

**“EMPOWERMENT OF THE DALITS IN WEST
BENGAL: A STUDY IN THE DISTRICT OF
BARDHAMAN (1993—2006)”**

Synopsis Submitted

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SYNOPSIS

The present study proposes to focus on the nature of promises, problems and prospects of empowerment of the Dalits in a block of Bardhaman District of West Bengal. It is a micro study about the socio-economic political and cultural spaces of Dalits within a greater society. The objective of this study is to highlight the process through which since 1991 the Dalits have launched vociferous demand and formulated the strategy to make skillful use of adult franchise and parliamentary democracy to establish their own dominance. Along with this objective the study is also interested to explore the tension and anguish which are brewing up centering around the identity of 'Dalits', who were previously exploited, excluded and subjugated by the upper caste Hindus.

Caste system, the unique feature of Indian society divides its members into different segments on the basis of ascribed status. The people situated at the bottom have been identified as unclean or untouchables or *achhuts*. Though it is an eternal truth that all men are not equal but when and where human beings became unequal due to their birth then that inequality became a crucial issue in the process of political mobilization. This way, the study of dalits acquired importance in cognitive research. It is not a single dimensional problem but multi-dimensional and the whole problem lies in the argumentative tradition scarcely used with deliberation and commitment.¹ The common feature of this problem is maintaining a specific order which generally stood for suppressing the voices of the bottom rungs and concomitantly ignoring the usefulness of voice as instrumental to attain social justice.²

However after Independence the introduction of parliamentary democracy, universal adult franchise, various constitutional rights, and government sponsored development programs and enactments brought a massive change in caste based inequality. Various developmental and social transformation programs gave birth to the demands for equality and assertion of collective identity among the erstwhile segregated and marginalized groups.³ They became vociferous about their identity, honor, dignity and prestige. They emphatically demanded their share and participation in every walk of life. Actually the post-independence discursive history of caste inequality has been viewed on the one hand as an ameliorative mechanism for the low caste and on the other hand as a tale of severe deprivation and obnoxious acts perpetrated on low caste people. This dialectical situation ultimately gives birth to new forces, which stand up to erase traditional abysmal position of the poor, segregated, low caste people and at the same time organize themselves for the installation of dignified and hegemonic position. This new forces raise hope among the low castes that they could set aside the parochial strictures of castes which would make way for a more secular political society. They were propagating the notion that individual equality per se would not emancipate automatically, so they need to re-invent dignity in their collective identity.⁴ This contextual transformation ultimately provoked those marginalized low caste groups who have, by the help of the aforementioned mechanisms of politicization, emerged with a new sense of humanity and forge ahead to shape a new society based on the principles of justice, equality and freedom.

At the outset it is necessary to justify the construction of the term 'Dalit'; whom we may identify as dalit or who are identified as dalit in this study. The word was

derived from Sanskrit language and its literary meaning is 'ground down' 'oppressed' or 'broken'.⁵ As political epithet it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi Marathi translation of 'Depressed class'. Generally since 1960s the ex-untouchables have been identified as dalit. It is important to note that the category dalit is not a homogenous one, but made with three broad divisions, each having its own distinctive background and own problems. These three divisions are scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward communities. Besides, the religious minorities have also begun to claim their belongingness to this category. We may not consider the members of dalit category as simple laborers' or economically deprived or exploited individual. It is an aggregate of closed status group. The commonality of the members of this category is they are socio-economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically marginalized for centuries; actually all the members of this category are ex-untouchable. The determining factor of this category is not economic but the birth identity. For interpreter 'Dalits' are those who have been broken, ground-down by social groups above them in a deliberate manner. This identity is actually constructed on the one hand to express the denial of pollution or untouchability, unjustified caste hierarchy and on the other hand to express the spirit of pride and militancy.⁶ By this constructed identity ex-untouchables emphatically express their willingness to uproot the traditional practice of untouchability and forge initiative in adopting and promoting a new identity which stands for their honor and advancement.

In administrative parlance, scheduled castes are considered as dalits. But some scholars and activists considered it as a narrow inclusion and demanded a broader one to encompass all those considered to be either similarly placed or natural

allies. They intend to include landless poor peasant, women, scheduled tribes and other backward castes in this category. However though scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes are all marginalized group, yet their social heritage is not the same. The backward castes identified themselves as '*pichadi jati*' and the scheduled tribes preferred to call themselves as '*soshits*'. The three words '*dalita*', '*soshita*' and '*pichadi jati*' are evocative of the anguish and frustrated aspirations but it is not sufficient for sameness.⁷ It is also important to note that always conceptualization of dalit in terms of traditional account would not provide complete picture of their places in society. It is difficult to provide a single universal definition of dalit. However considering present situation and common parlance this study regarded the scheduled castes as 'dalit'.

In recent years, social development and empowerment of dalits acquired pompous connotation among social scientists, policy makers, development activists and politicians. Such as Neil Webster in his book titled, 'Panchayati Raj and The Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal (A Case Study)' which was his doctoral dissertation on changing agrarian relations in Burdwan during the pre-1977 period with a case study of two gram panchayats, reported and evaluated the performance of panchayat institution on rural development, specifically the development strategy directed at improving the socio-economic condition of the rural poor. An important objective of Webster's investigation was to search to what extent West Bengal's "people oriented administration" resulted in an improved distribution of development benefits to dalits. He has also assessed along with the dalits people's subjective perceptions about changes, if any, brought about in their objective conditions of life by West Bengal's new

politico-administrative activism. In this work Webster endorsed a new perspective on rural development which calls for active participation of the beneficiaries in the developmental planning from below and he also opined that it would be instrumental to inverting the erstwhile relationship between the planners and producers of rural development.⁸

Kirsten Westergaard's work on the West Bengal panchayats was done in 1986. In his work, Westergaard, taking three districts of West Bengal, i.e. Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore, considered the concept of popular participation as central to his analytical framework. By his study Westergaard analyzed the functions, policies and benefits of rural development. Through case studies he narrated the ascendancy of the rural poor in the institutions of power and also commented on the nature of their control over these institutions. He opined that popular participation in rural development and in the institutions of power certainly constitutes a switch from the previous period where it was primarily controlled by the big peasants. This study has also focused on the social class composition of the actors at the gram panchayat level. Westergaard commented on the pre-73rd Constitutional Amendment Act period's system of co-optation of dalit members in panchayat bodies' at all three tiers as the members stand at the entrance door to the room during meetings and do not participate in any discussion at all.⁹

Georges Kristoffel Lieten's book 'Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal' was based on a micro-study done in Muhammad Bazar Block in Birbhum district. In this study Lieten tried to explicate that the panchayats have become less the nodal point of rural mobilization, but their role in rural development management

had appreciably increased. He focused on the over determining role of politics in the process of development and empowerment of rural poor. As visualized by Lieten in his study, the importance of the panchayat system lies in increasing access of the poorest sections of the rural society to the local level administration. When Lieten made his study way back in the late years of 80s and early years of 90s, no obligatory quota was there in the panchayat bodies for dalits and other allies. The observation of Lieten in respect of the participation of dalits and other allies in the panchayat bodies can be mentioned here: "If we limit ourselves to women and SC/ST, the record of the Left Front is rather disappointing in respect of the former and highly successful in respect of the latter".¹⁰ Lieten's study explores the fact that direct election to the panchayats along party lines keeps alive the process of competitive mobilization of the rural masses and compels all contending political parties to catch up with one another in reaching down to the poorest of the poor. Lieten opined that this 'catching up process' enables more and more the dalits and their allies of the rural population to move up in the political power structure no matter whether the sponsoring parties heartily desire it or not. This again will have considerable amount of destabilizing impact on prevailing class structure and inegalitarian social relations in the village.¹¹

Amartya Sen and Jean Dre'ze in their India Development and Participation have elicited the fact that in West Bengal political organization of disadvantaged classes has significantly altered the balance of political power, especially in rural areas. This political change has made it possible to implement a number of far-reaching social programmes. Revitalization of democratic institutions at the village level is the prime example of that political change. It improves the rural infrastructure as well as the institutional basis of local governance. Therefore a

good illustration of feasibility of political empowerment of disadvantaged group has come from West Bengal, which helped them not only in economic terms but also enhanced their dignity and self-confidence.¹²

Anil K. Chakraborti's work in association with Prof. Apurba Kumar Mukhopadhyay and Dr. Debesh Roy on Beneficiaries of Land Reforms: The West Bengal Scenario has unravelled the outcome of the land reforms programmes in West Bengal. What has actually happened on the ground in terms of changes that have taken place in the socio-economic status of *pattadars* and *bargadars* – the principal beneficiaries of land reforms? The major issues that have been raised in this field based research, covering the entire state, includes an assessment of impact of land reforms on the social and economic status of the beneficiaries. The investigation has thrown light on the role of Operation Barga in ensuring security of tenure, reducing dependency relationship and guaranteeing enhanced entitlement to share of produce. The main thrust of this research has been towards a scientific assessment of the socio-economic condition of the beneficiaries of the development programme launched by the Government of West Bengal since 1970s onward. The field level data of this study has shown that at the State level Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe *pattadars* respectively account for 39.66% and 12.69% of the total number of the *pattadars* in the state. At the state level, *bargadars* belonging to the Scheduled Caste constitute 32.99% of the total *bargadars of the state*.¹³

Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar in their works on “Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal” showed that since 1977 people of West Bengal have experienced class-based politics, which was publicly committed to improving

the position of the poor in rural areas as a matter of priority. Agrarian reforms and the local government institutions both explicate the distinctive feature of West Bengal, which manifested redistribution of socio-economic benefits from the well-off to the poor. It also focused on the matter that guarantees of local political office to members of deprived groups can help in this process, but it is in the exercise of political power for the expansion of public services, and the universalization of primary health care and education that the foundations of egalitarian and participatory economic and social development can be laid.¹⁴

Apurba Kumar Mukhopadhyay and Dilip Ghosh in their unpublished monograph, Down but not out: A short profile of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, 2007, tried to explore the socio-economic, political and cultural status of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population of West Bengal within the overall perspective of development with social justice, individual dignity and community empowerment. This study focused on the state sponsored welfare schemes, policies and programmes of development for marginalized social groups in the post-Independence period, administered by the agencies of provincial and local governments aiming at improving the life situations of the weaker section of the society, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in particular.

In this study the concept 'empowerment' has been used not only in terms of political parameters but the social, economic and cultural parameters as well. The study is also interested in examining the administrative and institutional mode of sharing of power by dalits. How far the institutions are willing to provide required spaces for dalits? Can dalits be empowered without changing the

institutional arrangements? There are several such questions involved in this study. The objective of this study is to examine and understand a) the changes in socio-economic and political conditions of dalits, b) enhancement of their capability and dignity, c) participation in decision making, d) share in crops with guarantee against eviction e) literacy access etc. In course of exploration and analysis, the study also considers changes in the life situation of the dalits in the study area in the context of new economic reforms, globalization, dynamics of social movements, grassroots mobilization, initiatives of state, civil society and other bodies, and by the dalits themselves in particular.

From time immemorial the existing arrangements of distribution of wealth, honor and power in our society have been hierarchical in nature. Unequal distribution of scarce values had been legitimized by normative doctrine, traditional customs and rituals along with its institutional and ideological set up. Thereby on the one hand the systemic arrangements of unequal sharing and distribution of scarce values legitimize the subordination of the dalits and on the other hand contribute to the process of representation of this inequality and social construction of marginalization. Development and empowerment of dalits means achieving economic development, and expanding opportunities irrespective of birth identity and securing social justice. This study used the term 'empowerment' to mean 'full participation' in decision making which enables people to strengthen their economic, social, political and cultural conditions.

The methodological approach of the study:

The community development block Aushgram II in the district of Bardhaman in West Bengal is the universe of the proposed study. The choice of this area may

raise several questions. Primary considerations in this selections are; 1) the proposed study considered the scheduled caste people as dalit because traditionally they have been considered as untouchables and this area is a reserved constituency for both parliamentary and legislative election for the scheduled castes, 2) generally dalits are confined in rural areas and this block is totally rural, 3) most of the dalits are engaged in agriculture and as labour or small and marginal farmer and in this area agriculture is the main source of income and livelihood and a major portion of population spend their livelihood as agricultural labourers or small and marginal farmers, 4) the plight of the low caste Hindus is also pertinent for the selection of this area. Apart from this consideration, the symptom of emancipation and collective efforts to come out from traditional silence and subjugation amongst new generation of the low caste groups have also provoked the researcher to select this area.

Choice of the period of the study may also raise question. The main reason behind this choice is that in 1991 elections to both the Lok Sabha and West Bengal State Legislative Assembly were held to be followed shortly by the Panchayat elections in West Bengal in 1993. Significant policy changes pertaining to both the economic and political spheres were brought about in the early nineties. The bearing of such changes on empowerment of disadvantaged social groups at micro level has attracted the attention of many scholars from the country and abroad particularly since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992.

Finally the observation of this study is tested against the empirical evidences available from the three sample gram panchayats out of seven under Aushgram II

block of Bardhaman district. These three sample gram panchayats have been selected randomly from the list through lottery method. The following Gram Panchayats of Aushgram II block were chosen: Bhedia, Ramnagar and Valki. Thus the study covers a fairly substantial portion of the aforementioned community development block in terms of both area and population. The village was the primary unit of analysis for this study. For logistical reasons I personally decided to survey approximately 50% villages in each of the three sample Gram Panchayats chosen for the study which aggregated 22 villages in the total sample. For the selection of specific villages random sampling design was used. Altogether 300 respondents have been interviewed in this study for generating the qualitative data. From each sample Gram Panchayat 100 respondents representing upper caste and ex-untouchable scheduled caste i.e. the dalits of this locality; of which 50 respondents from upper castes and 50 respondents from dalits and among this total respondent of both caste category 50% respondents have been selected from male persons and 50% from female persons. Respondents have been selected from the electoral rolls of the village level constituency randomly on first come first meet basis. I am born and brought up in a village of Aushgram II. Considering my deep and constant acquaintance within the area under exploration, as research method the technique of ethnographic study with participant observation has been followed for data collection. The underlying reason for adopting this particular research method is the topic of the research itself. For exploration of nature and determinants of promises, problems and prospects of empowerment of the Dalits at micro levels, it is necessary to observe and assess the socio-economic, political and cultural spaces of Dalits within a greater society, their tension and anguish which are brewing up around

the identity of 'Dalits' for understanding the socio-cultural, political and economic context for micro level behavior of the people under study. Therefore the study seeks to understand those things from the native point of view, entering above mentioned community development block with the purpose of doing field research by using ethnographic participant observation. Survey research method is the main technique for the proposed study which is helpful also to obtain systematic and specific information through interviews and personal participant observation of the life situation of a relatively large number of individuals. For purpose of the present study semi-structured questionnaires have been used for primary information and data collection. First two questions are related to the general information about respondent's socio-cultural, political and economic condition and remaining part is related to the respondents' observation about the objectives of the study. I personally administered all the questions to the respondents, so verbal exchange and discussion on questions took place between the respondents and myself. As a researcher I personally tried to understand present socio-cultural, political and economic status of local ex-untouchable scheduled caste people in comparison to the upper caste local people from within the locality, and capture it as external to and independent of personal prejudice. However in order to get a comprehensive understanding of socio-cultural, political, economic status of ex-untouchable scheduled castes of this locality the study primarily relied on respondent's narratives and present circumstances and happenings within the locality. The study is designed through extensive field survey, covering a cluster of selected villages in the proposed study area. This will be supplemented by the survey of existing literature and document analysis. Data have been procured from both official and non-official or primary sources. The

study also approached some dalit men and women from various walks of life using the diary method and supplementing the same with information gathered from officials, political leaders, and activists belonging to both the dalits and non dalits in and around the field. Thus a broad spectrum of perceptions on or about the dalit be obtained and compared to our findings. The specificity of this study is that it does not differ from those encountered in the field survey.

Therefore we have divided the present study into the following chapters:

1. Introduction: Nature, Scope, Objectives and Methodology of the Study.
2. The Dalits and their Empowerment: Conceptual and Historical Parameters.
3. The Dalits of Aushgram: A Socio-cultural Profile.
4. Empowerment of the Dalits in the 1990s.
5. From Politicization of Dalits to Dalitization of Politics: The Scenario in the New Millennium.
6. Conclusion: In Search of a Dalit Vision of Empowerment
7. Bibliography

In the first chapter nature, scope, objectives and methodology of the Study have been discussed. Since 1991 the Dalits of rural West Bengal have launched vociferous demand and formulated the strategy to make skillful use of adult franchise and parliamentary democracy to establish their own dominance for the socio-economic political and cultural spaces within a greater society.

Second chapter is concerned with the study of the conceptual and historical parameters of Dalit empowerment. So it is obvious to us to explore few fundamental questions of Dalit identity and their empowerment. Who are dalit? What is the historical and ideological source of Dalit identity? Is the identity a homogenized one? Does it register an identity of collective emancipation? What is the political explication of this identity? What are the parameters of dalit identity? And what is the historical condition of their empowerment? What position do Dalits have in society vis-à-vis other members of the society? These are a few questions raised in this chapter.

Third chapter deals with those socio-cultural factors and features which shape the society and social structure of Aushgram II block, the demography, religious composition, customs, beliefs, values, education, economy, caste hierarchy, caste mobility of the habitants of Aushgram II block. Therefore focus is placed on composition, characteristics and social structure of people of Aushgram II community development block with data available from census reports, district statistical handbook, reports and information from various departments of district and block level government offices, local journals, local newspapers, local periodicals and other local available information and sources like oral statement by the elderly people of the locality.

The purpose of the fourth chapter is to present the findings of an investigation into the empowerment of dalits in 1990s in Aushgram II block in the district Bardhaman of West Bengal. The investigation examines the extent to which

the state government has been successful in pursuing the empowerment of the low caste and increase political participation in local government institutions. This investigation is also supposed to explore the grassroots reality of the legitimate sharing, distribution and redistribution of power and the position of the dalits as a member or as a beneficiary or as common people of locality.

In the fifth chapter an attempt is made to examine the scenario in new millennium from the perspective of transformed conditions and assertive attitude of ex-untouchables. This chapter has focus on how the dalits sensitized with the Government sponsored development and empowerment programme since Independence and specifically the empowerment programme in 1990s, through active participation in local rural development planning and became conscious about the use value of their labour and numerical strength.

The last chapter is concerned with pulling together a number of concluding comments regarding the empowerment of dalits at micro as well as state level. This chapter has focus on the fact that though the Government of West Bengal has advocated class-based politics and implemented various affirmative empowerment programmes since 1977 onwards yet caste does still have a role in determining social attitudes and behavior of Bengali people as well as the politics of West Bengal.

The conclusion is followed by an extensive bibliography on the name of dalits in India and in West Bengal in particular.

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