CHAPTER 1

Social Context of Dalit History in India
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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DALIT HISTORY IN INDIA

At the outset it is pertinent to mention here that history of dalit studies in India have had social context that has in its centre the caste system which was based on the principle of graded inequality. The functioning of caste had enforced the norms of superiority of a particular group over other. Within the hierarchical organisation there were apologists of such a social order on religious ground. They considered caste a ‘just and natural order’ of social division to maintain social harmony. There were certain enlightened intellectuals and reformers who thought that the hierarchical division of caste had acquired certain features which were obnoxious and on ethical and moral ground were abhorrent and needed corrective measures. While there were others who pointed to the caste divisions as deliberate design to perpetuate the domination of privileged groups. Ambedkar’s review of the definition of caste as advanced by Senart, Nesfield, Risley and Ketkar were quite enlightening. Contesting the racial and religious basis of treating caste as natural division, he said, “Caste can exist only in the plural number. Caste to be read can exist only by disintegrating a group. The genius of caste is to divide and disintegrate”.

The present chapter is divided into three parts. The first part deals with spelling out the nature and dynamics of caste based society incorporating the reactions of people on it in espousing subaltern ideology; the second part deals with dalit movement; a historical
overview and the third part deals with the review of approaches in historical writings incorporating the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar as well to highlight the subaltern consciousness that reflected in their writings.

PART - I

The history of dalits cannot be understood without having some idea of the protest movements which were initiated during 6th century B.C.\textsuperscript{2}. So far as dalits are concerned they are referred to by various terms. Several terms such as ‘exterior castes’, outcaste, ‘depressed classes’, ‘Scheduled Caste’, ‘Harijans’, Ex-untouchables etc. have been used to refer to a particular social category who is popularly known as – dalits.\textsuperscript{3} The term dalit has to be understood in a binary context of superiority and inferiority. The domination of high caste people and relative subordination of scheduled caste people has been the main focus of the present study so far as the status of the most deprived section is concerned. As a matter of fact one of the most dramatic features of the contemporary Indian politics has been multifarious dimensions of political movement initiated by the deprived sections of people popularly called dalits.

Within the Indian hierarchical social structure caste provided an ideological basis of distinguishing a separate category of people who were identified as shudras. The \textbf{Varna} scheme of Indian social order recognised the supremacy of dominant groups known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas\textsuperscript{4}. The superior identities of these three Varna groups were projected by bestowing upon them a high ritual status.
They were the one who had the privilege of observing sacred thread ceremony (i.e. observing ‘Upnayan’ sanskar) which entitled them to go for Vedic learning. Those who were not allowed to observe this ritual were termed as shudras i.e. non-twice born group. They were not allowed to go for Vedic teachings. The so called dwija, i.e., the twice born groups had all the privileges in social, economic and political fields. The scruples of moral superiority enjoyed by dwija maintained their exclusive identity in the caste based hierarchical Indian social structure which was considered extension of Varna social order. Due to their low status the non-twice born groups were deprived of many privileges enjoyed in an exclusive manner by the twice born groups. Thus Shudras suffered from many indignities.

It is the traditionally despised positions of the shudras which made them occupy the lowest positions in the caste hierarchy of the Indian society. They were the objects of ideological condemnation as well as the material servitude. The ideology of Varna within the structure of jatis made shudras rank as permanently defiled. The caste structure of the Indian society created their perpetual subordination. Their subordination was based on social, political and the economic dominance of the upper caste people. Gokhale rightly observed, “The ideological and material system of dominance, which in traditional India coincided with and reinforced each other required that dalit communities exist in fixed relationship of inequality related to dominant castes / classes.”
Thus it is clear that within the caste based Indian social hierarchy dalits-constitute a social category who suffered from many indignities. Dalits are considered the most oppressed segments of Indian society. In recent historiography the historians have developed a new critic of colonial and nationalist’s perspective about the colonised countries and its people. Ranajit Guha pioneered subaltern studies during the course of studying peasant’s revolts and popular insurgencies in India. He provided a new impetus to bring out the more complex process of domination and subordination while studying dynamic features of Indian society.

Dilthey in a ponderous note argued that a simple chronology of individual life studied in succession is not enough for the history of social sciences. That means a history is to be situated in life itself, it is necessary for its narrative to be informed by new concept of time and dynamic actions involving action of community desperately trying to improve their condition of existence. Thus when history is made and created the tradition is eroded by time and people’s action. The political and cultural history of India has witnessed many changes. It had its leaders providing new guidelines, a strategy worked out to emancipate them form the existence of servitude. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar was the product of their own age and time and their phenomenological understanding of reality provides a vivid description and understanding that they had of people and their behaviour.
The period before independence has often been described as the period of disillusionment and subaltern studies as one of its outcomes. So far as disillusionment was concerned it was caused by failed possibilities. The period of 'disillusionment' was characterised by R. Guha (1997) as was, ".....one of anxiety suspended between despair and expectation and projected as such into the future." He further stated that subaltern study enabled, "..... a continuous dialogue with the proximate age groups but also from its freedom institutional constrains." He further stated, "Throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country-that is, the people. This was not an autonomous domain for it originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on latter."9

**Caste and Subaltern Consciousness:** It is important to bear in mind that the question of dalit subordination cannot be understood without understanding the nature of subaltern consciousness which contains caste as a basic constituent element. When we try to discuss the consciousness of subaltern groups the advocates of Marxian perspective, immediately bring into focus the importance of another category called-class. As regards class structure the Marxist tend to argue that the caste category under the pressure of industrialisation has begun to loose its traditional character and therefore, what is called as caste consciousness is somewhat contradictory, fragmented,
and ambiguous and therefore, complex in understanding. What is implied in their argument is the fact that in the course of historical process and transformation there has been an emergence of dominant and subordinate classes. There is also a contradictory unity of two opposed elements—one, being the autonomous and another dependent upon it. Partha Chatterjee while delineating the features of these two elements states that, "The autonomous element expresses the common understanding of the members of subaltern groups trying to transform the world through their own labour and the other which is borrowed from the dominant classes, expresses the fact of the ideological submission of the subaltern group."\textsuperscript{10} Gramsci also provided us with political criteria for a critic of subaltern consciousness. His comments suggests to us, a methodological approach treating subaltern consciousness contradictory. It consists of two opposed elements (i) autonomous and (ii) Borrowed.

In this context Partha Mukherjee suggests that the history of religion also reflect two opposed tendencies: First, where the attempt is made to articulate a universal code for society as a whole and the second, is a response against the opposition of this universal code of society resulting into the struggle by the subordinated. Thus both these tendencies are relevant for the study of consciousness in any class divided society. In Indian context however, we have to understand the nature of social formation which consisted of contradictory elements based on caste divisions and then to identify
the specific elements which rebelled against the caste divisions. Thus the dialectics of consciousness have always operated in our society.

Indian society unlike the European society has always been organised on the principle of hierarchy based on caste and therefore, under the Marxist framework it was difficult to replace caste with class as the fundamental explanatory framework. Therefore, the Marxist viewed caste as the fundamental feature of super structure of Indian society. That means they do not attach caste as governing the structure of material relation i.e. production relations, because for the Marxist production relations which is the base of a society is always characterised in terms of class relations. As against this position those who differ from Marxist framework of analysis suggested that caste in fact was the base of material relations having its own historical dynamics and therefore, caste subsumes class in Indian society.

The first approach which 'tries to incorporate the Marxist framework to understand the historical changes have found ample evidence in various studies. D. D. Kosambi's works contain several hypothesis of this sort. The difficulty with this approach is that the caste beliefs or practices have to be explained as functionally linked with production relations. Thus it may contain the problem of circular argument which may involve an element of tautology.

The second approach does not consider class divisions as co-terminus with caste divisions. Gail Omvedt is the one who strongly argues by suggesting that caste can not be characterised as a super structural form associated with a particular mode of production. For
her, “Caste is a material reality with a material base and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian economy and Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications today.”

Dalit movement has been studied historically by Gail Omvedt. In the pre independence period the dalit movement comprised strong non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu as well as in Punjab (the ad-dharm movement) Western U.P. (the adi-Hindu movement), Bengal (Nama Shudras movement), Kerala (Narainswamy Guru’s movements), Tamil Nadu (adi-dravidas), Coastal Andhras (adi-Andhras), and Hyderabad (adi-Hindus). Gail Omvedt while citing the features of dalit movement as largely consisting of anti caste movements identified with several leaders as the principal actor in providing leadership to the anti-caste movement in various places. The names of Jyotiba Phule, Baba Saheb Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Perriyar, prominently figure as among those leaders who were involved in anti-caste movement. There were some other leaders in other states who provided leadership in organising anti-caste movements. The names of Narain swamy Guru in Kerala, Acchutanand in Uttar Pradesh and Mangu Ram in Punjab may be referred as prominent leaders who attacked system of exploitation at all levels i.e. culturally, economically and politically. They all asserted that the Hinduism had not been the religion and culture of majority and therefore, it was an imposed religion. The leaders also suggested that in order to escape the exploitation, the low cast people the so called oppressed termed as dalits must reject this
impositions to define themselves as non-Hindus and take a new religious identity. Gail Omvedt suggested that the leaders of anti-caste movements associated themselves with a new religious identity. She (1994) stated, “Phule tried to formulate a new theistic religion; Periyar promoted atheism; Ambedkar turned to Buddhism; others in Tamil Nadu non-Brahmin movement tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion; Narayanswami Guru formulated ‘one religion, one caste, one God’ while his more radicals follower Ayyapan proclaimed ‘no religion, no caste, and no God for mankind.’

Thus it is clear from the above description of about the course of dalit movement that what started as movement against removing the rigidity of caste system acquired radical features in due course of time. It is pertinent to mention here the nature and character of religious reform movements which started in the first half of the 19th century. Earlier the elements of Brahanical order which was idealised by the division of Hindu society into the Varna order was criticised by the Buddhist Philosophy.

The Buddhism in India flourished for over a millennium from the time of king Ashoka (269-232 B.C.E.) to the demise of Buddhisms in Indian in 12th century of the Common Era. It is not significant for us to discuss here the causes of its gradual decline what is important to notice here is the fact that the adherents of Buddhism were trying to represent a counter ideology against the Brahminal ideology. Brahminism sanctified the estate structure of society (i.e. division into Varna) and the dominant position of Brahmin priests, who appeared
to be an architect of social progress. The Brahmins had declared themselves to be above all other men. In order to prove his superiority over others, they had propagated rituals which were contested by the adherents of Buddhist ideology. The scholars who reflect on Buddhism observed that, “Buddhism stood to replace Brahminism, the religion of early slave-owning society in ancient India.” Providing the importance of Buddhism in Indian Brodov writes, “The divisions of Buddhism into school and sects began as early as 4th century B.C. The common foundation of all Buddhist trends is this: The ultimate goals of life are salvation; ethical and religious experiences are the means of attaining the goal.” Thus it is clear from this interpretation of Buddhist Philosophy that the philosophical foundation of Buddhism is based on the theory of dharma. It is also interesting to note that apart from the philosophy of Buddha, there were other philosophical traditions which had progressive components and therefore the orthodox principles of propagating divisions of society into caste orders was being contested. In various other references we find the importance of great saints like Raidas, Nanak, Kabir etc. who followed a sufi tradition to question and contest the veracity of Brahminical orders which tried to glorify the caste based divisions in ancient India.

This was the period when social and cultural awakening had begun to acquire its progressive content and therefore, the social and cultural life in the 18th century was dominated by a lot of contradictory features of Indian society. One of the central features
which brought contradictions in Indian society centered on the caste based social order. Hindus were divided into numerous caste/ Jatis. The caste system not only divided people but it also fixed their status in social scale. The higher caste headed by Brahmin had full control and monopoly over all social prestige and privileges. The high caste Hindus also, dominated the lower caste people by devising the principle of an exclusive social order which excluded the lower castes from having any access to the social prestige and privileges enjoyed by them. No wonder it created division and splits among Hindus living in the same village or regions. Access to education was confined to the high caste people and those who ranked low in social scale could not think of acquiring education. Thus the social order that was created had perpetuated a hierarchical divisions based on the notion of what Louis Dumot called the ‘purity and pollution.’ Thus the two contradictory social groups that emerged as a result of caste based divisions were privileged and under privileged groups. In the Varna scheme of social divisions these groups were called ‘dwija’ i.e. twice born caste group and Shudras’ who were later designated as untouchables.
PART-II

Dalit Movement : A Historical Overview

In the preceding section an attempt was made to highlight the core of the problem associated with the social context of dalit's depressing conditions. The perception of dalits having been exploited, discriminated and oppressed was sharply pointed out by its legendary leaders first time during the 19th century under the inspiration of Jyotiba Phule, second time spear headed by Gandhi and Ambedkar (around the First World War) when both the leaders tried to change certain spheres of society. And finally, after independence when the affirmative action of the state for dalits upliftment coupled with their assertion in politics and open defiance of caste restrictions sparked event of atrocities that created renewed debate on dalit identity and politics. Gail Onvedt calls these phenomena as the 'Redemptive' 'Reformist' and 'Revolutionary' character of dalit movement. According to her "Redemptive social movements try to change certain spheres of society (e.g., religious conversions), Reformist social movements attempt to change the entire society but in limited ways, while revolutionary social movements finally attempt radical change in the entire society."16

In one of the sharply focused discourse on Dalit movement and its studies Kancha Iliiah observed, "In post independence India, ideological conflict between Dalitism and Brahminism has acquired not only a pan Indian social base but it has also become very intense. The other forces appear to have been absorbed into these two
contending politico-ideological social forces – dalitist and Brahminical. .... The Dalitist School represents an ideology of socio-political change and the Brahminical school represents a kind of modernised Hindu fundamentalist social base."  

He further states that in epistemological terms, the Indian nationalist discourse expressed itself in the thought process of three schools: (a) “religious nationalism of which Hinduism is the central and hegemonic school 18 (b) Dalit-Bahujan nationalism which believed in restructuring the Indian society into a casteless, classless, egalitarian shangha 19 and (c) Communist secular socialist nationalism which believed in abolition of class with a caste-blind scheme of revolution or transformation of the Indian society into a secular, socialist and communist society20.

He further clarifies, “These philosophical and ideological discourses have their origin in ancient Indian Dalit Bahujan school of thought which constricted their epistemology in their day to day interaction with prokruti (nature) and hence it seems to have had a strong material basis and also inclination to link itself to the production process of the Indian subcontinent.” 21

M.S.A. Rao (1978) while writing on backward class movements has pointed out that, “The growth of national movements was responsible for awakening the masses regarding their basic civil rights and in challenging orthodox cultural values.” 22 He felt that all these developments in 19th century and early years of the present century created a social atmosphere in which the depressed classes
became aware of their basic civic rights and also felt that they could do something to redress their conditions of relative deprivation.

There existed many forms of exploitation in the ritual and secular spheres for the depressed classes. It was Jyotiba Phule who led the movement in Poona against the tyranny of caste in general and of the Brahmans in particular. Even before Arya Smaj was established he organised an association called Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers’ Association) and directed his followers against engaging Brahmans priest. He also started schools for the children of non-Brahmins caste. 23


Gail Omvedt (1994) rates Jyotiba Phule as the prominent 19th century social revolutionary and main founder of the anti caste movement in India. Contesting the veracity of Aryan theory of race
and superiority of Europeans over the low caste people. Phule argued that the low castes who were termed as Shudras and Ati-Shudras and sometimes listed as Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars, Bhils, Kolis, Mahars and Mangs were the original inhabitants of the country, enslaved and exploited by conquering Aryans who had formulated a caste based Hinduism as a means of deceiving the masses and legitimising their power. Describing the revolutionary ideas of Phule, Omvedt observed, "Phule wrote new marriage ceremonies, following many peasant traditions but without the use of Brahmin priests and stressing equality between men and women and in the end took the radical step of proclaiming a new theistic religion, the sarvajati Satya Dharma, with a strong, moralistic emphasis."  

She traces the emergence of the Dalit movement between 1910-30 as conscious organised force in the social and political life of Bombay presidency, Nagpur, Madras presidency and even in Mysore. The ground for Dalit advance had been laid earlier in terms of educational and social activities initiated by Phule. Thereafter, in 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of Ambedkar, Mahars, a dominant depressed caste group was mobilised. Ambedkar's deference in 2nd round table conference and subsequent confrontation with Gandhi (in 1932) over Poona pact became a turning point in Dalit movement. Thus the years from 1930-36 were characterised by India depressed classes conference at Nagpur in 1930. Ambedkar's clash with Gandhi before and at the second round table conference culminated in the Poona pact of 1932. The famous conversion
announcement by Ambedkar in 1935 when Ambedkar stated, “I have been born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu.” – suggested a critical phase in the history of dalit movement. This also showed the process of disillusionment with Hindu as well as Congress. And the subsequent years in the period between 1936-42 was marked by growing radicalism in Bombay presidency which was carried out in Mysore state characterised by lack of a clear political challenge resulting into what Omvedt found a discernible themes of bourgeois – Brahmin incorporation of Dalits during the period starting from 1930 to 1956.

T. K. Oommen (1990) has pointed out that Dalits response and styles of protest is the manifestation of three sources of deprivation viz., low ritual status, appalling poverty and powerlessness. According to Oommen the protests registered by them were essentially of three types: (a) Bhakti Movement: It attempted to purify Hinduism of its evils and fought against the tyranny of caste system. (b) New-vedantic movements: It was oriented to a reinterpretation of the doctrines of Hinduism. (c) Conversion movement: Movements which rejected Hinduism led to adoption of other faiths.

Bhakti movements initiated by saints like Kabir, Ramanand and Ravidas in North, Chaitanya in the East, Narsinh Mehta and Tukaram in the West and Ramanuja and Basava in South had several features; reformist character which directed its efforts towards removal of evils of Hinduism; initiated by caste Hindus including the Brahmins against whose orthodoxy protest were directed; lacked programmes of socio-
economic upliftment of Dalits as it was confined to ideational realm and finally became popular among Dalits but the issue of equality and improvement in socio-economic status remained a mirage.\textsuperscript{28}

By the middle of 19\textsuperscript{th} century a new trend of protest began by Vivekanand and Dayanand Sarswati and its kernel was the dissociation of the practice of untouchability. Later the Dalits converted to Sikhism and Buddhism – these religions embraced by Dalits professed equality and brotherhood and the converted dalits came to be known as neo-Christians, neo-Buddhists. This is how omnipresent caste system penetrated into new religions. What is significant about the Dalit movements mentioned here is that all these three i.e. Bhakti, neo-vedantic and proselytisation movements were that the first two were not initiated by Dalits but the latter were initiated by the Dalits themselves. The proselytisation movements provided emancipation from the oppressive as well as elastic character of the caste system.\textsuperscript{29}

The importance of Ambedkar’s contribution was reflected in political mobilisation of Dalits for improving Dalits status and enlightened Dalits took lead in this direction. They were inspired by Ambedkar’s subaltern views. Two subtypes of Dalit movements and its consequences have been pointed by T. K. Oommen. First, those who had a favourable resource base and succeeded in crossing the pollution line ceased to be untouchables e.g. the Ezhavas of Kerala and the Nadars of Tamil Nadu. Second, those who had a relatively weaker resource base and did not succeed in crossing the pollution
line in spite of vigorous protest movements among them e.g. Mahars of Maharastra and Chamar of U.P. Commenting on its implication T. K. Oommen observes..... “All Dalits movements old and new – were at best reformative in their ideological orientations and they operated as interest groups to better their socio-economic conditions within the overall frame work of the society.”

Commenting on implications of Ambedkar and Gandhi’s ideology M. S. Gore felt that Ambedkar’s response to salvage Dalits position was to be worked out on the strategy of tit for tat. He states, “one should not expect the eclipse of untouchability to be over unless we show readiness to say tit for tat, rub wrist against wrist, and adopt a strategy of obstruction and all round checkmating (of Hindu social mores).” Gore further points out Ambedkar’s ideological implications on Dalit movement in terms of following gains first, the assertion of separate identities and special interest of their groups; Second, a claim that British must provide for special protection of these interests in any programme of political liberalisation that they may adopt for India; Third, the maintenance of a visible but variable distance between their own movement for social and political advance and the mainstream nationalist movement and Fourth, a similar variable distance between their movement and foreign ruling power. The decade 1930 to 1940 even more sharply brought into focus the ideology and strategy of Ambedkar led Dalit movement for their social and economic upliftment. As against this Gandhi according to Gore was reluctant to disown the dogma of Varna
division of Hindu society because he felt it to be natural division and required some minor institutional reorganisation.  


Based on a rather sketchy review of history of Dalit movement John C. B. Webster is of the view that those studies mentioned here often provide conflicting understanding of the nature and dynamics of
The modern Dalit movement therefore, he feels that the studies on Dalit movement must address to following five unavoidable issues to have a comprehensive understanding of those movements. The first relates to the question of Dalit. It is pertinent, to mention here that the part of the confusion centres around the connotation of term Dalit because it is not clear whether the users of this term are referring to Marathi and Hindu translation of the British term depressed classes. It is being used in a narrow original sense (i.e. confined to SC only) and in a broader sense (e.g., women tribals, the poor of all castes and religious minorities). And those who use class framework of analysis may also include peasants, agricultural labour, factory workers, students and the like.

The second is the conceptual issue concerning the use of movement – it is not clear whether they refer to different realities that are not used with reference to Dalits or they use specifically for Dalit movement. Oommen wondered whether many similarly placed primordial Dalit collectivities with similar histories of oppression simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system in different regional – linguistic areas could be subsumed within the studies of Dalit movements. Webster however, felt that the label modern Dalit movement makes a good sense as it sharply focuses the people under question.

Third, there has also been a disagreement over the background and origins of the movement. The initiatives ceased by non-dalits are also to be considered part of the movement or only those who were
Dalits. There were groups who were Dalits and took up the issues of Dalits only. And at the same time there were those who used occupational mobility to improve their lot and some resorted to conversion which made their situation, identity and aspirations a matter of public concern. It was this situation which Ambedkar and Gandhi both turn to such good advantage. Ambedkar was recognised for mobilising them in a radical manner while Gandhi for appealing the orthodox Brahmins to be more tolerant to the demands of untouchables.

The fourth issue concerns the dynamics of this movement not only at the centre but also at the regional and local periphery during 30 years from 1917 to 1947 – the period when the role of Gandhi and Ambedkar was involved in the struggle.

Finally, amidst the plethora of micro-studies, how the post independence history of Dalits movement can be best understood? Webster has identified two approaches that seem to integrate and synthesise several studies on Dalit activities. In the first approach Webster referred to the studies conducted by Nandu Ram who differentiates the three types of Dalit activism – movement against socio-economic exploitation and numerous types of atrocities on Dalits; movement for better access to opportunities and for realisation of goals of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice; and movements for gaining self-respect and dignified social identity.34

Barbara Joshi refers to four alternative paths to equality which dalits leaders were advocating while she was doing her studies. The
alternative paths were 'political power', 'economic independence', 'religious reform' and 'social reform'. The second approach is the one where Gail Omvedt, Webster and even Rajni Kothari seem to be in agreement where in different approaches underlying unity beneath the diversity seems to be the kernel of the approach. The modern dalit movement has accepted the challenge by means of education, employment and special rights to redefine the nature of imperialism in essentially social terms – both globally and locally. Webster thinks that social scientists may gain a rich understanding of the modern dalit movement if they concentrate on understanding “the nature of Indian society and the dynamics of modern history to stimulate fresh inter-disciplinary re-visioning of the subject.“ (1996)

At the turn of the 20th century there has been a resurgence of interest in Dalit studies and a fresh inter disciplinary focus on the subject has brought about various dimensions of Dalit struggles in contemporary times which are aptly termed as ‘Modern Dalit movement.’ S. R. Charley and G. K Karanth while writing ‘editors note’ in the Cultural Subordination and the Dalit (challenge series) acknowledges the processes of cultural, political, social and cultural studies that transcend these distinctions. Taking a global view of the Dalit situations they point out in editor’s note of second volume edited by Ghanshyam Shah (2002) four important changes that have occurred in the life and world of Dalits. First, widely acknowledged fact is that equality is beginning to be realised as a desirable norms and Dalits too are eligible to be treated equal in the modern society.
Second, capitalist development of Indian society has weakened the caste system even if more recent economic restructuring (liberalisation) is not necessarily beneficial to Dalits in general. Third, Dalits are beginning to experience a modicum of social mobility thanks to policies of positive discrimination. Finally, there has been unprecedented rise in political consciousness among Dalits. 35

The highpoint of Ghanshyam Shah’s edited volume Dalit Identity and Politics (2001) is that it has provided different social scientist’s view to address and explore the issues relating to Dalit’s socio-cultural, economic and political status in recent times. It traces the history of various Dalit struggles and highlights the salient features of those movements in different regions of India. Needless to mention in many of these Dalit struggles Ambedkar’s and Gandhi’s subaltern approach remains the point of reference. This only goes to suggests that Gandhi and Ambedkar’s ideas about Dalits social and economic upliftment still continue to occupy an important place in understanding the dynamic aspects of Dalit society and issues related to their changing identity and perception of reality in contemporary times. The succeeding chapters i.e. Chapter-2 deal with the examination of subaltern approach and its relevance for understanding both Gandhi and Ambedkar’s idea on Dalits. A comparative assessment of their views have been attempted to understand the significance of subaltern approach.

**PART—III**

Review of Perspectives in Historical Writings
Historians have stressed upon the role of individual in bringing about social change and in this regard the personalities such as Gandhi and Ambedkar have always been a subject matter of historian's investigation. The actions of personalities of Gandhi and Ambedkar's stature provide contrasting styles of mobilisational strategies.

Therefore, the men whose actions become historian's subject of study were not to be treated as isolated individuals acting in vacuum. Rightly observed E.H. Carr when he stated (such individual’s role), "........acted in the context, and under the impulse of past society."36 Needless to mention here the definition that E.H. Carr gave while defining history, ".........history, “is a continuous process of interaction between the historians and his facts, an un-ending dialogue between the present and the past.” E. H. Carr also wanted, “to inquire into the relative weight of individuals and social elements on both sides of equation. Since historian himself is a product of history, society and therefore, the work of historian mirror the society in which he works.” Rightly observed E.H. Carr when he said, “It is not merely the events, that are in flux. The Historian himself is in flux.”37

Thus it is clear from this observation that ideology of an individual has a great role in shaping the society. In historical writings we also find the examples of individual genius being portrayed as creative force in history and therefore lot of historian have suggested that ‘history is a biography of great men’. Carlyle was the one who seems to have strong opinion on this.

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In historiography we find different approaches providing accounts of historians, explanations in terms of human intentions as the deciding factor in human history. A. J. P Taylor once said that “..... The history of modern Europe can be written in terms of three titans—Napoleon, Bismarck and Lenin.”38 E. H. Carr has extensively referred to the views of historians who have alluded to the writings of different historians who have played a positive and negative role in history.

It is also pertinent to mention here the role of intelligentsia who played a crucial role in transforming the Indian society. The historians have discussed the role of intellectuals from different perspectives. Four approaches i.e. imperialistic, Nationalist, Marxist and Subaltern perspectives have inspired the thinking in historiography. A brief outlines of these approaches have been discussed below.

**Imperialist Perspective:** The Imperialist approach which included Cambridge historians was having different ideas about the dynamics of Indian society. The scholars with imperialist affiliations ‘tended to focus’ on the continued divisions within Indian society. They also had what Sumit Sarkar observed, “..........the limited and sharply fluctuating appeal of even the Gandhian Congress, the Muslim break away and partitioned.” 39 Thus the imperial approach was coloured by the imaginations and prejudices of the British / European scholars. The period between 1757-1947 when the commercial company of England had established it’s political supremacy and therefore, they
were interested in portraying a picture of Indian society that suited their economic and political interests. They never realised that super imposition of Government or colonial rule could never assimilate the main stream of Indian life. The apologists of the imperialist school wanted to apply the utilitarian doctrines in India.

James Mill was of the view that Indian society was dominated by caste, privileges and prejudices which could never be improved except through enlightened despotism. There were others who took more sympathetic understanding of Indian situations. The evangelist Shore and Grant were supported by missionaries who justified British rule in India. They thought that Indian society could be changed through conversion and education. Some other scholars like Elfred Lyall, Henry Maine and William Hunter who viewed British rule as an interaction of western and eastern forces; they took keen interest in the study of Indian institutions and society. Within the imperialist school there were other historians who are recognised as the modern scholars. P. E. Roberts, T. G. P. Spear, C. H. Phillips, Holden Furber and others who adopt Ranke's technique of writing history. They suggest use of historical materials in careful and critical manner so that understanding of Indian society through historical information is made more objective.

**Nationalist Perspective:** In response to the British historians, the Indian historians who joined the academic discourse later wanted to understand the Indian society with a political mind. They did not hesitate to debate and enter into the field with a challenging mood to
advance their own views. The legacy of intellectual renaissance inaugurated by enlightened socio-religious leader like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, made them refute many of the European theories about India as unacceptable. The emphasis was to understand activities of India’s own people as formulated by their own ideas in history. They thought that the significance of history lies in the transformation of Indian society and contributions made by those who were concerned to change the destiny of country. Those involved in understanding the Indian history through history assumed an extremist position in this matter. Scholars like Raja Narayan Bose, Chandrachur Basu, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, A. C. Das, K. P. Jaiswal, B. G. Tilak, B. D. Sarvarkar and others belong to the extremist school who asserted the superiority of Hindu culture over western culture. It also included the rationalists like R. Mitra, R. C. Dutta, R. G. Bhandarkar Roy Choudhry, who wanted a more objective view on these issues. Scholars like D. Basu, A. C. Majumdar, Chintamani and Surendra Nath Bannerjee exposed the economic exploitation of India by the Britishers to support the nationalist’s role in their struggle for freedom.

Thus the nationalist historians secured the ultimate breakthrough in convincing the masses the oppressive designs of colonial rule. This approach has been also appreciated by historians like Sumit Sarkar (1983) who writes, “To nationalist historian, the ultimate breakthrough to the masses seemed both impressive and only natural, since potentially the interests of all Indians were
surely always opposed to alien domination, and only a charismatic
de leader had been lacking.”

Thus it is clear from the writings of historians that the role of
conventional nationalist historians and even what Sumit Sarkar\textsuperscript{41}
termed as Cambridge type Namierism focused on party or trade union
programmes which had somewhat elitist bias. Sumit Sarkar further
pointed out that even “in more genuinely nationalist history-writing an
abstract cult of the people or nation often didn’t prevent basically
elitist and sometimes quite uncritical glorifications of a few great
leaders.”\textsuperscript{42}

The nationalist historians respond to some of the charges of
western scholars who bitterly attacked Indian way of life. Their two
criticisms were – first, the nationalists historians were imbued with an
element of patriotic fervour who referred to the sources for fresh
material that helped in the understanding of Indian history through
Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and other languages for inspiration and
guidance. Secondly, with the help of indigenous sources of
information the nationalist historians could refute the charges leveled
by the western scholars against Indian culture. The initiative taken by
the historians provided a fresh look on India hoary past. Thus it
infused in the Indian masses a feeling of national pride and fervour.
Thus the writings of such historians prepared a stage for rousing
patriotic feelings among the Indians by recalling the glories of past.

Bal Ganga Dhar Tilak an ardent supporter of nationalist
approach tried to prove that the Rigveda was composed as early as
4000 B. C. Another historian K. P. Jaiswal was of the view that before Europe built up democratic and self governing institution, India had known them and implemented it for governance.

Thus by the time the dynamic leaders like Gandhi began to spearhead the national movement a feeling of national awakening was already in existence. No denying the fact that the nationalist writings reflected some element of subjectivity in it as it tended to exaggerate the role of Indian cultural heritage and therefore, Sumit Sarkar laments that, "....... As a historiographical trend, nationalist writing on the freedom movement has been on the whole more than a little inadequate. Professional Indian scholars tended to keep away from such themes from till the 1950s and regional and communal distortion have been all too obvious at times."\(^{43}\) In short it may be concluded here that the nationalist history writing was, " an abstract cult of people which did not care to prevent what Sumit Sarkar cautioned, as a basically elitist and some times quite uncritical glorification of a few great leaders."\(^{44}\) Thus it could also be inferred from the nationalist approach that the nationalist period in India demonstrated, ".......analogy to the European historiography of romanticist era, where emotions and sentiments played the vital role and history was written not on the basis of reason but on instinct."\(^{45}\)

**Marxist Perspective:** In historical writings besides the nationalist historian approach there exist yet another approach which tried to improve upon the charges of colonial framework and the charges of elitism, which reflected in the writings of Marxist historians. The
Marxist scholarship did not concentrate on national, regional leaders, patriotic ideologies elite pressures or factional strategies but they defended the trade union programmes and pointed the structural paradox of the Indian society. In their strategies and approaches they had vision of social transformation which could be worked through the understanding of dynamic forces that were hidden in the economic structure. Thus the Marxist historians suggested good use of wider range of sources along with distrust and bureaucratically organised political movements. What in fact they were pleading for was the 'history from below'. It was in this respect that historians such as Hiren Mukherjee, R. P. Dutt, D. D. Kosambi, A. R. Desai Partha Chatterjee and others are considered the leading spokesmen of the Marxist perspective in history.

Marx was a great German scholar who highlighted the role of working class in major social transformation. In one of his major propaganda literature i.e. 'Communist Manifesto' he wrote, "History of all hitherto existing society is a history of class struggle." Marx started from the conception of a world ordered by laws of nature. For him history meant three things – (i) the motion of events in accordance with objective and primarily economic laws. (ii) the corresponding development of thought through a dialectical process, (iii) corresponding action in the form of class struggle which reconciles and unites the theory and practice of revolution. In one of his famous quote he observed, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, but the point is to change it.” What is important
in Marxian writings are the role of working class people in changing and transforming the world that is free from exploitation of one man by another. Thus Marx thought that moulding of class consciousness is no longer an automatic process but a job that needs to be undertaken. Indian historian’s writings also reflected the concerns that Marx offered through his writings. Some of the prominent Marxist works in the first half of 20th century were produced by scholars such as R. P. Dutt, M. N. Roy, A. R. Desai, Bipan Chandra and some Soviet scholars.

A. R. Desai in particular points out the major fallacies of historians in not adequately paying attention to social, political, economic and cultural developments keeping in mind the class interest of the people. He writes, “The absence of class analysis disables these historians to probe deeper into the causes which result into the apparently contradictory behaviours of various political parties and other organizations.” A. R. Desai besides being Marxist scholar had joined communist Party of India in 1934. He had extensively studied the works of Marx, Engels Kautski, Trotsky and Morris Dobb. He developed a perspective which answered many questions that bothered people. He was mainly concerned with India’s under development, poverty, exploitation, the character of the state etc. In his pioneering studies i.e. “Social Background of Indian Nationalism” (1948) and Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism (1960) he has sketched out the nature of capitalist development and its implication on Indian society. He developed the Marxist framework
to outline the process of capitalist development in India. He provided an analysis of emergence of various social forces during the British period which transformed the economy and the society in India as a result of colonisation of India. He inspired many students who in turn applied the Marxian framework to understand the contradictory features of economic development of India. He was extremely critical of India's heading towards a capitalist state. It was the Marxist historians who also pointed out some of the critic of nationalism. In this respect the assessment of the role of Indian National Congress and its leaders was also examined by Marxist historians because their ideas provided ideological, political and programmatic content to the nationalist. He also realised the need to understand the caste structure of Indian society and the nature of India's capitalist development. Indian bourgeoisie is largely composed of certain caste and communities belonging to certain regions. His assessment was that Indian bourgeoisie due to its historical position, "... is incapable of fully resolving the tasks of what the historians have described the bourgeois democratic revolution such as complete liquidation of feudalism, organisation of a prosperous national economy, solution of the nationality problem, democratization of social institution, creation of a modern rationalist culture and others."  

Thus the Marxist historians wanted the explanation of social change by analysing the nature of capitalist development and the role of state power in providing vested interests to dominate and prevail over the will of toiling masses. The Marxist historians were interested
in exposing the role of leaders belonging to the Indian National Congress who were trying to develop India into what A. R. Desai called a ‘bourgeois welfare state.’

A. R. Desai in his book, ‘Social Background of Indian Nationalism’ expressed the view that the basic economic debacle confronting Indian society can be resolved only if the entire property relation were transformed, only on the basis complete elimination of capitalist property relations. Thus the Marxist historians were in favour of, “a structural transformation of entire existing capitalist economic system – to transform it which ends the very private property basis of that economy and substitutes in it’s place social ownership of the means of production......” He further emphasized and suggested that in a transformed order, “society as a whole will own and administer the productive technique at it’s disposal; with the satisfaction of human needs with the sole motive of production.”

Viewed in the background of Marxist approach the role of Gandhi and Ambedkar was full of contradictions because both the leaders had excluded socialist vision out of their political agenda and therefore what they were advocating with their ideologies and strategies were a sort of bourgeois democratic forms of protest which was completely devoid of structured transformation adumbrated by the Marxist historians.

Subaltern Perspective: After having reviewed the various approaches of history it becomes clear that the historical writings can be put under the theoretical perspective highlighted here. The decades
after 1980s however, have identified an important approach to the study of peasant movement enunciated by Ranajit Guha and his historian colleagues in India and abroad. The new approach is designated as subaltern historiography.  

While writing the preface of the first volume of subaltern studies Ranajit Guha suggested that the purpose of the subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies was directed, “......to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area.” While defining the word subaltern he suggested that it carries the same meaning as was given in the ‘Concise Oxford Dictionary’ which stands for ‘inferior rank.’ Further more, he suggested that the inferior rank’ may be expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way. Thus what he meant by the term subaltern seems to suggest the subordination of people in binary relationship. The binary relationship comes out clearly in class relationship explained by Marx in his theoretical formulation based on class relationship. When Marx talked about class relationship he had in mind the classes having contradictory relations in a given mode of production. It was in the capitalist mode of production where he suggested the contradictions get sharpened between the ‘have’ and ‘have not’. The former in Marxian terminology designated as ‘bourgeoisie’ and the later as ‘proletariat.’ Thus there is a binary relationship between these two classes whose economic interest seems to remain in conflict with each other.
Ranajit Guha also talks about the relationship between the dominant and subordinate groups. He suggested that in historical writings there existed the long standing tradition of elitism and South Asian studies. Therefore he was interested in emphasising upon, studying, “The subaltern functions both as a measure of objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critic of elitist interpretations of that role.”

Ranajit Guha while talking about the historiography of Indian Nationalism identified two sources of elitist thought, i.e., colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism. He further goes to point out that the colonial source of elitism is the direct outcome of the ideological product of British Rule in India. Subsequently after independence neo-colonialist ruler and neo-nationalist incorporated it in their analytical framework. One of the premises of the elitist historiography was – it represented, “An idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom.” Ranajit Guha while developing the critic of this approach suggested that this approach, “demonstrated beyond doubt by its failure to understand and assess the mass articulation of this nationalism and involvement of the Indian people in vast numbers.” He suggested that such phenomena could easily be noticed in – Rowlatt Upsurge of 1919 and Quit India movement of 1942. Thus he was highly critical of the narrow and partial view of politics demonstrated in the writings of elitist historiography. In other words, ‘the politics of the people’ was simply ignored.
Yet another point of criticism developed by Guha suggested that, "Mobilization in the domain of elite politics was achieved vertically whereas in that of subaltern politics, this was achieved horizontally. The former was on the whole more cautious and controlled, the latter more spontaneous." Thus it is clear from Guha’s explanation of subaltern approach in historiography he used terms as elite and ‘mass people politics in binary terms. The elite signified the dominant group which could include both – the British officials of the colonial states and the indigenous people consisting of the landlords, whereas the people and subaltern classes included the people with inferior rank. It is also pertinent to mention here that Guha used the terms ‘people’ and subaltern classes’ as synonymous.

The importance of Guha’s subaltern approach has been highlighted by several historians. Sumit Sarkar calls this as a major shift in the historiography of Indian national movement. He found in Guha’s subaltern approach the emergence of a kind of ‘a history from below’. He cited many examples of historians such as Thompson and Gutman providing useful insights in British and American labour history; by Hobsbawm, Rude and Thompson in studies of ‘pre-industrial Protest’. Thus according to Sumit Sarkar ‘history from below’ naturally begins by concentrating on local or regional development. Commenting on Guha’s subaltern approach, D. N. Dhanagre pointed out that his main objective was to study, “......insurgencies of the colonial period to show how patterns of subordination and insubordination have run on parallel tracks
throughout the colonial history of India- and how counter insurgency have reinforced each other.” He further stated that Guha has abstracted certain common forms and general ideas in the rebel’s consciousness. He stated that the form of the rebel consciousness expresses itself in six forms which are: ‘negation’ (implying negative identity), ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality. Thus Dhanagre thought that the subaltern element pointed out the role of ordinary people in protest movements.

The critics of subaltern studies however, have attacked the notion of autonomy in the subaltern approach. Irfan Habib has questioned the validity of the role of subaltern groups and their protest movements in isolation from other parallel political processes. Dhanagre also points out the lack of precise meaning that the concept of, ‘subalternity conveys. Dhanagre thinks the concept to be lacking in analytical category. According to him it is not homogeneous. He argues, “The term is more residual in its connotation as it includes practically all non-elite sections of the people.” The agricultural labourers, the tribals, the untouchable or dalits, they all may be designated subaltern group as per Guha’s formulation. All these terms carry specific meanings. Despite these limitations Dhanagre considers Guha’s framework consisting of six forms of insurgent’s consciousness quite useful in the study of protest movements.

Thus the reviews of perspectives in historical writings provide useful understanding of studies conducted in various approaches of historiography. How the imperialist, the nationalist and the Marxist
approach have lost its relevance has clearly been spelt out here. Viewing the relevance of the various approaches examined here, it is pertinent to mention that both Gandhi and Ambedkar represented the approaches which had distinct flavour. While Gandhi in his approach seems to have incorporated the nationalist, the subaltern approach with reformist fervour, Ambedkar on the other hand chose to be little more radical in his approach. He was the product of a society which had clearly identified a group as untouchables. Thus for him the term subaltern meant those oppressed sections of the society who suffered from the caste based discriminatory treatment. Ambedkar's approach therefore, was directed towards alleviating the conditions of those caste groups who were designated untouchables earlier and subsequently designated as Scheduled Caste groups and popularly called as dalits.

Viewed in this context both Gandhi and Ambedkar imbibed the rhetoric's of subaltern approach in their campaign to improve the conditions of ordinary people. In this respect Gandhi and Ambedkar did not subscribe to the ideas of elitist historiography which was aptly criticised by Ranajit Guha in his subaltern approach.
Notes and References:


2. The rise of Buddhism took place in response of the hierarchical and unequal status of caste based society. Buddhism propagated egalitarian ideology.

3. The term SC was first used in the Govt. of India Act, 1935 for drawing a list of Castes which suffered from social, economic and religious disabilities for statutory safeguards and benefits. The term becomes a part of the constitution of the Republic of India in 1950.

4. The ChaturVarna (scheme of fourfold division) consisted of Brahmans on top, Kshatriyas and vaishyas in the middle and the lowest in the scheme were called Shudras. Their rank was the lowest in the hierarchical division of Varna order.

5. The twice born groups are called dwija who are supposed to be observing sacred thread ceremony, a ritual after which they are considered eligible for Vedic teachings. Shudras however were not allowed to observe this ritual.


7. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was a German social scientist made a distinction between physical and the cultural sciences. The physical sciences deal with facts; the cultural sciences with meaning. In physical sciences thought takes the form of explanation; in the cultural sciences it takes the form of understanding. The method of explanation in natural science is experiment; the method of understanding in the cultural sciences consists in interpretation by means of ideal types or configurations of meanings. See Don Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London), pp. 377-378.


9. Ibid, PP 14-15


The term dalit implies the militant ideology of the oppressed groups. Dalit writers and activists namely Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar launched a Dalit Panther forum in Bombay in 1972. The term Black Panther was borrowed from the Black Panther of America. They called themselves Panthers because they were supposed to fight for their rights like Panthers and not get suppressed forever by the strength and might of their oppressors. The formal local organisations of Dalit Panther came out openly against high caste militant groups to register protest against the atrocities in the hands of high caste people. There have been instances of Dalit Panthers organising counter attacks on the caste Hindus whenever the latter harassed the poor dalits. Open confrontation between the Dalit Panthers and upper caste Hindus took place several times in the 70s (e.g. Worli riots in 1974 and Aurangabad riots in 1978).

The term Dalit includes all oppressed classes in society. The manifesto of the Dalit Panthers (1973) defined dalits as, “All SCs and STs, landless labourers, small farmers and nomadic tribes who are committed to fighting injustice stemming from political power, prosperity religion and social status.” (Murtvgkar, 1988). Shah (1995) has pointed out that a journal of Dalit Sahitya Akademy ‘Dalit voice was started in 1981 which considered besides ex-untouchables, all persecuted minorities and the other backward castes as Dalits. The journal clarified that the former (i.e. ex-untouchables) suffer from social oppression which the later (i.e. persecuted minorities and other backward castes) do not.

Gail Omvedt referring to John Macionis ideas on social movement has discussed these types of movements and its implication on Dalits. See Gail Omvedt, (Ambedkar and after: The Dalit Movement in India) in Ghanshyam Shah (ed) Dalit Identity and Politics (Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2002), p. 144.


Raja Rammohan Roy, Tilak, Gandhi, Nehru, Golovalkar and Shayma Prasad Mukherjee represented the Hindu Brahminical School.

Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Naiker belonged to Dalit Bahujan School.


26. T. K. Oommen (1990), p. 255 has provided following chart to show types of identity and styles of dalits mobilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Deprivation</th>
<th>Types of Identity</th>
<th>Nature of Oppression</th>
<th>Patterns of Mobilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degrading ritual status</td>
<td>Untouchable</td>
<td>Socio-cultural repression</td>
<td>Social reform movements for social equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Political disenfranchisement</td>
<td>Mobilization for pol. participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Slave</td>
<td>Economic Exploitation</td>
<td>Bargaining for the betterment of eco. condition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


29. It had important structural ramifications in that protest orientation and counter mobilization were necessary attributes of Sanskritising movements.


32. Ibid., p.122.


37. Ibid., p. 30.
38. Ibid., p. 35.
40. Ibid., p.5
42. Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, 1885 -1947, (Macmillan India Limited, New Delhi, 1983), p.5
43. Ibid., p.5
44. Ibid., p.6
48. Ibid., p.53.
49. Ibid., p.53.
50. Ranjit Guha, Subaltern Studies: (1982), p. VII.
51. Ibid., p. VII.
52. Ibid., pp. 4-5.