

In the Fight for Social Justice: Some Experiences

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Overcoming the social oppression and economic exploitation of the dalits is one of the objectives that was sought to be achieved by our Constitution. Many laws were enacted for the purpose. Various schemes were implemented. However, if we look at the experience of the last six decades and the results achieved, the situation is not optimistic. The main reason is, the forces that would gain if a status quo is maintained are exerting a stronger influence over the government and the civil society than those who are fighting for a radical change in the conditions of dalits. Another reason is the weaknesses found in activities and understanding of various caste, class, mass organizations which work for the dalit cause. I will share some of the experiences gained through our activism, about the strengths and weaknesses of the Dalit Social Movements and about how the various forces that want a change and that work against the change in the condition of dalits behave during various movements.

I will analyse some of the experiences with regard to positive and negative role played by various forces in the society during the course of three important campaigns. (Struggle for the formation of SC/ST Commission, direct action against untouchability and demanding a law for SC, ST Sub-plan)

Let me first explain about the struggle for the formation of state SC, ST Commission in Andhra Pradesh.

An opinion that untouchability is almost eradicated in society is widely prevalent in various quarters. Many people ask the question: where is caste discrimination in our state? The followers of bourgeoisie-landlord parties tell that there is no discrimination against the dalits and even if it exists it is not as intense as portrayed by the Left parties, dalit organisations and some voluntary organisations. *Sangh Parivar* propagates that some Christian organisations are aggressively campaigning on this issue to encourage and defend religious conversions. Some dalit leaders who have mingled with the ruling parties, in their talks, try to reduce the intensity of the caste discrimination. Even for the mainstream media, it has become a habit to remain silent on caste discrimination and if they were forced to talk about it, they often twist the facts.

To bring out the real state of affairs before the people, we have organised a state wide survey in October 1999 to bring out the facts about untouchability and caste discrimination. In the survey carried out in 11,000 dalit bastis for 15 days, our activists went around to assess the situation at the ground. The findings were an eye opener for all.

As the saying goes, that 'it cannot be a truth unless it comes from the horse's mouth', society will not recognise the prevalence of caste discrimination unless it comes from the government. It is for this reason that we initiated struggle demanding the formation of a Commission to study the prevalence of caste discrimination in the state and suggest remedies for eliminating them.

Sustained struggle was carried out in 1998-99. Thousands of people participated in the 'Chalo Assembly' call given by the Organisation on March 22. Members of the Left parties in the legislative assembly raised this issue in the House. It is because of the pressure exerted both outside and inside the Legislative Assembly that the government

was forced to appoint a one-member Commission of retired High Court Judge K. Punnaiah on 23.03.2001. This Commission toured all over the state and collected evidence on the discrimination meted out to the dalits and their status. It organised public hearings. It received memoranda and complaints from individuals, organisations and parties. On the basis of the information collected, it had submitted a 1996 pages Report to the government. This had brought to light the fact that caste discrimination is prevalent with much more intensity in the state than people thought. It had suggested 42 recommendations as the solution.

To force the government, to establish 'State SC, ST Commission', to implement the recommendations of the Punnaiah Commission, another struggle was launched. As a result, in 2003, the government had enacted a legislation for the establishment of a State SC, ST Commission. For the first time in the state, a Commission was formed with Justice K. Punnaiah as the Chairman.

This first Commission worked for three years. The first term of the Commission proved beneficial to the dalits as it gave moral support to the people by its active involvement on various issues and demanding accountability from the government, though it had no power to supervise or regulate the failure in implementation of the law. In the second term, the ruling party had appointed its own representative as the Chairman of the Commission. This had reduced the activity of the Commission. The post fell vacant as the Chairman contested elections in 2009 as a candidate of the ruling party. The same ruling party that had come to power after the elections failed to appoint a Chairman to the Commission for the past four years.

Nobody had the illusions that with the formation of the Commission at the state level, discrimination will be eliminated or that all the problems of the dalits will be resolved. We have looked at it as an instrument and platform to mobilise people against discrimination. If the Chairman is active, there is an increased scope to bring pressure on the government machinery. Actually, this had happened during the tenure of the first Commission. This was possible because the Chairman during that period was really concerned about the plight of the dalits and had the individuality to act. As the next Chairman was appointed as political beneficiary, he had neglected his duties.

Because the Commission was useful as an instrument for the activists, though it had no real powers and bite, ruling parties and classes were unable to tolerate even its mere existence. That is the reason why a Chairman was not appointed till date.

Interestingly, dalit organisations have remained silent even though the government failed to appoint a Chairman for the last four years. They did not show any concern to revitalise this institution, they did not show even thousandth part of the concern that they exhibited for reservations. This, most importantly shows, how alienated are the leaders of the dalit organisations who are basically from urban employee sections, from the dalit populace in the rural regions.

Now let me analyse the direct action struggle against untouchability.

Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination had organised a direct action struggle against untouchability in 2006 throughout the state. In Rangareddy district, I personally along with 25 other young activists conducted a cycle yatra to motivate dalits for direct action to assert their rights. The cycle yatra continued for 13 days (April 2-14, 2006), passed through 152 villages and travelled 950 kilometres. In 69 villages direct action was carried out with events like entering temples, breaking the two-glasses system and other similar activities. Again in 2007 similar cycle yatras were carried out for 10 days in 8336 villages, covering 41,000 kilometres.

This programme attracted wide attention throughout the state. We received both praise and criticism. Some sections had criticised us saying that we were instigating conflicts in villages that were peaceful. Some had criticised us saying that we are creating enmity between people who are living as brothers. In many villages, certain dalits would stop us from entering the villages saying that the upper castes are looking after them well, they are living in amity and that there is no caste discrimination. When enquired, it became known that those dalits were acting as touts of the upper caste landlords at their behest. In many cases, women came out bravely to narrate the reality, when compared to the men. Men, mostly older ones, narrated to us more about the problems of welfare schemes, lands and burial grounds than about discrimination they were facing. The village upper caste landlords will not be angry even if dalits tell at length the problems they face from the government. These problems too need to be solved. They are ready to compromise on social oppression with a view that they cannot win any conflict with the upper castes. There were criticisms from quite opposite sides on temple entry. Some stated that communists are encouraging religion through their campaign for temple entry. Some had questioned, why are the communists encouraging the Hindu religion which is the basis for the caste system and why are they preventing them, thus, from converting to other religions. This is the first criticism. Why are atheist communists encouraging temple entry? This is the second criticism. Both these criticisms are ignoring the issue of untouchability. The issue here is not about encouraging one religion or discouraging another. What we did is not for religion. Irrespective of our personal beliefs, if some individual or group of individuals who have religious feelings demand the elimination of discrimination in their religion on the basis of caste and that they too should have the equal right to enter a temple, we should stand by them. Only then will we be fighting against caste discrimination.

The reaction of leaders of the bourgeoisie-landlord parties, particularly the local leaders was very mischievous. Some leaders who are adept at deception, met the yatra team and praised the campaign saying that there is no discrimination in their village. Those dalits who could not speak before them, spoke about the prevalence of discriminatory practices after they had left. In some villages, the dalit leaders were tutored to tell the yatra team that there was no discrimination in the village, discourage the team and tell them that it would be better for them to go to another village. They had instigated the locals then and there and the leaders left the villages. In many villages, they had set aside their political differences and came together against the dalits. In some places, the backward castes were more aggressive than the upper castes and women were more aggressive than the men in resisting direct action.

There are many instances where people rallied for justice when there were attacks, atrocities and harassment on dalits. Dalit organisations did a good job in the aftermath of Karamchedu, Tsundur and the recent Lakshimpet incident. Though there is no unity among the leaders of the dalit organisations, they are reacting after an incident. They are not conducting campaigns against untouchability, discrimination – asserting their self-respect and equality – unrelated to some incidents. If we conclude that because most of the dalit leaders are employees living in urban areas and are thus unable to understand the problem of discrimination in rural areas and therefore are unable to act upon them, it would be wrong because these very leaders are actively working in the villages on the issue of categorisation of Scheduled Castes. This shows that the problem lies in their thinking. There is a difference in the manner these organisations react and work on the issue of reservations and the manner in which they react to the issue of untouchability. Every year on April 14, the birth anniversary of Dr B.R.Ambedkar, leaders of the dalit organisations only confine to celebrating it in many villages and towns. They express

their anger and indignation on untouchability and discrimination. But Many of them do not strive to rouse the consciousness of dalits in villages against untouchability even for four-five Sundays or other holidays per year.

Communists are accused of ignoring the issues of social oppression and of giving exclusive emphasis for class struggle especially economic struggles. This criticism may be partially true, but the irony is that it is those dalit organisations and leaders, at least most of them, who are more eligible for this criticism for, these are the people who are giving exclusive importance to the issues of reservation and economic benefits.

Even dalits who are facing untouchability regularly are not easily getting ready to confront it. You will be here today and confront the system, but who will be there with us tomorrow when the upper caste landlords carry out attacks on us? This is a question that repeatedly came before us. This is a valid question. When we gave the confidence that we will be always with them and stand by them, dalits came out to confront discrimination. Direct action, confronting the discriminatory practices were possible only when our Organisation had the necessary mechanism or if there was any other organisation that gave them the necessary confidence or if some individuals from that village came forward to lead them with a strong individual consciousness. Where such conditions did not exist, the yatra could succeed only in campaigning. It would not be possible to eliminate discrimination unless the dalits get united and village has already existing organisations like that of the trade unions, agricultural workers, peasants, other dalit organisations and NGOs, and political forces like the Communists and other such organisations that stand for social justice. In some villages where there was a special campaign, we had witnessed the restoration of old system.

The third movement was for enactment of the law on sub plan and nodal agency.

There is discrimination against dalits not only on social issues but even in the issues concerned with development.

Dalit bastis and adivasi habitats are being neglected in village development programmes. Contrary to the claims of the government, injustice is meted out to dalits and adivasis in the budget allocation, which has to be done according to the ratio of their population and in expenditure. On these issues too dalit organisations and NGOs are working for many years. Observing that representations and memorandums will not yield results, Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination organised a struggle campaign in February 2007. 25 district and state level leaders observed *satyagraha* for six days. Due to the pressure exerted, the government was forced to pass orders appointing a nodal agency in November. These orders remained confined to papers. Concluding that if there is to be a guarantee for the implementation of the sub-plan, it is only through the law, a *satyagraha* was conducted for seven days in 2011. The government conceded and appointed a ministerial sub-committee headed by the Deputy Chief Minister to look into the feasibility of the demand. As the government is sitting upon the recommendations of the committee and not taking any decision, a broad united front consisting of 100 organisations conducted a protest programme on March 27. The government was forced to move and enacted a law in December 2012. Though it is a positive factor that a law is enacted, there are no guarantees to ensure that the amounts allocated for dalits and adivasis are spent on dalits and adivasis only. There are many lacunae also in the Act. To overcome these lacunae and ensure that the law is implemented pressure has to be maintained.

If we observe the way various forces had conducted in these three struggles many interesting facts emerge. The way the same forces acted differently in the movement

against caste discrimination and in the sub-plan campaign also come out sharply.

Though science has proved that all human beings are physiologically one in spite of their castes and the liberal, humanitarian values teach us that all are equal and the relation between caste and occupation was cut, there are political and economic reasons for the continuation of caste discrimination. Caste discrimination is useful as an important means to ensure that the poor dalits do not challenge the hegemony of the dominant caste landholders in the rural areas. If dalits reject discrimination and act according to their own thinking, it would be difficult to subjugate the remaining poor and backward sections in the society. The non-dalit poor will give more importance to their work relationship they share with dalits than the caste relationship they share with the landlords and lean towards class unity. Then the poor will increase their strength to fight against class exploitation and land concentration. This will strike at the very roots of the power of the ruling classes. That is the reason why, even to safeguard their class exploitation, the ruling classes think it is better to continue with caste discrimination. In these circumstances, even for class struggles it is important for the dalits to gain the necessary independent strength to fight against caste discrimination. Hegemonic forces, in whichever party they be, they want the dalits and other poor to be subservient to them. It is even more necessary to ensure that dalits remain under their control for vote banks in parliamentary democracy. That is the reason why they think it is good for the rural hegemonic forces and ruling class parties to ensure the continuation of discrimination.

Ruling class parties and hegemonic forces do not have any problem as long as dalits wage their struggles for the implementation of government welfare measures. In many instances, those ruling parties which are in opposition extend their support. Even the parties in power make many promises. They even implement some of them. On these issues, however strong the activism of dalits may be, it does not come in the way of their exploitation and political hegemony. Above all, they can convert some among dalits as brokers, religious agents and followers. These people live among dalits but ensure that there is no threat to the ruling parties' influence.

Dalit organisations played a more active role in the movement for sub-plan when compared to the movement against caste discrimination. Many dalit intellectuals and groups had done enormous work for many years in thoroughly studying the sub-plan. They played an important role in creating awareness. Dalit representatives in ruling parties and dalit officers in the State bureaucracy pressurised, though to an extent from their own platforms. Even though dalit organisations did not mobilise substantially for the agitation, but their leaders participated enthusiastically. As the implementation of dalit sub-plan does not cause anger to the rural hegemonic forces, even dalit representatives in the government too took an active role. In contrast to this, dalit representatives in ruling class parties neglected the movement against caste discrimination. Some of them had expressed their solidarity personally. Though dalit organisation leaders had praised the movement, they did not show much interest.

The government, which was forced to enact a legislation for sub-plan is now campaigning that all the opposition parties opposed the law, but it had gone ahead and enacted the law for the welfare of dalits. The chief minister of the state has even started honouring him self as, 'friend of dalits' (*dalit bandu*). They are conducting a campaign called 'Indiramma dreams'. Ministers and legislators of the ruling parties are competing each other in praising the Chief Minister for this achievement.

Successive governments did not show similar interest in propagating against caste discrimination. They did not come forward to conduct a special discussion in the

legislative assembly. For four years, they did not appoint a Chairman to the SC, ST Commission. Dalit representatives who have benefited from reservation in the name of community could not react on untouchability and this in itself shows how intense is the pressure exerted by the rural hegemonic forces on them.

There is no mention or discussion on untouchability and caste discrimination in the houses of peoples' representatives. However, it had become a regular feature to find the ruling classes indulging in self-praise about the number of schemes they had initiated for the well-being of dalits. Even this is not prevalent in the mandal and zilla parishads where there is more intense impact of the rural hegemonic forces.

On the whole, two important conclusions can be drawn. Bourgeoisie parties will in the end compromise on issues like reservations and sub-plan. They might delay the resolution of the problems. If necessary those compromises do not shy away from reaching an agreement. Because they think that ultimately they do not harm their hegemony or exploitative system. They know very well the methods to co-opt leaders of the movements and also ensure that movements go out of their hegemonic sphere. But on issues like caste discrimination and untouchability these parties firmly stick to their resolve to keep the atrocious system intact. They try to overtly or covertly sabotage the efforts launched for their elimination. Because they know very well that to retain their hold over village poor, they have to ensure the continuation of caste discrimination.

With regard to the activities of organisations working for the cause of dalits experience clearly showed up some of the weaknesses in their work which prevent them from achieving the expected results.

Five of the key weaknesses are the following.

1. Failure to mobilise dalit masses to assert their rights: Though there are many organisations, institutions and individuals working against the caste system and for the cause of dalits and other backward sections, most of them are reacting to the incidents but are not working continuously for ensuring that dalits assert their rights and fight against the discrimination they are facing in their day-to-day life.

2. Less practise, more rhetoric: There are ceaseless arguments and discussions on various aspects of caste. Will caste system die without renouncing the Hindu religion? Will caste system cease without the elimination of the class system? Will caste discrimination and untouchability go away without the annihilation of the caste system? Many a times, discussions on these issues cross the limits and stoop down to the level of mutual recrimination. Theoretical discussion and arguments are necessary to clarify the issues. This, however, should not mean confining ourselves to argumentation. Those issues that cannot be resolved through arguments can be settled through practice. The worth of any organisation lies in the practice of its ideals.

3. Lack of faith in eradication of untouchability: Some people express pessimism about the possibility of eradication of untouchability and discrimination without destroying the caste system. It is incorrect to see the issue in this way. At least, untouchability and extreme forms of discrimination can be eliminated in public sphere through continuous and concerted struggle.

4. Unending fragmentation: Division more than unity appears to be the tendency of the various caste and identity organisations. This is the main obstacle in taking forward the task of achieving social justice. Even if some sort of unity is achieved when some grave incidents happened (like for example, Karamchedu, Tsundur and other such incidents), this remains momentary and temporary. Differences remain primary. There

are no efforts to achieve broad unity for achieving a particular objective. The need for organisations that can work as catalysts and with determination to achieve such unity is very important at present.

5. Still lingering sectarian tendencies: Exclusivist tendencies like only dalits can understand the problems of dalits, only dalits should work for dalits were strong in the past. Though this sectarian tendency has weakened to an extent, it still remains a considerable force. Without overcoming these tendencies and uniting all those forces that come together in the fight against caste discrimination, waging an isolated battle will not be successful. In the struggle for dalit self-respect, no doubt, dalits should play a central role. However this should not mean that the efforts to mobilise democratic and non-dalit people, should be ignored.

6. Insufficient attention from class movements: Those forces that are working for building an egalitarian society, mainly communists, are forming many organisations to mobilise people and bring them into movements. They are organising them as workers, peasants, agricultural labourers, students, youth and women, according to their specific needs. Though these organisations have as one of their tasks, the struggle against caste discrimination and working for the welfare of dalits, they are unable to continuously focus on this objective. This has not been possible because of the various issues and concerns that these organisations had to take up.

Any organisation or individual interested in eradicating untouchability and discrimination should strive to overcome the above weaknesses and build a broad based united movement. In the last fifteen years of its existence Organisation for Struggle Against caste Discrimination tried to practice the above understanding .