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INDIAN SOCIETY
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SOCIAL JUSTICE

CONTENTS

Social Empowerment in India

"*Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity*".   *–General George Smith Patton*

Social empowerment may be defined as the process of developing a sense of autonomy and self-confidence, and acting individually and collectively to change social relationships and the institutions and discourses that exclude a certain section of people and keep them in deprivation. Empowerment can have different aspects encompassing individuals ability and capabilities such as: human (such as good health and education), social (such as social belonging, a sense of identity, leadership relations) and psychological (self-esteem, self-confidence, the ability to imagine and aspire to a better future).

Social empowerment, particularly in developing countries like India is as important as food and water. People can exist without electricity and internet, but not without social empowerment. It assumes even greater importance when we account for the fact that India is a democracy. It has therefore been on the minds of social reformers right from the time the idea of a democratic India was envisaged. But the goal is very difficult to achieve, the journey has been mired with all kinds of issues and challenges, but every generation has to stand up to these challenges and find dynamic ways and means to resolve these issues, if at all we want to cherish living in a vibrant and progressive democracy.

Meaning and Scope of Social Empowerment

The notion of empowerment entails numerous things to many people. Concepts of choice, liberty, agency, capacity, contribution, self-sufficiency and increased resources are common to almost all definitions. Most of the researchers agreed on the idea of empowerment as ways to improve quality of life and human well-being. Briefly, empowerment can serve as a tool in the hands of the people for exercising greater and deeper control over their own lives and to secure a more dignified existence for themselves vis-a-vis others affecting a broad-based social revolution.

In social science literature, it is documented that the process of social change can be discovered at the personal as well as structural levels. At one end, social change can be visualized as a consequence of the development of individuals, gained through education, training, access to material resources, and the like. From this perspective, structural change is supposed to be an automatic outcome of individual empowerment. On the other end, the human being is seen as a part of society, and change is considered impossible unless social structures related to political power are changed primarily. Individual and structural transformations are closely associated with the individual's inner life, social environment, and that environment, in turn, exerts a deep influence on one's mystical and psychological well-being. The symbol of the body politic, likening all of humanity to a single social organism gives a valuable framework to discover empowerment as means to follow the transformation of individuals and civilization. Empowerment depends on and

contributes to a system in which different actors are provided resources required for each to make a unique contribution to the whole. From this analysis, it can be extrapolated that an individual and his social environment work together in a system set-up interacting with each other in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Therefore, what needs to be emphasized is that we need to kick- start this mutually reinforcing relationship either by empowering the individual himself or by creating social structures which promote individual empowerment and even if we are successful in working out one side of the relationship, we can create a self sustaining and self strengthening system.

However, some scholars visualize a third element as well, i.e. community which is nothing but a collection of individuals, but is perceived as a distinct element because of the nature of its functionality which is something more than the sum of its constituents and therefore sometimes manifests pursuits which are distinct from those of its constituents.

This matrix of individual, community and the social structures when dons the attire of dynamism churns out social change which is sometimes a synonym of social empowerment. Therefore, social change when manifested through vibrant individuals, community and institutions also become an agent for social empowerment.

Another aspect which deserves a mention is that social empowerment per se, largely refuses to be seen in isolation with economic and political empowerment. And rightly so because social empowerment cannot happen in a vacuum, it needs the fertile land of economic and political empowerment, to sprout and sustain itself. As the social structure is nothing but a sum total of the various other institutions present within its ambit, it ought to be necessarily influenced by the dynamics of these institutions and the sway which they command on the individual and the community. Having said that, it is needless to mention that the economic and political well being is bound to have a positive impact over the political and economic institutions with which they interact and hence on their overall social empowerment.

The meaning and scope of social empowerment continue to remain cloudy, till the time we do not transport the philosophical discussion into tangible indicators which can be further translated to definite goals and outcomes.

The following is therefore, a broadly framed list of goals which the idea of social empowerment seeks to achieve in terms of the ability of poor and vulnerable groups:

- To attain a set of skills, knowledge, self-perception, sense of identity and leadership relations
- To bring them at par with the rest of society as enshrined in the Constitution.
- To attain human capability such as access to quality health and education.
- To involve in local associations and inter-community cooperation such as Self-help groups, farming cooperatives, local panchayats, civic society, etc.
- To own assets such as land, housing, livestock, savings.
- To ensure equal rights, access to benefits and resources and empowerment to enable them to develop their potential and capacities through the process of planned development which acts as agents of social change.

Need for Social Empowerment

India is a land of diversity, though this diversity is used in positive connotations indicating diversity in the cultural sphere, but non-egalitarian social structure within

this diversity tends to be an exploitative and undemocratic in spirit. Therefore, this diversity needs to be blended with social empowerment. That is to have the socio-economic empowerment of individual, community and society as a whole. Diversity in Indian society can be celebrated only when it thrives in an empowered society free from any socio-economic cleave.

Moreover, we cannot afford to tolerate the great divide between the privileged and the disadvantaged, between the haves and the have-nots, because the very essence of democracy is the protection of the rights of all citizens and in a lopsided society where socio-economic balance is not in its place, the goal of achieving protection of basic rights of all citizens is largely unachieved. This is because in the absence of empowerment, people are shy of asserting their rights which leads to the emergence and perpetuation of exploitative tendencies by using the tools of discrimination and restriction of fundamental freedoms, to the expense and detriment of the disadvantaged sections of the society.

Social structure in India is composed of numerous castes and communities. We have sizeable populations of nearly all the important religions of the world. While followers of Hinduism are a majority community, other religions constituting minority groups are in sizeable number. Within the Hindu religion itself, we have four Varna and within each Varna there are numerous castes and sub-castes. Then, we have the Scheduled Castes (SCs), though they are beyond the Varna system, yet constitute a sizeable chunk of the population. Then, we have the tribes or the STs which is another important constituent of the population. Now, almost 50% of entire population is constituted by women who are separate entity in itself, which cannot be ignored whenever we talk about social empowerment.

This social composition is largely a jumbled and messy lot when it comes to socio-economic status. On the one hand, we have the upper caste Hindus, which is largely considered the dominant castes socially as well as economically, but there are islands of misery and destitution within them as well. On the other hand, we have the Dalits and the lower caste groups which are largely considered socially, economically and educationally backward, but there are islands of prosperity and status within these communities as well. Similar trends can be observed when we try to study the socio-economic profile of religious minorities, tribes or for that matter women population. This variegated composition is largely a result of our chequered history and various initiatives of reform taken up by various individuals, groups and the welfare State, at various points of time.

For the sake of its programmes and initiatives, the State has identified certain groups and communities which have been historically considered socially, educationally and economically backward. Certain other groups have also been identified, though not historically disadvantaged, on basis of deprivation due to factors like age, gender, or physical disability.

Disadvantaged Groups or Weaker Sections

Scheduled Castes

Term Scheduled Caste is not explicitly defined and the people belonging to this section vary from place to place in India. Article 341 of the Constitution states, "The President may, with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case

may be". As per the 2011 caste census, the Scheduled Castes comprise about 16.6%, of India's population. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 lists 1,108 castes across 29 states in its First Schedule.

Scheduled Tribes

The definition of Scheduled Tribes is also not fixed and is broadly governed by the wordings of Article 342 of the Constitution, which states "The President may, with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be". As per the 2011 caste census, the Scheduled Tribes comprise about 8.6% of India's population. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists 744 tribes across 22 states in its First Schedule.

Other Backward Classes

Other Backward Class (OBC) is a collective term used by the Government of India to classify castes which are socially or educationally disadvantaged, but not by caste alone. It is one of several official classifications of the population of India, along with Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs). The OBCs were found to comprise 52% of the country's population by the Mandal Commission report of 1980, a figure which had shrunk to 41% by 2006 when the National Sample Survey Organization took place. However, there is still a debate over the exact number of OBCs in the country. The commission recommended a reservation of 27% for OBCs.

Minorities

Minorities are usually classified on the basis of language and religion into religious minorities and linguistic minorities. Linguistic minorities are usually not covered under the agenda of social empowerment because these groups are more in search of protection of their distinctive languages and the cultures associated by virtue of being a part of that linguistic minority rather than an improvement in their socio-economic status. However, there are certain groups within the ambit of religious minorities, for example, within Islam, Sikhism and Christianity, which seek improvement in their socio-economic status by employing the instrument of social empowerment. Some scholars suggest that even the backwardness of these groups is related to the influences of the Hindu Caste system over them.

According to the 2011 Census, 79.8% of the population of India practices Hinduism and 14.2% adheres to Islam, while the remaining 6% adheres to other religions (Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and various indigenous ethnically-bound faiths). Christianity is the 3rd largest religion in India. Zoroastrianism and Judaism also have an ancient history in India, and each has several thousands of Indian adherents.

History of Social Empowerment Movements in India (Post 1947)

Social empowerment of society can be institution driven or in lack of any impetus from the political institution same can be driven by community through social movement. In community led empowerment the most potent instrument is social movement. Social

movement which sprouts from among the people is inspired by the goals and aspirations of the people. It flourishes because the people themselves want to bring about a change in their lives and this becomes the engine of the movement and powers it to bring about empowerment in the form of change. Therefore, a study of social movements aimed at the empowerment of a community is the best method to study the historicity of social empowerment.

Dalit Movements after Independence

Constituent assembly mandated with function to draft constitution of independent India, adopted the Constitution based on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. the real idea behind the said ideals was to create an egalitarian society where discrimination in any forms be denounced and state would aspire to create an empowered society free from any such discrimination.

Indian constitution provided constitutional guarantees and protections for a wide range of civil liberties for individuals. On the bedrock of fundamental rights constitution provided for the abolition of untouchability, discrimination based on caste, race, gender and place of birth.

Ambedkar argued for extensive economic and social rights for disadvantaged sections, and also won the Assembly's support for introducing a system of reservations of jobs in the civil services, schools and colleges for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, a system akin to affirmative action. These were the first of the measures of post independence, which were conceived for the empowerment of the Scheduled Castes.

Sanskritization

The prime motive of Dalit movement has been to bring change in social status and overcome disadvantaged position in society. Thus ultimate objective of the Dalit movement was achieving upward mobility, some Dalit leaders thought that such upward mobility could be achieved by adopting Brahmanical practices like wearing the sacred thread, vegetarianism, putting sandalwood paste on their foreheads etc. Now since upward mobility in terms of ritual purity was seen as contiguous to upward mobility, in other areas of life some Dalit leaders like Swami Thykkad (Kerala), Pandi Sunder Lai Sagar (Uttar Pradesh), Muldas Vaishya (Gujarat), Moon Vithoba Raoji Pande (Maharashtra) and others tried to adopt established cultural norms and practices of the higher castes. Imitation of the high caste manners by Dalits was an assertion of their right to equality.

Conversions

A good number of Dalits converted to Christianity, especially in Kerala. Some of the Dalits, especially in Punjab converted to Sikhism. They are known as Mazhabis. Dalits also got converted to Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with his millions of followers in Nagpur in 1956. As a protest against Hinduism, some of the Dalit leaders founded their own sects or religions. Guru Ghasi Das (Chhattigarh) founded Satnami Sect, Harichand Thakur (Bengal) founded Matua Sect, Ayyan Kali (Kerala) founded SJPY (Sadha Jana Paripalan Yogam) and Mangu Ram (Punjab) founded Adi Dharam.

Ideas of Ambedkar and Radicalization of Dalits

Ambedkar believed that the caste system was at the root of Dalit exploitation, and salvation lies in denouncing the caste categorization and its existence. According to him,

caste system was an essential part of the Hindu religion, so he tried to denounce the caste system which preached discriminatory treatment to the Dalits so much so that he led his followers to abandon Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. Ambedkar chose to embrace Buddhism over Sikhism, Christianity or any other religion because he thought that within the contours of Sikhism, Christianity or any other religion the Dalits may not be able to get the respect and acceptability which they were looking for and there was a chance that they might be reduced to a second grade status.

However, the basic difference between the ideas of Ambedkar and that of Gandhi on the approach to deal with caste based exploitation was the fact that Gandhi wanted Dalits to be embraced and absorbed dignifiedly within the fold of Hinduism and hence, implored upon the upper castes to drop all kinds of caste prejudices against Dalits and give them the respect and dignity which they deserve as inseparable members of the Hindu society. This idea of Gandhi was not acceptable to Ambedkar, who believed that reform within the Hindu caste system in favour of the Dalits was not possible because of the entrenched socio-economic vested interests present within it, therefore for Dalits to get their due respect they will have to mobilize themselves and fight against the evils of the oppressive practices of the Hindu caste system. He further believed that political mobilization was the road to achieve socio-economic mobility.

He also emphasized on the need of education in achieving socio-economic mobility and observed that once the Dalits had access to education which translates to the awareness of their rights they would be able to improve their socio-economic status by becoming a political force.

This approach of Ambedkar, however, gave rise to a Dalit movement which was somewhat confrontationist if not revolutionary in its outlook against caste Hindus and tried to utilize the benefits of political power as a means to achieve socio-economic empowerment. It is further important to mention that Ambedkar distinguished caste from class, so despite the fact that he supported the labour movement on several occasions, yet such support was only issue based and he never believed that the Marxists ideology of class can be utilized for annihilating the evils of caste in India. This is evident from the fact that Ambedkar joined hands with a few political parties – one the Communists (while joining the strike of mill workers) and the other is the Praja Samajwadi Party of Ashok Mehta in the 1952 elections. Although, he accepted the Congress support and offered to work in their government, he never tied up his political outfit to the Congress. Therefore, Ambedkar's ideology was never contiguous to the Marxian ideology of class based mobilization for achieving the empowerment of the have-nots. This is not to say that Ambedkar subscribed to capitalism in any manner rather it needs to be essentially mentioned that he once explicitly declared that he was confronted with twin foes of Capitalism as well as Caste and that the Dalits needed to fight both of them.

Though the Dalit movement after the death of Ambedkar acquired various hues and shades, yet the towering personality of Ambedkar continued to and continues to cast its spell around all of them and the future leaders could not imagine of building anything devoid of Ambedkar.

Dalit Panther Movement

Dalit Panther as a social organization was founded by Namdeo Dhasal in April 1972 in Mumbai, which saw its heyday in the 1970s and through the 80s. Dalit Panther was inspired by Black Panther Party, a revolutionary movement amongst African-Americans,

which emerged in the United States and functioned from 1966-1982. The members were young men belonging to Neo-Buddhists and Scheduled Castes.

Article "Kala Swatantrata Din" (Black Independence Day) by Dhale was published in "Sadhana" in 1972 created a great sensation and publicized the Dalit Panthers through Maharashtra.

The Dalit Panther movement was a radical departure from earlier Dalit movements. Its initial thrust on militancy through the use of rustic arms and threats, gave the movement a revolutionary colour. The prominent feature which makes the Dalit Panther's party movement an integral mention in the historicity of the Dalit movements post independence is its endeavour to conjoin the Dalit identity with the revolutionary proletarian class identity which was a clear cut departure from the accepted legacy of Ambedkar. On the other hand, Ambedkar not only divorced caste identity from class identity, but also shunned the use of revolutionary means for the achievement of their goals. This was particularly because although, have-nots from both Dalits and non-Dalits craved for a fundamental change, the former who were Ambedkarites adhered to what appeared to be Ambedkarian methods of socio-political change and the latter to what came to be the Marxian method which tended to see every social process as the reflection of the material reality. It is to the credit of Panthers that the assimilation of these two ideologies was attempted for the first time in the country but unfortunately it proved abortive in the absence of the efforts to rid each of them of its confusing influence and stress their non-contradictory essence. This contradiction is not resolved till date which is visible from the fact that even in the modern political scenario we do not see a merger or assimilation of the left forces with Dalit forces.

Panther-Naxalites Connection: Moreover, neither there was theoretical effort to integrate these two ideologies, nor was there any practice combining social aspects of caste with the question of holding land or property in the village setting. On the other hand, the reactionaries objected to the radical content of the programme alleging that the manifesto was doctored by the radicals – the Naxalites.

There is no denying the fact that the Naxalite movement which had erupted quite like the Dalit Panther, as a disenchantment with and negation of the established politics, saw a potential ally in the Panthers and tried to forge a bond right at the level of formulation of policies and programme of the latter, the panthers, however, did try to respond but the internal contradictions within the Panthers did not allow them to create a strong and durable bond and ultimately a united front could never be created.

Importance of Panther Party Movement: Unfortunately, quite like the Black Panther's Party (BPP), the Panthers lacked the suitable ideology to channel the anger and disenchantment of the Dalits for achieving their goal. It went the Republic Party of India (founded by Ambedkar) way and what remained of it were the numerous fractions.

Nevertheless, however as they reflected the positive aspects of the BPP's contributions in terms of self-defence, mass organizing techniques, propaganda techniques and radical orientation, the onset of the Panther's movement can be appreciated in the sense of creating a radical force within the Dalit community and opening the prospects of its relationships with the leftist forces in the country, which was harnessed to some extent by Kanshi Ram and his successor Mayawati although in a different form and spirit.

Bahujan Samaj Party Movement

In 1973, Kanshi Ram, who had quit his job in DRDO in 1971, and had been working since then to address the problems of employees in their workplace with his colleagues