



DALIT CAPITALISM IN THE NEO-LIBERAL ERA: PROMISE AND PARADOX

Lakpha Sherpa

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Sree Chaitanya College, Habra

ABSTRACT This paper offers a contextual analysis of the rise of Dalit Capitalism within the broader context of neoliberal economic reforms in India. While market-oriented policies that have been placed since 1990s are portrayed as a vehicle of inclusive growth and social mobility, their impact on historically excluded communities remain deeply contested. By analyzing from the contemporary political economy and recognition theory, the article suggest that Dalit Capitalism is a paradoxical form of emancipation: Although it fosters a space for economic assertion, it preserves structural caste hierarchies. Focusing on the conceptual framework and practice of the Dalit Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), the paper looks at how neoliberal market argument intersect with caste identities to reshape Dalit socio-political emancipatory goal. It claims that market-based empowerment without substantial redistribution and social democracy runs the danger of reproducing inequality in a new ways rather than dismantling cast domination. By positioning Dalit Capitalism at the intersection of caste, capitalism and neoliberal governance, the paper offers a critical intervention in interdisciplinary debates on economic citizenship, social justice and the limits of market-led emancipation in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS : Dalit Capitalism, Dalit, Market, Entrepreneur, Caste

INTRODUCTION

The idea of Dalit Capitalism is drawn from Black Capitalism originated in the USA. When one hears the phrase 'Dalit Capitalism' one may wonder how are two non-compatible paradigms like Dalit and Capitalism can coexist? The oppressive Indian caste system gave rise to the concept of Dalit; in contrast, Capitalism was originated in the Western context. While the first has social and cultural implications, the latter is economic but has social and cultural implications. The relationship between caste and economy has been analyzed from various perspectives in the domain of social science. Lately, the idea of a Dalit Capitalism has been the subject of public discourse with the establishment of the Dalit India Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) in 2005 by Milind Kamble. Beyond the legislative framework of affirmative action and in addition to special welfare initiatives aimed at Dalit community, 'Dalit Capitalism' has been promoted as a panacea for emancipating of Dalit and unleashing the entrepreneurial instincts within the community. The idea of Dalit Capitalism has come at the time when liberalizing Indian state has felt the need for a more explicit welfare agenda along with the growth to carry forward the neoliberal agenda. While what Yogendra Yadav termed as the "Second democratic upsurge" marked the arrival of Dalit politically, Dalit Capitalism has been identified as signaling the assertion of Dalits for economic power (Singh, E. 2015.07-12)

The board of experts of DCCI assert that excessive competition prompted by economic reforms in 1991 paved the way for competitive markets which are dependent on cheapest supplies of labour and materials irrespective of caste. Milind Kamble and Chandra Bhan Prasad, who are the great exponent of Dalit Capitalism, argued that the market opened up new spaces of competition for Dalit. Historically the caste system in India categorically excluded Dalits from accumulation of wealth. However, the exponent of Dalit Capitalism insist that money has become bigger than caste and capitalism is changing caste system much faster than any other human intervention. Hence, Dalit should viewed capitalism as a crusader against caste, which will provide Dalits with an opportunity to assert for their share of wealth.

With the rise of Dalit Capitalism assertion, however, has brought the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar to limelight making it strong discourse of social justice and quest for equality. In contrast to the view of DCCI Dr. Ambedkar in a memorandum on safeguard for the scheduled castes submitted to the Constituent Assembly of India on behalf of All India Scheduled Caste Federation published under the title "State and Minorities" in 1947, he termed Capitalism "a dictatorship of private employer" Elsewhere he rationalised his choice of saying that "Capitalism appeals to the rich and does not appeal to the poor" (Telumbde, A. 2011 vol no.10). Anand Telumbde (2011) pointed out that Ambedkar never subscribed to ideas of profit-making and stood firmly against Capitalism. "The odds have thus multiplied against the vast majority (more than 90%) of Dalits, with caste neatly enmeshed in modern secular institutions. In the face of this pathetic Dalit reality, citing stray example of Dalit petty Capitalists as the marker of progress is nothing short of a cruel joke,".

Research Methodology & Source of Data

In this article, I attempt to analyses the impact of Dalit Capitalism in Neo-Liberal era and try to find out how its affect on the Dalit politics for emancipation. The aim of this paper is to understand the interaction of caste and neo-liberal policies in the context of Dalit politics. The method that I have used to explain my article is document study method. The nature of data is secondary, which have been collected from relevant books, articles and internet.

Dalit Mobility or Marginalization

Clarinda Still raises some captivating questions: Has the position of Dalit improved or deteriorated in contemporary India? Are Dalit more socially mobile than ever or rather have recent changes to the economy and society marginalized Dalit in new ways? The answers to these captivating questions carries both the element of mobility and marginalization in contradictory character. Hence due to this contradictory situation there is a growing interest in the effect of liberalization and globalization, compelling scholars, activists, policy-makers to assess how historically marginalized group will fare in the foreseeable future.

In order to understand Dalit as entrepreneurs or labours in a neoliberal regime within the Indian context, it is significant to understand the nature of caste in India. Balmurli Natrajan mentions that the 'caste system' has been based on a tripartite foundation of hereditary occupational specialization, ritualized hierarchy and mutual separation. Further all the division are reinforced by, and kept in place by, political forces like dominant caste groups, violence, patriarchy and state. Natrajan signifies the contradictory character of the caste system, he argues that despite the relative decline of the caste system, the caste based identities are invoked in public, and persist and flourish in the Indian society in both electoral politics and everyday life regarding access to land, capital, employment, housing, knowledge, prestige and power. (Natrajan. B 2012).

It can be witness a certain shift in the economic position of some of Dalit prior to the neoliberal policies, generally from the 1980s. Which came effect due to improved pay, fair working conditions, migration from villages and moving out of agricultural/bondage labour. Economic growth has also allowed the government to introduce welfare measures for Dalits, like subsidised food and housing project for poor, sanitation, roads, community buildings, micro-credit schemes for women and state-supported projects for the construction of statues of Dalit icons. During this period education and affirmative action also make a considerable impact on Dalit. Which facilitated Dalit access to government colleges and universities, and a section of minority Dalits also gained salaried state employment and eventually a strong and influential Dalit middle class began to grow (Still. C 2014: 9-10).

This gradual upliftment and upward mobility of Dalits came under much debate and scrutiny. Commentators noted that with the introduction of liberalization policy, the state had begun to roll back its welfare measures and it will be useless if they still continued to fight for

a share of the state resources. This was a serious concern, and as the private sector grew, Dalits would not be in a situation to acquire the lucrative opportunities of the growing economy because of lack of necessary capital (financial, educational, social and political) to survive in a free market economy. Some argued that with the absences of affirmative action policies providing them equal opportunities, Dalit would be marginalised all over again (Still. C 2014: 11). The following discussion aims to demonstrate how this specific group of people has been marginalised and prevented from participating in the business economy by a lack of economic, political and social capital within the new liberal regime.

In connection with this context, Sudha Pai argued that Indian polity is moving towards a market-oriented economy with effect of globalization. Due to this development 1990s witness the emergence of conscious middle class of Dalits. They questioned oppression and domination by the upper castes/classes and firmly believed that they should receive a fair share in the fruit of globalization which resulted in the higher growth rates, a market economy, emergence of a strong private sector, high-paid professional occupations and business opportunities. In order to promote inclusive development, the government expended its strategy to support Dalit ownership of private enterprises by giving capital to Dalits, preference when choosing location, training in entrepreneurship skill and providing incentives for market expansion (Pai. S, 2014: 44-45). This effort of government was questioned by Vidyarthee by arguing that despite government policies, there exist certain local-level forces at work that effectively prevent Dalits from participating in business economy, therefore, this policies needs to be reexamined and reformulate by comprehending this phenomena in order to incorporate the Dalits into the business economy. The government did face setback due to certain social dynamics despite its effort to implement inclusive development because single economy growth alone was not feasible. Some scholar argue that the upper castes do not allow Dalits to progress as they feel the reservation policies are already in action, ensuring their upliftment in term of public sector jobs (Vidhyarthee .K.K, 2014 :98-99)

Dalit today are not just "passive participants"; they have clear plans and goals for achieving social, economic and political equality. Their efforts include using various strategies to achieve these aspiration (Roy and Singh, 1987; Raj, 1998: 148-154). They have moved beyond government jobs and entered many other professions, improving their socio-economic status significantly. Dalits now aim for equality with caste Hindus in education, jobs, politics and culture even though their progress in these areas has been shorter and sometimes less successful. As they experience social and economic growth, Dalit face growing resistance and violence from upper castes. Upper caste people often dislike Dalits entering their businesses and see them as outsiders because this sector has not traditionally been part of their social world. Additionally, identifying Dalit-owned shops or businesses by the owner's caste instead of the products or services they offer harms their business. This also causes humiliation for Dalits and lowers their social status (Jodhka. S.S, 2010)

Analysing, Dalit Capitalism Gopal Guru argued dalit entrepreneur as 'spectacular' that to low intensity, as an instrument to create false consciousness and fake association between society and spectacles. This dalit spectacles of the corporate class lack in power to act as self-sufficient ideological category. In reality, corporate strategies still within the framework of caste, ideally dalit millionaires are supposed to project themselves as role model that work out for the cultural consumption of dalit masses. But these low intensity spectacles seems to be just as a lotus requires mud for its growth, logically dalit masses provide the ground for dalit millionaire. These spectacle can be explain as Dr. B.R.Ambedkar said, 'individual mobility, success and performance are worthy of respect, but most of the time cannot be worthy of imitation; collective success is much superior to individual success. Individual success may have achieved a Himalayan height, and yet is dwarfed in front of collective success'(Guru,2012 41-49). Hence it will be futile to accept Dalit Capitalism is emancipator in nature as it is confined to few people in the community.

Caste Capital and Future of Dalits

In India Caste and economic cannot be separated there is a direct link between them, which is often defend by the proponents of free markets which view caste as a form of social capital and as an important driver of development. In contemporary literature too, caste enters as a driver-facto category in understanding inequalities in economics and social outcomes when the fact is that cast is the central to economic

transformation itself.(The Hindu,23.06.2022) The view that how caste plays the role of an important source of capital in the Indian context was explained by Teltumbde. Capital was initiated during the colonial times, but it did not have to contend much with the feudal forces. The Indian caste system and its logic of capital accumulation helped capitalism grow by dividing the proletariats (low castes) from the bourgeoisie (upper castes). After independence, this upper caste used its wealth to benefit from the reform policies, such as land reforms. These changes led to the Green Revolution, and the accumulated wealth was later invested in capitalist industries. Tiruppur a world leader in the knitted garment industry, belongs to the Grounders, a typical middle farming caste of Tamil Nadu (Teltumbde, A. 2011 vol no.10).

While, under the neoliberal political economy, the caste as a social capital has acquired an important place in the development paradigm. Francis Fukuyama in his book, Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity, has argued that culture constitutes 20 per cent of the missing element in economics (1995). S. Gurumurthy, a political commentator, ascribes caste as the missing cultural element in the Indian context. He claims that the caste forms a strong bond by linking families, and as a safety net it offsets problems caused by expanding individualism and acute atomization in society (Gurumurthy, 2009).

Similar arguments have been made by Gurcharan Das, author, entrepreneur and columnist, and R. Vaidyanathan. Das contends that the caste structure smoothen market functioning by providing rules of self-restraint which creates required trust between economic agents. Caste, according to him, is also a source of knowledge and capital, and those who have used caste in business have been far more upwardly mobile than those who have used it in politics.

Whereas, the application of social capital analysis to caste has, in general, taken two forms. One assumes caste itself as social capital; and other claim how different caste groups achieve by means of certain social networks and voluntary clubs. Both fail to see that caste is a hierarchical system and instead assume that caste is discrete and horizontal. If castes are seen as relation to each other, then inclusion of some groups would mean the exclusion of others. The process of either inclusion or exclusion thus become systemic and structural. Even within the social capital framework, caste clearly lack both linking and bridging capital (M. Vijayabaskar, Kalaiyaran A, 2014, p34-38).

Today the Dalit struggle for emancipation has come a long way which gave the birth to Dalit Capitalism, which was totally radical as compared to the revolutionary Dalit Panthers or the mainstream Bhujan Samaj Party. This new struggle view that economic ideology is the only way to achieve freedom and progress for Dalits. They strongly believe that instead of relying on government support for their progress, Dalits should focus on individual efforts rather than group movements to overcome the caste system and caste discrimination (Jayal, N.G 2015, P117-133). But their lies some pertinent question, Does accumulation of wealth by Dalit capitalists ensure that they would be devoid of any stigma and discrimination? Or does it dilute the aggression of the emancipatory Dalit politics? (Thakare. V, 2016). Supporting capitalism while ignoring the injustices and inequalities it has caused over time can have serious negative effects on Dalits. This is because capitalism often increases wealth gaps and leaves marginalized groups, like Dalits, more vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion.

The way these caste ideologies are played out in the civil society as well as in the market needs critical engagement. Campaigners for Dalit Capitalism also need to understand that simply increasing consumerism within community and sub-caste does not mean emancipation. It might just lead to the growth of a middle class without any real change in their social status. Form a broader perspective, capitalism may have divided Dalits into different classes: the wealthy upper class, a middle class shaped by consumerism, and a lowers class still stuck in traditional, low-paying jobs. This could lead to a division within the Dalit community based on economic interests, which would weaken radical Dalit activism. Economic ideology alone cannot shoulder emancipatory project of Dalits, as true emancipation lies in social transformation and embracing social democracy.

CONCLUSION

Dalit Capitalism believes that capital and entrepreneurship can help Dalits overcome caste barriers. However, research suggest this may not be true. As discussed above, studies of scholar like Gopal Guru

argued dalit entrepreneur as 'spectacular' that to low intensity, as an instrument to create false consciousness and fake association between society and spectacles. Likewise, Jodhka and Mhaskar reveals that most first-generation Dalit entrepreneurs operates small-scale business as sole proprietors. They primarily rely on informal sector labour, lack access to formal credit, and depend largely on community-based support system.

However, it is now a time to redesign and reshape the ideas of Dalit Capitalism, the approach should not focus solely on blind growth but instead aim to dismantle caste-based barriers and facilitate the socio-culture emancipation of Dalits from their stigmatized identities.

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