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# UNIT 1 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE DALITS

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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- To introduce the students to the basic notions of Dalit history and its implications.
- To acquaint them with the historical-social basis of Dalit life.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In India Dalits represent a community of 170 million, constituting 17% of its population. One out of every six Indians is Dalit, yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens of India. This unit tries to give a historical and social evolution of Dalit, beginning with the originary myth, evidence for their Indian rootedness and the their quest for dignity and freedom.

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## 1.2 THE ORIGINARY MYTH

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The classic aetiological text concerning the origin of the caste system is the celebrated *Purusa-Sukta* myth, Hymn 10.90 of the *Rgveda*. *Purusa* is Brahmanical version of the primeval gigantic man from whose body all that is, came to be. *Purusa* is described as having a thousand heads and a thousand feet; he also emanated *Viraj*, the female creative principle. The Vedic chants emerged as *Purusha* was sacrificed and out of him were born the four castes or *varnas*: from his head (more properly, his mouth) were born the *Brahmins* (the learned men who would become the priestly sages and religious leaders of the people); from his mighty arms came the *Kshatriyas* (the strong men who would be the warriors who would defend the nation); his thighs would provide the *Vaishyas* (men of business acumen who would ensure the prosperity and economic

power of the community); finally, there would be the *Shudras* (humble toilers, who lacked the governing graces of the other three *varnas*). The four castes are sub-divided into more than 3000 sub-castes (or *jatis*) and there is a final, lowliest group of all: the Untouchables. These are so impure and despicable that they stand outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether.

### Interpretation

At first sight, the four castes are nothing more than the natural fourfold division of society into its basic functions. Plato, in the *Republic*, divides his perfect city-state into a similar four groups (except that he preferred to see philosophers as the source of the political leaders of the State). Plato's is more of a *class*, not a *caste*, *set-up*. The characteristic mark of caste is that one must remain in the caste into which he/she was born, must marry into that caste, learn and practice only the traditional profession of his caste or sub-caste. This rigid understanding of one's role in society condemned an individual to a particular role, status and dignity (or lack of it). In a class system, one can improve one's lot through education and aspiring after a nobler profession, as also through marriage.

It has been suggested that the original myth never intended the watertight and unjust discrimination that the traditional interpretation of caste implies. It could have simply been a clever way to stress the interdependence of all members of society on each other: there are no "high" or "low" people – all are equal, just as the human body can not function if all were a head or a foot. This is exactly the image of "The Mystical Body" that St Paul envisages in his First letter to the Corinthians: "If the foot were to say, 'I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body', would that mean it stopped being part of the body? ... If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything?" Just as Paul was suggesting it would be foolish to try and rank parts of the body as higher and lower, but more sensible to see each playing different yet indispensable roles in the human body, so should we view the different ranks and functions of persons in the body politic. If this is true, then the *Purusa-Sukta* myth is aimed at creating precisely the opposite effect that the caste system has been made to do. It would suggest that powerful, vested interests have deliberately distorted the original, interpretation of the myth so as to ensure that all power and authority remain in their clutches for all time...

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## 1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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India's caste system is perhaps the world oldest surviving hierarchy, based on a totally unfounded and unjust set of challengeable presuppositions. Its defining feature is a complex ordering of social groups on the questionable basis of ritual purity. This questionable system was able to survive because key religious leaders had taught the common people that it was part of divine ordinance – "God's will". It also received a kind of reinforcement from the common Hindu belief in re-birth: if one does not obediently submit to the caste code, one would be punished by being re-born into a gradedly inferior caste in his/her next life; were one to humbly submit to all the insults and hardships that came one's way as a *Shudra* or untouchable, he/she might be reborn as a Brahmin. Thus the much abused religious virtue of 'resignation to the will of God' is once again twisted to maintain the status quo in favour of the powers that be.

All this seems to be borne out by recent studies and archaeological evidence. To sum up the latest findings:

- Early Prehistoric India was apparently first inhabited by Negritos. Then came the Australoids (to which belong our Santals and Bhils). Then came the Mongoloids, who have till today retained their characteristic racial and religious identities (in the North-East)
- The fourth and largest group of early/original inhabitants, or *adivasis*, as we say in India, was the Dravidian group. There is practically unanimous agreement among scholars that they arrived in India from the Eastern Mediterranean about 3000 BC; they had extended their civilisation all over the country by 1400 BC. Traces of their highly developed level of culture are to be seen in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Scholars, like Goetz, speaks of the Indus Valley civilization of the Dravidians as having links to Sumeria, the earliest known bed of human civilization.
- It was about 1000 years later that the Aryans came, probably from present-day Turkestan, via Afghanistan. This fair-skinned race was apparently superior in military prowess to the more dark-skinned, shorter Dravidians, whom they either exterminated or enslaved as they advanced, gradually conquering the whole of Northern India by 1000 BC. Such are the views of Mishra and Wheeler himself (the original authority on the Indus Valley Civilisation), as well as many other reputed authorities (Marshall, Cunningham, Madhu Sarup Vats, B B Lal, R D Banerjee, etc).
- The *Rg-Veda* concurs in describing the natives (Dravidians) as dark-skinned and snub-nosed, of a different language and religion from their fair-skinned conquerors.

All the major scholars of the period agree as to how the native Dravidians were largely exterminated by the light-skinned invaders who pushed them further South and destroyed their forts or towns, making slaves of all those they had conquered. It is significant that *varna* has the original meaning of colour: caste was the original apartheid – discrimination by the fair-skinned of the dark-skinned, a way of ensuring that the conquered, darker race, remain imprisoned in an inferior, sub-human state of life.

### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

1) Describe how the *varnas* originated according to the Vedas.

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2) Give some archaeological evidence for caste system.

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## 1.4 LITERARY EVIDENCE

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The early Indian religious texts (originally those of the conquering Aryans) confirm the view that the subjugated Dravidians were reduced by their oppressive conquerors to a sub-human state.

- *The Rg-Veda*: This, the earliest available text, dating from 1500 – 1000 BC, enshrined a version of the *Purusa-Sukta* hymn, mentioning the four basic *varnas*. There is, as yet, no mention of any outcast, untouchable caste.
- *The Upanishads*: These date from much later (about 700 BC). By this time, the untouchable were beginning to be noticed. For instance, the famous *Chandogya Upanishad* only refers to the three upper castes and compares the *chandala* (outcaste) to a dog or a pig (10:7)
- *The Ramayana*: (About 460 BC) At the time of the *Ramayana*, the plight of the outcast has worsened all the more. For instance, when Lord Rama hears that a *Shudra* has presumptuously undertaken *tapasya* (penance and meditation) in order to attain a higher dignity (something only the three upper castes are permitted to do), the good and virtuous ideal king slays the man for his blasphemy. One can imagine how much more serious the crime would have been had it been perpetrated by an outcast person, far more inferior to even a *Shudra*.
- *The Mahabharata*: Here the degraded status of the outcasts is further exemplified. There is the case of Ekalabya, a Dravidian (indigenous) boy, who has not only dared to learn archery but even come to rival Arjuna in this art. As punishment, he has the thumb of his right hand cut off.

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## 1.5 THE DALITS

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This is the name that the former outcasts want to be called by. They had been originally classified as *varna-sankara*, or outside the caste-system – so inferior as to be subhuman, capable of polluting all other castes and therefore “untouchable”. Among themselves, they were further sub-divided into a hierarchy of untouchability. Unlike the other castes, they could not change their occupation. They were deprived of the right to education, to possess assets and of weapons to protect themselves. They were subjected to all manner of humiliating treatment, sanctioned by the Laws of Manu (500 BC) and even the *Bhagavad-Gita*, regarded by many Hindus as the noblest of all Scriptures, upheld all this.

Mahatma Gandhi preached against untouchability and acted in direct contravention of the rules enforcing it. He even advocated re-naming them “*Harijans*”, children of God, but the term was not welcomed by the untouchables as they felt it merely covered up their pitiable and inhuman condition. They preferred to call themselves “*Dalits*”, which traces itself back to a Sanskrit word, *dal*, that implies being broken, cut, torn asunder, scattered, crushed or destroyed. Coincidentally, this also links up with a Hebrew root (figuring in the Old Testament of the Bible), also *dal*, which has the connotations of weakness, lowliness and poverty. This Indo-European affix appears as *dal* or *tal* in certain English and German words, such as the English dale (a valley or ‘cut’ in the ground) or the German *Thal* (a tailor – note the similarity of the English word – who is basically one who cuts.).

The word owes its popularizations among the oppressed untouchables to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, (1826 – 1890) the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, who

used it to describe the outcastes as broken and dispersed victims of our caste-ridden Indian society. The connotation of scatteredness, brokenness and being cut implies that they were once whole, free and human. This further implies that there was some instrument or agent that reduced them to this oppressed and degraded condition. So the starting point of Dalit history is the moment when they began to be broken, scattered and oppressed.

Dalits were called by different names in different parts of India, all invented by caste people and all entailing insult and contempt. Such names include words like *dasa*, *dasya*, *raksasa*, *asura*, *avarna*, *nisada*, *panchama*, *chandala*... The British called them “Depressed Classes” or “Scheduled Castes” (as per the Scheduled Caste Act of India, 1935, whereby their caste-names – and/or subgroups – were listed on a schedule or list). The practice of “untouchability” was banned under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, but old habits die hard – especially in remote rural areas – and it continues to affect the attitudes and relationships between people.

Today, dalits number some 25 millions, about 25% of the entire population of the country. Every hour some two dalits are assaulted, every day three dalit women are raped, two dalits are murdered and two dalit houses are burnt.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Give some instances of how the early religious texts confirm the view that the Dravidians were subjugated to sub-human state.

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- 2) What is the meaning of Dalit?

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## 1.6 DALIT RELIGIOSITY

One of the reasons for the stringent rules of untouchability and isolation was to keep the religion of the fair-skinned conquerors and that of the darker-skinned Dravidians from mixing. It was with the clear and conscious goal of preserving ritual purity that dalits were forbidden to enter any temple. The Laws of Manu decreed that molten lead was to be poured into the ears of any dalit who presumed to study the Sanskrit scriptures or even listened to them being read. Therefore, by no stretch of the imagination can one say that the dalits were Hindus. Indeed, to form an idea of the original religion of the dalits, one would have to study the evidence of Mohenjo-daro. There, one would come across of a strong concept of a personal and transcendent creator God, though this was also linked up with the need to placate good and bad spirits in Nature.

The dalits were attracted particularly to Buddhism, because it rejected caste and untouchability as also the authority of the Vedas and bloody sacrifices. Neither Islam nor Christianity had really succeeded in rooting out the caste mentality from their adepts, even after conversion to these non-Brahminic faiths. Eventually Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism with some five lakhs of his followers, at Nagpur. Thus the aspiration of the dalits for an egalitarian religion found its fulfillment and the Neo-Buddhist movement was born, saving the faith of Gautama Buddha from the total elimination that the Brahmins had almost brought upon it.

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## **1.7 THE DALIT QUEST FOR FREEDOM**

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Dalits make up some 25% of India's total population – a staggering 250 million people. They are among the poorest of the world's poor, stripped of their basic human dignity, denied their civil and human rights and entrenched in a hierarchic system that denies them any scope for opportunity or self-improvement. About 70% of them live below the poverty line.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1836 -1890), referred to above, was a unique personality among the many Indian social reformers of his time. While the latter were more concerned with reforming one or other Indian social institution, marriage or family structures or campaigning for the rights of women, he focuses his vocal attacks on the unjust caste system. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), an untouchable himself – who was to become one of the members of the Indian Constituent Assembly and dubbed “the Father of the Indian Constitution” – the dalits began to acquire a sense of dignity and confidence in their own ability to liberate themselves. In the 1970s emerged the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra (modeled on the Black Panthers of the US), giving them a constant reminder of their age-old oppression and offering them equally a sign of hope in recovering their lost self-identity and dignity. Kancha Illaiah (1952 -), chairman of the political science department of Osmania University, is one of the major and most outspoken (some would say, offensive) influential dalits of today who is engaged in a no-holds-barred battle with the caste system. He calls himself an anti-Hindu and openly avers his hatred for all things that are Hindu.

Many non-dalits from different parts of India also joined in the fray to champion the cause of dalits. Probably the most notable of all these was E V Ramaswamy “Periyar” (1979 – 1973), the founder of the Dravidian movement in the South, that struck at the Brahmin domination of the Congress. Already in the sixth century AD, there arose the Bhakti Movement in South India. It advocated passionate love for the divine as a (if not the) means of attaining moksha: neither caste status nor gender was a barrier for the bhaktas. One of them, Janabai, in the thirteenth century AD was a Shudra from Maharashtra and a woman to boot. Spreading gradually to the Central Western region and on to the North, this movement bears testimony to the many creative ways in which oppressed dalits sought to attain some measure of liberation. They even rejected the traditional norms of asceticism and some of them were householders, living devout and saintly lives within families.

### **The Dalit Freedom Network**

On November 4, 2001, dalits from all over India began to converge on New Delhi to denounce and renounce the unjust set-up under which they and their ancestors had been forced to eke out a miserable existence from some 3000 years. Crying out for holistic reformation, they demanded that their villages be



transformed from within. No movement for the liberation of dalits would be able to succeed unless and until this was assured. It was precisely with this aim in view that a new movement, The Dalit Freedom Movement, was launched, in November, 2002. Its primary focus was on village transformation, targeting the radical change of 1000 villages as its goal for the next decade.

Now the first step in achieving this noble end would be through education. Since most dalits are illiterate and unable to attend school because of discrimination or due to financial problems, few dalit children (if any.) have access to a better life. Dalits need quality English-medium primary schools. The Dalit Freedom Network (DFN) has committed itself to providing these in each of the targeted villages. Next, dalits – especially dalit children are in need of basic medical care. DFN aims to ensure this by setting up local village and regional healthcare centres, with “barefoot doctors and nurses” to provide for the family. Finally, DFN hopes to better the peoples’ prospects through micro-loans, self-help groups and economic education. DFN provides dalits with a network to protect their basic human rights, with centres all over India and even in Washington Dalit Culture and London.

The caste system is also very much alive and well in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. As Hinduism gradually spread over the South Asian sub-continent and established itself as the dominant religion there, the caste system and its attendant ideology and justification followed suit. Caste even migrated along with the South Asian diaspora and took root as far away as Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam, the Middle East, Malaysia and the Caribbean. It even managed to transplant itself to some extent among the Indian settlers in the UK and the US.

In both Nepal and Bangladesh, dalits face discrimination rather similar to that faced by their comrades in India. Nepal’s 4.5 million dalits (a rough 20% of the entire population) have hardly attained any singular measure of liberation. There are no dalits at all in Nepal’s legislative assemblies, literacy hovers at about 10% and life expectation is around 50 years only. Over 80% of Nepal’s dalits fall below the poverty line.

In Pakistan and Sri Lanka the situation is much better (except in the Tamil areas of the latter.), as the caste system is less rigid there and has little or no connotation of ritual pollution (for historical and cultural reasons, Tamilnadu is heavily caste-ridden and this attitude was carried across the water with the Tamil tea planters who crossed over to the then Ceylon). Still, social distance and restricted access to land is still, even in these places, a harsh reality. The Swat region of Pakistan, however, practices extreme forms of humiliation of dalits there, especially as regards women.

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## 1.8 THE GANDHI-AMBEDKAR DEBATE

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As Ramachandra Guha puts it, in his insightful essay “Gandhi’s Ambedkar”, in his recently published, provocative and eminently readable recent book, *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays*, it might be more appropriate to hail Gandhi, not so much as the Father of the Nation as the Mother of all debates and discussions with leading freedom fighters for the future of India. And perhaps the fiercest and most long-running of all these exchanges was between him and the Leader of the Untouchables, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. It is very difficult to take a calm, dispassionate view of this exchange: one tends to let his or her position on the side of the caste divide colour his or her assessment of the two protagonists, seeing one or the other as hero or villain depending on whether one is high or low caste.

It would seem to me that much of the controversy was due to the fact that Gandhi tended to see the dalits as Hindus (and so tried to retain them within his vision of a reformed caste system, for he saw caste as essential to the Hindu set-up), while Ambedkar was adamant that his people must find liberation outside the Hindu fold. Furthermore, to quote Guha, once again, “Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured non-violent protest while being suspicious of the State; Ambedkar was a steadfast nationalist, who worked within the State and sought solutions to social problems with the aid of the State.” For Gandhi, the Congress Party represented all of India, including the dalits. Ambedkar was not quite convinced. He distinguished between freedom and power. Content to let the British pass on the power to the Congress, Ambedkar was convinced that the dalits had to form a separate party to secure their freedom. Herein lay the crux of the painful fallout of the Pune Pact.

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar were good men. Neither were the villains the extremists of either side tried to make them out to be. They were more tragic heroes, caught up by forces beyond their control. Gandhi’s pain was the lack of support he received from his Congress fellows as regards the dalit problem. They felt he was giving in to their demands too much, or too fast and not sympathetic enough to non-dalit issues. Ambedkar’s agony was that, for the good of his people, he was obliged to make common cause with the British. Arun Shourie, in his voluminous *Worshipping False Gods*, would never have us forgive this and, refusing to make the power-freedom division we have alluded to above, did not scruple to call him (and all dalits) unpatriotic and anti-Indian.

It is important to note that neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar ever stooped as low as some of their fanatic followers and never abused each other or accused each other of unworthy motives. Gandhi, in particular, went out of his way many times to express his respect for his dalit antagonist, recognizing that, even if he could not agree with his call for a separate electorate or party for dalits, the latter had genuine grievances at stake. In June 1936, Gandhiji remarked that Ambedkar “has had to suffer humiliations and insults that should have made anyone of us bitter and resentful.” And he went on to add, “Had I been in his place, I would have been as angry.”

Maybe the time has come to try and see the visions and achievements of these two great men, decades after their deaths, as complementing each other. Perhaps, only then will the story of dalit emancipation begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

### **Check Your Progress II**

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

1) What would be the first step in achieving the Dalit quest for freedom?

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2) Name a non-Dalit who championed for Dalits.

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## 1.9 LET US SUM UP

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We have traced the general historical roots of Dalits. Further, in this unit, we have seen their religiosity and spoken of the quest for freedom, exemplified by two prominent and conflicting personalities, Gandhi and Ambedkar. We hope that the story of dalit emancipation begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel soon.

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## 1.10 KEY WORDS

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<b>DALIT</b>	: The term Dalits”, traces itself back to a Sanskrit word, <i>dal</i> , that implies being broken, cut, torn asunder, scattered, crushed or destroyed.
<b>VARNAS</b>	: <i>Varna</i> means color, or the make up and the hue of mind; a social division or order of society such as caste in India

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## 1.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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