
UNIT 2 MARGINALIZATION OF DALITS AND ITS DECONSTRUCTION

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to give an overall understanding of the reality of the ‘Dalits’ - the oppressed people of the Indian society. They are reduced to be the ‘untouchables’ by the mainstream of the Indian caste system. This Unit does not claim to be an exhaustive portrayal of the details of the ‘how’ they are systematically subjected to slavery in practice. But it dwells on the ways in which the ‘Dalits’ encounter the suffering imposed on them while seeking to build a new humanity founded on egalitarian way of living together with others as co-humans. Grappling with the implications of the meaning behind the term ‘Dalit’, we shall further reflect on the multiple ways through which the oppressed people of Indian social context look forward to deconstruct marginalization. Emancipation from the clutches of oppression can never be presented to any one. Rather it has to be achieved by people as the subjects of their own history and destiny. Dalit studies are not merely the academic pursuit, but a way of life to promote egalitarian values both within oneself and the society at large. By the end of this Unit one should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of Dalits;
- to take stock of their aspirations and struggles;
- to have glimpses into how they grapple with their suffering;
- to explore into the possibilities of accompanying them to become co-humans with others;
- to know the importance of philosophy of Dalit struggle to attain integral human liberation.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian society, for not less than the past three millennia, has been under the grip of the system of social hierarchy of casteism. It is founded upon the iniquitous mind-set of ‘permanent’ purity and pollution legitimized in the name of ‘the divine’ conveniently interpreted by the traditional culture of domination. And accordingly, ‘the sacred’ or ‘the impure’ is attributed to one’s birth or origin, and any upward or downward mobility is neither permissible nor made possible. Being projected as the harmonious one, this atrocious caste system is further claimed by the minority of the dominant and the privileged as the natural, moral, and even the divine order. This very abominable system as such is drilled into the collective consciousness of the majority of the people systematically disempowered by this systemic evil. The caste system reducing a large number of people as untouchables (about 250 millions out of 1000 millions) refuses to treat them as co-humans with the so-called caste people. One has to be acutely aware of the social location of those who offer such titles gratuitously to them in every situation. But the same very untouchables are demanded, with meagre pittance and scanty respect, to be involved in the productive labour for the welfare of the community at large. The untouchables are needed for the labour, but not as dignified co-humans with others.

2.2 DALITS

The term “Dalit” is derived from the Sanskrit root, which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed. But although the term has ancient roots, its contemporary usage to specify a section of the people of India who have suffered oppression throughout history under the prevailing religious and social norms goes back only a few decades. As such *Dalit* has become part and parcel of the vocabulary of all the Indian languages. For example, the well-known Hindi dictionary *Bhasa-Sabad Kosh* describes *Dalit* as an undeveloped or backward section of people, such as among the Hindu untouchables (*achut*) or serving caste (*shudra*). In Punjabi, the *Mahan Kosh* defines *Dalit* as one who belongs to the lowest caste (*hini jati*) and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper caste (*uchi jati*). The seeds of this understanding of *Dalit* could be traced to two great Indian personalities: the 19th century reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and the 20th century intellectual and revolutionary B.R. Ambedkar. Mahatma Phule used the terminology *shudra* for the so-called “touchable backward castes” and *atishudra* for the so-called “untouchable backward castes”. In order to enslave the *shudras* and *atishudras*, Mahatma Phule said, the priestly caste conspired to divide them into these two classes. Ambedkar wrote in detail about *shudras* and untouchables in the following two well-known works: *Who were the Shudras?* (1947) and *The Untouchables* (1948). In his writings, he used the English term “untouchable” (*achuta*) for “Dalits”.

The term *Pariah* in those days was generally deployed by the foreigners and social observers as an umbrella concept incorporating all the landless labourers divested of social dignity and ownership of land making their livelihood with their manual labour irrespective of one’s caste affiliation. Only in the 20th century we observe the gradual sophistication of the nomenclature of the intricate layers of caste hierarchy. Today *Pariah* refers to one of the subgroups among the so-

called untouchables, who by and large, assertively claim the self-designation as Dalits.

The recent use of the term “Dalit” has been developed in the Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers Movement of the Indian state of Maharashtra, published in Bombay in 1973. Accordingly the Dalits are the “members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion”. In other words, the Dalits, on the basis of the graded four-fold caste structure of Indian society, are cast out as “outcastes”. On the basis of this attributed status they have been made to bear extreme forms of humiliating oppression and continuous assault on their humanity of being reduced to a state of being “lesser humans” and “no-people”.

A variety of other names have been used in both English and Indian languages to designate these people who are outside the social structure because of the contempt and hatred shown by others. Besides the terms “scheduled castes” and “untouchables”, the terms “exterior castes”. “Depressed classes” and *harijan* have become well known and will be used at several points in the historical account in this book. What is most important to emphasize at this point is that “Dalit” is the term these downtrodden people have given to themselves. This helps to account for the popularity of the term among Dalit people of different protest movements in India. “Dalit” is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for the recovery of their past identity. The struggle of these “outcastes” has given the term *Dalit* a positive meaning. The very realization of themselves as Dalits, the very acceptance of the state of “Dalitness”, is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.

The practice of untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the face of earth, which survives the ever-changing forms of the power structure. Legal measures like abolition of untouchability in the Indian Constitution and the Atrocities Act-1989 have not succeeded in breaking the evil of untouchability and casteism. Moral discourses from the political platforms and religious pulpits have not made any dent into the structural violence of the caste system. Even the fast-growing process of migration due to the pressures of urbanization and globalization has not adequately tackled the habitual rut of endogamy in-built in the practice of casteism.

2.3 MARGINALISATION

The names like *chandalas*, *bhangis*, *chamars*, *churhars*, *malas*, *madhikas*, *mushikars*, *pulayas*, *parayas*, *pallas*, *chakkiliyas* are attributed to Dalits in various regions. The Gandhian title for them as *Harijans* (children of God) does not find favour with them for its apparent condescending attitude. The legal and the bureaucratic title *Scheduled Castes* does not connote the humiliation they are subjected to or their legitimate spirit of self-assertion.

The marginalisation of the Dalits could be perceived through the following patterns of practices:

segregation of the living locations and burial grounds

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step motherly treatment meted out to them regarding their dignified participation in public events, social activities, community worship, or governing institutions

denial of equal rights in marriage or burial ceremonies and car procession of festivals

indifference and even opposition towards promotion of vocations to dignified services at the civil level and sacred premises of the worshipping places

continuing the tradition of endogamy perpetuating the caste systems

By and large, these regular patterns of elbowing out Dalits from the mainline society is taken for granted as the habitual cultural praxis by the caste-minded people with their socio-economic powers operative in their respective locations.

As the victims of the shameful practice of untouchability, the Dalits are subjected to lots of suffering as indicated below;

The damage of human dignity with arbitrary attribution of permanent pollution as untouchables due to the practice of caste hierarchy.

The contradiction between being wanted as menial executives and unwanted as people with equal footing.

The inner conflicts between the personal desire for equal placement with others and the impersonal duty of being reduced to be lesser humans in the socio-political ladders.

Conflicting expressions of the explicit consciousness (immediate agenda of survival) and the implicit consciousness (sustaining passion for collective human identity).

When the achieved status is ridiculed and camouflaged by attributed inferior status.

When multiple forms of day-to-day socio-psychological and politico-physiological violences are trivialized by routinization, naturalization or even legitimization by the media, bureaucracy or judiciary.

The vicious cycle of behaviour due to depression or self-hatred resulting in fear of alienation and punishment.

Ever carrying the heavy burden of initiating the painful process of reconciliation, at least for the short-term political alliances, with the anti-Dalit forces which are just above in the social pyramid of caste hierarchy.

When Dalit ethical sensibilities are thrown overboard as eccentric claims for any regional, national or international discourse.

While scanning through all these sources, we realize that these sufferings are not inflicted by the Dalits upon themselves. And hence the classical ways of approaching the problem of evil (suffering) cannot be adequate while dealing with Dalit suffering.

Without entering into dialogue with this Dalit world, there seems to be a general sense of fear psychosis operative in the minds of the people when they come across Dalits. This fear may be fabricated due to the arbitrary imagination of the following possibilities: (1) Direct pollution, (2) Proximity with the hated object,

(3) Possible role exchange in which the oppressed might eat into the present privileges of the oppressors, (4) Pre-empting the possible uprising of the oppressed with disproportionately vehement offensive, (5) Prevailing endogamy might give in to exogamy and thus a possible dismantling of the so-called orderly society. And consequently the Dalits are socially discriminated, religiously neglected, politically ignored, and economically pauperized.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is your general understanding of the term ‘Dalit’?

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2) Explain how the Dalits are marginalised in Indian society

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2.4 DECONSTRUCTION OF MARGINALSATION

The Dalit agenda for integral liberation does not merely attempt at mobilization for acquisition of resources and power. Along with the above, it predominantly addresses the question of basic identity as dignified co-humans with others both as individuals and a people. And hence, any Dalit discourse, mild or articulate, in the last analysis, seeks to project an inclusive ideology. In their on-going struggle for annihilating caste-system and gaining their human dignity, the Dalits are relentlessly optimistic in building a new human family in which there will be no trace of any discriminatory hierarchical consciousness.

The rebellion against caste system is as old as the caste system itself. But the power structures- legislature, judiciary, and executive- right from the ancient era up to the present neo-colonial era of market globalization are deployed as the handmaids serving the needs of the oppressive caste minded people. As part of the self-assertion of the victims of untouchability against the derogatory treatment imposed by the caste people, they have chosen the self-designation as Dalits to empower themselves by annihilating the caste system.

Right from the inception of the practices of casteism and untouchability, the victims have been revolting against them. The following list has to be seen as

the multiple forms of protest against the hegemony of those practicing casteism and untouchability down the centuries in the Indian soil: Buddhism and Jainism (B.C.E.), Bhakti Movements and Protest Movements (Siddhars, Sufism, itinerant mendicants) from the subaltern cultural soil (A.C.E.), the Mass Conversion Movements towards Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, and the Counter-Cultural Movements initiated by Mahatma Phule, Iyatheethaasa Pandithar, Ambedkar, Periyar, Vaikundasamy, Ayyankali, Narayanaguru (18-20 centuries A.C.E.).

Bhakti Movements opposed caste system as early as 12th century. Unlike Vedantic speculations, these movements believed that salvation is accessible to one and all through simple devotion to the divine irrespective of one's creed or colour, and cult or caste. Instead of mantras through which the caste elite controlled worship they introduced simple songs, music, dancing and waving of lights and preferred local languages for prayers instead of Sanskrit. Among all the saints of Bhakti cult Ramananda, Vallabacharya, Kabir, Tukaram, Meerabai and Chaitanya were prominent. Many Dalits who then were considered as 'untouchable' saints like Ravidas, Chokamela, Kanaka, Nandnar and others were attracted to Bhakti Movements. However these Bhakti cults could create a philosophical equality but not effectively achieve social equality.

There were Dalit Reform Movements like Ramdeo Panth founded by Guru Ramdas in Rajasthan, Satnami Panth founded by Ghasidas in Madhya Pradesh, Kabir Panth founded by Kabir in Khasi, and Nasraiah Sect founded by Nasraiah in Andhra Pradesh. The most important among social movements during this time that envisaged social equality is that of the vision of Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra. Phule was not a Dalit but belonged to the 'Mali' (gardener) caste, which is classed with the Kunbi-Maratha caste, a 'sudra' community in Maharashtra. He began as a social reformer establishing schools for both girls and untouchable boys, and founded 'Satyasodaka Samaj' in 1875. Phule's Movement can be best understood at three levels: (1) dissent against the Brahminic orthodoxy, (2) Rational analysis of the oppression of the peasants and (3) creative integration of theistic roots and egalitarian fruits. Such attempts tried to bring about social transformation through religious faith. They promoted principles like boycotting temples of 'caste Hindus', discarding Brahmin priest for any ceremony, and to maintain unity among Dalits.

During Muslim and British period, many of the Dalits joined the martial services to escape from the caste system. It was estimated that in 1856 the Mahars (Dalits) from Maharashtra comprised one-third of the British Army Quarters in Bombay. Through some initial level of educational opportunities and exposure to the outside world, they grew up in self-confidence. At the same time, Zamindari system and Ryotwari system encouraged and supported by the British created a new class of landlords to safeguard British interests of collection of revenue. Now the land has been recognized as private property and became a commodity which can be mortgaged, leased, or sold. This new system of land ownership further deprived Dalits of their land as it gave rise to money lending and exploitation. Landlessness became the fertile ground for the birth of various People's Movements struggling even with arms and weapons. Dalits as landless agricultural laborers and poor peasants joined these Movements in large numbers.

In India atrocities against the Dalits continued unabated even after independence and they got aggravated during 1960s. This gave rise to Movement called 'Dalit

Panthers’ in 1972 in Bombay. They were inspired by the Movement of the ‘Black Panthers’ of America with the asserting spirit of assertion against the oppression especially from the dominant system of discriminatory caste hierarchy.

Along with Dalit religious and social movements, it is important to know about Dalit political struggle. E.V. Ramaswamy, known as Periyar, has quit congress as early as in 1925 and attacked it as a tool of Brahmin domination. He organized the ‘Self- Respect Movement’ in Tamil Nadu and protested against the Aryan domination. On the eve of independence, he called upon the Dravidian people of South India ‘to guard against the transfer of power from the British to the Aryans’. Dalit politics got streamlined through the active political involvement of Ambedkar. Unlike the political leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Lokmanya Tilak who thought that political democracy will solve all problems in India, Ambedkar argued that unless there is social revolution (moving towards annihilation of caste system) political democracy will not result in social justice. He believed that there cannot be political equality without social equality. Therefore he developed a protest ideology where he encouraged people to revolt by saying that Dalits cannot gain their rights by begging but only through political struggle. He is instrumental in establishing three political parties and their manifestos, namely, the Swatantra Mazur Paksha, the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Name some of the leaders of Bhakti Movement, leading the religious protests against the practice of casteism.

2) Spell out some of the political struggles against caste system

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2.5 STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION

Dalits are struggling to do away with the existing sad states of affairs in constructing a new world order ensuring personal dignity to be celebrated with all other humans as sisters and brothers. Their mind-set, both articulate and inarticulate, could be portrayed as indicated below:

FROM	TOWARDS
Imposed disempowerment	Self-empowerment
Experience of dishonour and shame	Experience of honour and dignity
Being excluded in human relationship with equal footing yet imposed with menial labour	Being included in human relationship with personal choices of work with creativity
Acceptance and internalization of the discriminatory hierarchy	Eradication and annihilation of every form of discriminatory hierarchy
Denial of participation in decision-making everywhere	Appropriation of participatory roles in every realm
Being looked down upon as demerited beneficiaries of reservation	Equal opportunities in every realm
Deprived of land and other means required for decent life	Availability of the means needed for dignified life
Exclusion and humiliation as lesser humans with denial of human dignity and legitimate share of opportunities	Dignified inclusion as co-humans with due share of power and opportunities
Violent placement under the permanently stratified caste hierarchy with no possibility of upward or downward mobility	Demolition of every trace of discriminatory hierarchy for ushering in an egalitarian ethos
Mythological legitimization of the arbitrarily attributed status of the pure and the impure for the perpetuation of the privileges of the socio-cultural elite	Rational legitimization of the ethically achieved status by enabling the victims of casteism to humanise themselves even amidst conflicts

By and large the existing Dalit discourses, ideologies, philosophies, theologies, strategies and programmes, by and large, seem to articulate the aspects of their deprivation (Dalits as Victims), or/and also of their affirmation (Dalits as Subjects). Besides the labour from the Dalit manual power contributing to the welfare of the society, the passion for creating a casteless humanity is the unique Dalit agenda in building up the community. Hence the Dalits, through their very struggles are the community-building community. And the existing Dalit discourses have to deepen their commitment and broaden the scope of their strategies to accomplish the desired result of integral Dalit emancipation. In other words, the Dalits themselves are challenged to extend their hands out of this Dalit-centredness to reach out to a broad-based Dalit discourse while deepening their commitment to their emancipation. What could be the role of Dalit solidarity with other communities of victims around them and across the globe? What are the practical implications of the role of Dalits as the community of community-builders?

Exploration into the new spaces for dialogue between Dalits and others (both at the intra and inter levels) is the need of the hour while constructing Dalit Theologies.

Dalit Women & Dalit Men

Less Privileged among Dalits & More Privileged from Dalits

One subgroup of Dalits & Other subgroups of Dalits

Christian Dalits & Other Dalits

Dalits & Untouchables like Burakumin

Dalits & Adivasis

Dalits & Tribals

Dalits & Nomadic Peoples (Koravan Korathi, Boom-boom Maattukkaarars & Others)

Dalits & Immediate Bahujans (MBC, BC, OBC)

Dalits & Blacks (Africans & Afro-Americans)

Dalits & Victims of Global Economy (Minjung & Others)

Dalits & Indigenous Peoples (Maori & Others)

For anyone, who chooses to accompany the Dalits, cannot have the luxury of supporting them from outside. Their own pre-understanding has to be organically tempered by the ever-struggling and ever-exploratory preunderstanding of Dalits. It is with this deep sense of genuine solidarity with them, they are constantly challenged to play the role of compassionate midwife to Dalits who are undergoing the ongoing labor pain of delivering dreams of Dalit empowerment.

2.6 ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Some dimensions that need to find a place in the educative formation of the children, youth, and the people at large, both in the formal and non-formal education process could be spelt out as follows:

Basic and advanced familiarity with Indian Constitution

Basic Legal and Human Rights Education

In-depth probe into native resources like Dhamma Pada, Grant Sahib, Ambedkar, Ramabai, Periyar, Ayyankali, Kabir Das, Ayodhidas Pandithar, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Narayana Guru, Meenakshi Moon and others

Dalit women’s concerns and challenges and Dalit movements.

Skill and capacity building training to handle conflict situation and to face the challenges of life and livelihood.

A genuine sense of Dalit solidarity seeks to work for unity and cooperation for the wellbeing, prosperity and the empowerment of Dalits. This could be done by the following 2 steps:

(1) Bringing together all the Dalits by building a shared consciousness of their identity, culture and history as well as to conscientize them to the future possibilities. (2) Gathering all the likeminded people who include all the people

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of good will other than the Dalits who recognize the plight of Dalits throughout history. People could never value feeling one with Dalits if they do not realize that the total emancipation of the whole of the humanity cannot be achieved without actualizing the total emancipation of the Dalits.

It has been drilled into the minds and hearts of the Dalits that they were born only to serve their oppressors who designed caste system and draw the benefit out of it. Being made disempowered by grabbing away their land they are also deprived of education. Hence the attempt at creating Dalit Solidarity seeks to bring about unity not only among the Dalits who are kept divided but also unity between the Dalits and others. This process involves struggles to restore Dalits with their land and to work for their self-governance by affirming their power, freedom and dignity. The following strategies could affirm the gradual growth of the envisioned Dalit Solidarity:

Conscientizing Dalits and others about the rich Dalit heritage (Dalit identity, Dalit history and Dalit culture)

Building and furthering Dalit movements for struggle for emancipation

Developing Dalit leadership

Internationalizing Dalit issue

The unity of the Dalits cannot be achieved without underlining their common cause of emancipation from the oppression of the caste system. On the other hand, Dalit unity has to be worked out on the basis of affirming their common Dalit identity in relation to their history and culture.

Developing Dalit leadership is essential requirement to build Dalit solidarity. One of the reasons for lack of concerted efforts on part of the Dalits to build a casteless society is lack of credible leaders who could lead them to liberation and freedom. By and large, they are reduced to be the sheep without a shepherd. Not to say that there are no leaders among Dalits in history but mostly they are unsung heroes. In general, leadership is defined from the dominant perspectives in history. Leadership is associated with the qualities like domination, power, control, intellect, riches or success. But from Dalit perspectives, leadership has to be constructed through one's contribution for the protection and welfare of the society at large. This is possible only by placing oneself with the people suffering humiliation and asserting themselves for achieving the human dignity. It enables the leader to genuinely to journey with his people with a sense of belonging. What matters here is not the power to dominate but to have the credible solidarity with the people whom s/he seeks to accompany in their journey towards emancipation for all.

Even the modern educational systems could not effectively tackle the evil system of casteism. Ambedkar realized the need to open up Indian society to external influences if at all caste system has to be annihilated. Apart from encouraging religious conversions he also presented the problem of caste at different international circles to gain their solidarity. He raised the issue before the British Round Table Conference from 1930 to 1947 during the struggle for Independence. Even today the caste system was not being recognized by United Nations as a social evil on par with racism. In the third World Conference Against Racism, Racial discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in 2001 at

Durban, South Africa, the Human Rights activists raised their voice as follows: “Dalit Rights are Human Rights.” This has resulted in international recognition of the plight of Dalits as well as in gaining solidarity of the world community, which eloquently communicated to India to effectively eradicate caste system.

‘Casteism is Sin’ and ‘Untouchability is a Crime against Humanity’. Without concrete historical realization of the emancipation of the Dalits and the Tribals, India can never become a genuine land of freedom. Into the haven of freedom let my country awake!

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Comment on Dalit Solidarity.

2) What are the ways of empowering Dalits?

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to offer some glimpses into the world Dalit deconstruction of their marginalisation. Dwelling on the nuances of the Dalit experience of marginalisation, we have entered the discussion on the meaning of the term ‘Dalit’ leading to the possibility of creating Dalit Solidarity to create a new order of humanity built on the foundation of egalitarian values. Every brand of discriminatory exclusion and inequitable hierarchy is sought to be demolished by Dalit sensibilities. To empower the Dalits to continue with their struggle towards their emancipation, all people of good will have to join hands with them in rightly identifying their human identity, their history of struggles for deconstructing every type of marginalisation. One has to realise that the Dalits Rights are the Human Rights. India can become an exemplary nation, when she has determined to demolish the dehumanising practice of casteism and untouchability.

2.8 KEY WORDS

Dalits	: People reduced to be untouchables by the practice of caste system yet assertively struggling against to bring about a new order of humanity without any discriminatory hierarchy.
Marginalisation	: Systematic ways of excluding the so-called ‘untouchables’ to be ‘lesser humans’ as socially discriminated, religiously neglected, politically ignored, and economically pauperized.
Deconstruction of Marginalisation	: Movement towards annihilation of caste system through the gradual empowerment of the Dalits awakened to their human dignity in deep solidarity with co-Dalits and other co-humans.

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2.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The term “Dalit” is derived from the Sanskrit root, which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed. What is most important to emphasize at this point is that “Dalit” is the term these downtrodden people have given to themselves. This helps to account for the popularity of the term among Dalit people of different protest movements in India. “Dalit” is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for the recovery of their past identity. The struggle of these “outcastes” has given the term *Dalit* a positive meaning. The very realization of themselves as Dalits, the very acceptance of the state of “Dalitness”, is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.
- 2) The marginalisation undergone by the Dalits could be briefly spelt as follows:

segregation of the living locations and burial grounds step motherly treatment meted out to them regarding their dignified participation in public events, social activities, community worship, or governing institutions denial of equal rights in marriage or burial ceremonies and car procession of festivals indifference and even opposition towards promotion of vocations to dignified services at the civil level and sacred premises of the worshipping places continuing the tradition of endogamy perpetuating the caste systems

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Religious upheavals like Buddhism, Jainism, and Bhakti Movements were the Protest Movements against casteism. The Movements of mass conversion towards Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism were also the response towards casteism. Similarly the counter-cultural Movements initiated by Mahatma Phule, Iyatheethaasa Pandithar, Ambedkar, Periyar, Vaikundasamy, Ayyankali, Narayanaguru, Ramananda, Vallabacharya, Kabir, Tukaram, Meerabai and Chaitanya were prominent. Many Dalits who then were considered as ‘untouchable’ saints like Ravidas, Chokamela, Kanaka, Nandnar and others were attracted to Bhakti Movements. However these Bhakthi cults could create a philosophical equality but not effectively achieve social equality. There were Dalit Reform Movements like Ramdeo Panth founded by Guru Ramdas in Rajasthan, Satnami Panth founded by Ghasidas in Madhya Pradesh, Kabir Panth founded by Kabir in Khasi, and Nasriah Sect founded by Nasraiah in Andhra Pradesh. The most important among social movements during this time that envisaged social equality is that of the vision of Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra.
- 2) During Muslim and British period, large number of Dalits joined the martial services of the rulers. When lands were handed over to the land lords and Zamindars, the Dalits as landless agricultural laborers and poor peasants joined various People’s Movements in large numbers. In the face of unabated atrocities against the Dalits even after Independence, there appeared a

Movement called ‘Dalit Panthers’ in 1972. it was inspired by the Movement of the ‘Black Panthers’ of America with the asserting spirit of assertion against the oppression especially from the dominant system of discriminatory caste hierarchy. E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar organized the ‘Self- Respect Movement’ in Tamil Nadu and protested against the Aryan domination. Dalit politics got streamlined through the active political involvement of Ambedkar. Unlike the political leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Lokmanya Tilak who thought that political democracy will solve all problems in India, Ambedkar argued that unless there is social revolution (moving towards annihilation of caste system) political democracy will not result in social justice. Therefore he developed a protest ideology through establishing three political parties and their manifestos, namely, the Swatantra Mazur Paksha, the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

- 1) A genuine sense of Dalit solidarity seeks to work for unity and cooperation for the wellbeing, prosperity and the empowerment of Dalits. This could be done by the following 2 steps:

Bringing together all the Dalits by building a shared consciousness of their identity, culture and history as well as to conscientize them to the future possibilities.

Gathering all the likeminded people who include all the people of good will other than the Dalits who recognize the plight of Dalits throughout history.

The unity of the Dalits has to be achieved by focusing on the common cause of emancipation from the oppression of the caste system. Attempts at creating Dalit Solidarity seeks to bring about unity not only among the Dalits who are kept divided but also unity between the Dalits and others. This process involves struggles to restore Dalits with their land and to work for their self-governance by affirming their power, freedom and dignity.

- 2) The following strategies could be adapted for achieving the envisioned Dalit empowerment:

Conscientizing Dalits and others about the rich Dalit heritage (Dalit identity, Dalit history and Dalit culture)

Building and furthering Dalit movements for struggle for emancipation

Developing Dalit leadership

Internationalizing Dalit issue

Common Dalit identity in relation to their history and culture has to be underlined. Developing credible Dalit leadership is essential requirement to build Dalit solidarity for creating a casteless society. What matters here is not the leadership to dominate but to have the credible solidarity with the people whom s/he seeks to accompany in their journey towards emancipation for all. International solidarity has to be strengthened to tackle the evils of casteism and untouchability. “Dalit Rights are Human Rights.” “Casteism is a Sin”. and “Untouchability is a Crime against Humanity”. Without concrete historical realization of the emancipation of the Dalits and the Tribals, India can never become a genuine land of freedom.