

The Dalit Situation in India Today

by John C. B. Webster

According to the 1991 Census there were about 138,200,000 Dalits in India and they constituted about 16.5% of the entire population of India. The 2001 Census has now been completed. The total population has risen to over one billion, but we do not know yet what the Dalit total is; however, if past trends continue, we may safely assume not only that the Dalit population will also have increased but also that the Dalit proportion of the total population has risen as well.

Dalit

“Dalit” (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India’s caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections. Dalits have chosen the “Dalit” label for themselves for at least three important reasons. First, the label indicates that the condition of the Dalits has not been of their own making or choosing; it is something which has been inflicted upon them by others. Thus, secondly, there is an element of militancy built into the label; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied them. “Dalit” also indicates that all these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis, etc.) share a common condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

The Dalit Political Strategy

Both historically and currently Dalits have adopted four strategies, singly or in combination, in order to attain these ends. The first and most dominant has been the political strategy of gaining power either as an end in itself (if you have power, others come to you and you do not have to go begging to them) or as a means to other ends (e.g., greater economic and educational opportunities).

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However, Dalits have been divided over whether to pursue political power independently of other castes or in alliance with those members of other castes and communities whose interests and ideals are close to their own.

For example, there are at present Dalit members of Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies, as well as Dalit party workers, in virtually all the major political parties, including the Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party, which in its traditionalist Hindu ideology, is

Their Economic Strategy

The second strategy has been economic. Not only are Dalits extremely poor (almost half of them living below the poverty line as compared to less than one-third of the rest of the population) but they are also almost totally dependent upon the dominant castes for their livelihoods as agricultural or urban labor. Thus many Dalits have sought greater economic independence, both as an end in itself and as a means to other ends (e.g., political power, educational

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quite anti-Dalit. There are also exclusively Dalit political parties at the regional level and two Dalit-led political parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati as well as the Republican Party of India, have members of Parliament as well. The Dalit debate within and between the various parties over whether to get whatever share of power Dalits can through whatever alliances are most expedient or to maintain pressure from outside on those in power by maintaining some ideological and programmatic unity, at least among Dalits themselves if not with other disadvantaged groups (tribals, religious minorities, women, the poor in general) as well, has yet to be resolved. As this brief description suggests, there is little political unity among Dalits at the present time and many are wondering out loud whether the political process can deliver what Dalits have every right to expect from it.

opportunity). During the past decade a good number of international development agencies, both religious and secular, have also adopted this strategy by funding a variety of grassroots Dalit organizations engaged in a range of community development activities. These activities focus on such things as small-scale industries, teaching new skills, educating Dalits on how to take advantage of government development assistance, developing cooperatives. The task is enormous. Over 75% of the Dalit population is still rural and so these activities have to be carried out village by village. They also face opposition within each village from members of the dominant castes who want to keep Dalits as an impoverished and dependent source of cheap labor.

The Social Strategy

A third strategy, which can be described as social, has two components. Education is one. If Dalits become literate (10.2% in 1961, 37.4% in 1991) or even educated, they can move beyond

unskilled labor, earn more money, and so gain greater respect. The other is making life-style changes which get rid of those practices considered especially "low" or "polluting" and substituting those of the "higher" castes instead. For example, they should give up eating certain meats and cease working at certain jobs (e.g., cleaning latrines). The aim of education and life-style change has been to remove some of the more obvious reasons for anti-Dalit prejudice.

The social strategy was adopted by the Christian missions over a century ago and it still dominates the churches' thinking about improving the Dalits' lot. Today there are churches which are not only giving special priority to Dalits in some of their institutions of formal education, but are also developing job-oriented, nonformal educational projects to enhance skill development. The social strategy has also undergirded much of the affirmative action policy built into India's constitution. The assumption is that if Dalits get educated, get better jobs, and earn more money so as to raise their class status, then their caste status (measured in terms of mutually respectful and friendly relations with members of "higher" castes) would improve also. The problem has been that the government (controlled by the dominant "higher" castes) has never fully implemented all the progressive affirmative action legislation it has passed into law. This is a source of great resentment, especially among educated Dalits.

The Religious Strategy

The fourth strategy has been religious in nature. Its moderate form involves reform from within one's own religious tradition. For example, some Hindu sects have renounced caste hierarchy and some Hindu reformers, Gandhi being the best known, have sought to "uplift" the Untouchables. The more radical religious option, however, has

been conversion to another, more egalitarian religion. For example, over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today the majority of the Christian population of India is Dalit! Following the induction of their great leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, into the Buddhist Sangha in 1956, several million Dalits have become Buddhists.

What a new religion offered to the Dalits was a new identity defined by religion rather than by caste, as well as a more egalitarian religious counter-culture. This has been only partially successful. No matter what goes on in Christian or Buddhist circles, most Indians still think in terms of caste and so simply assume that anyone who is a Christian or Buddhist is a Dalit. Moreover, both Christian and Buddhist Dalits were denied the affirmative action benefits and protections granted to other Dalits; in 1990 the Buddhist Dalits became eligible and Dalit Christians are still ineligible. By denying these to Christian (and Muslim) Dalits the government is in fact providing strong economic disincentives to conversion and strong economic incentives to Christian Dalits to return to the Hindu fold.

The Christian Dalits

As this brief analysis suggests, the present situation of Dalits in India is complex and confusing. There are no obvious, agreed upon solutions to the problems which the Dalits face; the way forward in the Dalit struggle is by no means clear. However, there are a few trends visible among Christian Dalits which are quite important for Christian thinking on this subject. First and foremost among these is a growing acknowledgement that they are Dalits and that conversion to Christianity has not really changed that significant fact of their lives, despite hopes and promises to the contrary. Most

Christian Dalits thus have a dual social and psychological identity, Christian as well as Dalit, and have to live with the tensions built into that dual identity.

A second trend is an increasing assertion of Dalit identity as a positive thing, a source of pride rather than of shame. In this they (rightly) challenge pervasive cultural norms. One expression of this assertiveness is Dalit Theology; another is a harsh critique of those missionary and Indian Church leaders who, in their efforts to “Indianize” the Church, have equated “Indian” culture with Brahmanic instead of Dalit culture. (One reason why Dalit Christians have resisted a lot of efforts to “Indianize” the theology and liturgy of the Church is because they are fed up with the Brahmanic culture which they converted to get away from!) Perhaps most obvious of all are the persistent efforts to “raise the caste issue” and exorcise the demon of caste discrimination (which is “Legion” and takes many forms) within the churches themselves. Until this is done, the churches cannot embody much “good news” for their own Dalit members, let alone for other Dalits.

Finally, there are Christian Dalits who are staunch advocates of each of the four Dalit strategies described above and are working hard at implementing those strategies. I see no evidence that one strategy, or even one combination of strategies, has become clearly predominant in Dalit Christian circles. What does seem evident, however, is that over the past two decades Christian Dalits are working more closely with other Dalits to achieve common aims and objectives than was true earlier. “Dalit Solidarity” is an end and means much desired but difficult to achieve; yet many Dalit Christian leaders have come to the conclusion that their Christian hopes for their own people cannot be realized in isolation from the realization of the hopes of all the Dalit people. **IJFM**