
UNIT 1 DALITS' OUTLOOK ON LIFE AND WORLD

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to understand Dalit's Outlook on Life and World. This study will help the student of philosophy to realize the pluralistic nature of Indian philosophy and culture. The identity of India is under great discussion. While many philosophers and social thinkers consider India mainly from Brahmanic Hindu perspectives, the study on Dalit's outlook on life and world will expose the students of philosophy to view India in all its complexity. Dalits who are at the bottom of Indian society have their own culture, philosophy and political aspirations. This Unit aims to expose the world of Dalits to the students of philosophy. Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of who are Untouchables;
- to differentiate the aspirations of Untouchables with that of caste Hindus;
- to relate Dalits with their struggles for human dignity;
- to expose the philosophy students with prominent Dalit Social Thinkers
- to know the importance of Dalit philosophy today

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Hindu society is divided into groups, known as castes, with varying degrees of respectability. The lowest rung in the caste hierarchy is that of the untouchables. They have been called by this name because the very touch of them would pollute the caste people above them. They have been kept at a distance due to the above consideration. Their person, shadow, food, vessels were to be avoided. They were made to live separately and often could not share such common village amenities as the well. The stigma of "untouchability" was also related to the type of occupation these castes did such as clearing the dead chattels, cleaning the public places and removing the night soil. This stigma could be traced back to centuries old Manu, the Hindu law-giver.

Who then were the Dalits? They were the ones who by virtue of their *jati* (caste) membership were placed socially, economically, culturally and politically at the very bottom of a hierarchical society (Webster, 1994:32). They make up about 16 per cent of the Indian population and number about 138 million. They have been called by various names, such as ‘Untouchables’, ‘Harijans’, (a glorified term, coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted and popularised by Mahatma Gandhi), ‘Exterior Castes’ (used by J.H. Hutton), ‘Depressed Classes’ (by British officials), ‘Outcastes’, ‘Pariahs’ (commonly, but undoubtedly derived from the Tamil word *para* or *parai*, the drum (Deliege,1997). In more ancient times the terms ‘Mlechha’ ‘Chandala’ (used by Manu), also Panchama (the fifth class), Avarna (i.e. outside the four varnas), Nishada, Paulkasa, Antyaja, Atishudra, etc., were used (see Michael 1999: 12). But the term ‘Dalit’ that is being used today is a name that the untouchables have given themselves. “Dalit” means ground down, downtrodden, oppressed, but it now is being used by the low castes in a spirit of pride and militancy. The name “dalit” is not only a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or “untouchability,” it reveals a sense of unified class, of a movement toward equality. It speaks of a new stage in the movement of Untouchables in India (Zelliot, 1996:1).

1.2 ORIGIN OF CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY

The origins of caste and of untouchability lie deep in India’s ancient past and the evidence of those origins provided by the archaeological and literary sources now available is, at best, circumstantial. Consequently, scholars have been forced to engage in considerable speculation in their efforts to reconstruct the past history of untouchability. What we now have are not hard and clear facts but a variety of competing theories, all of which have proved difficult to substantiate in a convincing manner.

The dominant view traces the origins of caste and Untouchability to the Aryans themselves and to their ways of relating to the peoples of India with whom they came into contact. The Aryans, a set of related and highly self-conscious tribes sharing a common language and religion, began their invasions of India from the northwest around 1500 B.C. For centuries they remained in seemingly constant conflict with the indigenous peoples, whom they looked down upon as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean. Once conquered by superior military technology, some of these peoples withdrew into regions as yet unoccupied by the Aryans, while others were incorporated as separate and inferior castes within Aryan-dominated society. In post Rig-Vedic literature there are more frequent references to primitive forest-dwellers who were kept on the fringes of Aryan society in the conquered regions. Among these were the Candala. Although the Candala were severely stigmatised in the later Vedic age, it was only in the period between 600 B.C. and 200 A.D. that untouchability appears as such (Webster, 1994:2). In the Dharmasutras and in Kautilya’s Arthasastra the Candala are treated as untouchable and the “mixed caste theory” of the origins of untouchability is enunciated. However, it is in the Manusmriti that this theory, as well as the varna theory and the classification of castes in a hierarchy based on occupation and degree of pollution, receives its classic statement.

According to Manu, the ancient Indian law-giver, untouchability is the punishment for miscegenation, between a member of a high caste and that of a

low caste or an outcaste. The children of such an unequal pair become untouchables, and the greater the social gap between the two parents, the lower the status of their children. The consequences are also more severe if the mother is of the superior caste. Thus the offspring of a Brahmin father and a Shudra mother is called Nishada; the child becomes a fisherman. The offspring of a Shudra father and a Brahmin mother is called Chandala; he is the most degraded of all mortals. To Manu a degraded occupation is not the cause of untouchability, rather untouchability condemns a person to a low and impure occupation. In later times racial mixture was added as a factor of impurity. In the period after Manu increasing numbers of the members of the lower castes belonged to different races and cultures. The practice of untouchability was intensified and applied to more groups in the years following 200 A.D., while Candala became a label not simply for a tribe but for all whom the Aryans considered to be at the very bottom of society.

What has been described thus far relates to North India. The literature from South India suggests that the people whom the Aryans conquered were Dravidians, who subsequently moved south subjugating the indigenous people. It was only later, when Aryan influences spread to the South, that the *varna* system and untouchability came into being there.

J.H. Hutton, eminent anthropologist and author of the best book on caste, *Caste in India*, locates the origins of caste in the taboos and divisions of labour in the pre-Aryan tribes of India as well as in their efforts at self-preservation in the face of invasion (1963). In his opinion untouchability is the consequence of ritual impurity. He says: "The origin of the position of the exterior castes is partly racial, partly religious, and partly a matter of social custom. There can be little doubt but the idea of untouchability originates in taboo."

Von Fuerer-Haimendorf, another eminent anthropologist believes that untouchability is an urban development and is the result of an unclean and ritually impure occupation (see the Foreword in *Children of Hari*, Fuchs 1950). Once untouchability had developed in urban or semi-urban settlements its gradual spread to the villages was inevitable, for it is everywhere the towns which set the standard.

Dr. Ambedkar's thesis on the origin of untouchability, as expounded in his book *The Untouchables* (1948) is an altogether novel one. The distinction between the Hindus and the untouchables in its original form, before the advent of untouchability proper, was the distinction between Tribesmen and Broken Men from alien tribes. It is the Broken Man who subsequently came to be treated as untouchable. There are two roots from which untouchability has sprung: a) Contempt and hatred for the Broken Man, as far Buddhism by the Brahmins. b) Continuation of beef-eating by the Broken Man after it had been given up by the others.

Dr. Ambedkar tries to explain what he means by Broken Men. He proposes an ingenious hypothesis: When primitive society began to settle down and to cultivate, certain tribes remained nomadic and warlike. They began to attack the settled tribes as the latter were wealthier. In addition they had grain which the nomads wanted but did not possess. The settled men needed defenders as they had lost their warlike spirit. They employed 'broken men' - defeated

nomads, and stray individuals who needed protection and shelter. These became mercenaries of the settlers, but were not allowed to stay within the settlement. They were kept at a distance, as they belonged to a different tribe. They were treated with disrespect, as 'broken men' and as mercenaries.

Dr. Ambedkar provided supporting evidence for such a process from Ireland and Wales. The difference was that in those countries the outsiders were after nine generations absorbed into the settled community. This did not happen in India, for the Hindus had contempt for the broken men who were Buddhists and beef-eaters.

At first sight this theory may seem rather far-fetched. However, agreeing with the views of Dr. Ambedkar, Dr. Stephen Fuchs says: "It is a well-known fact that the nomadic animal breeders of Inner Asia, for example, enjoyed nothing more than raiding and fighting. When a tribe was defeated and routed, the survivors often used to be sold into slavery by their conquerors. Those who managed to escape had to seek the protection of another tribe. Being powerless they had often to content themselves with menial jobs, tending horses and cattle, making and repairing saddles and other leather-work, such as tongs and bridles, making and cleaning weapons, etc. As these animal breeding nomads generally despised menial and manual work, this contempt was also extended to those who had to perform it" (Fuchs, 1981:13). There was thus a deep social cleavage between the masters and their servant class. Dr. Ambedkar believes that the root cause of untouchability lies in a pronounced cultural or racial difference coupled with a close economic dependence of the inferior society on the superior one.

Dr. Stephen Fuchs proposes a new theory regarding the Origin of Untouchability (1981: 15ff.). According to him the above proposed theories as well as various others presented by a number of Indologists seem to suffer from one great defect: they do not penetrate deeply enough into the past of the dominant Indian peoples. They restrict themselves unduly to happenings in India. It is true that the caste system and untouchability developed after the arrival of the Aryans and, most probably, of the Dravidians in India, that caste system, as it has grown in India, is unique and not found elsewhere in the world, and that nowhere in the world are untouchables found in such vast numbers - 138 millions! Yet, the roots must be sought in an age when both population groups lived on the steppes of Inner Asia. Here the animal breeding societies developed a pronounced hierarchical structure. These animal breeders gave up cultivation completely and regarded manual work of any kind as unworthy of a shepherd and a warrior. They also developed a social structure of their own: an extended joint family system with a patriarch at its head in whom all power was vested.

According to Dr. Stephen Fuchs, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the Aryans as well as the Dravidians on their arrival in India still belonged to such an animal breeding culture. They must have brought along also their aversion to manual work and to foreign people. The Aryans, on their slow advance through northern India, and the Dravidians wandering down along the west coast into South India, encountered on their way a multitude of earlier settlers who either submitted passively to their conquest or were defeated in fierce battles. As conquerors they managed to impose many of their cultural values and prejudices on the subject peoples of India. Adding to their inherited attitude to manual

work and racial purity a new dimension, namely that of ritual purity, they gradually developed this unique Hindu caste system which is intimately connected ideologically with the concept of untouchability.

None of the above explanations for the origin of untouchability are conclusively proved facts. As so often happens with human institutions, no single cause can explain untouchability. It is deeply rooted in Indian history, in the agrarian social order that dominated the Indian economy until the advent of the British, and which remains today India's largest economic sector. Though the relation of India's rural Untouchables to this social order has shifted in subtle ways in the past two centuries, there remain pervasive continuities, especially of meaning and of cultural construction, with this deeply rooted past.

1.3 UNTOUCHABILITY TO DALIT MOVEMENT

Perhaps the first modern Dalit voice was that of Jotiba Phule, a powerful advocate of social and gender equality based in Maharashtra. Another Dalit deeply influenced by liberal values was the Ezhava leader of Kerala, Narayana Guru, who attacked the institution of caste in a regional society where Adi Shankara had argued, long centuries ago, of the essential oneness of things in his metaphysical formulation of *advaita* (non-dualism) as the true basis of reality. There was a fair sprinkling of Dalit leaders elsewhere holding out identical messages. Their principal argument was loud and clear. Humankind was made up of a vast community of individuals all of whom, in principle, were entitled to the same social status and economic and cultural dignity.

Though the Dalit voice expressed itself eloquently from the outset, it was left to B.R. Ambedkar, a second-generation Dalit leader, to articulate the abject condition of his community in the idiom of modern politics. Ambedkar also spelt out why Hindu discourse offered no route to liberation for the oppressed classes located within the Hindu social matrix. The Dalit communities, Ambedkar argued, were not the stratified constituents of an associational social order. Instead, they constituted the nethermost stratum of an organically integrated social body held together somewhat tightly by the world-view of Brahminical Hinduism. The only way to liberation for the Dalits, therefore, was to opt out of the Hindu fold.

In the course of empowering his Dalit caste fellows, Ambedkar was drawn into an epic conflict with Gandhi on the critical question of the Dalit location within the Hindu social order. Ambedkar felt that once India got freedom, his people, the Untouchables, would once again be subjected to the hegemony of caste-Hindus and be forced to scavenge and sweep for them. To safeguard their interests, he proposed that there should be a number of special seats in Parliament for the depressed classes which would be filled through elections from special constituencies. While drafting a new Constitution for India in the 1930s, the British extended to the Dalit communities the privilege of voting as a separate electoral constituency. Gandhi opposed this constitutional provision with all the strength at his command, since (so he believed) a separate Harijan electorate would damage Hindu society beyond repair. Instead, he offered the Dalits reserved seats in the central and provincial legislature(s) on a scale more generous than promised by the British. The so-called Poona Pact of 1932 was a triumph for the Mahatma because it ensured the social cohesion of Hindu society.

According to Gandhi, “the most effective, quickest and the most unobtrusive way to destroy caste is for reformers to begin the practice with themselves ... The reform will not come by reviling the orthodox. The so-called higher classes will have to descend from their pedestal before they can make impression upon the so-called lower classes”. Ambedkar on the other hand believed that India requires a cultural revolution to destroy the caste system and his call to his followers was: “`educate, organise and agitate’”.

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In addition to providing leadership, Ambedkar engendered among the Depressed Classes the vital element of self-respect without which the untouchables movement probably could not have arisen. Under his leadership they realised that it was possible for them to organise resistance and challenge the injustice they were suffering under.

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 Dalits?

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2) What is the difference between the term “Untouchables” and Dalits?

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1.4 UNTOUCHABLES’ OUTLOOK ON LIFE AND WORLD

As Exploited

The word “Dalit” in Sanskrit means “broken”, and “downtrodden”. Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar often described the “untouchables” as broken people. The Dalits are socially weak, economically needy and politically powerless,

despite the protective policies followed by the government under provisions of the Constitution (guaranteeing them educational concessions and scholarships, employment and political reservations and socio-economic welfare benefits). The term 'Dalit' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on the ground of their lowly birth. The word 'Dalit' is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimised section of the Indian population right down the ages. The word 'Dalit' as such was first used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writings. Following this, the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the early 70s gave currency to the concept and word "Dalit" to highlight the sufferings and struggles of the untouchables to begin with, but later extending it to include all the oppressed groups, namely the Scheduled Castes, the tribes, the workers, landless labourers, small farmers and other poor, and also the neo-Buddhist converts. However, more recently, the Scheduled Castes (earlier called Depressed Classes under the British and Harijans by Gandhiji) prefer calling themselves "Dalits" or "the oppressed", while the tribals prefer to call themselves "soshits" or the exploited. Both the words are evocative of the anguish and frustrated aspirations of these victims of social injustice for several thousand years. The word "Dalit" particularly emphasises the dehumanising "caste oppression" that makes them out-castes and untouchables (a degradation not shared by the tribals or sohits), within the context of the Hindu caste system with its religio-social organising principle of "purity and pollution" (see Zelliott, 1992; Prabhakar, 1990: 24-25; Massey, 1990: 40-41; Irudayaraj, 1990).

As Impure

Dalits experience that they are treated as impure people. Many high caste Hindus have certain ideas in mind about people belonging to the lower orders: ideas that they are dirty, lazy, quarrelsome, not reliable, they have no morals.

The foundations of untouchability were laid in ancient times. The immigrant Aryans were very different from the non-Aryan dark people whom they found living in India. Aryans considered themselves superior and were proud of their race, language and religion. They considered non-Aryans to be non-humans or *amanushya* (Rigveda 1981:X.22.9). The non-Aryans were described as *Krishna varna* (Rig Veda 1981: IX.41.1) or dark-skinned, *anasa* or without nose (snub-nosed). Thus the Aryans maintained a distance from the earlier settlers or Dasas. These Dasa were declared to have been created as the 'lowest of all' (Rig Veda 1981:II.12.4). They were also called the *Chandala*.

The Chandala has been declared the lowest of all men. He has been assigned the work of removing unclaimed bodies. Chandalas are called *nirvasita*, or exiled, and they were segregated and made to live on the outskirts of villages. It is recorded that under the rule of the Marathas and the Peshwas, the Mahars and Mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona after 3 p.m. and before 9 a.m. because before nine and after three their bodies cast too long a shadow, which falling on a member of the higher castes - especially Brahmin - defiles him (see Ghurye, 1969:11). The impure castes, and particularly the untouchables, could not enter even the outer portions of a temple. The schools maintained at public cost, were practically closed to untouchables. The toddy-tappers of Malabar and the east coast, the Shanars, were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to wear shoes or

golden ornaments, to milk cows. Members of all castes, except the Brahmins, were expressly forbidden to cover the upper part of their body above the waist. In the case of women also, until 1865, if they belonged to the untouchable castes, they were obliged by law to go with the upper part of their bodies quite bare (for more details of the discrimination of the untouchables, (see Ghurye, 1969:10-15).

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) How do the Untouchables experience their world as exploited people?

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2) Illustrate the sense of impurity in Caste society and how it affects the Untouchables?

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1.5 DALITS’ OUTLOOK ON LIFE AND WORLD

From the above background of exploitation and impurity, today Dalits have developed a militant and revolutionary outlook towards life and world. It is important to understand that Dalits are not a homogenous and unified group. There are regional, ethnic and religious variations among different previously known untouchable castes of India. All the same, there is some common experience among them.

Impact of Social Philosophers on Dalit Outlook on Life and World

The militant Dalit outlook on life and the world has been developed mainly by some eminent social philosophers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar, with many others throughout India (Narayanswami Guru in Kerala, Acchutanand in U.P. and Mangoo Ram in Punjab). They attacked the system of exploitation at all levels, cultural, economical and political. They developed their vision of Indian society as an alternative to the upper caste understanding of life and the world.

Jotirao Phule gave Dalits a proud out of life by unearthing the Indian history by arguing that the low castes were the original inhabitants of the country, enslaved

and exploited by conquering Aryans who had formulated a caste-based Hinduism as a means of deceiving the teeming masses and legitimizing their own power. It was the confirmed and sincere view of Jotirao that the ancient history of India was nothing but the struggle between Brahmins and non-Brahmins (Keer, 1964:120). Hence, Phule consciously sought to bring together the major peasant castes (these were, besides the Kunbis or cultivators, the Malis or 'garden' cultivators and Dhangars or shepherds) along with the large untouchable castes of Mahars and Mangs in a common 'front' against Brahman domination.

Jotirao's attack on Brahmanism was uncompromising. He realised that the seeds of the Brahmins' power, supremacy and privileges lay in their scriptures and puranas; and these works and the caste system were created to exploit the lower classes. Phule also reinterpreted sacred religious literature. To give an example; by reading the nine avatars of Vishnu as stages of the Aryan conquest and using King Bali as a counter symbol to the elite's use of Ram, Ganapathi or Kali,. Thus, Jotirao attacked the brahmanical scriptures and puranas, revolted against priestcraft and the caste system and set on foot a social movement for the liberation of the Shudras, Atishudras (untouchables) and women.

Another important social philosopher who influence the outlook of Dalits today is E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker Periyar (1879-1973). Periyar became convinced that casteism and Hinduism were one and the same. He wanted Hinduism, as he saw it, to go altogether. Periyar realised that the important feature of all new ideologies of the elite was the "Aryan view of race". The "Aryan view" was adopted enthusiastically by the Indian elite as a new model for understanding caste. That is, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were held almost as a matter of definition to be the descendants of invading Aryans, while Shudras and untouchables were those of the native conquered inhabitants. In this new language of caste and race, to claim "Aryan" descent was equivalent to claiming "twice-born" status, to say "Dravidian" or "non-Aryan" almost equivalent to saying "Shudra".

The high caste elite of India began to take Aryan and Sanskritic culture as the basis of "Indian nationality", but in so doing they were in fact taking a part - the culture of the upper castes and roughly more northern groups - for the whole.

Periyar's social philosophy sought to defend the rights of the Dravidians against Aryan domination. He saw in the Brahmins the representatives of Hindu arrogance and the stronghold of social injustice (see Devanandan, 1960). Naicker publicly ridiculed the Puranas as fairy tales, not only imaginary and irrational, but grossly immoral as well. Naicker attacked the Hindu religion as the tool of Brahmin domination.

It is indeed impossible to understand the contemporary Dalit outlook to life and world without understanding the ideas of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). For a growing number of young Dalits across India, many born after his death in 1956, he has become a symbol of a vision that can be achieved, a vision of freedom from social and economic injustice. Ambedkar attacked two central features of the Indian order: culturally enforced inequality and economic inequality.

Throughout his writings and actions there is one common thread, i.e. that socio-economic transformation in India requires a cultural revolution, one that will not only destroy the culture of the past but also build something of value in its place.

Ambedkar was inspired and guided by the noble example set by Mahatma Jotiba Phule. Phule was no longer there to guide Ambedkar. Nevertheless, his example had an indelible imprint on Ambedkar's mind. He was determined to complete the work started by Jotiba and it is not surprising that it became his life's mission (Rajasekhariah, 1971:18-19; also see Keer 1974: vii).

Ambedkar was a revolutionary. He led the fight against Untouchability, Hinduism, and the Brahman caste. He was convinced that the caste system was not only unjust but also immoral. He established a new dispensation, a new religion ((Neo-Buddhism) whose foundation is its unequivocal rejection of Hinduism.

Ambedkar criticised the caste system vehemently. For him, the fight against casteism and untouchability was central, at the heart of his agenda. Hence, he was very critical of the two contemporary approaches to reform of the caste system, namely Dayananda Sarasvati's and Gandhi's (see Baxi, 1994). According to him neither could bring about a real solution to casteism. He held that society should be based on the three fundamental principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

If caste was to be destroyed, he said, then its religious foundation in the Vedas and Shastras must also be destroyed. Faith in these scriptures was nothing more than a legalised class ethic favouring the Brahmins. "If you wish to bring about a breach in the system, then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras, which deny any part to reason, to the Vedas and Shastras, which deny any part to morality. You must destroy the Religion of the Smritis" (Ambedkar 1945:70).

Ambedkar also rejected the position of Gandhi with regard to caste and its reform. Gandhi felt that the ancient Hindus had already achieved an ideal social system with varna vyavastha. According to Gandhi, "The law of varna means that everyone will follow as a matter of dharma-duty the hereditary calling of his forefathers.... he will earn his livelihood by following that calling" (Zelliot, 1992: 154). In contrast, Ambedkar believed that an ideal society had yet to be achieved in India. For him, the priority was not making "Hinduism" or Hindu society "shine forth" but building a new, equal, free, open, non-hierarchical, modern India.

According to Ambedkar: "It is wrong to say that the problem of the Untouchables is a social problem....the problem of the Untouchables is fundamentally a political problem (of minority versus majority groups)" (Ambedkar, 1945 a:190). Hence, Ambedkar launched his revolutionary movement for the liberation and advancement of the Dalits. On July 20, 1942, he declared at Nagpur: "With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of full joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or sordid in it. For our struggle is our freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human respectability which has been suppressed and mutilated by the Hindu social system and will continue to be suppressed and mutilated if in the political struggle the Hindus win and we lose. My final word of advice to you is, 'educate, organise and agitate'; have faith in yourselves and never lose hope". (see Das and Massey, 1995: viii). Thus Ambedkar was able to put the untouchability issue on the centre stage of Indian politics (see Shashi, 1992).

Ambedkar painfully realised that within Hinduism the untouchables would never be able to get equal status and receive just treatment. He was also convinced that individual and group mobility was difficult for the untouchables within the Hindu social system. In this context, he saw two possibilities for social emancipation: the political unity of untouchables and an en masse conversion. Hence, in 1936 he talked of conversion to another religion: "Though I have been born a Hindu, I shall not die as a Hindu" (1936-31st May, Bombay). He had already made a first mention of conversion in the Yeola Conference of 1935.

The conversion call of Ambedkar disturbed the Hindu leadership very much. Several leaders tried to persuade him not to go ahead. Ambedkar expressed surprise that the caste Hindus, who had never shown any fellow-feeling for the untouchables were suddenly beseeching them to stay within Hinduism. Since Untouchables had been for centuries ill-treated and humiliated by caste Hindus, why did they now suddenly take such an interest in keeping them within the Hindu fold?

On the 14th October, 1956, after long deliberation and a conscious choice in favour of Buddhism, Ambedkar took his diksha at Nagpur at 9.30 a.m. Assembled were about five lakh Mahars, who all converted to Buddhism on that day. Ambedkar's embracing of Buddhism was a strong protest against all that the Hindus had failed to do. For him swaraj did not mean anything if it did not also put an end to the slavery of the untouchables (Gore, 1933 :144).

Ambedkar's view that the problem of the Untouchable is economic, social, and political, as well as religious, is widely held in India.

The above Phule - Ambedkar - Periyar tradition represents the effort to construct an alternative identity of the people, based on non-Aryan and low-caste perspectives, that was critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant Hindu caste society but also of its claims to antiquity and to being the dominant Indian tradition (see Omvedt, 1994, 1996).

Politics of Number in Dalit Outlook of the World

With the growth of democratic institutions and the "politics of number" in contemporary India, the Dalits began to assume some importance in national politics. The Dalit leaders, in order to take advantage of the situation and bring about their liberation, began to mobilise forces.

To fight untouchability, which was spread throughout the country and was deeply rooted in the minds of the people, was not a simple task. Firstly, the Dalit leaders had to lift their brothers and sisters from their ignorance; to teach them to agitate against injustice and to organise them into a pulsating force. The response was at first weak, clumsy and slow, but later it became positive and healthy. Secondly, the leaders had to face and stand up against the reactionary caste Hindus. Every step towards the liberation of the Dalits was followed by sharp reaction from the caste Hindus in the form of boycotts, atrocities, arson and other crimes. In all such critical situations, the Dalit leaders had to stand by their poor brethren, raise their morale and help them wage a peaceful and legal battle against the forces of reactionaries. Thirdly, the Dalit leadership had to convince the government to accept their demands of human rights.

Today’s political scene in India cannot be understood without understanding the phenomenon of the upsurge of Dalit-OBC self-consciousness that has spread from the South and the West to the North. The backward castes hold immense political potential, if they could be united into a powerful force. They would bring about a true social revolution for equality and justice.

There is growing awareness that weak, relatively passive official policies of affirmative action and reservation have produced poor results. In 1981, some 126 million of 156 million S.Cs and S.Ts were illiterate, the proportion of rural female illiterates being as high as 91.5 and 93.2 per cent. The Government admitted in Parliament on April 22, 1994 that there were 62,113 cases of atrocities against Dalits and tribals between 1991 and 1993. The annual report of the ministry of welfare for 1995-96 shows that the number of cases of crimes against SCs and STs committed by members of non-scheduled castes and non-scheduled tribes has shown a continuous increase with the number of cases going up from 25,352 in 1992 to 38,926 in 1994. The increase in crimes against SCs and STs in 1994, as compared with crimes in the preceding year, was as high as 36 and 27.4 per cent respectively (Godbole, 1997:14). In Class I and II of the Central services (leave alone State government jobs) Dalit representation is as low as 6.9 and 10.4 per cent. The persistence of caste injustice remains a shameful blot on this society.

Today, the Dalits have decided that they will fight their battles directly, in their own way, independently, without mediation by brokers and upper caste sympathisers. They want to represent themselves, not be represented by others. They have decided that they will not call themselves “Harijans” - simply because it is a paternalistic expression. There are numerous small and large organisations of Dalits all over the country such as the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in Karnataka, Indian Dalit Federation in Kerala, Dalit Maha Sabha in Andhra Pradesh, Bahujan Samaj in U.P. and Bihar etc. The Dalits are trying to get organised into a well coordinated political movement with an all-India organisation and all-India leadership that can challenge the established socio-political order. This aim is inspired by their resentment against the existing social system which expresses itself through various forms of agitation and struggle and is bound to acquire the momentum of a national movement in the years to come (Ayrookushiel, 1990: 14-23).

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) What are the philosophical thought of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar? How it influenced the Dalit outlook to life and world?

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To understand the Dalit outlook on life and world, we need to understand their social position in the Hindu hierarchical society. As untouchables, their outlook to life was very different from the present self perception as Dalits. The pioneers who worked for the liberation of the Dalits like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar have played a tremendous role in changing the perception of Dalits. Today, Dalits believe in the idea of the need for a cultural revolution or a total transformation of Indian society. There is, however, much discussion and dispute on the means of attaining these ideals. This problem is worsened by the multiple divisions existing in the Dalit ranks; for example, the Dalits are divided among themselves along sub-caste lines and like the proverbial crabs keep clawing at each other, pulling down those who move up, so that all of them remain in their lowly position. They are also hindered by the present political climate where the upper castes are trying to establish a unified Hindu cultural nationalism. What is needed is good and able leadership.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

The Untouchables are the victim of Hindu caste system. They are placed at the bottom of Hindu society. For centuries, the untouchables internalized their status as divinely ordained. But, with the dawn of modern era, through the universalization of education and by the impact of Christianity, Buddhism and other equalitarian religious ideologies, the situation began to change. Prominent social thinkers like Jotirao Phule, Ramaswamy Periyar, B.R. Ambedkar and others developed a radical social philosophy for the emancipation of Untouchables. Today, the Untouchables of India reject their traditional term “Untouchables” or “Harijans”. They are proud to call themselves as “Broken” (“Dalit”) people. With the dawn of parliament elections, the Dalits use their strength as a political pressure group to attain their social emancipation. They have developed their own philosophy of emancipation.

1.7 KEY WORDS

- Untouchables** : Certain sections of Indian population who are placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy due to the Hindu belief in “impurity”. They have been traditionally discriminated in social, cultural and political participation in the main Hindu society.
- Dalits** : The word ‘Dalit’ is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimised section of the Indian population right down the ages. Following this, the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the early 70s gave currency to the concept and word “Dalit” to highlight the sufferings and struggles of the untouchables.

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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Hindu society is divided into groups, known as castes, with varying degrees of respectability. The lowest rung in the caste hierarchy is that of the untouchables. They have been called by this name because the very touch of them would pollute the caste people above them. They have been kept at a distance due to the above consideration. They were made to live separately and often could not share such common village amenities as the well. The stigma of “untouchability” was also related to the type of occupation these castes did such as clearing the dead chattels, cleaning the public places and removing the night soil. They have been called by various names, such as ‘Untouchables’, ‘Harijans’, ‘Exterior Castes’ ; ‘Depressed Classes’ ; ‘Pariahs’; ‘Mlechha’; ‘Chandala’; Panchama; Avarna; Nishada; Paulkasa; Antyaja; Atishudra. But the term ‘Dalit’ that is being used today is a name that the untouchables have given themselves. “Dalit” means ground down, downtrodden, oppressed, but it now is being used by the low castes in a spirit of pride and militancy. The name “dalit” is not only a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or “untouchability,” it reveals a sense of unified class, of a movement toward equality. It speaks of a new stage in the movement of Untouchables in India.
- 2) The origins of caste and of untouchability lie deep in India’s ancient past. What we now have are not hard and clear facts but a variety of competing theories, all of which have proved difficult to substantiate in a convincing manner. The dominant view traces the origins of caste and Untouchability to the Aryans themselves and to their ways of relating to the peoples of India with whom they came into contact. The Aryans, a set of related and highly self-conscious tribes sharing a common language and religion, began their invasions of India from the northwest around 1500 B.C. For centuries they remained in seemingly constant conflict with the indigenous peoples, whom they looked down upon as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean. Once conquered by superior military technology, some of these peoples withdrew into regions as yet unoccupied by the Aryans, while others were incorporated as separate and inferior castes within Aryan-dominated society.

Answers to Check your progress II

- 1) The word “Dalit” in Sanskrit means “broken”, and “downtrodden”. Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar often described the “untouchables”

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as broken people. The Dalits are socially weak, economically needy and politically powerless, despite the protective policies followed by the government under provisions of the Constitution (guaranteeing them educational concessions and scholarships, employment and political reservations and socio-economic welfare benefits). The term 'Dalit' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights

- 2) Dalits experience that they are treated as impure people. Many high caste Hindus have certain ideas in mind about people belonging to the lower orders: ideas that they are dirty, lazy, quarrelsome, not reliable, they have no morals.

From the background of exploitation and impurity, today Dalits have developed a militant and revolutionary outlook towards life and world. It is important to understand that Dalits are not a homogenous and unified group. There are regional, ethnic and religious variations among different previously known untouchable castes of India. All the same, there is some common experience among them.

The militant Dalit outlook on life and the world has been developed mainly by some eminent social philosophers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar, with many others throughout India (Narayanswami Guru in Kerala, Achhutanand in U.P. and Mangoo Ram in Punjab). They attacked the system of exploitation at all levels, cultural, economical and political. They developed their vision of Indian society as an alternative to the upper caste understanding of life and the world.

Ambedkar's view that the problem of the Untouchable is economic, social, and political, as well as religious, is widely held in India.

With the growth of democratic institutions and the "politics of number" in contemporary India, the Dalits began to assume some importance in national politics. The Dalit leaders, in order to take advantage of the situation and bring about their liberation, began to mobilise forces.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

- 1) Though the Dalit voice expressed itself eloquently from the outset, it was left to B.R. Ambedkar, a second-generation Dalit leader, to articulate the abject condition of his community in the idiom of modern politics. Ambedkar also spelt out why Hindu discourse offered no route to liberation for the oppressed classes located within the Hindu social matrix. The Dalit communities, Ambedkar argued, were not the stratified constituents of an associational social order. Instead, they constituted the nethermost stratum of an organically integrated social body held together somewhat tightly by the world-view of Brahminical Hinduism. The only way to liberation for the Dalits, therefore, was to opt out of the Hindu fold.