
UNIT 1 THE STORY OF THE TERM DALIT AND OF THE PEOPLE

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Story of the Term ‘Dalit’
- 1.3 The Story of the Dalit People
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Key Words
- 1.6 Further Readings and References
- 1.7 Answers to Check your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit titled *the story of the Term ‘DALIT’ and of the People* aims at:

Introducing the meaning of the term Dalit in its textual and contextual understanding by tracing the historical and the social sensibilities of the term Dalit.

Discussing the context of caste system as to situate the history of the people called Dalits.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Oh my unfortunate Motherland! Those whom you have insulted would drag you down to their same level. Those whom you have deprived of the rights of humanity would bring you down to their same status. By avoiding the touch of man every day, you have insulted the divinity in man..., If you avoid to embrace all and shut yourself up within the thick walls of pride, you would be simply courting Death which will level you all” are the poetic but lamenting words of Rabindranath Tagore that echoes the outrage of the practice of untouchability within the Indian social organisation called the caste system. The people who are deprived of humanity, who are insulted of the divinity in man and who suffer various forms of untouchability, according to the Indian tradition are known as the *outcastes*. The recent and broadly used term that refers to the outcaste people is generally known as Dalits.

Addressing the problem of Indian caste system is vital for reasons of building up an egalitarian Indian society. Rabindranath Tagore remarks: ‘The thing we in India have got to think of is this – to remove those social customs and ideals which have generated a want of self respect and a complete dependence on those above us – a state of affairs which has been brought about entirely by the domination in India of the caste system and blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are incongruous anachronisms in the present age’. The mentality and the system that generate inequality and inhumanity are but casteism and caste system respectively. Dr. Ambedkar in 1936 emphasized that a

socialist revolution cannot be achieved without transforming the caste system. In the ladder of caste system, the people who suffer the heaviest burden of casteism are the Dalits. R.M. Lohia notes that the removal of poverty in India cannot be achieved unless and until we first remove both caste and gender segregations.

The present chapter is divided in two inclusive parts. The first part titled ‘The Story of the Term Dalit’ deals with different naming of Dalits in the tradition and the social practices and the second part titled ‘The Story of Dalit People’ deals with the historical roots and the life history of Dalit people.

1.2 THE STORY OF THE TERM “DALIT”

The Meaning of the Term Dalit

The question of the meaning of the term Dalit is the concern here. Philosophically speaking, there are two important ways by which the meaning of a/any term or a sentence may be clarified. They are the *textual* and the *contextual*. The textual meaning of a term implies both (i) Sense and (ii) reference of the term. Generally speaking, the connotative meaning of the term is said to be the sense of the term and the denotative meaning of the term is said to be reference of the term. Take for instance the term ‘rose’, which connotatively mean that rose is a kind of flower with some specific characters and denotatively it means the actual flower called rose. Thus the textual meaning of the term rose refers to connotative sensibility and the denotative sensibilities of it. The contextual meaning of a term refers to both (i) the historical and (ii) the social implications. Take for instance, the term, *prohita* or priest in the Hindu tradition. The term *prohita* cannot be understood completely merely by its sense and reference (textually) alone. It requires a specific social context namely Hinduism both as a religion and a social order. Accordingly to understand the meaning of the term Dalit, it is necessary that we trace both the textual and the contextual meaning of it.

The word ‘Dalit’ in the recent past has gained so much attention that its meaning has gained international recognition. It mainly refers to the so-called untouchables of Indian caste system. It is used in the modern times in literature, in the realms of politics, economics, culture, sociology, anthropology, religious studies and theology. Only in the last decade the term Dalit is employed in philosophical literature.

The Numerical Strength of Dalit Population

Dalits are the people who by the Government of India under the *Presidential Order 1950* (amended in 1956 and 199.0) are generally referred Scheduled Castes. K.S. Sharma in his work, *The scheduled Castes, People of India, National Series Volume II*, identifies that there are 450 Dalit communities out of 751. According to the Census 1981, these Dalits formed 15.75 per cent of India’s population, and numbered 104,754,623. Presently as per the official estimate, there are 170 million Dalits in India, and the estimate excludes the number of Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims and the Dalits residing in other countries. There are about 20 million Dalit Christians, 50 million Dalit Muslims and 20 million Dalits residing in other countries. This provides at approximately 260 million Dalits in the world. As per the survey reports, Dalits are about 17 per cent of the total Indian population. Among them 62.59 per cent are illiterates and about 50 per cent each live in below poverty line both in rural and urban areas. As per the 1991 Census

Data, taken from ‘*Database on Scheduled Caste Literacy in India*, of the total number of Indian female population the Dalit women constitute 16.3 per cent. This means that the majority of Dalit female population live in rural areas that evidently deny the facilities of progress that are available in urban areas.

Etymology of the Term ‘Dalit’

Linguistically the term Dalit has its roots both in Indian and Hebrew languages. The term *Dalit* in Sanskrit is both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, *Dalit* may be used for all three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter. Etymologically the term is derived from the Sanskrit root word ‘*dal*’ which means to crack, open, split, and so on. When used as a noun or adjective, it means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed, oppressed, subjugated. Suppressed, broken. (Refer *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Sir Monier Monier-Williams, Delhi, 1988 (reprinted), p. 471; and also *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Vaman Shivram Apte, Delhi, 1989 (reprinted), p. 493)

The Dalits called by Various Names

Prior to the usage of the term Dalit, the so-called untouchables or outcastes were designated by various trivial names. The Vedic literature depicts them as *Desas*, *Dasyas*, *Asuras*, *Antyajas*, *Avarnas*, *Nisadas*, *Mletchasa*, *Chandalas*, *Panchamas* etc. These name designate the Dalits in a derogative manner in the sense that the Dalits are unholy, devilish, untouchables, enemies, and outcastes. These naming depict pejorative social (upper caste) attitude towards the Dalits and ill treatment meted over to the Dalits for centuries.

The uncomplimentary and depreciative manner of naming and treating the Dalits remain to the common characteristic feature of Indian caste system. For centuries until the present day, the Dalits were treated as people devoid of human dignity and self-worth. If we ponder on the question of unifying factor of Indian society there seems to be none other than this negative character of unification that reduces the Dalits as no-people. It is not surprising to note that in every state of Indian nation the Dalits are unfortunately but purposely identified callous or heartless manner. In Tamilnadu, the Dalits are identified as *Paraihas*, *Pallas*, and *Chakkillyas*, which as well depict the sub-castes among the Dalits. In Andhra Pradesh they are known by the names such as *Malas* and *Madigas* that situate the Dalits as untouchables. In Kerala, a state known for its high literacy rate for many years, the Dalits are called as *Pulayas*, *Cherumans*, and *Ezhavas*. In Karnataka, the Dalits are known by the names such as *Holeyas* and *Idigas*. In Uttar Pradesh they are called by names such as *Charmars* and *Pasis*. In Punjab and Haryana they are branded as *Valmikis* and *Bhangis*. In Maharashtra they are categorised as *Mahars* and *Manghas*. Thus if we draw the geo-political Indian map, it will solely depict the caste-category of pigeonholing the Dalit community as untouchables. These identifications speak for themselves the vulgarity of caste system and dire humiliation that Dalits undergo in the social history of India. They are not the names by which the Dalits called themselves, but they are the pejorative names by which the upper caste people identified the Dalits. They express strong sensibilities of contempt, hatred and inhumanity towards the Dalit community.

The British Government for reasons of identifying the different communities of Indian nation, categorised the Dalits as Scheduled Castes meaning that the Dalit

community is a separate community as they were reduced to age long inhuman treatment which in turn needs special and justifiable attention and action for social progress.

Interestingly Mahatma Gandhi had his share in calling the Dalits by names. He designated the Dalits as *Harijans*. The term *Hari* means, the Divine or God (but an inferior God in comparison to the Supreme God known as Brahman) and the term *jans* means people. Thus in combination, the term *Harijans* implied that the Dalits are 'people of God'. But then this naming of Dalits as *Harijans* did not cultivate any positive attitude towards Dalits. Instead it only continued to reinstate and serve the negative attitude of the upper castes towards the Dalits. This naming as *Harijans* further implied the meaning that the Dalits are but the children who are born to *Devadasis* (*Devadasi* refer to the system of prostitution that was prevalent among the priestly communities for reasons of sexual exploitation of the selected women but unfortunately enjoyed socially approval and religious sanction). Since the period of Gandhi, the term *Harijans* gained currency to continue to identify and treat the Dalits in negative manner. The Gandhian effort to name the Dalits as children of God did not have any positive effects but it continue to reinstate the excessive caste mentality only. De facto, the so-called untouchables rejected the practice of naming them in downbeat terms. They resisted every external ways of naming them down the socio-political history of India. The forced and the externally given names only express the idea that the Dalits belong to a low grade social status and hence easily vulnerable to exploitation and dehumanization. They refused to accept the appellation and the negative implications of these very many names. They considered that naming themselves is their birth right and priority. Therefore, the term Dalit is the chosen or the preferred name by which they called themselves in the recent years. The chosen term Dalit is an expression of their historical and social identity both as people who are oppressed in the caste system and as people who continue to struggle against or resist such forms of oppression and misidentifications.

The Meaning of the Term 'Dalit' in Contemporary Period

James Massey, a scholar in Dalit social history, in his work on '*Dalits in India*', observes that the present usage of the term *Dalit* goes back to the nineteenth century when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jotirao Phule used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society. It is also believed that this usage was first coined by B.R. Ambedkar however, he employs the term Scheduled Castes or Depressed Class in most of his speeches and writings. The term Dalit gained momentum in 1970s due to the Dalit assertion to human dignity by the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra. Such a usage of the term is a constant reminder of the untold sufferings and age-old oppression denoting the fact that the Dalit community for centuries is treated subhuman within the social parameters of Indian caste system. Besides its common use, the term Dalit today is specially used for those people who, on the basis of caste distinction, have been considered 'outcaste. They were 'outcaste', because they were not according to the architects of the system fit to be included in the fourfold graded caste structure of Indian society. On the basis of this status they were made to bear extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries, which made them almost lose their humanness. Thus the term Dalit for its people is not mere a title, it is both an expression of their community identity in the Indian social history, to

assert their rights and to restore their identity with dignity and self worth. It as well depicts their continuous struggle for liberation. It is both a remainder of social caste oppression and a renewed identity to reassure their affirmation as a people of a nation.

1.3 THE STORY OF THE DALIT PEOPLE

The Roots of Dalit History

We need to bear in mind that the social locus and practice of caste system and the continued assertion Dalits to self dignity and identity constitutes contextual meaning of the story of the Dalit people. Hence we shall make an attempt to trace the historical roots of the life of Dalit people here. It is a fact that we lack much of written sources about the history of Dalit people. However from the available sources we shall make an attempt make sense of the life-story of Dalits. The queries that draw our immediate concern include: what is the identity of Dalit people in the social history of India? How the Dalits are considered and treated in the Indian tradition? What is social locus in which the Dalits are situated? What are the constituting factors that construe the identity of Dalits as untouchables? And how do the Dalits view themselves or reassert their human dignity and identity? There could be number of other related issues that can be raised in the context of re-constructing the life and identity of Dalits for these are foundational and interrelated issues that go to shed light on the history of Dalits. Response to these issues is vital because they provide the basis to understand the life story of Dalits. James Massey observes: ‘Though in the absence of the right material, there are some archaeological and literary sources which lead to the possible historical roots of the Dalits. Where the question of archaeological and literary sources is concerned, it seems the story of the origins of the Dalits goes far back in history. The people known as the Dalits today had definitely a beginning, similar to the beginning of other human beings on earth’. According to many scholars in history, the story of Dalits is traceable to the archaeological evidences of Mohenjodaro, Harrapa and Indus Valley civilizations whose period is approximatly fixed as 1500 B.C.

Such an observation asserts the fact that the history of Dalits as people of a nation remain to be very ancient and highly developed in its beginnings. They are the aboriginals amongst Ancient Asian civilization. However, the story of Dalits as untouchable, unseeable, and unapproachable etc are recorded in the literary sources of Vedas. This means that the life of Dalits as outcastes is of a later period, namely the period of Vedas. It is generally agreed that the Vedic literature and its world belong to the Aryan civilization. Among the famous four Vedas, the *Rigveda* contain ample evidences towards rigid adherence and practice of caste social order. This evidently implies that the prevalence of casteism came into existence right from the Vedic period whose period is roughly traceable to 1000 B.C. Thus we may infer the following:

That the people of Mohenjodaro, Harrapa and Indus Valley civilizations are the aboriginals of the then Indian continent. That the people of Mohenjodaro, Harrapa and Indus Valley civilizations are different from the people of Vedic culture and they are generally identified as Dravidians and this in turn distinctly imply the fact that the ancient Dalits belong to the Dravidian culture.

The people of Vedic culture broadly known as the Aryans do differ from people the Dravidian culture. That between these two cultures there existed continuous conflict between these two cultures. Many of the Vedic hymns evidently imply the prevalence of a conflict between these two communities and as a result the people of Vedic community were the winners of these conflicts. To the claim that the historical roots of Dalits as touchable community is intrinsically connected with the caste world view of Aryans can be evidenced from various verses of Rig Veda. Most of the Vedic hymns or texts are addressed to Lord Indra and they narrate the rivalry between the Aryans or *Aryas* and the *Dasyas*, the excluded communities by the Aryas.

To evidence more about these two opposing groups and hostility of the Vedic People against the Dalits, few of the relevant verses from the hymns of the *Rigveda* are stated with their subsequent meaning.

vi janihayaran ye ch dasyvo... means ‘You (Indra) know well Aryas and Dasyus’
....hatavi dusyun prarya vaarnamavata ,, means...He (Indra) killed the Dasyus and protected the Aryan race (colour).

Indrapanch Kachhatinama” means Indra is the ruler of the five (races).

Tadindragni Yadus Turvasesu yad ... Druhyus Pavanusu Purusus sath.” means “O Indra-Agni, you live among (the people of) the Yadus, Turvasas, Druhyus, Anus and Purus.

par yat samudramati sur parshi paraya Turvasa Yadu svasita” means O hero (Indra)! When you came over the sea, you brought over it Turvasa and Yadu.

vadhihi dasyu dhanini.. means You (Indra) killed rich Dasyu. .

akarma dasyurabhi no amanturanya-varto amanus” means “All around us are ritual-less Dasyas who do not practice religious rituals and are alien to Vedic laws.

anaso dasyu.. means Noseless or faceless dasyus

sajatubharma chhadadadhana ojo... puro vimindannacharada vi dasi ... vidana vajirna dasyuve hetimasnarya...saho vadhrya sumnamindar. . dasyu hatyaya means ‘Armed with his thunderbolt, Indra went about destroying the forts of Dasas, ... O Indra, throw .your thunderbolt at the Dasyus, ... increase the power and glory of Aryas.

yo hatavahimarinata sapat sindhuna ... yo ga udajadapadha valdsaya,...yo asamanorantargina jajana... savivak sajanam Indra, means ‘One who killed the Dragon and freed the Seven Rivers (*Sapatsindhu*): he who drove the cows from the Vala, One who created fire between stones, and had beaten the warriors in the battle. He, O people, is Indra.

sa vartrahendra Karsunayoni ... purandaro dasiraraiyadavi...hatavi dasyuna pura ayasinin tarita means Indra the Vartra-killer, fort-destroyer scattered the dasa, who dwelt in darkness.. .he killed the Dasyus and broke the forts made of iron.

These are but few selected hymns (though there are many verses) of the *Rigveda* tell that the Dasyus were rich and wealthy and they also lived in well-fortified houses and cities, which imply the existence and the destruction of Indus valley

civilization, intrusion of Aryans and consequently resulting in the birth of Dalit as outcastes. Since the Vedic period and its culture falls after the destruction of the Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Indus Valley civilizations one can evidently imply that the Aryans, namely the people of Vedic culture were responsible to the destruction of Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Indus Valley people and instruction of caste social order.

The Theory of Conflict Resulting Outcaste People

Many scholars (Srivastava, Kapur Singh, Ambedkar, Smith, Basham, Chattopadhyaya, Chanda, D.D. Kosambi, and others) agree to the fact that the destruction of the Indus Valley Civilisation and contents of the hymns of the *Rigveda* are related. Both these sources point towards a war-conflict among different groups of people. This has a direct relationship with the history of Dalits, because the time of war-conflict of these opposing groups will be the beginnings of the history of the Dalits. The status of Dalits as outcastes is the direct consequence of the instruction of Vedic Social Order, the Caste System. Thus we can safely infer that the Vedic social organization is the historical context of the existence and prevalence of Dalits as outcastes or *panchamas* meaning that the Dalits fall outside the geopolitical borders of caste system. H.G. Wells, an archaeologist tells how at a point of ancient Indian history, one group (the nomad folk/The Aryan) defeated the other groups (the settled folk) and how as a result the history of both the groups was completely changed. He wrote: 'Down pour the united nomads on the unwarlike unarmed plains; there ensues a war of conquest. Instead of carrying off the booty, the conquerors settle down on the conquered land which becomes all booty for them; the villagers and townsmen are reduced to servitude and tribute-paying, they become hewers of wood and drawers of water, and the leaders of the nomads become kings and princes, masters and aristocrats.'

Scholars like Ambedkar, Rao, Koenraad Elst, Navaratna S. Rajaram, Shrikant G. Talageri and K.D. Sethna hold the opinion that the Aryans, the people of Vedic culture and the Dravidians that include the Dalit people belong to Indian nation and therefore both these cultures are of indigenous origin.

The Theory of Invasion Situating the Intrusion of Aryans

Scholars namely Jyotirao Phule, Ghose, Srivastava, Chanda, Chattopadhyaya, Fuchs, Hutton, Swami Dharma Theertha, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Jawaharlal Nehru, D.D. Kosambi, Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund and many others are of the opinion that the Aryans are not of indigenous origin and they are invaders into the Indian. According to them, Aryans are the emigrants, who originally settled in Iranian plateau, and in later periods were the invaders into Indian nation. Such a conclusion is possible due to the following factors:

A comparison between language of the Vedas and that of the Iranian Avesta proves that these languages are dialects of one and the same older language. Entire passages of Vedas may be converted into good specimens of the Avesta language by mere phonetic modifications.

The practice of religious worship of fire (*agni*) and various types of sacrifices to Gods are similar among the ancestors of the Iranians and the Vedic Aryans.

The prevalence of four fold divisions, namely the priests (*Brahmnas*), the warriors or the rulers (*Ksatriyas*), the business people (*Vaisesyas*) and the servicing labourers (*Sudras*) are common to both these groups. This is evident from the *Rigveda*, which is supposed to be the oldest literary source, the famous *Purusasukta* hymn mentions the existence of four castes: “The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya (*Ksatriya*) made, His thighs became the *Vaishya*, from his feet the *Sudra* was produced.”

Thus many scholars came to belief that the Aryans are but the ancient Iranians and therefore they are not of indigenous origin which in turn meant that the Aryans were invaders in to ancient India. The Aryans during their effort to Indian settlement waged continuous war against the Dravidians.

In spite of the differences of claims amongst these theories yet there are points of commonalities namely that Dalits as untouchables did not exist during the period of Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Indus Valley civilizations; that Dalit as untouchables originated came into existence during the Vedic periods due to the Vedic social order i.e., caste system named *varnasahramadharama* in Vedic literature. Thus we can therefore be confident to assert that the roots of Dalit history is traceable to the aspect of the destruction of Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Indus Valley civilizations and the rise and settlement of Aryan race and its allied practice of caste system. The Dalits have been reduced to their present state ‘by centuries of exploitation and servility’ right from the establishment of the Aryan rule and its allied religious practices and taboos.

It is revealing to note that the *Upanishads* which is considered as the culmination or end portion of Vedas does have reference to the existence of outcastes as the fifth category enlisted outside the four-fold caste categories. For example, the *Chandogya Upanishad*, not only refers to the three upper castes, but also compares *Chandala* (outcaste) with a dog or a swine. In the tenth *khanda*, verse seven reads as follows: ‘Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here - the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahman, or the womb of a *Ksatriya*, or the womb of a *Vaisya*. But those who are of stinking conduct here - the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb - either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcaste (*chandala*).

This means that the problem of Dalits as untouchables grew stronger during the period of Upanishads and consequently implying the idea that the birth of Dalits as untouchables is prior to Upanishads and belong to period of intrusion of Aryans and construction of Vedic hymns.

Apart from Vedas and Upanishads, the reference to Dalits as untouchable are found in other Indian traditional texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (5th Century B.C) , the two great epics, the *Mahabharata*, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* that speak of undeniable faith in four-fold caste system, *Manusmriti* (the Ordinances of Manu), (possibly composed during the period A.D. 700) which segregates the people who are twice born and the people whose birth is a misnomer. By the time the *Manusmriti*’s composition was complete the ill treatment of the Dalit had reached its climax.

Against the supremacy of Brahmans and the upper castes even the revolt of Mahavira (540-468 B.C.) and Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.) did not succeed

for reasons that the attempts could not stand the supremacy and caste rigidity. Dumont notes that (a famous sociologist and a scholar on the studies Caste system) Buddhism could not survive as a force beyond the fourteenth century. The Jain strategy to deal with the problem also failed due to the fact that its opposition did not express the Dalit problem as untouchables. Jainism ultimately could not divest itself from the influence of the Hindu caste system. Buddhism faced a different kind of problem, because by the time of the *Manusmriti*, the followers of Gautama Buddha were also considered untouchables. In post-Independence India, the hundreds of thousands of Mahar Dalits of Maharashtra who became Buddhists, in 1956 and later and their progeny are known as *Bauddh*, which in Marathi has become a synonym for Mahar (untouchable).¹⁰⁴ Thus the protest of Jainism and Buddhism, against Brahmanism or the caste system could not stand the onslaught of Casteism. The later developments of Indian history may be divided into three important periods namely the Muslim period, (A.D. 700 to 1700) The British period, (A.D. 1700 to 1947) and the Post-Independence period, 1947 till date.

The Islam and the Dalit Problem

The rule of the Muslims could not address the Dalit problem for reasons that the Muslim society itself was divided into number different grades or classes like Ashrafs (honourable), Shaikhs (chiefs) and Mughals (warriors) and Pathans. The converts to Islam from untouchable communities could not find a place in any of these three categories and hence continued to be considered as untouchables.

The British Rule and the Dalit Problem

The British rule which began with the inauguration of the East India Company (London) in A.D. 1599 showed more interest in business and trade and later in successfully ruling the country with their policies of non-interference in the internal affairs such religious and caste practices and 'divide and rule'.

Christianity and the Dalit Problem

The spread of Christianity did not attack the Caste problem and specifically the problem of untouchability of the Dalits for reasons that it showed its interests in evangelising itself; its social structure like casteism forms an hierarchy of the priestly and the lay people where in the priestly class remain upper and the later positioned lower; the fear that attack on casteism from the stand point of Dalits would limit the spread Christianity; the converts from upper-caste communities to Christianity continued to retain their upper caste mentality as well occupied high status within Indian Christianity and enjoyed privileges; The Caste Christian attitude continued to treat Dalit converts to Christianity as untouchables and socially excluded.

Reform Movements and the Dalit Problem

The efforts of most of the social reform movements such as during the British period were limited to reform rather than aimed at total change despite the fact there are individual personalities who addressed the caste and Dalit problem. The notable social reform movements include Arya samaj, Brahma samaj, Theosophical society, and Congress and Non-Brahmin Movement spearheaded by Justice party and later lead by EVR Periyar as Self Respect Movement. Arya Samaj and the Brahma Samaj's efforts to social reformation addressed the issue

of retaining Hindu Identity and thus by Caste Identity; Theosophical society found its followers mostly from upper caste communities and hence the problem of Dalits was beyond the sight of it; The Pre-Independence Congress interest was political i.e., to achieve political freedom which seriously imply a transfer of political power from the British to upper-caste leaders, and not social thus deprived of the capability of addressing the Dalit issue. It is to be noted that these movements did not address the Dalit issue directly and hence the status of Dalits as untouchables and vulnerable to different forms of exploitation did persist. Most of these movements ended up with *sanskritizing* themselves, a process of self-identification as Brahmins or else belonging to the world view of Brahmanism.

Individual Personalities and the Dalit Issue

The social protest spearheaded by Jotiba Phule, Ambedkar and Gandhi is notable in the context of the Dalit traditional, historical and social identity as outcastes. The resistance to casteism (through his movement called Satyashodhak Samaj) by Jotiba Phule was greatly appreciated by Ambedkar to the extent that Ambedkar dedicated his work *Who were the Sudras* to Phule with these words: *Inscribed to the memory of Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1827-1890): The Greatest Sudra of Modern (Mahatma Jotiba Phule) India who made the lower classes among Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes, and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule.* The efforts Phule had considerable influence on Ambedkar.

The efforts of Gandhi in participating the National Congress for Independence broadly remained to be political rather than social. His social interest or dream to construct a society of the welfare of all (*Sarvodaya*) through the so-called method of non-violence however notable it may be, did not analytically the decode the problem of Dalits within caste system. De facto, Gandhi like other reformers aimed at retaining the caste-system as an occupational order in the traditional language of *varnashramadharma*. To the question of social transformation the Gandhian approach was not sufficiently scientific and analytical of the Indian caste society. Gandhi had his political interests in addressing the problem of untouchability though he claimed that untouchability is sinful. Even during the period of the British, at the Round Table Conference, Gandhi strongly resisted the idea of granting separate electorate for Dalits to the extent that he went in for a fast unto death though it was supported and enhanced both by the British and Ambedkar. This means that Gandhian approach to Dalit problem lacked sufficient political will and did not reflect the stand point of Dalits themselves.

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 are the reasons for the transitions in Tribal culture/philosophy?

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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Question

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the pioneer in addressing the problem of Dalits as a person belonging to Dalit community particularly contributed in addressing the Dalit existential problem directly. Having born to a untouchable community (Mahars) from Maharashtra, Ambedkar understood the Dalit problem from the perspective of a Dalit. All through his life the concern for the liberation of Dalits is significant. The pain-experience of Dalit did not rob his strength to fight against casteism rather it positively contributed to understanding of it more deeply and scientifically. Ambedkar voluminous works titled as 'Writing and Speeches' (published by the Government of Maharashtra) stand witness to the fact that Ambedkar is an uncompromising person to the question of annihilating caste system. His works that chiefly aim at the Dalit issue depict the scholarship of Ambedkar in various fields such as Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Law, Political Science, Comparative Religion, Philosophy etc. He demanded for separate electorate at the Round Table Conference though opposed by Gandhi for political reasons, found its expression as the policy of reservation or affirmative action in the constitution of India, the making of which was headed by Ambedkar himself. To question of Caste and the status of Dalits Ambedkar upheld the views that (i) it is through the practice of endogamy (marriage within the same category) that caste continue to thrive in the Indian society (ii) Caste system is diabolically political and social in nature and finds its sanction through Hindu religious practices creeds and scriptures (iii) Hinduism and Casteism are but two sides of the same coin (iv) annihilation of Caste and its allied practice of untouchability amounts to the restoration of Indian society to the status of equality and justice and the affirmation of Dalit identity in terms of human dignity.

The existential Status/Meaning of Dalits in the Post-Independent era

In the Post-Independent period, despite the constitutional guarantee to safeguard rights of Dalits, the social condition of Dalits has not substantially improved. This means that the caste-ridden Indian society continue to resist any social transformation in terms of democracy, justice, and equality. The condition of the majority of Dalits to various forms of exploitation and thus towards social extermination remain to be a matter great concern and challenge. The following facts and figures depict the deprived social condition of Dalits: A high per cent (40 per cent) of Dalit population live in rural areas.

Nearly 20 per cent of Dalit population does not have access to safe drinking water.

The Eight Five year Plan of the Government of India, 1992-97 estimate that of the Dalit total population, 44.7 per cent are below poverty line.

The 1991 Census of India evidently records that 37.41 per cent of Dalits are illiterate.

Official reports register the fact that in 1991, 86.25 per cent of Dalit households were landless (irrespective of the land reforms policies of Indian government) and 49 per cent of Dalit population are agricultural labourers.

Dalits compose a majority of the 40 million as bonded labourers in India.

Despite the constitutional claim towards the abolition of untouchability, it continue to stay alive in various forms social prohibitions: prohibition to sit on par with dominant castes in public or private places; prohibition to inter-caste marriage;

prohibition to walk with footwear in caste dominant villages; prohibition of Dalit dead bodies being carried through available paths/roads; prohibition to draw water from public village water resources; preventing exercise of franchise at elections through harassments, threats, actual murder of elected representatives from Dalit communities and forcible prevention to contest democratic elections; prohibition to demand for just wages; insult and degradation of Dalit women; The 1997-98 report of the National Sc/ST Commission reports a total number of 90925 cases of crimes and atrocities against the Dalits spread all over India. The nature of atrocities and crimes include Murder, Hurt, Rape, Kidnapping, Abduction, Dacoity, Robbery, Arson etc.

Reservation of posts for Dalits in most States of Indian nation are either not filled or delayed. As per the 1995 records, only 18.71 per cent of Dalits are in the Central Government Services.

About 70 per cent of Dalit households have no electricity and 90 per cent of have no proper sanitation facilities.

According to 1991 Census report, the female literacy rate of the Dalit population is only 23.76 per cent and the male literacy rate is about 49.91 per cent. The school drop-out rates among the Dalit communities is greater than that of the other communities.

It is alarming to note that the death rate of Dalits is higher in comparison to other communities.

The above mentioned facts are only a sample evidences that depict massive practice of social exploitation against Dalits in India. The existential situation of Dalits as people of self-worth human dignity seems to be farfetched in the contemporary periods. The Dalit right to livelihood, to gender equality, to access to land ownership, to education, to employment and reservation, to life, and to social security remain to be continued struggle amongst the Dalits. Thus the story Dalits is both a story of suffering and struggle for liberation and it is through these pain and protest state of affairs the meaning of Dalit Identity is restorable.

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) Trace the views of Ambedkar regarding caste system and liberation of Dalits.
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1.4 LET US SUM UP

The term Dalit literally means a specific sense of oppression, exploitation within the social organization called Caste system. The etymology of the term Dalit is traceable to Hebrew and Sanskrit languages. The Dalits are the earliest settlers of India and they are indigenous population. Dalits are about 17 per cent of the total Indian population.

Dalits were called by various names such as outcastes, *Dasyas*, *Panchamas*, *harijans*, Depressed Class, Scheduled Class, etc each terms indicate the facets of social exclusion and exploitation both in tradition and in contemporary Indian society. The roots of Dalit history may be situated in the context of the factors such as the demolition of Mohenjodaro, Harrapa and Indus Valley civilizations and the emergence of Aryan race. Regarding the origin of Aryans, there are two opinions prevalent amongst the scholars: (i) they are like Dalits indigenous people (ii) they are one of the ancient invaders to India from Iranian places. There are textual and archaeological evidences of status of conflict between Aryans and Dasyas resulting the origin of Dalits as Untouchable and vulnerable community. Despite of the presence and practice of religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity that claim equality there continue to exist the practice of upper-caste domination and these religious communities are not sufficiently capable of addressing the Dalit problem squarely for reasons that casteism is both a mentality/attitude and social structure by traditional inheritance. The attempt of social reform movements in the social history of India did not address the problem of the exploitation of Dalits directly. The Gandhian approach to caste and Dalit question do lack scientific and analytical approach. However Ambedkar’s approach to Dalit problem is both scholarly and socially revolutionary that really aims at the liberation of Dalits. However the facets exploitation and discrimination against Dalits continue to exist in various forms in the contemporary Post-Independent period of India. Thus the story Dalits is both a story of suffering/pain and struggle/protest assertion of Dalit Rights and Dalit liberation.

1.5 KEY WORDS

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| Dalit | : | The term indicates the sense of brokenness of the Dalits as untouchables and the struggle for liberation and self assertion. |
| Caste System and Casteism | : | Caste system refers to the hierarchical and the discriminatory sense of social organization specific to Indian tradition. Casteism is the mentality or ideology emanating from caste system. |
| Endogamous | : | the practice of marrying within once caste-fold/category. |

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1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The question of the meaning of the term Dalit is the concern here. Philosophically speaking, there are two important ways by which the meaning of a/any term or a sentence may be clarified. They are the *textual* and the *contextual*. The textual meaning of a term implies both (i) Sense and (ii) reference of the term. Generally speaking, the connotative meaning of the term is said to be the sense of the term and the denotative meaning of the term is said to be reference of the term. Take for instance the term 'rose', which connotatively mean that rose is a kind of flower with some specific characters and denotatively it means the actual flower called rose. Thus the textual meaning of the term rose refers to connotative sensibility and the denotative sensibilities of it. The contextual meaning of a term refers to both (i) the historical and (ii) the social implications. Take for instance, the term, *prohita* or priest in the Hindu tradition. The term *prohita* cannot be understood completely merely by its sense and reference (textually) alone. It requires a specific social context namely Hinduism both as a religion and a social order. Accordingly to understand the meaning of the term Dalit, it is necessary that we trace both the textual and the contextual meaning of it.

Answer to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the pioneer in addressing the problem of Dalits as a person belonging to Dalit community particularly contributed in addressing the Dalit existential problem directly. Having born to a untouchable community (Mahars) from Maharashtra, Ambedkar understood the Dalit problem from the perspective of a Dalit. All through his life the concern for the liberation of Dalits is significant. The pain -experience of Dalit did not robe his strength to fight against casteism rather it positively contributed to understanding of it more deeply and scientifically. Ambedkar voluminous works titled as 'Writing and Speeches' (published by the Government of

The Story of Dalits

Maharashtra) stand witness to the fact that Ambedkar is an uncompromising person to the question of annihilating caste system. His works that chiefly aim at the Dalit issue depict the scholarship of Ambedkar in various fields such as Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Law, Political Science, Comparative Religion, Philosophy etc. He demanded for separate electorate at the Round Table Conference though opposed by Gandhi for political reasons, found its expression as the policy of reservation or affirmative action in the constitution of India, the making of which was headed by Ambedkar himself. To question of Caste and the status of Dalits Ambedkar upheld the views that (i) it is through the practice of endogamy (marriage within the same category) that caste continue to thrive in the Indian society (ii) Caste system is diabolically political and social in nature and finds its sanction through Hindu religious practices creeds and scriptures (iii) Hinduism and Casteism are but two sides of the same coin (iv) annihilation of Caste and its allied practice of untouchability amounts to the restoration of Indian society to the status of equality and justice and the affirmation of Dalit identity in terms of human dignity.