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# UNIT 1 DALIT WORLD-VIEW AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of this Unit is to introduce the complex nature of the Dalit life-world or world-view and the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. Dalit roots and resources are attuned move towards the dignified inclusion of all humans as co-humans. Even with limited socio-cultural space, their meaning-generating activities through various methods and dialogical efforts seek to create a new humanity built upon the foundation of egalitarianism. In this process of Dalit self-empowerment, how could the Philosophers become organic intellectuals with genuine solidarity with them? And here, by the end of this Unit one should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of Dalit world-view;
- to look into the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives;
- to have glimpses into the deconstruction and reconstruction of Dalit agenda;
- to know the importance of the responsibility of the Philosophers walking with Dalits;
- to explore into the intricacies behind philosophizing on the Dalit struggles for integral emancipation.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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As long as the resources, public institutions, knowledge, assets remain undemocratic, the dominant groups, in any divided society, creates, sustains, and perpetuates an arbitrary hatred against the dominated groups. This has the advantage to the privileged groups to continue with their domination as a permanent feature. The Philosophers in India are not an exception to this. In this context, we realize that the Philosophers too are quite vulnerable when they face the emotionally charged expressions both from the caste-minded people as well as the caste-breaking Dalits. But the Philosophers of good will seeking to affirm the subaltern life can afford to take a credible step to evolve adequate strategies and programmes

to walk with Dalits with their day to day struggles. They have to grapple with the fact that unless the nexus between the secular and religious institutions of society and casteism, and between the human mind and untouchability is broken, the prospects of constructing a new humanity on egalitarianism will become impossible.

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## **1.2 DALIT WORLD-VIEW**

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The world-view or the life-world does not mean the stagnant cluster of ideas and concepts. It is a process of cognition and operative foundations of human subjectivity. The latent and active complexes of values and rules of knowing embedded in the collective and individual consciousness control the whole spectrum of perception, behaviour, decision and choices. Any human community in a given living context of nature and nurture could be predominantly nomadic, agrarian, or IT in life orientations. In the globalized context of the contemporary age, the life-world of human communities, including those of Dalits, seem to be a mix-up of nomadic, agrarian and IT components. The whole complex web of oral wisdom, written discourses, movie stories or television serials from the religions, cultures or literature of the native Dalit soil is already embedded in the depths of their collective consciousness along with the impact of their historical successes and failures.

Caste conflicts fragment the human society horizontally and human depths vertically. At the level of inner world-views of Dalits, some of the following aspects and manifestations of their conflict consciousness have to be philosophically explored into: assertive obedience, chaotic harmony, polytheistic monotheism, disorderly order, noisy contemplation, oral memory, revolting consensus, and restless composure. And hence to grapple with Dalit world-view with all its conflicting dimensions is a major challenge in philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. It could be undertaken through the critical reflection on the historical and down-to-earth process of dehumanization in the cultural, social and psychological milieu of Dalit life. Also the inherent inter-textuality operative in the Dalit world-view has to be identified in all its complexities. We realize that the perspectives of liberal and modernist values of solidarity, identification, oneness or liberation in general terms are too inadequate, when we are highly sensitized with openness towards the fabric of Dalit roots and resources.

The very Dalit existence with its struggles in history is passionately attuned to move its present wounded history towards a new possibility of building a new human community. The articulate and inarticulate agenda of this transition is from the state of imposed exclusion and humiliation to the possibility of conscious inclusion of others as co-humans with due human dignity with equal footing. In other words, Dalits are struggling to do away with the existing sad states of affairs while constructing a new moral order ensuring personal dignity to be celebrated with all other humans as sisters and brothers. This dynamic mind-set could be portrayed as follows:



### **FROM**

- Imposed disempowerment
- Experience of dishonour and shame
- Being excluded in human relationship with equal footing yet imposed with menial labour
- Acceptance and internalization of the discriminatory hierarchy
- Denial of participation in decision-making everywhere
- Being looked down upon as demerited beneficiaries of reservation
- Deprived of land and other means required for decent life
- Exclusion and humiliation as lesser humans with denial of human dignity and legitimate share of opportunities
- Violent placement under the permanently stratified caste hierarchy with no possibility of upward or downward mobility
- Mythological legitimization of the arbitrarily attributed status of the pure and the impure for the perpetuation of the privileges of the socio-cultural elite

### **TOWARDS**

- Self-empowerment
- Experience of honor and dignity
- Being included in human relationship with personal choices of work with creativity
- Eradication and annihilation of every form of discriminatory hierarchy
- Appropriation of participatory roles in every realm
- Equal opportunities in every realm
- Availability of the means needed for dignified life
- Dignified inclusion as co-humans with due share of power and opportunities
- Demolition of every trace of discriminatory hierarchy for ushering in an egalitarian ethos
- Rational legitimization of the ethically achieved status by enabling the victims of casteism to humanise themselves even amidst conflicts

These innate movements and inherent transitions could be construed as the springs of life flowing from the fertile soil of Dalit cultural location.

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## **1.3 PHILOSOPHIZING FROM DALIT PERSPECTIVES**

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Philosophy engages itself in ideas, presuppositions, beliefs, concepts and contents of truth and the interpretations of them. Every attempt at doing philosophy has to begin with basic questions of problems of life and death. These are raised neither from the textual world of the tradition, nor from the rhetorical field of the Philosophers. They emerge from the particular human community, in our context from the community of Dalits, endeavouring to become a better one amidst many conflicts. That is why the process of philosophizing gets itself rooted in the ongoing dialectical interaction between cognitive structures (cultural symbolism) and social structures (power relations). This fertile conversation is sought to generate new energies in transforming the present disorder into a new order in future.

This process of doing philosophy primarily addresses the question of transformation.

It is the actual movement from the present state of affairs towards consciously creating new alternatives for bettering historical situations. This is at once a probe into the past, the query into the present, and the search into the future. This on-going exploration hovers over the visible and the invisible world, the empirical data and the truth seeking, concept and intuition. The transformation envisaged by the process of philosophizing is multi-dimensional at once personal and communitarian, structural and collective, micro and macro. The ethical commitment for such transformation is the predominant feature of doing philosophy. This process of philosophizing does not pretend to be evolving the final product of the contents of truth. Its multiple phases could be spelt out as follows:

- (1) Immersion, insertion, experience, praxis, reflected involvement or involved reflection
- (2) Analytical probe into the forces and sources of conflicts operative in the lives of people concerned (Dalits) affecting their cultural symbolic world and various power-structures
- (3) Meaning-generating activities through the on-going dialogical interactions between questions emerging from actual life situations and the life-promoting meaning-generating resources from various cultural soils
- (4) Alternative directions and orientations to be consciously traced by the people concerned (Dalits) as actors in the proximate and distant future

One need not assume that the process of philosophising traces the above four phases one after another in the same order. Each contains all the other dimensions in some degree or other. At every level, for sorting out the layers of consciousness, tracing the roots of the problems, identifying the meaning-generating potentials, and evolving the new paths of transformation, we need interdisciplinary collaboration with various social sciences.

By and large, the philosophical insights are articulated in a particular type of language understood only by the experts in the respective fields. Further, the technical language of elitist philosophical analysis too does not evoke much of appeal in the minds of the people (Dalits) on whose problems philosophical questions are raised. The alternative to this technical language is the symbolic dimension of popular culture. The need to explore the symbolism, myths, dreams, and visions of the ordinary people has to be emphasized. The operative world-views of the people concerned (Dalits) are to be identified in their ways of conceptualising realities and expressing them through proverbs, myths, rituals, performing arts. The world-views at work in the very language as both structure and performance definitely lead us into the foundations of the cultural world. Critical interpretation of the symbolic world may lead us to comprehend the cognitive structures and their functioning process towards production of various social effects.

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

- 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

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 attempting at a dialogue with the above-mentioned aspects of the Dalit world, there seems to be a general sense of fear psychosis operative in the minds of the caste-minded people. This might be expressed through the following ways: (1) indifference, (2) deferment, (3) transference, (4) co-option, (5) enticement, (6) coercion, (7) Self-defence, (8) pretension, (9) rationalization, (10) legitimization, (11) retribution, (12) proxy war, (13) Sloganeering solidarity. This fear may be fabricated due to the following explanations of arbitrary imagination: (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:** Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the various aspects of the Dalit world-view?

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2) Spell out the phases of the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives.

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3) Comment on the approach to 'the problem of evil' appropriate to the Dalits.

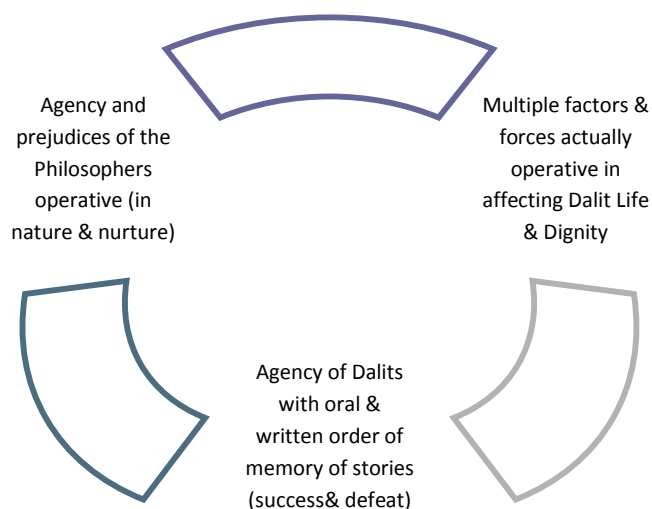
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## 1.4 ROLE OF PHILOSOPHERS

The Dalits are the central agents in any act of philosophising from Dalit perspectives. The stories of successes and defeats told by the people in their own words are the foundation upon which the real questions of conflict-ridden situations emerge. Not all these Dalit articulation may hit the headlines of the media. Rather they are drowned under the commotional clamour of the celebrities projected by the market forces. The Philosophers have to plough through such jungles of elite prejudices before rightly identifying the actual voice of the oppressed Dalits. The agency of the Dalits has to be incorporated into the inner world of the Philosophers with a sense of solidarity. The complex web of the Dalit intertextual religio-cultural resources is the vast reservoir to be deployed in the process of the generation of meaning. Any gratuitous offer of ready-made solutions and meanings from Philosophers' own religio-cultural resources, very often, becomes a misfit.





It is a matter of fact that the agency of the Philosopher is coloured by his/ her own socio-cultural location. The implicit or explicit prejudices, operative in Dalit locations, determine his/her way of objectification of the reality of the people and their context. Whatever are the Philosopher's actual identity, and the fabric of the personality tempered both by nature and nurture, his/her ethical stand and commitment has to be adequately made explicit in the process of accompanying the Dalits. For anyone, who chooses to credibly accompany them, cannot have the luxury of supporting them from outside. Their own world-view has to be organically tempered by the ever-struggling and ever-exploratory world-view of Dalits. It is with this deep sense of genuine solidarity with them, the Philosophers 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.

Besides the two poles of Dalit interpretation of the meaning systems (Dalits and the religio-cultural texts and textures), we need to take into account, the role and function of the third pole called *the enablers* of such hermeneutical dialogue. They could be the organic intellectuals (Philosophers) articulating the insights of interpretation with and on behalf of the Dalits. Every Philosopher claiming to be engaged in enabling the dialogue between the Dalits and the meaning systems could be a Dalit or non-Dalit by birth. But what matters is that these organic Philosophers, be it from the religious platforms or the secular academia, have to be brought under the serious scrutiny of hermeneutical responsibility. They have to be made accountable to the Dalit-world in its struggles to annihilate the virus of caste hierarchy. What could be the salient features of such accountability in the Dalit hermeneutics?

- There should be an on-going attempt on the part of the Philosophers (organic intellectuals) to identify and enter into the web of the inter-textual layers of Dalit consciousness. It has to be undertaken with genuine and growing proximity with the Dalits.
- An empathetic journey of solidarity into the Dalit world has to be undertaken by these enablers. It entails deep insights into Dalits native symbolic universe (religio-cultural resources).
- The enablers need to further dwell upon Dalit linguistic world with narrative patterns and poetic outbursts. The dynamics of their oral articulation and communication styles, historical perceptions through genealogies, myths and folklore is to be recognised. The animating dimensions of rituals and performing arts, traditional modes of encountering joys and sorrows, are to be grappled with.
- The complex process of Dalit identity-formation, both at the individual and collective levels, is to be perceptively located amidst imposed identities.
- An overall familiarity with the diverse ways of hermeneutical attempts from Dalit perspectives could help them avoid methodological dogmatism and doctrinal fundamentalism.
- Traversing through the intra-Dalit world and the intra-textual world of the religio-cultural resources does not suffice here. The inner world and the interior movements of the third pole, i.e., the organic Philosophers has to be correctly identified. Their mind-set, pre-understanding, and the texture of consciousness formed by their formal education, social location, economic placement and caste prejudices also play an important role in their attempts at hermeneutics.

- The attitude and outlook of the Philosophers towards the Dalits and the religio-cultural resources (say, the Vedas, Mahabharata, Quran, Dhammapada, Bible, Writings of Periyar or Ambedkar, Dharma Shastras), have to be openly manifested. Consciously chosen ideological sites and interpretative strategies are to be explicitly articulated.
- Care should be taken to ascertain the original agenda of such Philosophers to test their commitment to Dalit struggles.

No doubt, the subject(s) of Dalit interpretation of the religio-cultural resources is none other than the flesh-and blood person(s) from among the Dalits, and not primarily the Philosophers, even when they try to become organic intellectuals. At the most, they could play the role of the mid-wife empathetically enabling the 'Dalit delivery of new meanings' in dialogue with the religio-cultural resources.

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## **1.5 DALIT PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE**

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The Philosophers have to create a space for educating themselves to evolve new frame works for understanding the intricacies behind such conflicts with the following questions:

- What are the differences between the bruised ego of the caste-minded people and the bruised ego of the caste-negating Dalits?
- How to differentiate between the inflated ego with its insane desire for power and control over others and the deflated ego with its legitimate pursuit of becoming co-humans with others?
- What is the operative power discourse during conflictual exchanges between the caste-minded people and Dalits?
- In all these conflict situations from the struggling location of Dalits one has to ask this question: "How could one react in the way of *Ahimsa* prescribed by the leisurely class people, when one is reduced to be an object left to the whims of somebody else's ego, or lust for power?"
- Are the Philosophers sensitive enough in making their dealings and way of proceeding with Dalits transparent enough in this age of RTI (Right to Information Act-2006)?
- To whose pressure tactics do the Philosophers hasten to respond? And to whom they hesitate to respond with endless delay tactics?
- When Dalits act on misperception or deliberate choice what could be the ways of philosophizing? When the caste-minded people act on misperception or deliberate choice what could be the ways?
- Are the Philosophers well-equipped to discern the differences between the discourses on mass conversion and personal conversions to other religions as understood by the caste-negating Dalits and by the caste-fundamentalists?
- How are the condemnations against Dalit 'excesses' voiced by those habitually expressing their anti-Dalit denouncements are to be interpreted by the Philosophers?
- Against the on-going scourge of the untouchability, what are the concrete interventions by the organizers of and the participants in the grand philosophical conferences passing inspiring resolutions?



Dalit location is the consequent result of the conflict situation created by the following two factors:

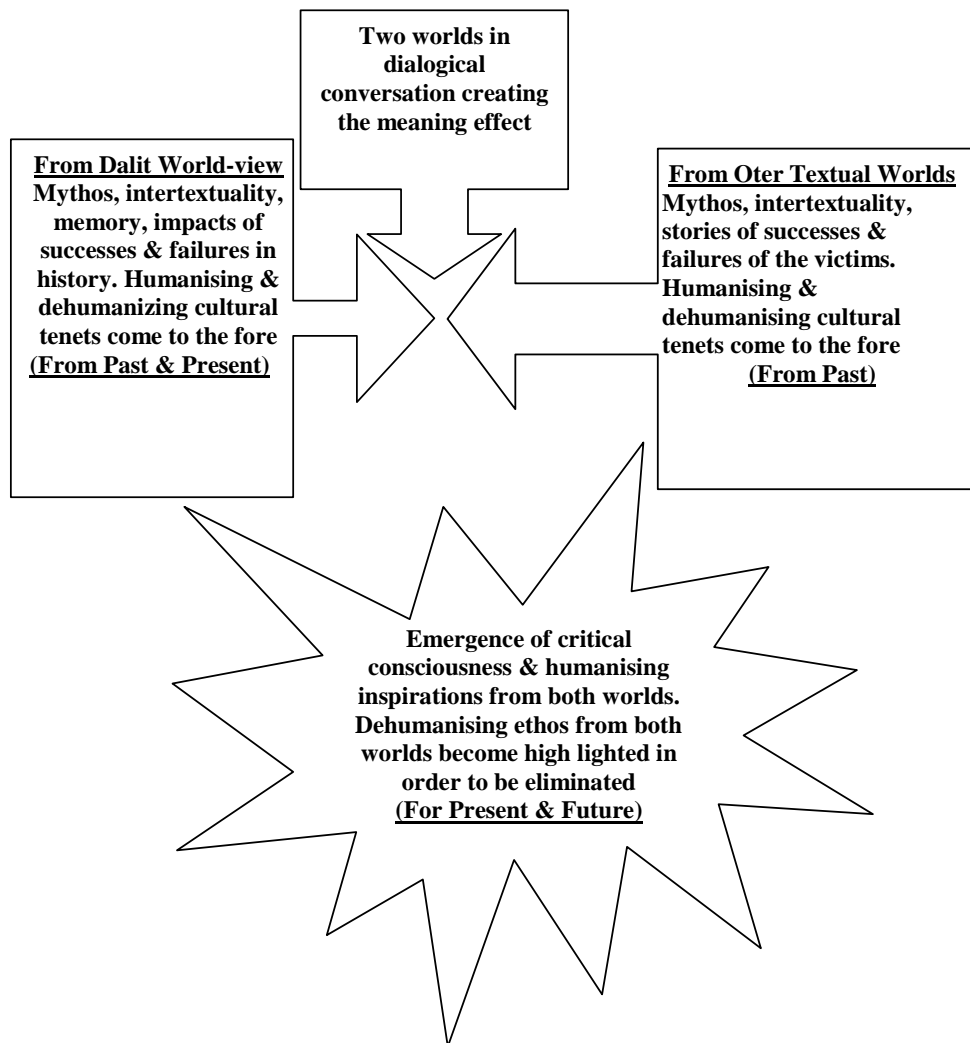
1. Status Quoism (the arbitrary imposition and maintenance of caste hierarchy, and defiant refusal to demolish it.)
2. Demolition of Status Quo (the ethical need for annihilation of caste hierarchy and assertive building of human communities with egalitarianism)

The world-view of status quoism is found among those beneficiaries enjoying the privileges reaped from caste hierarchy. Dalits on the other hand, seeking to wriggle themselves out of this oppressive system, have their mind-set and pre-understanding in terms of complete annihilation of it. This agenda is not mere subversion of converting the caste system upside down wherein the oppressed at present will turn out to be the oppressors in future and vice versa. Dalits, in the last analysis, do not demand the 'pound of flesh' from the caste people. Nor do they cry for the role exchange between the-oppressors-and-the-oppressed.

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 assertion (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 human community. Hence 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 in constructing Dalit Philosophies. Hence the Philosophers need to trace the mythos, religio-cultural practices, ethical sensibilities, intertextuality, impact of the history of successes and failures of the Dalit communities in the past. This could help the present Dalit world-views to be articulately explicitated. Similarly these aspects from the textual world of various religio-cultural resources are to be traced. Both of them are to be brought together for a meaningful hermeneutical dialogue.

It is through the prism of the present Dalit world-views in continuity with its past mythos, the ancient life-world portrayed in other textual worlds is encountered by the Dalits. In this process, the new possible world projected by rereading them is to be identified. That is to say that a future world is constructed through the present eyes in the light of the past world, both of the Dalits and other textual worlds.



In the meaning effect thus created by the hermeneutical dialogue, the Philosophers could identify not only the humanizing inspirations but also the dehumanizing ethos from both the worlds. The life-promoting aspects could be appropriated and the life-negating aspects rejected from both the worlds. For instance, the strong sense of determination and historical consciousness of the prophetic voice of dissent to dehumanization and assent to rehumanization can be an effective antidote to the sense of determinism and magical consciousness prevailing in the Dalit world.

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, Iyothee Thass 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 people of good will 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.

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. 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.

### **Check Your Progress II**

**NOTE:** Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What are the salient features of the effective organic Philosophers working with Dalits?

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- 2) Explain the nature of Dalit location.

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## **1.6 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit we have tried to dwell upon the complex nature of the Dalit world-view and the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. Dalit roots and resources are attuned to move towards the dignified inclusion of all humans as co-humans with due share of power and opportunities without any trace of discriminatory hierarchy. The process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives have the following four phases: (i) Immersion, insertion, experience, praxis, reflected

involvement or involved reflection, (ii) Analytical probe into the forces and sources of conflicts operative in the lives of people concerned (Dalits) affecting their cultural symbolic world and various power-structures, (iii) Meaning-generating activities through the on-going dialogical interactions between questions emerging from actual life situations and the life-promoting meaning-generating resources from various cultural soils, and (iv) Alternative directions and orientations to be consciously traced by the people concerned (Dalits) as actors in the proximate and distant future.

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## 1.7 KEY WORDS

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**DALIT WORLD-VIEW:** The whole complex web of oral wisdom, written discourses, movie stories or television serials from the religions, cultures and literature of the native Dalit soil is already embedded in the depths of their collective consciousness along with the impact of their historical successes and failures. The latent and active complexes of values and rules of knowing embedded in the collective and individual consciousness control the whole spectrum of perception, behaviour, decision and choices.

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## 1.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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