



Research Paper

## National Movement and Dalit Struggle: A Sociological Perspective

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### Abstract

During the foreign rule in the country, different sections of the society, distressed by their colonial policies, took part in the movements against them for various reasons. The aspirations of each section of the country during the movement and the subsequent success were also different. Amidst all this, there were many groups of the Dalit class living in the country, some of which were completely opposed to the foreign rule, for which they were continuously fighting, while the initial goal of some was to end the exploitative, inhumane untouchability and caste system prevalent in the then society which historically had become an integral part of the Indian social system as a cultural element.

In the presented research article, the individuals and groups of the Dalit class who struggled against the foreign power and also made efforts under the law and order of the British Government to eradicate the social evils prevalent in the country like untouchability, casteism etc. and for the socio-economic and political upliftment of the Dalits. Efforts to be made for this have been discussed. Through this article, an attempt has been made to establish that the revolutionaries and social reformers of the Dalit class have not yet got the respectable place they deserve in the history of the Indian mainstream, rather their contributions are being underestimated and erased.

**Keywords-** National movement, Dalit, freedom struggle, society, culture

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With the weakening of the Mughal rule in our country, various regional powers had started their own governance at the local level, but the mutual differences and the tendency of these weak small principalities to continuously attack each other created a threat to the foreign powers, especially the British helped a lot in capturing the whole of India. The policies of the British were extremely exploitative. Britishers were continuously bringing all the parts of India under their jurisdiction with the help of his policy of 'Sam, Daam, Dand and Bhed'. They tried to bring radical changes in the social, economic and political system here by making new laws, which affected almost all sections of the residents here, among whom Dalits and tribals were prominent. Due to the policies of changing the traditional system of the British, the traditionally ruling classes lost power here, due to which there was severe dissatisfaction among them towards the British. After which they called upon the general public to unite to fight against the British. They tried to explain to the general public that "India means its residents. Every resident here is the embodiment of India, irrespective of his class, caste, colour, ethnicity, language and gender etc. and all the wealth and resources of this land are for the consumption of the residents here and not for these foreign English people. Unless we snatch away the power of governance from these foreigners, it will not be possible for Indians to do so." Such ideas instilled the feeling of a nation and nationalism among the people, which later became the reason for various rebellions and formation of factions and parties on social and political basis.

It is clearly seen that there was a lack of unanimity among the Dalit groups and their leaders in the twentieth century, however they believed that the upper caste Hindu leaders were not willing to share their rights with the Dalits, hence some were widely opposed to the British government but some were expressing their support. They strongly believed that if there is a change in governance (political leadership) without Dalits getting equal social rights as other classes through social revolution, it will further strengthen the hold of the upper caste people over the Dalit classes.

Instead of agitating against the foreign government, Dalit intellectuals emphasized on achieving their social, economic and political rights and presented their concept of nationalism related to equality and companionship. They clearly believed that the sufferings of the Dalits would not be removed by anyone other than the Dalits, rather they would have to do so through their own efforts and for this, political power would be required. Political power will be achieved only through the constitution of the state, for which it is necessary to have a British government.

Most Dalit leaders criticized the Congress's lack of commitment to power sharing with Dalits and expressed doubts about the commitment of the upper class leadership to social equality. Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was so concerned about the oppression and exploitation endured by the Dalits for centuries that for him no movement of any kind had any importance without ending the internal oppressive exploitation system prevailing in the country. Babasaheb strongly believed that political freedom was meaningless without ensuring equal rights for Dalits. Unless the freedom struggle ensures the dignity of life and equal rights of all citizens, it will not be enough for them to achieve political independence from the British.

Despite this kind of cooperative strategy of Dalit class leaders towards the British, many Dalits actively participated in Tebhag and other big movements due to local reasons. At many places, people from the Dalit class played an important role as soldiers and also independently in the wars of the previous native kings against the British, the few of which are described below -

### **Tilka Manjhi**

Although the Indian independence movement is considered to have started from 1857, Tilka Manjhi had rebelled against the British in Santhal Pargana of Bihar during 1780-1784. Due to his proficiency in the art of war and accurate shooting, he had killed many British. Only after this, Dalits and tribals in Maharashtra, Orissa and Bengal started revolting against the British. Many times the British had to face war with the tribals. The British trembled with the bravery of Sidhu Santhal and Mochi Manjhi but eventually they were caught and given death sentence.

### **Udaiya Chamar**

The sons of Nawab Nahar Khan of Chhatari rebelled against the British rule in 1804-1807 and a fierce war took place between the two sides. In this war, Udaiya, a friend of the Nawab's sons, supported them and single-handedly killed many British. Later, Udaiya was caught and hanged.

### **Matadin Bhangi**

Many laborers from the untouchable community also worked in the British cartridge manufacturing factory in Barrackpore. One day a thirsty laborer asked for water from a constable, that constable was Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey did not give water to that untouchable laborer because he himself was a Brahmin, on this the laborer who was the Mata said, "Son of a Brahmin! The cartridges you use are coated with the fat of a cow or a pig, which you break with your teeth and put into the gun, That time, where does your caste and religion go? Shame on your Brahminism" These words of Matadin spread in the camp. On the morning of March 1, 1857, Mangal Pandey broke the line during the parade and started firing bullets at the British, accusing them of hurting their religious sentiments. Later Mangal Pandey was hanged in front of all the soldiers. After this incident, there was a rebellion in Barrackpur on 10 May 1857 in which many soldiers were martyred. The first name in the charge sheet that was prepared was that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested and accused of treason.

### **Chetram Jatav and Ballu Mehtar**

After the beginning of the Barrackpore Revolution, on 26 May 1857, in Soro area of Etah district, Chetram Jatav and Ballu Mehtar also joined the Barrackpore Revolution. Sadashiv Mehre, Chaturbhuji Vaishya etc. were also present in this revolution. Chetram and Ballu, who were the driving forces behind the revolution, were tied to trees and shot, the rest were hanged from trees in Kasganj area.

### **Banke Chamar**

Banke was a resident of Kuarpur village, Machli city, Jaunpur. When the revolution failed, the British declared Banke and his 18 other associates as rebels. After arresting Banke, hanging order was given.

### **Veera Pasi**

Veera Pasi was the security guard of Raja Beni Madhav Singh of Murar Mau in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. Raja Beni Madhav was arrested for taking part in the rebellion. One night Veera entered the prison and helped the king escape. This incident was extremely shameful for the British. They decided to capture Veera dead or alive and placed a reward of Rs 50,000 on his head but they could not catch him.

### **Jhalkari Bai**

Jhalkari Bai led the 'Durga Dal', a group of women formed by Maharani Lakshmi Bai. There were many women soldiers in that contingent like Motibai, Kashibai, Juhi and Durgabai who attained martyrdom while fighting bravely against the British in the battle of Jhansi. Jhalkari Bai is mentioned in a Marathi composition named 'Majha Pravas'.

### **Udadevi Pasi**

To avenge her husband's death, the brave woman Udadevi sat on a Peepal tree in Sikandar Bagh, Lucknow on 16 November 1857 and shot 36 British soldiers passing by. Later she herself was martyred. The complete details of this incident have been given by Sergeant Fovance of the British Army in his book.

### **Udham Singh**

On 13 April 1919, people had organized a meeting in Jallianwala Bagh of Amritsar in protest against the arrest of Dr. Satyapal and Saifuddin Kitchlu and the Rowlatt Act, in which Udham Singh was working to provide water to the people. Enraged by this meeting, the then Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, ordered his nickname, General Dyer, to teach the Indians a lesson. On this, General Dyer surrounded Jallianwala Bagh from all sides with 90 soldiers and started firing indiscriminately. In which hundreds of Indians were killed. To save their lives, many people jumped into the well located in the garden. It is written on the plaque in the garden that 120 bodies were taken out from the well alone. Shocked by this incident of Jallianwala Bagh, Udham Singh took the soil of the garden in his hand and swore to teach General Dyer a lesson. To carry out his work, Udham Singh reached London in 1934, where he arranged for a car and a revolver and started waiting for the right time. The opportunity that this Indian warrior was waiting for got on 13 March 1940 when Dyer arrived to attend a meeting at Caxton Hall in London. At the end of the meeting they fired bullets targeting Dyer. Two bullets hit Dyer and he died there. Veer Udham Singh was hanged on 31 July 1940 in Pantville Jail. On July 31, 1974, Britain handed over the remains of Udham Singh to India.

### **Movement of 1857 and Dalits**

Dalits believe that the movement of 1857 was started by them only. They believe that the military rebellion in the British Army in Jhansi in 1857 was done by the Dalits only, which later turned into the freedom movement. This was a real freedom movement because at that time the Dalits were fighting for their motherland instead of getting power. That movement was led by Bhau Bakshi and Poonam Kori with whom Jhalkari Bai fought shoulder to shoulder against the British to protect the motherland. Dalit stories of the first freedom movement are full of stories of brave martyrs belonging to Dalit communities like Jhalkari Bai, Avantibai, Pannadhari, Udadevi, Mahaviri Devi.

### **Reasons for Dalits associating themselves with 1857 and other movements**

Linking Dalit heroes to the 1857 struggle helped the community establish its caste identity in mainstream history. Although the authenticity of the respective heroes has been a matter of debate, the stories related to them have had the ability to inspire the common people. In later years, such as in the writings of the independence movements that took place in the 20th century, the leaders of that period tried to create a unified and all-embracing story of India's independence, in which very little space was given to Dalits. Be it the Non-Cooperation Movement, Quit India Movement or many other such movements, many people from the lower castes lost their lives but only the people from the upper castes were glorified.

Memories of the events of 1857 are not only part of Dalit memory but also part of the broader collective memory of the local area, which is reflected in popular cultural songs, plays and other media. The fact that memories resided enabled Dalits to discover their history and be proud of their heroes. They were inspired to remember their heroes who could become both local heroes and ethnic identity symbols for the people of their community in their day-to-day struggle for dignity and self-respect. The Dalit leadership understood that it was extremely important to align themselves with the nationalist narrative and to assert their role in the freedom struggle, although it was difficult for them to find a place in the main stage of the freedom movement because at the time when Dalit upliftment was taking place the struggle was at its peak when Dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar had created a rift with Gandhiji. Thus, the revolutions during 1857 were left with no other option but to find their own heroes so as not to antagonize the state, which legitimized the nationalist narrative. Since dialogue with the state was an important catalyst for the development of the Dalit nationalist narrative, it could not be ignored. Dalits could neither reject the narrative of Babasaheb Ambedkar and his nationalist movement based on equality, freedom and justice nor the dominant nationalist narrative that has been presented as the foundation of the present state. The need to strike a balance between the two led Dalits to look for their heroes within the nationalist narrative.

## Conclusion

Dalits were born in the lowest caste of the Indian caste hierarchy and faced many hardships due to their low socio-economic status but they never sold themselves against their country. No one can accuse even a single Dalit of doing this. Whenever the need arose, he sacrificed his life for his motherland. Through their narratives of the 1857 movement, Dalits not only try to establish their own heroes but also try to separate the existing upper caste heroes from the mainstream narrative. In these stories, the upper castes are portrayed as traitors, conspirators and those who are disloyal to their motherland. Through these narratives, they also want to prove that the upper castes establish themselves as the biggest nationalists by capturing history and political scenario. Although the historicity of the narratives propagated by Dalits is doubtful, yet through these stories there is a desire to uproot the established heroes of the mainstream narratives. To fulfill this objective, he adopted a three-dimensional analytical action plan. Alleging distortion of mainstream writing about the events of 1857. Establishing your heroes as freedom fighters. To prove that the landlords, feudal lords and the rich section of the society were conspirators who helped the British.

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