit category negatively.

However, contrary to this denigration exercise by exponents favouring the use of bahujan and Buddhist are consistent attempts by a few dalit writers and ideologues who offer a radical definition. Baburao Bagul, who provided an ideological face to the Dalit Panther manifesto, promotes the use of dalit as a revolutionary category for its hermeneutic ability to recover the emancipatory potential of the historical past of dalit culture. He argues that this category has a greater capacity to reach out to a larger section of people. In Bagul's view this category is based on a materialist epistemology and is not a mere linguistic construction. On the contrary it is a category historically constructed through the revolutionary struggle of the dalits. And finally, as the Panther manifesto and Bagul spell out, this category is imbued with an ontological ability to identify itself with the lower castes, tribals, women and all the toiling masses in the country.¹¹

In the same vein, S.P. Punalekar offers another radical definition of dalit category. He claims that the term dalit is an intellectual construct aimed at decoding the subterranean, genuine and all-encompassing currents within society, meaning thereby the expression of the powerless and voiceless.¹² Thus, Punalekar provides a positive reading of the category dalit in a theory of politics which intends to foreground authentic thought and practice. Other scholars like Ghanshyam Shah, Gail Omvedt and Raosaheb Kasbe too define the dalit category more or less in a similar fashion.¹³ However, scholars like Ashis Nandy treat the category dalit as a social construction of the middle class which defines it in purely ascriptive terms. Nandy further argues that this construction ignores the cultural moorings that correspond to other dimensions like traditional crafts and skills of the dalit.¹⁴

Thus, the intellectual and political journey of the term dalit is complex. It is used in multiple ways, often in a contradictory fashion and therefore suggests a kind of conceptual hierarchy in its use. Other rival categories are so constructed that they provide little internal affinity with each other in

terms of their political meaning and function, for example, the bahun and Buddhist categories.

Such a privileging of any one category over others raises many issues. First, what is the historical trajectory of the dalit category? How is this category arrived at? Two, in the context of the ensuing debate, the category dalit involves a conceptual hierarchy which by definition implies that the conceptual space in the political explanation can be occupied by only one dominant category or a set of categories. In other words, does it involve any kind of homogenization of other categories? Or does it show a measure of tolerance and permit mutual coexistence with other categories belonging to the same logical class? Third, what is the future of these categories, particularly in the political domain? Will they be accepted by the different political forces in the country or are they destined to become untouchable?

In the historical journey, untouchables were characterized by the upper caste social reformers, particularly in Maharashtra, in a variety of ways. For example, S.M. Mate, a Brahmin social reformer in 19th century Maharashtra, used the term *asprushtha* for dalits, meaning the untouchable rather than the untouchable.¹⁵ V.R. Shinde, the Maratha social reformer, used depressed classes for dalits and thus located the term dalit in the imperial setting.¹⁶ Most importantly, among the major efforts at naming dalits, Gandhi introduced the term *harijan*. Though different from the imperial setting, this was rejected by several sections of society.

It is interesting that the category dalit was first used by Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly *Bahishkruit Bharat*. He defined it comprehensively: 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste brahminical order.'¹⁷ Ambedkar, however, did not use this category often, preferring to deploy different terms depending upon the changing context. For example, when dealing with the imperial state he used the category of depressed classes.¹⁸ When addressing high caste Hindus he used the category *bahishkruit*, meaning totally outcaste.¹⁹

In the arena of competitive politics, he preferred the term 'scheduled caste'. It was evident when he used this term for establishing the political party, Scheduled Caste Federation. However, he also tried to provide a class identity to the dalits during the late 1940s.²⁰ Finally, in an effort to politically radicalize his own social constituency, he used the term *pad dalit*, meaning those who are crushed under the feet of the Hindu social order.²¹ In more recent years the category dalit was first comprehensively deployed by the Panthers, thereby combining the caste, class and gender dimensions which were also part of Ambedkar's mode of thinking and his revolutionary politics.

Let us now examine these in relation to categories from the opposite setting. The category of harijan cannot be encapsulated within the dalit category since it is entirely 'metaphysical'. It imputes an element of

‘resigned fate’ to the subject and therefore can render it inactive. Second, the term harijan is an ascribed one since it does not flow from the untouchables own experiences. It was artificially imposed on the untouchables by Gandhi and those upper caste people who could not genuinely integrate them within their social consciousness despite its divine association. Overall, the category of harijan lacks a discursive capacity.

In contrast, the category dalit is not a metaphysical construction. It derives its epistemic and political strength from the material social experience of the community. It is this social construction of dalithood which makes it authentic and dynamic rather than passive and rigid. Hence, the term dalit, in Gail Omvedt’s opinion, provides a militant alternative to the Gandhian term harijan.²² Finally, the category harijan, given its divine association, is inadequate for capturing the specific realities since it also replaces the need for internal critique.

The category dalit needs to be distinguished from the terms ‘backward and forward’. It does not entertain such binary opposition because such binaries assume backwardness as a given in order to legitimize its distinction from forward. To state it more sharply, the category ‘forward’ logically feeds on the presence of the ‘backward’ and is sustained by it. Other binaries like privileged and underprivileged are unsuitable for the same normative considerations which are aimed at transcending all the constructs that underlie and renew the structures of inequality and exploitation.

These binary categories represent a minimal and at times negative agenda in the political sphere. They connote a negative utopia because they are primarily anchored within bourgeois structures embedded in the consciousness of possessive individualism which is basically self-limiting in terms of facilitating collective trans-formative political action. In other words, the category dalit, unlike harijan or the others, does not derive its substance from the politics of patronage or rhetorical concessions that liberal politics tend to offer to dalits and other toiling masses. Thus, the term dalit has a subversive potential which emanates from a realization of the limitations of the symbolic success which is the essence of bourgeois ideology.

The category dalit is also distanced from state constituted categories like scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and OBC. On the surface these categories, which are a legal construction by the state, appear innocent and at times secular. However, when understood in the context of their function they become a deliberate and therefore an artificial construction by the state. These state constituted categories have a three-fold function.

First, they enable the state to trap the SCs into ‘juridification’ which in effect subordinates more and more SCs to the structures of spoil and patronage controlled by the state. Attempts to access these structures of

paternalism reconstitute the SCs as the repository of a dole receiving mentality and charity rather than parity. Yet, at another level, these state constituted categories also acquire the status of a statistical entity which is then used by the state for *ad hoc* planning rather than for theoretical treatment of the social situation into which these categories are rooted.

Two, these categories, created by the state in the name of social planning, trap the SCs into a kind of 'domestic discourse' which in effect dilutes their creative energies by making them either official intellectuals who are ever ready to provide advice to the state, or power brokers with a vested interest in the perpetuation of the hierarchies in power structures. Thus the SCs, as constituted by the state, become the repository of malignant rather than benign power.

Finally, through creating such categories the state promotes the myth of sponsored individual mobility and initiative. This dampens the possibility of creating an autonomous political identity and a discursive space which might help the SCs constitute a collective context to find solutions to their own substantive problems outside the state framework or even to interrogate this very framework. The state constituted categories are patronizing and hence acquire an ascriptive status like the category of harijan or asprutha.

The category dalit emerged primarily in opposition to this 'domesticating discourse' in the early 1970s viz. the emergence of the Dalit Panthers. The category dalit, therefore, seeks a political mutilation of these state constituted categories. Through its negative hermeneutic it resists any provisional achievement in the process of human emancipation. Possibly for this reason, Omvedt describes the state constituted categories as colourless.²³

The category of dalit also resists being drawn into a simplistic division between the majority and minority or the bahun and mahajan dichotomy floated by certain bahun leaders. It distances itself from these categories for two reasons. First, it does not perceive people as a statistical entity to be manipulated by the dalit-bahun power brokers or 'poll pundits'. This category does not exist *a priori*, either for computing or for electoral arithmetic, but has to be discursively constituted across the social and ideological spaces through constant and sincere negotiation with other vibrant and sensitive categories and their supportive ideological frameworks. For this reason the category is just not available for chicanery, political manipulation or calculation by any internal or external forces. Thus, the category of dalit has a potential to undermine the pragmatist politics (*realpolitik*) of the opportunist, both from the dalit community and outside it.

We now address the issue raised by Ashis Nandy who considers the category dalit as a social construction of the middle class. The category dalit is clearly not a middle class construction. If anything, its interrogation of the state constituted categories should answer Nandy's query. He claims that the category dalit is blind about its cultural context. He does not realize that the term dalit does not arise from a mechanical movement through the

highways of politics. Instead, it arises from the bylanes of critical cultural traditions such as the Buddhist, Warkari and Kabir.²⁴ But unlike Nandy, the term does not privilege the cultural over others; if anything it seeks to locate the cultural in the context of power structures that have a bearing on culture. It interrogates the structures of social and material hierarchies that sustain a particular cultural ethos. Thus, the category dalit is not one dimensional but is sensitive to its other anchorages.

Finally, we need to query the ontological relationship of the term dalit with categories like bahun, Buddhist, class or subaltern. In other words, are all these categories mutually hostile to each other? The answer, much to the disappointment of the politicians from the lower and the upper castes is in the negative. These categories belong to the same logical class in as much as they share the same positive utopia of creating a society free from coercion, exploitation and thus, dehumanization of people. For example, how can the category Buddhist be in opposition to dalit or dalit in opposition to subaltern, class and bahun when all encode the promise to engage the toiling masses into the radicalization of politics necessary for challenging the forces of hegemony.

The accommodation of these categories into an emancipatory project is not out of convenience; it has authenticity in as much as all these categories confront various structures of domination and exploitation. To conclude, the category dalit provides both an element of negation (to state constituted categories or harijan) and permits the conjunction of categories belonging to the same logical class (Buddhist, bahun).

Footnotes:

1. *Dalit Newsletter* is published from the USA by Dr. John Webstar, and besides the US it reaches parts of Europe. Moreover, the term dalit has become a part of universal academic discourse as one finds articles in various social science journals like *Social, Economic and Historical Review*, 1997. Even political leaders in India use this term frequently.

2. This is the general reaction that one comes across from the dalit middle class all over the country. They look at the term dalit with disdain.

3. The dalit middle class which is also criticized as the Dalit Brahmin expressed this reaction to the autobiography *Baluta* by the late Daya Pawar, one of the leading Dalit writers in the early 1980s in Maharashtra.

4. Bhausaheb Adsul (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar – Preneche Sahitya* (Marathi). Maharashtra Buddha Sahitya Parishad, Mumbai, 1981, p. 6.

5. This comes up very frequently in the collection of R.D Gaikwad who collated Ambedkar's memoirs in Marathi. It was published by Sugawa Publication, Pune, in 1996.

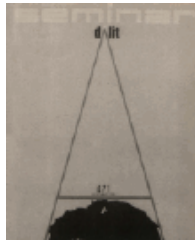
6. Op.cit., Adsul.

7. Ibid.

8. The term bahun was floated by Kanshi Ram and also by Prakash Ambedkar and Makharam Pawar from Maharashtra.

9. It has been the recurrent theme of dalit literature in Maharashtra.

10. Baburao Bagul, *Dalit Sahitya Ajeche Kranti Vidnayan*. Buddhist Publishing House, Nagpur, 1981, p. 105.
11. Ibid.
12. S.P. Punalekar's comment on my paper in the seminar on Dalit Discourse held in Pune on 28-29 March 1998.
13. See Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India*. Sage, 1988; Gail Omvedt, *Dalit and Democratic Revolution*. Sage, 1994, and Raosaheb Kasbe, *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra*. Keshav Gore Memorial Trust, Mumbai.
14. Ashis Nandy's speech at United Theological College, Bangalore on 29 July 1998.
15. *Bharatatil Aspustahncha Prashna* (Marathi). This book was written by S.M. Mate in 1930.
16. Vithal Ramji Shinde established the Depressed Class Mission in Bombay in 1906.
17. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Yanche Bahishkruit Bharat ani Muknayak* (Marathi). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, pp. 194-98.
18. See *Ambedkar's Writing and Speeches*. Vol. 9. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.
19. Op. cit., *Ambedkar Bahishkruit Bharat*.
20. Ambedkar established the Scheduled Caste Federation Party in 1942.
21. Ratnakar Ganvir, *Bahishkruit Bharatatil Dr. Ambedkaranche Sfut Lekh* (Marathi). Ratnamitra Prakashan, Bhusawal, 1981, p. 56.
22. Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Vision*. Orient Longman, 1995, p. 77.
23. Ibid.
24. Gopal Guru, *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra*. Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai, 1997.



Seminar 471, 'Dalit', November 1998, pp. 14-18.

