

Dalit* politics and the Indian State: Changing landscape, emerging agendas

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The conscious effort on the part of *dalit* activism to take the issue of *dalit* empowerment beyond the pale of the agency of the modernising State and firmly place it in the arena of global civil society, and the frequent appeal to the United Nations or the international human rights bodies to pressurise and morally coerce the Indian State, is part of the new *dalit* political tactics. This dampens the formation of a critical *dalit* consciousness by altering the flow of discontent from the State towards an incipient global civil society. Downgrading those struggles which are political / economic in nature or seek to capture State power, the new *dalit* activism tries to hegemonise the entire *dalit* movement.

Dalit politics¹ has been characterised by a multiplicity of political strategies geared to the twin issues of cultural identity and electoral mobilisation. On the one hand, there have been diverse attempts to project a counter-culture of *dalit* resistance vis-à-vis Brahminical hegemony, while on the other, there have been concerted efforts to expand the social basis of democratic imagination among the *dalits*. Recent years have witnessed a new development i.e., that of *dalit* politics consciously trying to reach out to a global audience on a variety of issues. Though consolidation of

1 The term '*dalit*' has been used partly on account of its political correctness and partly because it has gained wide currency in the media and among academics, though other related and largely synonymous terms such as 'ex-untouchables', 'the Scheduled Castes', 'untouchables' and '*harijans*' are also in use. The term 'Depressed Classes' has fallen out of use. For the conceptual genealogy and politics of these terms, see Charsley (1996).

* Grateful thanks are due to Dr. Ranjita Mohanty for having invited the author to present this paper at the Second PRIA Conference at Hyderabad. The author would also like to thank Dr. Arun Patnaik, Aparajita Ganguly and Praveen Priyadarshi for their valuable feedback on the paper.

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the politico-administrative gains arising out of electoral mobilisations and institutionalised parliamentary politics remains an important goal for varied currents within *dalit* politics, the new generation of *dalit* leadership has taken to the forging of transnational alliances and networks to further the *dalit* cause. From the *Kuala Lumpur Dalit Convention* (1998), and the *Voice of Dalits International*, London (2001), to the *International Dalit Conference*, Vancouver (2003), *dalit* politics seems to have acquired a definite transnational orientation. The *dalit* political campaign in the context of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban (2001), seems to have been the high watermark of the new *dalit* politics. It is new not only in terms of its political urge to present discrimination against *dalits* in terms of the globally visible racial discrimination, but also in the employment of new means of political communication such as the Internet and the global media. The highly visible presence of *dalit* groups at the recently concluded World Social Forum, Mumbai (2004) is a tribute to their expanding transnational/global reach. Not surprisingly, scholars have started talking of the emergent *dalit* diaspora (Kumar 2004).

In this paper, we attempt to understand the transnational dimensions of *dalit* politics while examining attendant discourses on discrimination and socio-political justice. We take the contemporary *dalit* critique of the Indian State as our point of departure and address the following questions: In what ways does the newly acquired transnationalism of *dalit* politics inaugurate a new positioning vis-à-vis the Indian State? Is it symptomatic of a new mode of thinking so as to overcome the continuing impasse of State-centric institutional politics? Does this transnationalism emanate from the exclusionary nature of the Indian State and its increasing retreat from the social sphere in the context of liberalisation and globalisation, affecting *dalits* in particular? Does this transnationalism have the potential to circumvent the institutional constraints and exclusions imposed by the State? More importantly, what are the effects of this transnationalism on the national-level *dalit* politics and the varieties of local political engagements? What are the implications of the growing the assertion of political and cultural rights by the *dalits* in terms of globally circulating categories of racial discrimination, rights of the indigenous people and human rights violations? Does transnational politics dampen the formation of a critical *dalit* consciousness within the confines of the nation-State by altering the flow of discontent from the State towards an incipient global civil society? Lastly, and perhaps more controversially, does this politics enhance the power of the State, and by implication, add to the powerlessness of the struggling *dalits* by defusing discontent at the level of the territorial nation-state?

Our engagement with *dalit* politics is justified not simply because *dalits* constitute more than 15% of the Indian population (a sizeable number in absolute terms) but also because *dalits* have constituted themselves as a potent and visible force both in the institutional and civil society domains of political action. No sensible observer of the post-colonial Indian politics can afford to overlook the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP hereafter) since the mid-1980s in the most populous State of the Union of India (Pai 2002). In fact, the Congress's extraordinary willingness to forge an alliance with the BSP for the coming Lok Sabha polls (2004) is a testimony to the growing salience of the BSP in the emergent political configuration. Even otherwise, the three aborted alliances of the BSP - twice with the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP hereafter) and once with the Mulayam Singh Yadav led Samajwadi Party - retrospectively points towards 'the Rise of Low Castes in North Indian Politics' (Jaffrelot 2003). Indeed, no political party can, *ipso facto*, ignore the numerical strength that the *dalits* represent and the issues and struggles that they bring to the political front yard.

The State as the benefactor of the 'Scheduled Castes'

The State has always been an important actor in relation to the unfolding of *dalit* politics in the country. Its agenda of reforms has facilitated the entry of sizeable number of *dalits* into the urban middle classes. It has helped many more by diverting public resources and the flow of benefits towards the *dalits*. New democratic spaces have been created for the political participation of *dalits* in the State structures. Undoubtedly, the process has been tardy and limiting. As Guru (2000) rightly remarks, the *dalits* have undergone a slow process of inclusion in the structures of opportunity and of mobility, despite widespread State patronage.

Nonetheless, the State remains important for the *dalit* movement² even when its role has changed in the society and economy since the 1980s. True, the State might not have been able to expand the social basis of *dalit* political aspirations the way it should have, but *dalits* have invested unbounded faith and confidence in the State for such expansion. Given an increasingly casteist and violent society, the State, notwithstanding its various limitations, has often been preferred to civil society by mainstream *dalit* politics. It needs no reiteration that even the colonial State played an

2 By *dalit* movement, we refer to 'many similarly placed primordial Dalit collectivities with similar histories of oppression simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system, but with differing visions of their own and society's future' (John C. B. Webster as quoted in Pai 2002).

important role in creating conditions which led to the steady growth and development of an anti-brahminical consciousness among the 'depressed classes'. In our own time, the capturing of State power has become the pre-eminent objective of the BSP, so much so that analysts have come to characterise its anti-Brahmanism as political rather than cultural.

In the immediate aftermath of Independence, the ruling consensus favoured a definite dose of welfarism towards the *dalits*. It was politically imperative for the Indian State to assuage the feeling of relative deprivation among them by redirecting the flow of resources via various constitutional provisions and welfare programmes.

The State plays an extremely important role in keeping the sense of relative deprivation alive and active among the marginalised groups. It manages the all-pervasive sense of relative deprivation in a systematic and shrewd fashion by virtue of transferring the resources from the more privileged sections to the underprivileged sections. The perceptual shift from the absolute deprivation to relative deprivation however, as Guru (1993) has argued, had a politically debilitating effect; the State has not only significantly diffused the critical consciousness that the *dalits* would have otherwise articulated against the structures of domination but, as a corollary, has also discredited the movement by co-opting the most vocal and assertive elements into the pacification structures built around the welfare State (Guru 1993). In contemporary times, in fact, one sees the initiation of a reverse process indicating a shift from relative to absolute deprivation because the Indian State has been finding it quite difficult to shift the resources from the privileged to the underprivileged on account of its withdrawal from the social sphere.

Oblivious of the recent changes in the social character of the State, *dalits* have, for long, followed two political paths: (i) agitational politics or (ii) direct action by way of struggles and participation in parliamentary politics through elections and holding offices in various decision making institutions (Shah 2001). In course of their chequered political history, they have raised issues such as untouchability, caste atrocities, minimum wages, land rights, employment, political representation, self-respect and dignity and, of late, violation of human rights and discrimination in terms of a globally circulating category, namely, race. Throughout the vicissitudes of *dalit* politics, for many *dalit* groups, hopes in parliamentary democracy remain unshaken even though the State has failed to deliver on its promises to them in the last fifty odd years (Zelliot 2001). Other observers, however, do not share Zelliot's optimism about *dalit* politics. For instance, Shah

(1997) believes that *dalit* politics have reached an impasse and the *dalit* movement has been reduced to a mere pressure group, with a blurring of its revolutionary edge clearly in sight.

Such scholars clearly underestimate the '*dalit* upsurge' (Kothari 1994; Yadav 2000). In fact, beginning with the 1993 Assembly elections, a more radical democratisation of north Indian society has taken place, thanks to the 'Bahujan participation in electoral politics' and what Yadav (2000) calls 'the second democratic upsurge'. As the *dalits* begin to realise that their economic and social conditions have not improved much despite decades of State-sponsored welfarism, they wish to take the reins of the State in their own hands. Not surprisingly, what the BSP wants today is not a reform of the system, or more social welfare policies, but a share in political power. For the BSP, the redistribution of economic assets and the attainment of social justice can be ensured only by the State. Thus, the realisation of the *dalit* dream of an egalitarian and non-hierarchical social order is intimately tied up with the capturing of State power by the *dalit* parties.

Viewed thus, the failure of the State to live up to the expectations of *dalits* has fuelled the growth of a dynamic political consciousness around caste issues and related strategies of empowerment. This *Bahujan* consciousness has been a pervasive social and political force in the country. Also, one can discern a definite shift in the very mode of articulation of *dalit* politics: 'Moving beyond just waging a defensive battle, they [*dalit* movements] show that *dalits* were no longer willing to suffer silently, that their interests had to be taken into account and their voice heard for any movement to succeed, for any government to be stable' (Omvedt 2002: 113).

Two tendencies are visible in relation to the *dalit* mainstream politics. The dominant (and also important in electoral terms) tendency is to conflate the quest for social justice with the fabrication of caste majorities such as the *dalit-bahujan*. In fact, '*Dalits* have moved forward in politics in many States from being simply vote banks controlled by Brahmin-bourgeois political parties (usually the Congress) to becoming voting blocks, autonomous, acting on their own, bargaining with the larger parties. But these have proved to be jati-based blocks' (Omvedt 2002: 306). The danger with this tendency, as Kaviraj (2000) too points out, is the burden of relentless majoritarianism that it engenders. No doubt, the politicisation of caste has imparted a democratic and egalitarian thrust to the prevailing politics in the name of 'equality of castes', but then, caste majorities are by nature permanent, and their growing use as a political resource is bound to make democracy unbearable.

Secondly, the *dalit* institutional politics posits equality and dignity rather than the earlier Congress-type politics of reforms, albeit based on an acknowledgement of the reality of caste. *Dalits* no longer perceive themselves as the passive recipients of doles offered by an 'enlightened' and nominally 'progressive' ruling class (upper-caste coalitions). By recasting their political aspirations in the language of rights, they have posed historical challenge to the Statist consensus on the issue of 'Scheduled Castes'. In the process, however, they have encouraged a type of politics which seems to be structurally divorced from the issues of development, equality and good governance. Kaviraj (2000: 113) perceptively notes this crucial inadequacy of the contemporary low caste politics:

However, an enormous amount of energy of the new politics of the disadvantaged is spent in symbolic acts of retaliation which have increasingly tended to replace substantive measures directed against inequality. State-funded statues of Ambedkar in every Indian village might give Dalit politics greater prestige, but does nothing to alter the structural bases of privilege in education, health and other opportunities, which serve to reproduce the inequalities against which the politics of the lower castes is directed. Symbolic politics of this kind is likely to prove ineffective, precisely because resources and legal authority to act upon these sectors are being wrenched from the state's grip.

***Dalit* critique of the Indian State**

The post-Ambedkar *dalit* movement, though challenging some of the worst kinds of the oppression and subjugation of the *dalits*, have always held the Indian State responsible for their general misery. Expectedly, *dalit* activist groups have challenged the official claim of the Indian State that it is fulfilling its constitutional responsibility for the welfare of *dalits*. The very agency of the State as the benefactor of *dalits* has been questioned. The new generation of *dalit* activists not only finds a lack of political will on the part of the Indian State to tackle caste-based discrimination but also regards the State as a collaborator in the violation of *dalit* rights.

Their critique reached a crescendo on the issue of caste versus race in the Durban Conference (Thakur, forthcoming). They seemed to be in no mood to give any credence to the claim that *dalit* discrimination, unlike racism, is

not the official ideology of the Indian State, as it is not constituted officially and legally. For instance, the National Campaign Manifesto on *Dalit* Human Rights (1998: 9) claimed, 'though legal rights are enshrined in the Constitution of India, civil rights are constantly being violated through the collaboration of the State machinery'. In the reckoning of the *dalit* activists, it is the social character of the administrative elites, in particular, and the political class, in general, which makes the Indian State a collaborator in the violation of *dalit* human rights. In other words, the failure of the post-Independence policies to achieve *dalit* welfare is not merely a matter of *administrative performance* (slippage) but that of *political design* (conspiracy). In this view, 'not only were the class interests of the elite antagonistic to those of the Untouchable population, but so were their more diffuse *caste* interests' (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1996: 94).

Prakash Louis (2001: 03), a well-known writer and activist on *dalit* issues, puts the *dalit* critique in perspective:

In spite of the fact that various acts were promulgated and amendments were brought to the existing legislations, the plight of the Dalits continued unchanged and unchallenged. The Dalits have not been liberated from the servitude and bondage they are chained to under the caste system. Instead they continue to be subjected to ruthless repression and subjugation. While there is no change in the lives of the Dalits, the legal provisions have undergone amendments and have attained newer nomenclature... Thus various political parties and governments were engaged in futile exercises but *consistently* and *consciously* denied the Dalits of their basic rights (emphasis mine).

No wonder human rights violations have become such a pet theme with *dalit* activists. The issue of the violation of human rights provides them with a new globally recognised political baton to beat the Indian State with. It also helps them connect to global human rights agencies such as Amnesty International and the Human Rights Watch. *Dalit* activists have sought to enlarge the scope of human rights by bringing the human rights violations that take place in the civil society under its purview. The National Campaign Manifesto (1998: 16-17) rhetorically asks:

Is the State only Violator of Human Rights or should we also hold the societal forces responsible for violations?
Will the purview of Human Rights be limited to violations

by the State as has been the case with many Western Human Rights bodies or will atrocities and other forms of repression on the people by other societal forces be also brought under Human Rights? Should not the Human Rights Bodies bring pressure on the Governments to safeguard the social, economic, political and cultural rights of the people, considering such denial and violations of rights as Human Rights violations? Should not the state itself be held responsible for the atrocities perpetrated on Dalits, Women and Tribals by dominant caste forces?

What is important for our purposes is the conscious effort on the part of *dalit* activism to take the issue of *dalit* empowerment beyond the pale of the agency of the modernising State and firmly place it in the arena of global civil society. The frequent appeal to the United Nations or the international human rights bodies to pressurise and morally coerce the Indian State is part of the new *dalit* political tactics. For example, the *First World Dalit Convention* at Kuala Lumpur (10-11 October 1998) 'unanimously resolves to urge the United Nations to immediately appoint Special Rapporteurs' to commence investigation into this [*Dalit*] Human Rights violation and also take appropriate measures to effect the implementation of fundamental Human Rights instrument for *dalits* in India and other parts of the world' (*Dalit International Newsletter*, June 1999). Likewise, *Voice of Dalits International's* (VODI), London *Dalit Declaration*, (17 September 2000) states, 'World Bank and other international financial institutions should attach Conditionality clause, to their aid and loans for India, for improving the human rights of dalits. This should be monitored by UN body and evaluated on a regular basis' (VODI 2000). The Vancouver Declaration emerging out of the latest *International Dalit Conference* (16-18 May 2003) further amplifies the *dalit* mistrust of the Indian State. Out of its 11-point charter of demands, two are general in nature, two are specifically addressed to the Indian State whereas the remaining seven are addressed to agencies other than the Indian State,³ namely, the Private and the Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), the United Nations and its affiliates, non-governmental agencies concerned with human rights, social

3 They are (item nos 10-11): 'Reorganize the National and State Commissions for SCs and STs as the SC and ST Vigilance Commissioners and the decisions of these Commissions should be binding' and 'All laws, rules and regulations meant for protecting the rights of the Dalits must be included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution of India, to prevent unjust and lengthy litigation process which always goes against the community'.

and economic development, universities and educational and research institutions in North America and Europe, the World Bank and other international financial institutions, international governmental and non-governmental development aid agencies and the world community (see item nos 3-9 of the Vancouver Declaration). Seen thus, the *dalit* campaign around the Durban Conference is not an isolated episode. Instead, it underlines its transnational dimensions.

Since the State has forfeited its claim to be 'well-wisher, patron and referee' of *dalit* welfare, there is the felt need among *dalit* activists to transcend the State. In the words of Visvanathan 2001: 2413), the strategy has been 'to create a politics of embarrassment to counter the politics of the state. The theatre could not be electoral politics but international forums'. It is noteworthy that *dalit* activist groups no longer want the State to set the parameters of the *dalit* discourse. They would rather frame the rules of the game themselves, as the post-Independence State has betrayed the *dalit* trust. However, what comes as surprising is the fact of *dalit* scepticism about the potential of electoral politics for *dalit* emancipation. At a time when *dalits* are registering their political presence in effective ways, this may severely limit the newly found political edge of the majority of *dalits* in the country (Yadav 2000).⁴ But then, contemporary *dalit* activism is informed by a pressing urge to be seen as part of an internationally recognised subordinated people and thus claim that *dalit rights are human rights*. It is this urge to operate in global and transnational terms that potentially marks a new era in *dalit* politics. By trans-nationalising the *dalit* issue, these activists tend to render hollow the assertion of the State that systemic societal discrimination against the vulnerable caste groups has already been dealt with in the legal parameters of the constitutional system.

Nonetheless, the *dalit* recourse to the politics of human rights is not an uncritical one. Against the western conception of human rights, *dalits* are arguing in favour of the development of such legal structures which give distinct shape and form to the collective dimension of their existence. In fact, this collective dimension is recognised in the Universal Declaration

4 While taking note of the expansion and the deepening of the participatory base of Indian democracy, Yadav (2000: 120) writes, 'there is a participatory upsurge among the socially underprivileged, whether seen in terms of caste hierarchy, economic class, gender discrimination or the rural-urban divide. They do not lag behind the socially privileged as they did in the past; indeed in some respects they are more active today than the former'.

of Human Rights, which refers to the 'community in which alone the free and full development of personality is possible' (Das 1996). This attitude has led to redefining the 'individual right as group right' (Visvanathan 2001: 2514) and probably explains the slogan - *Dalits, a people, a culture, a history*. *Dalit* human rights are distinct because of their group character. As the Manifesto (1998: 9) asserts, 'while the violations of Human rights in many other countries assume an individual dimension, in India which is governed by a ruling caste, it is the *whole people* who are denied their rights'. It is the shared experience of suffering which imparts to the *dalits* the unique features of a subordinated people. This line of thinking does not take issue with the very ambiguity of the term 'people'. The fact that there is no legally accepted definition of 'people' has been pushed under the carpet. It does not entertain the possibility where the very empowerment of community against the State might lead to gross violation of human rights of the individuals by the community itself, a situation where interests of the community might engulf individual human freedoms.

Limits to transnational dalit mobilisations

Of necessity, the *dalit* critique of the State makes it turn towards various civil society actors including global NGOs and the UN bodies. This appeal to a global audience, by implication, implies discounting the emancipatory possibilities contained in the institutions of the State including electoral/parliamentary politics. Sure enough, it is politically soothing for the *dalit* activist groups that they have succeeded in globalising their political agenda (for instance, caste as a race). However, in their newly found moments of glory, the proponents of this '*dalit* theory of globalisation' seem to have developed an inflated account of the opportunities likely to be opened up for *dalit* welfare in the wake of the internationalisation of the *dalit* issue. Some of them believe that by drawing the attention of the world community they can expect an increased flow of foreign aid for taking up educational and empowerment programmes. Kancha Ilaiah advocates, 'instead of taking a loan even for causes such as primary education for millions of lower caste children why not ask for charity for primary education by telling about the historical magnitude of the caste problem?' ⁵

5 According to this line of thinking, there is no harm in openly acknowledging the prevailing practices of caste discrimination and the historical handicaps faced by certain low caste groups. In fact, this acknowledgement on the part of the Indian State will be a step in the right direction as it will help make India the destination of charity and humanitarian organisations of the world, thereby enhancing the resources available.

These recent attempts at the rewriting of *dalit* politics or the zeal in pressing for an internationalisation of the *dalit* issue have a tendency to undermine the pre-eminent ground on which the politics of *dalit* liberation could be effectively pursued. The reference is to the politics conducted at the level of the nation-state. Ambedkar's call 'we must become a ruling community' had a clear empirical referent - the State. Seen thus, the political parties exclusively devoted to the *dalit* cause seem to be much closer to this goal than the globalising *dalit* activists. Moreover, the politics of international networking and action groups have their own limitations (Dhanagare 1993: 154-181).

The transnational politics is going to alienate a substantial number of well-wishers who might not be *dalits* in ascriptive terms. Liberal minded groups and citizens have often supported the cause of *dalit* welfare and the related issue of social justice by providing political support to the State-sponsored measures of affirmative action. Similarly, many radical groups have not only championed the *dalit* cause but have also been comrade-in-arms in the struggles launched by *dalits* in the non-institutional domain (for example, various *naxalite* groups in central and south Bihar). All these support groups are bound to feel out of place in the changed political profile of *dalit* activism. By downgrading those struggles which are political / economic in nature or seek to capture State power, the new *dalit* activism tries to hegemonise the entire *dalit* movement.

Also, the transnational *dalit* mobilisations add to the vacuous nature of identity politics by pretending that there are no fissures within the *dalit* community. This political claim goes against the received wisdom of anthropological studies which demonstrate that 'paradoxically, strategies of status mobility, the rejection of ascriptions of inferiority and assertions of social independence and autonomy generate caste structures within untouchable communities which are more complex, more internally differentiated than those of high castes' (Gellner 1995: 395). The point is that *dalits* are as internally differentiated in social terms as any other such politically constituted group and, in fact, *dalits* may even produce structures of internal differentiation that are more complex when they have the power and resources to do so. Evidently, to talk of a unified monolithic *dalit* community is a political gloss over an internally stratified confederation of *jatis* and essentialises the *dalit* identity.

Indeed, the new *dalit* politics has inherent limitations to the extent that it amounts to privileging symbolic politics over the real-substantive politics. There is the lurking danger that the *dalit* activist groups might end up

being cannon fodder of international human rights NGOs. It is not for nothing that the Charter of *Dalit* Rights is addressed not merely to the Government of India and the United Nations but also to the International Human Rights Community.

What emerges very clearly from the major voices of contemporary *dalit* activism is the fundamental challenge mounted to the *statist* treatment of the *dalits* as a bureaucratic and welfare category. Their main aim has been the construction of the *dalits* as a social and political category in the international arena. To realise this aim, contrary to the popular perception, they have not rested content with the intermixing of sociological facts or categories. Rather, they have used the language of contemporary human rights discourse in a way where one logically places the *dalits* of India on par with the Roma, the Sinti and the people of African descent in the United States. Apparently, this approach yields multiple pay-offs. For example, it succeeds in privileging discrimination and resistance as the twin bases of *dalit* identity. Concomitantly, it projects *dalits* as *a people* even though they lack a single ethnic identity on the basis of either common physical form or cultural outlook. Moreover, it also helps them downplay their cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. In short, it helps forge the *dalit* as a powerful political category irrespective of their internal differentiations along a number of sociological co-ordinates.

These pay-offs notwithstanding, the new *dalit* activism can potentially divert attention from the growing tide of *dalit* assertion in the formal political domain. This is not to condone the opportunistic political alliances that the *dalit* parties have lived with or their unadulterated quest for State power. But then why single them out alone? The history of *dalit* movement betrays a relative lack of formal political organisation right through its initial phases. As Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1996: 68) note, 'by the early 1930s the Ambedkarites were ready to switch from social campaigns to political manoeuvring closer to the centre of institutional power... Importantly, the [*Dalit*] victories were not achieved through any mass mobilisation of *dalits* but essentially an elite action'. This is not to deny the significant, if isolated and fitful, mobilisation of *dalits* as a separate political entity throughout the post-Independence phase of Indian politics. In any event, Ambedkar had already snatched the initiative on the *dalit* issue from the reformist Hindus and had successfully transformed the *dalit* question from a moral problem (lying within the province of Hinduism) into a matter of political rights for a subordinated segment of Indian society (in the domain of citizenship and associated constitutional

rights). Seen thus, the supposedly global 'spread' of the Dalit cause might dilute the fights being conducted on the home turf, that is, within the framework of Indian polity and the ones which have the potential for the substantive expansion of citizenship rights.

By way of conclusion

True, the social and political gains the *dalits* have been limited. Equally true is the fact that the *dalits* have been the prisoners of grossly imperfect political mobilisations that have naturally limited the possibility of such gains. Even if the constitutional commitments of the Indian State to *dalits* have been a story of broken promises and monumental betrayals, the remedy lies not so much in the open-arm reception to the transnational politics but in identifying the fault lines in India's governance. More than ever, *dalits* will have to firmly decide where they stand today vis-à-vis the institutions of the State and the institutions that are outside the State. Any effective strategy of *dalit* politics will have to weigh the relative potential gains flowing from the institutions of the State and the ones that are outside it. In their 'overkill' of exposing the Indian State and its hollow claims, *dalits* should not end up obviating the transformative potentialities of the very agency of State lest it amounts to throwing the baby with the bath water.

At a time when the Indian State is in a process of retreating from the public domain, the stakes are too high for the *dalits* to allow this to happen. Turning away from the State-centric mobilisations will only accelerate the process of prising away social goods and assets from the control of the State. Rather than attempting to go beyond the State into an intangible and untested global civil society, *dalit* groups can better serve the *dalit* cause by giving a definite lead to the issue of active citizenship among the *dalits*. It was none other than Ambedkar who had proclaimed, 'a democratic form of Government presupposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy' (quoted in The Bhopal Declaration 2002). Striving for active citizenship and substantive social democracy should do more good to the goal of *dalit* liberation than the global hullabaloo through international conferences and conventions.

This would clearly mean transgressing the parameters of identity politics that have imprisoned the *dalits* for long. One can understand the political compulsions behind the perpetual attempt to project a single and unified

dalit community. But one has to factor in the valid fear that the forces of identity politics will further damage the *dalit* cause. Rather than constituting themselves into a monolithic vote-bank and remain fixated to the sole issue of caste, *dalits* have to embrace issues of development and good governance as their very own. They have to prove that mere symbolic politics of caste will not do and caste can no longer be made a permanent basis of losing or winning elections. Seen thus, the road to *dalit* liberation appears to pass through Bhopal rather than Kuala Lumpur, London or Vancouver. □

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