

## Struggles on Dalit Issues: Experiences

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Overcoming the social and economic exploitation of the dalits is one of the targets that were 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 those who are fighting for a comprehensive change in the conditions of dalits. I will share some experiences gained through our activism, about how the various forces that want a change and are against the change in the condition of dalits behave during various circumstances.

There are many organisations working for the welfare of dalit and backward sections of the society and against caste system. There is some lacuna in their functioning. That is the reason why they are not able to achieve expected results. To overcome this lacunae, activists working in various mass organisations came together and formed an organisation called, 'Struggle Organisation Against Caste Discrimination' in 1998. We thought of achieving a change in five aspects.

1. Though they are many organisations, institutions and individuals working against the caste system and for the 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. Will caste system cease without the ceasing of the Hindu religion? Will caste system cease without the ceasing of the class system? Will caste discrimination and untouchability cease without the ceasing of the caste system? These discussions are endless. They are ceaseless arguments. Many a times, these discussions cross the limits and stoop down to the level of mutual accusations and abuses. Theoretical discussion and arguments are necessary. This is how issues become clearer. This, however, should not mean wasting time over arguments. Practice should take place simultaneously. Those issues that cannot be resolved through arguments can be resolved through practice. That is the reason why practice too should be given importance.
3. It is improper to think that caste discrimination cannot be eliminated without the elimination of the caste system. At least, untouchability and extreme forms of discrimination can be eliminated. We should organise movements to achieve this. This understanding is reflected in our choosing the name, 'Struggle Organisation Against Caste Discrimination'.
4. Division more than unity appears to be the important 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 an unity is noticed during some grave incident (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 an organisation that can work as a catalyst and with determination to achieve such an unity is very much present.
5. Only dalits understand the problems of dalits. Exclusivist tendencies like only dalits should work for dalits are 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 a lonely battle will not be successful. In the struggle for dalit self-respect, dalits should play a central role. However this should not mean that the efforts to mobilise democratic and non-dalits around these people, should be rejected.
6. 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 their task, struggle

against caste discrimination and working for the welfare of dalits, they are unable to sufficiently function with this perspective. They are not making this struggle as their regular struggle. This is not possible because of the various issues and concerns that these organisations have to take up and not because of sectarian understanding.

In the last 15 years, the Struggle Organisation Against Caste Discrimination tried to put into practice such an understanding. I will explain some experiences and the positive and negative role played by various forces in the society during the course of three important campaigns carried out by our Organisation (struggle for the formation of SC/ST Commission, direct action against untouchability and demanding a law for SC, ST Sub-plan) during this period. From these, it becomes clear that there will be equally intense attempts to stop the efforts for achieving social equality.

Let us first analyse the struggle for the formation of SC, ST Commission.

Where is caste discrimination in the state? We have organised a state wide survey in October 1999 to bring out the facts to observe if there is any truth in the statement that caste discrimination had almost ended in the state. In the survey carried out in 11,000 dalit bastis for 15 days, our activists went around to analyse the situation at the ground. The findings were eye openers for all.

The followers of bourgeoisie-landlord parties tell that there is no discrimination against the dalits and even if it exists its 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 an habit for them to remain silent on caste discrimination and if they were forced to talk about it, they twist the facts.

As the saying goes, that 'it cannot be 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 were forced to 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 in various phases 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 Punnaiah on 23.03.2001. This Commission toured all over the state and collected evidence on the discrimination meted out on 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. It had suggested 42 recommendation for the solution.

Another struggle was launched demanding the establishment of 'State SC, ST Commission', to implement the recommendations of the Commission. 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 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 gthe 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.

As 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 its mere existence. That is the reason why a Chairman was not appointed till date.

Interestingly, dalit organisations 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, except lobbying for the post of Chairman according to their sub-castes, groups and individuals. 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 us analyse the direct action struggle against untouchability.

The Struggle Organisation 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 rouse the social consciousness. The cycle yatra was carried out for 13 days (April 2-14, 2006), passed through 152 villages and travelled 950 kilometres. In 69 villages direct action was carried out like entering temples, breaking the two-glasses system and other similar activities. Again in 2007 similar cycle yatras were carried out in 8336 villages, covering 41,000 kilometres in 10 days.

This programme created interest 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 lighting fire between people who are living as brothers. In many villages, certain dalits would stop us from entering the villages saying that the upper caste landlords 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 who have become representatives for the interests of the upper caste landlords are acting in this manner. In many cases, women came out bravely to narrate the reality, when compared to the men. Men, mostly older ones, told us that more than discrimination they were facing the problem of welfare schemes, lands and burial grounds. The village upper caste landlords will not be angry even when they 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 both 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 stopping them 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 neglecting 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 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 parties, particularly the local leaders was very ambiguous and was similar to fence sitting. Some leaders who are adept at cheating, 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 dalits 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 had moved 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 thus are unable to act upon them, it would be wrong because these very leaders are actively working in the villages on the issue of sub-division. This shows that the problem lies in their thought process. 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 conduct various activities in many villages and towns. They express their anger on untouchability and discrimination. But they do not work to rouse the consciousness of dalits in villages against untouchability even for four-five Sundays or other holidays per year.

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 have 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 their population ratio 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, Struggle Organisation 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 observed 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 and not taking any decision, a joint 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. 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 differences in the way similar forces acted 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 upper caste landlords 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 labour relationship than the caste relationship they share with the landlords and lean towards class affinity. Then the poor will increase their strength to fight against exploitation and land concentration. This will strike at the very roots 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 around them. This would be possible only if dalits are not independent. It is even more necessary to ensure that dalits remain under their control for votes 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 in opposition extend their support and encourage. Even the ruling parties make many promises. They implement some projects. On these issues, however strong the activism amongst dalits, they do not come in the way of their exploitation and political hegemony. Above it, they can convert some among dalits as brokers, religious agents and followers. They stay 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 good work for many years together in thoroughly studying the sub-plan. They played a good 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. Dalit organisations did not mobilise substantially for the movement, 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. But 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 using the epithet, 'friend of dalits' (*dalit bandu*). They are campaigning 'Indiramma dreams'. Ministers and legislators of the ruling parties are competing to cash on this achievement.

Successive governments did not show similar interest on the movement against caste discrimination. They did not campaign 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 they 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 remain under their hegemony. But on issues like caste discrimination and untouchability these parties express their lip sympathies or act secretly. 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.