
CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

One of the prominent aspects of economic, political and social relations revolves around the issues of inequality based on class, caste, race and gender. In the context of India, caste based politics has always remained in the forefront. But during the last two decades, the assertion of the people from low castes including the Dalits has assumed unprecedented significance. The Dalit question is one of the most important questions in today's political and academic debates in India. Dalit assertion, Dalit leadership and voting pattern of the Dalits etc., are the elements of these debates.

Dalits are underprivileged in all social, economic and political fronts which leads to their misery, discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated society. The theory of the caste system is interlinked with the *varna model* which divided the Hindu society into four orders-the Brahmins, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudras. 1 The first three castes are considered twice born or 'dvija' since the men from these castes were entitled to use the sacred thread at the Vedic site of Upanayana, which the Sudras were not allowed to perform. 2 Sudras were the people who cultivated the land, mended the shoes, washed the clothes and did all types of menial works. Members of this caste, however, shared the stigma of untouchability; they were frequently denied the chance to eat, smoke or even sit with members of the upper castes, and

they often must use separate wells from those maintained for the use of others. 3 This pitiable condition of Dalits was seen and well addressed by some eminent social and political philosophers like Joytiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar and others and during their long careers they had taken some ameliorative measures in order to raise their social status. India after gaining independence enacted different social legislations to reform the position of Dalits which included-to remove the untouchability and discrimination against them and secondly to elevate their status in such a way that they have an equal status with other segments. The provisions of voting rights, reservation in education and jobs and in the political fields, are the steps which have been in existence since the adoption of the Constitution. Efforts are still going on to remove different discriminatory practices against them. One of the major aspects of the socio-economic status of Dalits is their political consciousness and awareness about various political activities and participation in these activities. The Dalit consciousness about political activities may contribute in various decisions relating to their rights and privileges. Thus political awareness and participation of the Dalits is an important area of study.

At the outset, it may be pointed out that though the term Dalit signifies a broad canvas, yet it is generally used as an alternative for the Scheduled Castes as recognized in the Indian Constitution.

3.2 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

The two concepts which have been used in the present study are Dalit and political participation. Before presenting the details of the present study, it is pertinent to clarify the above mentioned terms as clearly as possible.

In India, Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables, who have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. In many cases, Dalits are easily targeted even now in this independent nation where the constitution guarantees equal rights and privileges to every citizen. Throughout the century they have been victimized religiously, socially, culturally and most of all economically. Dalit is an expression of the existing contradiction, inequality and exploitation in the Indian hierarchy. In the annals of Indian history, Dalits were referred to with different nomenclatures like- Chandals, Avarnas, Achhuts, Adidravida, depressed classes, oppressed Hindu, Harijan, Scheduled Castes etc. at different points of time.⁴ However, after the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement, they preferred to be called as Dalits. The word Dalit, should normally refer to all oppressed classes including not only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but also the extremely backward among other backward castes. However there is a general agreement about the fact that the Scheduled Castes form the hard core of Dalits, who face more oppression and social indignities than the OBCs. Our main concern in this work, therefore, is with Scheduled Castes.

The term Dalit is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal* which means burst, split, broken, down trodden. Dalit has become part of the vocabulary of the North-Indian languages. For example, in Punjabi the well-known Punjabi dictionary 'The Mahan Kosh' by Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha defines Dalit as one who belongs to the lowest caste (Hini jati) and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper castes (Uchi jati).⁵ The most appropriate definition is given by Professor Gangadhar Pantawane, founder editor of Amitadarsh (Mirror of identity):- "To me, Dalit is not a caste, he is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of his country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching

separation, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.⁶

It was used in the new context in Marathi by New Buddhist activists, the followers of B.R. Ambedkar in the early 1970s.⁷ Dalit refers to those who have been broken, grounded down by those above them in a deliberate way, there is in, the word itself, an internal denial-pollution, Karma and justified caste hierarchy.⁸ It was seemingly first used in the context of caste oppression by the great nineteenth century reformer Jyotiba Phule.⁹ It is interesting that the category Dalit was used by Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly *Bahiskruit Bharat*. He defines it comprehensively: Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order.¹⁰ He, however, did not use this category often, preferring to deploy different terms depending upon changing context. For example, when dealing with the imperial state he used the category of depressed classes and when addressing high caste Hindus he used the category '*bahiskruit*' meaning total out-caste.¹¹

If one takes this view, all the exploited, and the downtrodden producers, who have been deprived from the ownership of the means of production, denied basic rights of a dignified social life and livelihood, discriminated through biased socio-economic and political decisions taken in favour of non-producers and privileged classes and kept deliberately away from the mainstream advantages of progress are to be considered Dalits.¹² It is to be noted that economically, a poor person is different from a Dalit. A poor person may be deprived in the economic sphere, especially of income necessary to participate in the economy. However, he/she may not be necessarily deprived in social and cultural spheres, that is, he/she may not face the same type of exclusion in the social and cultural life of his neighborhood as a Dalit faces.¹³ The recent use of

the term Dalit has been developed in the manifesto of Dalit Panther movement in 1973 : “Who is Dalit?” in this regard, this manifesto says members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited socially, politically, economically and in the name of religion.¹⁴ So Dalits are exclusively the socially and economically marginalized people of India.

A variety of other names have been used in both English and Indian languages before and after independence to designate these people who are at the lowest rung in the social structure. Besides the term Scheduled Castes and untouchables the term- chandals, Avarnas, depressed classes and Harijan have become well known. James Massey¹⁵ points out that these have been changed occasionally, in most cases, to despise them or to show contempt. Since they were considered outside chaturvarna- the four-caste system, they were labelled out-castes and untouchables and alienated from the main stream of the society.¹⁶ Untouchable is the word used by Ambedkar for those castes who are lowest in the Hindu scale of pollution. It first appeared in 1909. However, the word had now disappeared from ordinary parlance following widespread education and constitutional provisions. Before Independence the Government used the term “depressed classes”: this term was replaced by Scheduled Castes in government of India Act 1935 when these castes were placed on a Schedule as qualifying for special rights. In the arena of competitive politics, Ambedkar also preferred the term Scheduled Castes. It was evident when he used this term for establishing the political party- Scheduled Caste Federation.¹⁷ Although this term has been used as a nomenclature in the present Constitution of India, it is not explicitly defined.

Mahatma Gandhi an ardent champion for removing untouchability within the Hindu-Chaturvarna frame-work called the untouchables as Harijans-men of God.¹⁸ Basically Harijan

word was first used by Narsinha Mehta but later propagated by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi himself clarified this in one of the issues of the weekly Harijan. He argued that, 'it is not a name of my coining-some year ago, several untouchable correspondents complained that I used the word *Asprishya* in the pages of Navjivan, 'Asprishya means literally untouchable: I then invited them to suggest a better name, and one of the untouchable correspondents suggested the adoption of the name Harijan, on the strength of its having been used by the first known poet saint of Gujrat.¹⁹ But Ambedkar believed untouchables do not regard Gandhi as being earnest in eradicating untouchability.²⁰ According to him "Saints never carried on a campaign against caste and untouchability. The saints of the Bhakti sect were not concerned with the struggle between man and man. They were concerned with relation between man and God".²¹ Later, a section of Scheduled Caste leaders rejected the term Harijan considering it an insult rather than an honour.²² The term Dalit, in Gail Omvedt's opinion, provides a militant alternative to the Gandhian term Harijan.²³ All those who have been converted to Buddhism use the term Buddhist and rejected all other nomenclature, including their original caste names.

In the mid 1970s, again, the Dalit leaders coined a new identity in the name of 'Bahujan' with the emergence of Backward And Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF).²⁴ Kanshi Ram used the term Bahujan to encompass Dalits, Adivasees, OBCs, and minorities together for a greater alliance. In recent years the term Dalit has been discarded as a social reactionary category by a section of the community who prefer Bahujan with both the Buddhist as well as Dalit categories.²⁵ Kancha Ilaiah in his book 'why I am not a Hindu' (1996) used the term 'Dalit-Bahujan' to maintain the special identity of Dalits while expressing a broader alliance.

What is most important to emphasize at this point is that Dalit is the term which down trodden people have given to themselves. This helps to account for the popularity of the term among Dalit people of different protest movement in India. Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for recovery of their past identity.²⁶ They were realized of themselves as Dalits, the very acceptance of the state of Dalitness is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.²⁷ With the trend of Dalit assertions becoming stronger many Dalit organizations have started propagating and popularizing the term Dalit more vigorously. On the other hand the word “Chammar” which is one of the sub-castes in the Dalits has come out openly as a separate entity and formed “All India Maha Chammar Sabha”. They put up posters and banner all over the Punjab recently declaring “” say with pride that we are Chammar.²⁸

3.3 Political Awareness and Political Participation

Political participation is an indicator and an outcome variable of political awareness. However, political mobilization can be an outcome of something other than political awareness. In fact it can be a result of lack of political awareness, such as, lack of knowledge regarding real issues, lack of the knowledge of the decision making process, lack of sensitivity towards larger interest of the nation.

Not only mobilization in general sense but even political participation can also be a product of simply mass hysteria. Though voting is an indicator of participation, yet increase in voting percentage during a particular election could be attributed to wave phenomena. For

instance high voter turnout after Indira Gandhi's assassination had nothing to do with the rise in political awareness.

In political participation, we do not confine ourselves to the act of voting alone, since there are other political activities which are important indicators of political participation. We include a wide range of activities covered under the term political mobilization like participation in rallies, becoming members of different political parties or the other pressure groups, forming their own political party or raising issues of political importance through different mediums-radio, television, newspapers etc. or participating in elections at all levels-voting, campaigning or contesting.

As Aristotle said, man is a political animal by nature and his political activity may take place either explicitly or implicitly within his own group. But that state structure has undergone great transformation from city state to modern democratic nation state, from his time to present. As a result, the nature of political participation of human beings should be qualitatively different from that of Aristotelian times. The political participation in present nation state has to be highly conscious and constant in order to establish democratic institutions which are useful for each and every individual.

In these days everybody accepts the wisdom and need of people's awareness about various state activities. People's involvement in setting the goal and implementing the policies is considered highly essential. The necessity or desirability of such awareness and consequent participation by the people has thus assumed much importance and with it, political participation which gives the people a chance to shape their destiny, has also become a matter of political importance.

Political awareness leading to participation (which is always of positive nature; political violence is not political participation; it is not a product of political awareness to indulge in unlawful methods of demonstration and protest) plays a significant role in the survival of an ongoing democratic political system. Lack of political awareness and passivity of the general masses make the political system irresponsible and ultimately non-functioning. It is political consciousness and political awareness which brings the sense of interest articulation among the general masses. When the interest is articulated as a result of political awareness and consciousness, it leads to interest aggregation. When the interest is aggregated, the resultant is mass mobilization. When the masses are mobilized the outcome is effective participation of the masses in the affairs of the political system.²⁹ In this framework the significance of political participation acquires a paramount importance. The process of political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society show active interest and play a role in the selection of rulers. It includes voting, seeking information, discussing, attending meetings, contributing financially, and communicating with the representatives, enrolment in a party, canvassing and registering voters and working in campaigns. It is clear that the term political participation draws our attention to political activities rather than attitude and behaviour of private citizen to those who are professionally involved in public affairs.³⁰

Social scientists broadly define political participation as being the process through which an individual plays a role in the political life of his society, has the opportunity to take part in deciding what the common goals of that society are, and the best ways of achieving these goals. Political participation refers to actual participation in those voluntary activities by which members of a society show interest in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public polity.

To understand the issue involving political participation, firstly, it becomes necessary to discuss what political participation is. Secondly to see what are the factors in making people participate in politics, or what are the different environmental factors that can influence the political behaviour of individuals or groups.

Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may, in some cases, have complete and direct control over these processes - in other cases the control may be partial or indirect. The important thing is that people have constant access to decision making and power participation in this sense is an essential element of human development.³¹

To define political participation is a very complicated problem and to decide what activities constitute political participation is no simple a matter, because it is a product of various factors.³² Some people devote their full time and energy in politics, others choose to remain deeply interested as passive spectators. For some, politics is a matter of continuous and responsible attention, for others, political activity is episodic or emerges only in time of crisis. Thus, the political participation ranges from most passive and sporadic, to the most active and consistent.³³

Political participation is a civil duty and it is a good sign for political health of country. The term political participation has very wide connotation. Political participation can be regarded as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in the democracy and the rulers are made accountable to the ruled.³⁴ Political participation implies participation by the various people in the politics of the country.³⁵ Political participation is a necessary ingredient of every political system.³⁶

Defining political participation Myron Weiner says ‘The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods intended in influencing the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs or the choice of political leaders.³⁷

Dowse and Hughes say that people participate in politics in many different ways, with different degree of emotional involvement and at different levels of the system.³⁸ According to Verba, Nie and Kim political participation refers to "those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take."³⁹ According to Milbrath and Goel, political participation may be defined as "those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics." This definition is broader than most others; it includes not only active roles that people pursue in order to influence political outcomes but also ceremonial and support activities.⁴⁰

McClosky views political participation as "those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers, and directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy."⁴¹

Rush & Althoff explain that political participation consists of voting, membership or activity connected with political groups such as movements, parties, pressure groups, office holding in political institutions, informal activities such as political discussions or attendance at political meetings, political persuasion of authorities or members of the political public.⁴²

Though political participation has been defined in various ways, yet in nutshell it refers to the participation of individuals in the political process, and that it ensures that individuals are able to take part in deciding the common goals of the society and the best ways of achieving it.

Activities related to political participation typically include, voting-discussing and changing options, attending meetings, contributing financially, and communicating with representatives.

Lester Milbrath⁴³ brings these activities under the following three categories-

- (i) Gladiatorial activities
- (ii) Transitional activities
- (iii) Spectator activities

Gladiatorial activities:

Gladiatorial activities are carried out by a small number of party activists through active association with party activities like:

- (a) being a candidate for office,
- (b) soliciting political funds,
- (c) holding public and party office,
- (d) attending a caucus or a strategy meeting,
- (e) becoming an active member in a political party,
- (f) contributing time in a political campaign.

(ii) Transitional activities: Transitional activities are following:

- (a) attending a political meeting or rally,
- (b) making a monetary contribution to a party candidate,
- (c) contacting with public officers or leaders.

(iii) Spectator activities: Spectator activities are following:

- (a) voting,

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- (b) wearing a button or putting a sticker on the car,
 - (c) making and joining a political discussion,
 - (d) influencing others to vote in a particular way.

From the above, it is clear that political participation is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of factors. Some of the most researched studies of political behaviour concern themselves with the association between political participation and various social and environmental factors. There are a number of variables, which work behind the concept of political awareness.

3.4 Variables of Political awareness

Although participation appears to be a complex phenomenon that depends upon great many variables of different relative weights, according to Milbrath the variables which determine the pattern of political awareness can at-least be grouped into three categories 44:

- (i) The Psychological variables
- (ii) The Social variables
- (iii) The Political variables

- (i) **The Psychological variables:** Psychological, involvement refers to the degree to which citizens are interested in and concerned about politics and public affairs.⁴⁵ Men participate politically because they detest isolation and want to have the association of others. Again one of the fundamental psychological traits of man is that he is a curious animal. This pursuit of meaning also serves as an important psychological reason for one's political participation. Individual becomes politically

involved because he is keen on deriving meaning from the political environment in which he is living. All these however are a conscious psychological grounds of political participation. Thus, psychological involvement is a central variable determining exposure to political stimuli, so it is a control attitudinal variable relating to participation in politics.

- (ii) **Social variables:** Political awareness is constantly influenced by social environment. A person's social characteristics such as his socio-economic status, his social ethnic group, his education, age, sex and religion whether he lives in rural or urban or whether he belongs to voluntary organizations, and so on, are likely to influence his political awareness. **Occupation:** A person's socio-economic status is likely to influence his political awareness. People with high occupational status, high income earnings and having high exposure to mass media are likely to be more participative than those who have less of the above. It has been seen that the people who are, economically sound, take active part in political activities. For a hungry man, politics has no meaning.

Age: The age factor also has been playing an important role in this field. Many studies over the world have found that awareness increases steadily with age until it reaches a peak in the middle years and the gradually declines with old age. For conventional activities other than voting, a similar curve has been reported in the five nation survey of Austria, India, Japan, Nigeria, and the United State.⁴⁶ In each nation, awareness rises in the early years, reaches a peak in the middle years, and decline in old age. At the young age due to lack of stability and security they are unable to understand the conflicting situations. Similarly the sense of political efficacy starts dropping at the old age. Such persons normally approach the retirement which makes an end of

active life. In the meantime, this saps his self confidence and in turn it affects his life and the rate of political awareness. **Education:** Understanding the relationship between education and political awareness requires an important qualification. Education is one of the most important variables which promotes political consciousness among the people. The higher the education, the greater are one's sense of civic duty, political competence, interest, responsibilities and also self-confidence and articulateness. The more educated are better able to transmit their political interest and knowledge to their children and hence, to perpetuate the relationship between education and participation.⁴⁹ The educated citizen is more likely to engage in political process than the uneducated person.

(iii) Political Variables: If the social environment is important for understanding the character of political participation, political environment is no less important in influencing political participation. Political participation is open competition for power in a society and more is the competition based on established and accepted forms of procedures, the greater will be the tendency to participate. The overall government programmes are also important. People may be so disappointed with inefficiency of the government of different political parties that they tend to become indifferent. The fact of indifference to politics by many citizens should not be taken to mean that government would function well if citizens ignore it completely. In order to keep public actions responsive to the wishes and desires of the people, citizens must at least participate in the choice of their public officials.⁵⁰ Of all political influences on participation, the party is probably the most potent. A political party performs wide range of important functions. Political parties were invented, among other reasons, to help citizens interpret political information and events and to organize and channel their political participation.⁵¹ The political

variables in respect of participation are, no doubt, important, but it should be noted that, as far as participation is concerned, the same political variables are often found to produce different results and this may be because the operation of the political variables is very much limited by the psychological and social variables.

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