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Dalit Assertion – Strategic Considerations

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By Dalit Assertion, I mean: *The right to influence, assert, demand, express frustration, offer alternatives, and strategically align actions to achieve the overall objective of creating an inclusive society where caste is not a barrier or a discriminatory factor for the development of the self, the community, or the nation.*

2016 marks the 125th birth anniversary and 60th death anniversary year of Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Over the past year, a significant amount of attention has been given to increase the profile of Dr. Ambedkar and to establish various monuments as tributes to his legacy. While many of these activities and tributes are received positively, some concerns have also been raised by the academia, social activists, and patrons of Dr. Ambedkar questioning the genuineness of these various activities and tributes. Some have even raised concerns that the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar is now being appropriated for political benefits and to advance the communal agenda of the Hindutva forces. Nonetheless, one thing is clear- Dalit movement has now become a force to reckon with.

In this presentation, I will highlight the current status of the Dalit movement and share my recommendations for the consideration by the academia, social activists, and policymakers to support the effective implementation of justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity- values that are enshrined in India's Constitution.

To understand the current context, let us first consider some salient aspects of the Dalit movement. Even by doing an informal analysis, it is evident that the current Dalit movement:

- Is very complex
- Faces many threats (e.g. concerns around appropriation)
- Is fragmented and is vulnerable to further fragmentation (e.g. multiple Dalit-based political parties and no single religious identity)
- Is lagging behind in number of social and economic indicators
- Is effected by continued atrocities
- Faces threats from the establishment by being labelled as anti-India, anti-National or even as a terrorist organization. For example, before and after the death of Rohith Vemula,

various ministers of the central government had hounded the Ambedkar Student Association and called it “*casteist*” and “*anti-national*”; called Vemula an “*abusive anti-national*” and a “*terror apologist*”;

- Is under threat of being decimated or even dismissed because of various orchestrated efforts to erase such words as ‘Dalit’ from the vocabulary, school curriculums, and official correspondence. Even political parties such as Republic Party of India, some would argue, have been successfully decimated if not totally eliminated yet.

In addition,

- Quality education is becoming less affordable and is having a disproportionate effect on Dalits and their wellbeing. Without access to affordable, quality education, competing in private sector jobs and in very limited government jobs, is becoming a mere dream than a reality for a number of Dalits.
- Opportunities available through the reservation or the affirmative action programs are diminishing because of the various globalization, privatization, and liberalization policies.
- Like the western world, role of public sector in India is shrinking; the numbers and size of Multi-national Corporations is increasing while at the same time opportunities for employment in the public sector are decreasing. This has had a significant impact on Dalits who for the last 70 years or so have relied on employment in public sector for their self- development and their families’ and community’s prosperity. As a part of the affirmative action strategy, a percentage of the government jobs were set aside (‘reserved’) for Dalits, which resulted in improving social and economic status of number of Dalits.

While these are significant factors that are placing the Dalit movement under various threats, there are also a number of factors or developments that are making the movement stronger, resilient, and in position of turning some of these weaknesses and threats into greater opportunities and strengths. This caravan of social transformation can therefore continue to move forward without taking or facing major setbacks. I regard the key positive elements as follows:

- Almost 15% of the BJP’s Lok Sabha strength consists of Dalit MPs elected from reserved seats meaning that 40 MPs elected under the BJP banner are from seats reserved for Dalits – making it the largest “*Dalit block*” in the Lok Sabha (House of Commons). This would suggest that this group of MPs could provide the leadership needed to reform from within the party and turn the weaknesses into strengths.
- Rohith Vemula alleged suicide and attacks on Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Hyderabad University (HU) – has united north and south India and created opportunity for a common platform to educate, agitate, and organize from. This has the potential to

turn fragmented efforts and agitations into organized, united national movement. After the death of Rohith Vemula, students from across India and across all caste-lines took to the streets and challenged the authorities to give due justice, and protect freedom and autonomy to the universities to be critical thinkers and provide alternatives where possible.

- It appears that Ambedkarism is becoming a threat to Hindutva forces- hence appropriation of Dr. Ambedkar and making concerted efforts to ban conversion to Christianity, Islam, and potentially other religions.
- Power of social media - social media is playing a critical role in spreading consciousness as dedicated groups of Dalit intellectuals and organisations are giving vent to ideological and political positions of Dalits on burning issues that are reaching out to millions worldwide. Rohith Vemula's message reached every nook and corner of the world bypassing the established media cartels in India. Groups like Roundtable India, Video Volunteers, DalitCamera, www.Ambedkar.org, www.dalitwatch.com, www.ambedkartimes.com, “We are ALL untouchables”, as well as independent facebook campaigners like senior journalist Dilip Mandal, and journalist Gurpreet Singh (Radio Desi) are just a few examples of those who are doing a great service in this regard.
- Collaboration between “*the left*” and the “*Ambedkarites*” is now being encouraged and realized as indicated by profiling of common slogans such as “*Jai Bhim Comrade*”, a title of Anand Patwardhan’s film (2011). It must be remembered that Rohith Vemula had joined the Ambedkar Student Association after leaving the Marxist Students Federation of India because he was bitterly disappointed with its casteism. Therefore, it is encouraging to read that “*the left*” is now opening up to better understanding and recognizing that the issue of caste-based discrimination, stigma, and oppression needs to be understood and not assume that it will get addressed simply by addressing class-based differences.
- Increased conversions to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as a sign of protest and to symbolically escape caste-based discrimination. In *Kite Mil ve Mahi*, a documentary film, Ajay Bhardwaj featured well known Dalit Poet, Lal Singh ‘Dil’ who explained his rationale for converting to Islam.
- National poll conducted by *The Outlook Magazine* in partnership with CNN-IBN and the History Channel declared Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar as “*The Greatest Indian*”, suggesting the mind-shift and acceptance of the contributions of Dr. Ambedkar of not only as the messiah of Dalits, but, as a true leader and contributor to the development of India on various fronts. Coincidentally, the bias was shown in the Panel of experts’ decision not to include M K Gandhi. The Panel decided Gandhi’s inclusion in the list of 50 great Indians would mean there would be no competition for title of “The Greatest Indian” as the Panel assumed Gandhi was already the greatest Indian prior to India’s independence. But would the voters have come to that conclusion? We were never given the chance!

- More willingness by National Commissions such as the national SC/ST commissions to be transparent with their findings and recommendations that may be used to hold the public bodies more accountable. In a State Level Review meeting held in January 2015, for example, the National SC/ST Commissioner, Mr. Poonia, highlighted a number of inequities in Punjab. Minutes of this review meeting are now posted at www.nscs.nic.in, indicating greater transparency and accountability and the availability of data for the advocacy groups and administration to study and utilize when making their cases.
- Dalit entrepreneurship is now increased as reflected by the establishment of Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries (DICCI) providing a ripe environment for DICCI and similar organizations to serve as role models and mentors to emerging entrepreneurs.
- Establishment of new “ism”, *Ravidassia Dharam*, after the assassination of a Dalit Preacher in 2009 in Vienna (Austria), Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan, for allegedly violating the code of conduct (Maryada) as defined by the Sikh religious bodies. This ism is now helping to unify patrons of Guru Ravidass across India. Guru Ravidass was a revolutionary saint of the 14th century, who challenged the Vedas for legitimizing caste based discrimination and some believe that by doing so, he was also assassinated by the ruling body of the time. Although establishment of this separate ism is not fully accepted in Punjab or by the Punjabi Dalit Diaspora, the followership is growing exponentially in other States of India.
- The up rise of ‘missionary singers’ in Punjab- since the assassination of Sant Ramanand, there has been a significant growth of singers who have made a livelihood by singing songs that glorify the mission and vision of Dr. Ambedkar, Guru Ravidass, and motivating youngsters to have Dalit Pride. Similar to the Black Pride movement in the United States that declared “*Black is Beautiful*”. These missionary singers are reinforcing the message of “*Dalit Means Dignity*”.
- A political party with strong Dalit base, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founded by Saheb Kanshi Ram Ji, was able to form a government four times with a woman leader, Behan Mayawati Ji, as Chief Minister. In spite of criticisms and controversy, BSP introduced strong developments such as Taj Corridor and constructed several parks and monuments as tributes to Dalit leaders and saints. Although cynics are less optimistic, many supporters are more optimistic and see the potential for BSP to rebuild and strengthen its partnerships with minorities and re-emerge as an alternative to mainstream parties in Uttar Pradesh and other states in India.
- The role of Dalit Diaspora – successes of profiling Dalit issues and concerns along with profiling Dr. Ambedkar as international icon particularly over the past few years has been very effective. Examples of such successes include:
 - Organisations like the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA) in the UK that has been leading in the campaign to outlaw Caste-based discrimination in the UK. Its timely report ‘*A Hidden Apartheid – Voice of the Community*’ (October 2009)

and bringing together of Dalit and non-Dalit organisations together was instrumental in getting 'caste' in the Equality Act 2010.

- Celebrating Dr. Ambedkar Day at the United Nations.
- Government of Maharashtra purchasing the home Dr. Ambedkar had lived in as a student in London and turning it into museum in his name.
- Installation of Dr. Ambedkar statues at the Columbia University, London School of Economics, Simon Fraser University, and York University.
- Installation of the life-sized statue of the Father of India's constitution, Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar at the World Heritage Site in Koysan, Japan;
- Organizations such as Ambedkar International Center and Chetna Association of Canada supporting and partnering with the Indian consulates and celebrating with celebrating Dr. Ambedkar 125th Birth Anniversary Day either on the facilities of the Mission, or, in the community.
- Presenting workshops related to *Caste Oppression Today*' at the International Conference being hosted at the University of Calgary.

Discussion:

Given that the caste-based hierarchal system has survived thousands of years and the 'structure' has gained mastery in dividing and conquering, it is perhaps easier to understand why the Dalit movement would, or continue to, be vulnerable, weak, fragmented and face threats. India's constitution has only been in effect for just over 65 years and the amount of resources that were needed to implement principles of justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity have never been adequately set aside. There has also not been any organized agitation or political movement to force the governing bodies to provide the needed leadership across India. As a matter of fact, after the death of Dr. Ambedkar, the Dalit movement had faced a significant setback. Failure of the government's decision to not endorse the *Hindu Code Bill* that Dr. Ambedkar introduced in 1955-56 session to liberate and empower women to be equal citizens, was one of the earlier signs that the implementation of the above referenced principles enshrined in the constitution was not going to be simple, or easy.

However, when we look at the list of strengths and opportunities that exist, one wonders why there are still roadblocks.

As I mentioned previously, the current ruling party has one of the highest number of Dalit MPs in history so one would assume that the party would be more receptive and understanding of the need for supporting Dalit agenda. However, when Rohith Vemula allegedly committed suicide, there was no public outcry from Dalit MPs who were "in government". In reaction, many social activists have raised questions such as:

- *Why did the BJP go so wrong in addressing this matter?*
- *Why did so many Dalit MPs not affect the functioning of their government and party?*

- *Why was a BJP MP allowed to hound the Ambedkar Students Association? And,*
- *How was the BJP spokesperson permitted to paint Rohith Vemula as a terrorist sympathiser even after his death?*

One possible explanation is that the joint electorate system is failing Dalits. It must be noted that joint electorate system was not the choice of Dr. Ambedkar- he advocated for a separate electorate system. In the 1931 Second Round Table Conference, held to discuss India's constitutional future, Ambedkar had argued for separate electorates for Dalits, in which Dalit voters would elect Dalit representatives.

Strategic Considerations & Recommendations:

Considering various degrees of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats Dalit movement faces in the current environment, I propose the following actions to make Dalit Assertion more effective and sustainable:

- Clarify, vision, mission, and value statements- without clear vision, it is much easier to be distracted, fragmented, and settle for the short term gains instead of championing the longer term benefits. As his final advice, Dr. Ambedkar had stated: *“My final words of advice to you are Educate, Agitate and Organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality.”* It is, therefore, very important be clear on the vision and develop strategies to ignite the passion and motivate all citizens for working towards the realization of the vision.
- Re-examine and reinterpret history- the practice that has been reinforced by religious beliefs is to de-dignify Dalit heritage and contributions Dalits have made to create civilized and scientific society. The affirmative action/reservation system has often been criticized and used to humiliate Dalit scholars, scientists, and inventors and they have been portrayed as *‘graduates without merit’*. Organizations such as DICCI can play a role in offering scholarships, mentorships, and recognizing achievers who are also contributing to achieving the vision. (Similar to Bill Gates Foundation for example)
- Create opportunities to support self-governance (e.g. First Nations of Canada) and leadership development so leadership can be provided from *‘within the Dalit section of Indian citizens’* and reduce concerns around appropriation of the Dalit movement.
- Re-examine and advocate for separate electorate system as this will improve accountability of Dalit MPs. In fact, according to Ajay Bhardwaj (Director, *Kite Mil Ve Mahi*), *“separate electorate system will unite Dalits across religions and give them a new resurgent identity which will offer a powerful counterpoint to Brahmanical communalism.”* Bhardwaj further states that: *“There are powerful movements of Muslim*

and Christian Dalits that consider Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar as the sole liberator of Dalits in India.”

- Right to Education is one of the fundamental objectives of the UN. Government bodies such as Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment can play a positive role in establishing benchmarks and reporting frameworks for the advancements (or lack thereof) can be easily identified and monitored.
- Collaboration and partnership with other social justice, environmental groups, and student bodies and identify common-ground and common outcomes so the available resources can be utilized more effectively and bridges among various movements can be constructed to leverage each other’s talent, passion, and strength.
- Reduce poverty by removing bonded labour and slavery, and paying equitable living wages.
- Make links with, learn and gain strength from organisations like the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance that are making excellent progress in outlawing Caste-based discrimination in the UK.