
UNIT 1 HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE DALITS

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Originary Myth
- 1.3 Archaeological Evidence
- 1.4 Literary Evidence
- 1.5 The Dalits
- 1.6 Dalit Religiosity
- 1.7 The Dalit Quest for Freedom
- 1.8 The Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate
- 1.9 Let us Sum up
- 1.10 Key Words
- 1.11 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the students to the basic notions of Dalit history and its implications.
- To acquaint them with the historical-social basis of Dalit life.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In India Dalits represent a community of 170 million, constituting 17% of its population. One out of every six Indians is Dalit, yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens of India. This unit tries to give a historical and social evolution of Dalit, beginning with the originary myth, evidence for their Indian rootedness and the their quest for dignity and freedom.

1.2 THE ORIGINARY MYTH

The classic aetiological text concerning the origin of the caste system is the celebrated *Purusa-Sukta* myth, Hymn 10.90 of the *Rgveda*. *Purusa* is Brahmanical version of the primeval gigantic man from whose body all that is, came to be. *Purusa* is described as having a thousand heads and a thousand feet; he also emanated *Viraj*, the female creative principle. The Vedic chants emerged as *Purusha* was sacrificed and out of him were born the four castes or *varnas*: from his head (more properly, his mouth) were born the *Brahmins* (the learned men who would become the priestly sages and religious leaders of the people); from his mighty arms came the *Kshatriyas* (the strong men who would be the warriors who would defend the nation); his thighs would provide the *Vaishyas* (men of business acumen who would ensure the prosperity and economic power of the community); finally, there would be the *Shudras* (humble toilers, who lacked the governing graces of the other three *varnas*). The four castes are sub-divided into more than 3000

sub-castes (or *jatis*) and there is a final, lowliest group of all: the Untouchables. These are so impure and despicable that they stand outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether.

Interpretation

At first sight, the four castes are nothing more than the natural fourfold division of society into its basic functions. Plato, in the *Republic*, divides his perfect city-state into a similar four groups (except that he preferred to see philosophers as the source of the political leaders of the State). Plato's is more of a *class, not a caste, set-up*. The characteristic mark of caste is that one must remain in the caste into which he/she was born, must marry into that caste, learn and practice only the traditional profession of his caste or sub-caste. This rigid understanding of one's role in society condemned an individual to a particular role, status and dignity (or lack of it). In a class system, one can improve one's lot through education and aspiring after a nobler profession, as also through marriage.

It has been suggested that the original myth never intended the watertight and unjust discrimination that the traditional interpretation of caste implies. It could have simply been a clever way to stress the interdependence of all members of society on each other: there are no "high" or "low" people – all are equal, just as the human body can not function if all were a head or a foot. This is exactly the image of "The Mystical Body" that St Paul envisages in his First letter to the Corinthians: "If the foot were to say, 'I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body', would that mean it stopped being part of the body? ... If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything?" Just as Paul was suggesting it would be foolish to try and rank parts of the body as higher and lower, but more sensible to see each playing different yet indispensable roles in the human body, so should we view the different ranks and functions of persons in the body politic. If this is true, then the *Purusa-Sukta* myth is aimed at creating precisely the opposite effect that the caste system has been made to do. It would suggest that powerful, vested interests have deliberately distorted the original, interpretation of the myth so as to ensure that all power and authority remain in their clutches for all time...

1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

India's caste system is perhaps the world oldest surviving hierarchy, based on a totally unfounded and unjust set of challengeable presuppositions. Its defining feature is a complex ordering of social groups on the questionable basis of ritual purity. This questionable system was able to survive because key religious leaders had taught the common people that it was part of divine ordinance – "God's will". It also received a kind of reinforcement from the common Hindu belief in re-birth: if one does not obediently submit to the caste code, one would be punished by being re-born into a gradedly inferior caste in his/her next life; were one to humbly submit to all the insults and hardships that came one's way as a *Shudra* or untouchable, he/she might be reborn as a Brahmin. Thus the much abused religious virtue of 'resignation to the will of God' is once again twisted to maintain the status quo in favour of the powers that be.

All this seems to be borne out by recent studies and archaeological evidence. To sum up the latest findings:

- Early Prehistoric India was apparently first inhabited by Negritos. Then came the Australoids (to which belong our Santals and Bhils). Then came the Mongoloids, who have till today retained their characteristic racial and religious identities (in the North-East)
- The fourth and largest group of early/original inhabitants, or *adivasis*, as we say in India, was the Dravidian group. There is practically unanimous agreement among scholars that they arrived in India from the Eastern Mediterranean about 3000 BC; they had extended their civilisation all over the country by 1400 BC. Traces of their highly developed level of culture are to be seen in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Scholars, like Goetz, speaks of the Indus Valley civilization of the Dravidians as having links to Sumeria, the earliest known bed of human civilization.
- It was about 1000 years later that the Aryans came, probably from present-day Turkestan, via Afghanistan. This fair-skinned race was apparently superior in military prowess to the more dark-skinned, shorter Dravidians, whom they either exterminated or enslaved as they advanced, gradually conquering the whole of Northern India by 1000 BC. Such are the views of Mishra and Wheeler himself (the original authority on the Indus Valley Civilisation), as well as many other reputed authorities (Marshall, Cunningham, Madhu Sarup Vats, B B Lal, R D Banerjee, etc).
- The *Rg-Veda* concurs in describing the natives (Dravidians) as dark-skinned and snub-nosed, of a different language and religion from their fair-skinned conquerors.

All the major scholars of the period agree as to how the native Dravidians were largely exterminated by the light-skinned invaders who pushed them further South and destroyed their forts or towns, making slaves of all those they had conquered. It is significant that *varna* has the original meaning of colour: caste was the original apartheid – discrimination by the fair-skinned of the dark-skinned, a way of ensuring that the conquered, darker race, remain imprisoned in an inferior, sub-human state of life.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Describe how the *varnas* originated according to the Vedas.

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2. Give some archaeological evidence for caste system.

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1.4 LITERARY EVIDENCE

The early Indian religious texts (originally those of the conquering Aryans) confirm the view that the subjugated Dravidians were reduced by their oppressive conquerors to a sub-human state.

- *The Rg-Veda*: This, the earliest available text, dating from 1500 – 1000 BC, enshrined a version of the *Purusa-Sukta* hymn, mentioning the four basic *varnas*. There is, as yet, no mention of any outcast, untouchable caste.
- *The Upanishads*: These date from much later (about 700 BC). By this time, the untouchable were beginning to be noticed. For instance, the famous *Chandogya Upanishad* only refers to the three upper castes and compares the *chandala* (outcaste) to a dog or a pig (10:7)
- *The Ramayana*: (About 460 BC) At the time of the *Ramayana*, the plight of the outcast has worsened all the more. For instance, when Lord Rama hears that a *Shudra* has presumptuously undertaken *tapasya* (penance and meditation) in order to attain a higher dignity (something only the three upper castes are permitted to do), the good and virtuous ideal king slays the man for his blasphemy. One can imagine how much more serious the crime would have been had it been perpetrated by an outcast person, far more inferior to even a *Shudra*.
- *The Mahabharata*: Here the degraded status of the outcasts is further exemplified. There is the case of Ekalabya, a Dravidian (indigenous) boy, who has not only dared to learn archery but even come to rival Arjuna in this art. As punishment, he has the thumb of his right hand cut off.

1.5 THE DALITS

This is the name that the former outcasts want to be called by. They had been originally classified as *varna-sankara*, or outside the caste-system – so inferior as to be subhuman, capable of polluting all other castes and therefore “untouchable”. Among themselves, they were further sub-divided into a hierarchy of untouchability. Unlike the other castes, they could not change their occupation. They were deprived of the right to education, to possess assets and of weapons to protect themselves. They were subjected to all manner of humiliating treatment, sanctioned by the Laws of Manu (500 BC) and even the *Bhagavad-Gita*, regarded by many Hindus as the noblest of all Scriptures, upheld all this.

Mahatma Gandhi preached against untouchability and acted in direct contravention of the rules enforcing it. He even advocated re-naming them “*Harijans*”, children of God, but the term was not welcomed by the untouchables as they felt it merely covered up their pitiable and inhuman condition. They preferred to call themselves “*Dalits*”, which traces itself back to a Sanskrit word, *dal*, that implies being broken, cut, torn asunder, scattered, crushed or destroyed. Coincidentally, this also links up with a Hebrew root (figuring in the Old Testament of the Bible), also *dal*, which has the connotations of weakness, lowliness and poverty. This Indo-European affix appears as *dal* or *tal* in certain English and German words, such as the English dale (a valley or ‘cut’ in the ground) or the German *Thal* (a tailor – note the similarity of the English word – who is basically one who cuts.).

The word owes its popularizations among the oppressed untouchables to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, (1826 – 1890) the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, who used it to describe the outcastes as broken and dispersed victims of our caste-ridden Indian society. The connotation of scatteredness, brokenness and being cut implies that they were once whole, free and human. This further implies that there was some instrument or agent that reduced them to this oppressed and degraded condition. So the starting point of Dalit history is the moment when they began to be broken, scattered and oppressed.

Dalits were called by different names in different parts of India, all invented by caste people and all entailing insult and contempt. Such names include words like *dasa*, *dasya*, *raksasa*, *asura*, *avarana*, *nisada*, *panchama*, *chandala*... The British called them “Depressed Classes” or “Scheduled Castes” (as per the Scheduled Caste Act of India, 1935, whereby their caste-names – and/or subgroups – were listed on a schedule or list). The practice of “untouchability” was banned under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, but old habits die hard – especially in remote rural areas – and it continues to affect the attitudes and relationships between people.

Today, dalits number some 25 millions, about 25% of the entire population of the country. Every hour some two dalits are assaulted, every day three dalit women are raped, two dalits are murdered and two dalit houses are burnt.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Give some instances of how the early religious texts confirm the view that the Dravidians were subjugated to sub-human state.

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2. What is the meaning of Dalit?

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1.6 DALIT RELIGIOSITY

One of the reasons for the stringent rules of untouchability and isolation was to keep the religion of the fair-skinned conquerors and that of the darker-skinned Dravidians from mixing. It was with the clear and conscious goal of preserving ritual purity that dalits were forbidden to enter any temple. The Laws of Manu decreed that molten lead was to be poured into the ears of any dalit who presumed to study the Sanskrit scriptures or even listened to them being read.

Therefore, by no stretch of the imagination can one say that the dalits were Hindus. Indeed, to form an idea of the original religion of the dalits, one would have to study the evidence of Mohenjo-daro. There, one would come across of a strong concept of a personal and transcendent creator God, though this was also linked up with the need to placate good and bad spirits in Nature.

The dalits were attracted particularly to Buddhism, because it rejected caste and untouchability as also the authority of the Vedas and bloody sacrifices. Neither Islam nor Christianity had really succeeded in rooting out the caste mentality from their adepts, even after conversion to these non-Brahminic faiths. Eventually Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism with some five lakhs of his followers, at Nagpur. Thus the aspiration of the dalits for an egalitarian religion found its fulfillment and the Neo-Buddhist movement was born, saving the faith of Gautama Buddha from the total elimination that the Brahmins had almost brought upon it.

1.7 THE DALIT QUEST FOR FREEDOM

Dalits make up some 25% of India's total population – a staggering 250 million people. They are among the poorest of the world's poor, stripped of their basic human dignity, denied their civil and human rights and entrenched in a hierarchic system that denies them any scope for opportunity or self-improvement. About 70% of them live below the poverty line.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1836 -1890), referred to above, was a unique personality among the many Indian social reformers of his time. While the latter were more concerned with reforming one or other Indian social institution, marriage or family structures or campaigning for the rights of women, he focuses his vocal attacks on the unjust caste system. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), an untouchable himself – who was to become one of the members of the Indian Constituent Assembly and dubbed “the Father of the Indian Constitution” – the dalits began to acquire a sense of dignity and confidence in their own ability to liberate themselves. In the 1970s emerged the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra (modeled on the Black Panthers of the US), giving them a constant reminder of their age-old oppression and offering them equally a sign of hope in recovering their lost self-identity and dignity. Kancha Illaiah (1952 -), chairman of the political science department of Osmania University, is one of the major and most outspoken (some would say, offensive) influential dalits of today who is engaged in a no-holds-barred battle with the caste system. He calls himself an anti-Hindu and openly avers his hatred for all things that are Hindu.

Many non-dalits from different parts of India also joined in the fray to champion the cause of dalits. Probably the most notable of all these was E V Ramaswamy “Periyar” (1979 – 1973), the founder of the Dravidian movement in the South, that struck at the Brahmin domination of the Congress. Already in the sixth century AD, there arose the Bhakti Movement in South India. It advocated passionate love for the divine as a (if not the) means of attaining moksha: neither caste status nor gender was a barrier for the bhaktas. One of them, Janabai, in the thirteenth century AD was a Shudra from Maharashtra and a woman to boot. Spreading gradually to the Central Western region and on to the North, this movement bears testimony to the many creative ways in which oppressed dalits sought to attain some measure of liberation. They even rejected the

traditional norms of asceticism and some of them were householders, living devout and saintly lives within families.

The Dalit Freedom Network

On November 4, 2001, dalits from all over India began to converge on New Delhi to denounce and renounce the unjust set-up under which they and their ancestors had been forced to eke out a miserable existence from some 3000 years. Crying out for holistic reformation, they demanded that their villages be transformed from within. No movement for the liberation of dalits would be able to succeed unless and until this was assured. It was precisely with this aim in view that a new movement, The Dalit Freedom Movement, was launched, in November, 2002. Its primary focus was on village transformation, targeting the radical change of 1000 villages as its goal for the next decade.

Now the first step in achieving this noble end would be through education. Since most dalits are illiterate and unable to attend school because of discrimination or due to financial problems, few dalit children (if any.) have access to a better life. Dalits need quality English-medium primary schools. The Dalit Freedom Network (DFM) has committed itself to providing these in each of the targeted villages. Next, dalits – especially dalit children are in need of basic medical care. DFN aims to ensure this by setting up local village and regional healthcare centres, with “barefoot doctors and nurses” to provide for the family. Finally, DFN hopes to better the peoples’ prospects through micro-loans, self-help groups and economic education. DFN provides dalits with a network to protect their basic human rights, with centres all over India and even in Washington Dalit Culture and London.

The caste system is also very much alive and well in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. As Hinduism gradually spread over the South Asian sub-continent and established itself as the dominant religion there, the caste system and its attendant ideology and justification followed suit. Caste even migrated along with the South Asian diaspora and took root as far away as Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam, the Middle East, Malaysia and the Caribbean. It even managed to transplant itself to some extent among the Indian settlers in the UK and the US.

In both Nepal and Bangladesh, dalits face discrimination rather similar to that faced by their comrades in India. Nepal’s 4.5 million dalits (a rough 20% of the entire population) have hardly attained any singular measure of liberation. There are no dalits at all in Nepal’s legislative assemblies, literacy hovers at about 10% and life expectation is around 50 years only. Over 80% of Nepal’s dalits fall below the poverty line.

In Pakistan and Sri Lanka the situation is much better (except in the Tamil areas of the latter.), as the caste system is less rigid there and has little or no connotation of ritual pollution (for historical and cultural reasons, Tamilnadu is heavily caste-ridden and this attitude was carried across the water with the Tamil tea planters who crossed over to the then Ceylon). Still, social distance and restricted access to land is still, even in these places, a harsh reality. The Swat region of Pakistan, however, practices extreme forms of humiliation of dalits there, especially as regards women.

As Ramachandra Guha puts it, in his insightful essay “Gandhi’s Ambedkar”, in his recently published, provocative and eminently readable recent book, *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays*, it might be more appropriate to hail Gandhi, not so much as the Father of the Nation as the Mother of all debates and discussions with leading freedom fighters for the future of India. And perhaps the fiercest and most long-running of all these exchanges was between him and the Leader of the Untouchables, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. It is very difficult to take a calm, dispassionate view of this exchange: one tends to let his or her position on the side of the caste divide colour his or her assessment of the two protagonists, seeing one or the other as hero or villain depending on whether one is high or low caste.

It would seem to me that much of the controversy was due to the fact that Gandhi tended to see the dalits as Hindus (and so tried to retain them within his vision of a reformed caste system, for he saw caste as essential to the Hindu set-up), while Ambedkar was adamant that his people must find liberation outside the Hindu fold. Furthermore, to quote Guha, once again, “Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured non-violent protest while being suspicious of the State; Ambedkar was a steadfast nationalist, who worked within the State and sought solutions to social problems with the aid of the State.” For Gandhi, the Congress Party represented all of India, including the dalits. Ambedkar was not quite convinced. He distinguished between freedom and power. Content to let the British pass on the power to the Congress, Ambedkar was convinced that the dalits had to form a separate party to secure their freedom. Herein lay the crux of the painful fallout of the Pune Pact.

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar were good men. Neither were the villains the extremists of either side tried to make them out to be. They were more tragic heroes, caught up by forces beyond their control. Gandhi’s pain was the lack of support he received from his Congress fellows as regards the dalit problem. They felt he was giving in to their demands too much, or too fast and not sympathetic enough to non-dalit issues. Ambedkar’s agony was that, for the good of his people, he was obliged to make common cause with the British. Arun Shourie, in his voluminous *Worshipping False Gods*, would never have us forgive this and, refusing to make the power-freedom division we have alluded to above, did not scruple to call him (and all dalits) unpatriotic and anti-Indian.

It is important to note that neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar ever stooped as low as some of their fanatic followers and never abused each other or accused each other of unworthy motives. Gandhi, in particular, went out of his way many times to express his respect for his dalit antagonist, recognizing that, even if he could not agree with his call for a separate electorate or party for dalits, the latter had genuine grievances at stake. In June 1936, Gandhiji remarked that Ambedkar “has had to suffer humiliations and insults that should have made anyone of us bitter and resentful.” And he went on to add, “Had I been in his place, I would have been as angry.”

Maybe the time has come to try and see the visions and achievements of these two great men, decades after their deaths, as complementing each other. Perhaps, only then will the story of dalit emancipation begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What would be the first step in achieving the Dalit quest for freedom?

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2. Name a non-Dalit who championed for Dalits.

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1.9 LET US SUM UP

We have traced the general historical roots of Dalits. Further, in this unit, we have seen their religiosity and spoken of the quest for freedom, exemplified by two prominent and conflicting personalities, Gandhi and Ambedkar. We hope that the story of dalit emancipation begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel soon.

1.10 KEY WORDS

Dalit: The term Dalits", traces itself back to a Sanskrit word, *dal*, that implies being broken, cut, torn asunder, scattered, crushed or destroyed.

Varnas: *Varna* means color, or the make up and the hue of mind; a social division or order of society such as caste in India

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UNIT 2 DALIT FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 A Cultural Approach
- 2.3 Analysis of Dalit and Non-Dalit Cultures
- 2.4 Analysis of Symbols
- 2.5 Analysis of Dalit Rituals
- 2.6 Values of Dalit Folklore and Cultural Expressions
- 2.7 Features of Dalit Folklore and Cultural Expressions
- 2.8 The Dance of Defiance
- 2.9 Liberative Dalit Culture
- 2.10 Let us Sum up
- 2.11 Key Words
- 2.12 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To familiarise the students with the varied folklores and cultural features of Dalits.
- To see the liberative potential in their cultural expressions.
- To foster a development that is humanistic and viable, using Dalit rituals and cultures.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Folklore consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, beliefs, fairy tales and customs that are the traditions of that culture, subculture, or group. It is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared. The study of folklore is sometimes called folkloristics. Folklorist states that folklore has many cultural aspects, such as allowing for escape from societal consequences. In addition, folklore can also serve to validate a culture, as well as transmit a culture's morals and values. Folklore can also be the root of many cultural types of music. Folklore can also be used to assert social pressures, or relieve them, for example in the case of humour music, dance and other art forms. In this unit we study some important feature of Dalit folklore and culture and see their special features.

2.2 A CULTURAL APPROACH

The history of India, nay the whole world, is a history of conflict between two cultures: The culture of the invading people and the original inhabitation of this place. Taking into account the historical roots and common cultural patronage we treat the culture of so called Low caste and the tribals as Dalit (Matriarchal / Lunar) Culture (Dalit Culture) and that of the Non-Dalits (Patriarchal/Solar) Culture (Non-Dalit Culture), following Dr J.J. Pallath (2001). When two cultures of opposing value system co-exist, the technologically dominant one subsumes the other. The history of the whole world is a history of conflict between invading cultures and the original cultures. The technique used almost universally by the dominant cultures to marginalize

the original inhabitation is by labelling them disparagingly as, "Cultureless", "uncouched", "rough" etc. But in reality it is observed that the marginalized are the most cultured people in terms of their humane value system and behaviour patterns.

The so called Hindu mainstream (non-Dalit) cultures itself vis-a-vis modern culture suffers from an inhibition in India similar to the Dalit cultures. Thus the mainstream culture of India is being swallowed by the dominant one dimensional consumer culture which denies bio-cultural and technological diversities through the imposition of mono-technology. The problem, thus, in summary is, the very same Indian main-stream (non-Dalit) culture which ruthlessly absorbs its Dalit cultures is being swallowed by the modern consumer culture. The quick look we have had at the uniqueness as well as the unique problems of dalits and non-dalit only shows that the problems of the state need to be viewed from a different angle. Disturbed by the dehumanizing trend in our social scientists, social activists, political leaders society and religious gurus have had made various attempts from the point of view their respective disciplines to explain the reason for the development of communities. But something grossly absent is a cultural approach to the problem (Pallath 2001).

Culture, in very general terms, the way of life of a people, hence a way of thinking, of viewing things, of comforting one's self, common to a society: the special mode of being human of a people. The concerns of a cultural analysis will be to detect the ruling cultural values and the particular world view that the value constitute which moves the people to perceptible patterns of thought and behaviour. Cultural analysis ask the why questions (the sociologists do in the plane of institutions and religious analysts do in their limited religious plane) probing into the internal make-up of people, into their collective psyche as bearers of a particular culture. This we do to find out those values, norms and customs of people that would promote humanization of the society as well as to detect those that would have dehumanizing effect of the life of the people.

2.3 ANALYSIS OF DALIT AND NON-DALIT CULTURES

The basic elements of cultural expressions are thought to be concepts (myth), acts (rituals) places and objects (symbols). Both sacred and secular myths, rituals, and symbols of a culture is said to be the Symbol System of that culture. Myth, ritual and symbols are integrally inter-related; there is a myth behind every ritual as well as symbol. The models and messages generated by the symbol system defines the personality trait of a culture which in turn determines the behaviour pattern of persons of a culture. Myth is a way of perceiving the reality, it is the specific emotional horizon within which one interprets the perceived objects. Humans are basically a story telling being, in fact, it is only in the story form humans can express themselves. Myth is a story which is capable of producing any one or all the shades of emotions. Heart is the realm of myth and the capability to create myth is the distinguishing mark of humans. The Dalit cultures are rich with myths and the people are gifted with richness of imaginations. (Pallath *Symbol and Myth Analysis*, 2001).

The Pulaya tribe of North Kerala, who were considered to be the lowest among the untouchables has a rich collections of myths. Their *potten theyyam* myth is representative of discriminating shouts of the learned Brahmins: "When you are wounded what gushes out is blood, When we are wounded what oozes out is blood, Why do you then speak of caste difference." The prevalent

sense of equality among the Pulayas as well as their protest against the caste discrimination is clear from the Pulaya's retorting. The non-Dalit cultures fossilized their myth through written traditions and through an analytical approach drained them off their emotional content; their myth, therefore, are reduced to the level of mere stories. They are used to domesticate the minds of simple people to be exploited by the high caste who created the story. The myths of the non-Dalit cultures generally contain myths with oppressive values.

Following is a comparative map of the Dalit and non-Dalit myths which functions as capsules of values (Pallathu 2001):

FEATURES OF DALIT MYTHS NON-DALIT MYTHS

DALIT MYTHS	NON-DALIT MYTHS
Females is superior to male	Male is superior to female
Sex is permissive	Sex is restricted
Women are born to be free	Women are born to be controlled
Politics, on the basis of democratic principles	Politics, on the basis of authoritarian principles
Life is innovative	Life is traditional
Spontaneity and display is human	Secretiveness and fear of spontaneity
Equality between man and woman gives joy to life	No equality between man and women in life
Motherhood is worshipable	Fatherhood is worshipable
Life is not order	Life is order
Life is passive and relaxed	Life is aggressively approached to achieve the goal
Appearance is unimportant	Appearance is important
Relaxed moral code	Strict moral norms

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is cultural analysis?

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2. Distinguish between the features of Dalit and non-Dalit myths?

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2.4 ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS

A symbol is that which points to something other than itself and participate in the represented reality and which opens up layers of meaning in the represented reality. Symbol is evocative of emotions in a sensitive person releasing some form of energy for action. Sign, like symbol, points to something other than itself but it is not evocative of emotions. A sign that is capable of generating emotion in the participating person is a symbol. There is an integral relation between myth and symbol. A symbol is always an expression of a myth in the wider sense. The national flag of India is symbol and the explanation of the signs on the flag which form the myth of the symbol - National Flag.

The symbols of Dalit cultures are rich with animal and plant symbols taken directly from nature with little or no stylization. Plants and animals are generally considered as manifestations of divine power. Among the animals the Dalit cultures give more prominence to earth bound creatures such as serpent, tiger, rat etc. that live in abodes, inside the earth and the saped trees such as *pipal*, *neem*, *kadamba*, *bilva*, *chembakam* and *kanjiram*. The symbols of non-Dalit cultures also use plant and animal symbols, but it uses predominantly birds. Dove, eagle, pelican, peacock are often used along with other animals such as horse, lion, wolf etc. sky-directed tree symbolism such as oak, palm, pigtree etc. dominate. In the Dalit culture the symbols are mostly inward looking whereas in the non-Dalit cultures the eyes are outward-directed.

The Dalit culture symbols are vibrant with emotions through distortions and exaggerations whereas the non-Dalit cultural symbols are stylized the proportionate expressing mainly one emotion, peace. The colour that dominate Dalit cultural symbols are red and yellow, the colour of earth, whereas the non-Dalit cultures are white and blue, the colour of sky (Pallath 2001).

The characteristics of the Dalit and non-Dalit cultural symbols are lucidly expressed by Pallath (2001) in the following chart:

DALIT CULTURAL SYMBOLS	NON-DALIT CULTURAL SYMBOLS
Earth (Immanence)	Sky (transcendence)
Moon	Sun
Mandals (centre)(<i>Yoni</i>)	Mountain (Vertical)(<i>Lingam</i>)
Cave-dwelling animals	Winged creature
Serpent	Serpent
Spiral	Spiral
Pot (<i>Garbha</i>)	Pillar (<i>Linga</i>)
Pipal tree (Horizontal)	Cedars (Vertical)
Dancing	Sitting or standing
Eye (<i>darsan</i>)	Hand (service)
<i>Stanam</i> (Place)	<i>Kalam</i> (time)
<i>Bhagavati</i> (mother-goddess)	Father (God)
Feminine	Masculine

It is obvious from the chart that the Dalit cultural symbols are closer to earth and spiral in design and feminine whereas the non-Dalit symbols are sky-directed, linear in design and predominantly masculine.

2.5 ANALYSIS OF DALIT RITUALS

Rituals are "culturally defined sets of behaviour" Rituals in its widest sense used here means any human symbolic behaviour which can evoke any or all emotions in the performer as well as in the participants (Pallath, 1989). Frozen rituals which has reduced to the level of more repetitive action and are not evocative of emotions are called cult. Most of the static religious performance can be included in the category of cult. While real rituals are dynamic in the sense of embodying the agonies and aspirations of the performing society, cult is static, representing the hope of the society which has given birth to it. There is an integral relation between myth, symbol and ritual. As there is a myth behind every symbol, there is a myth behind every ritual, ritual, thus in short is symbolic action of a myth.

(i) Ritual Inversion Vs. Ritual Affirmation

According to Victor Turner ritual performance of Dalit cultures can be classified into two: Life crisis ritual and calendrical rituals. Calendrical rituals, usually of a collective kind, in which, at certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle, groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors; and they, in their turn, must accept with good will their ritual degradation. Such rituals are described as rituals of status reversal. They are often accompanied by robust verbal and non-verbal behaviour, in which inferiors revile and even physically maltreat superiors (Pallath, 1989).

The ritual status reversal supplies the Pulayas with two character traits, (I) that they practice among themselves a democratic, egalitarian type of life (ii) they develop an unconscious rebellion within themselves for the unjust social set-up. This may be one reason that the people who practice ritual status reversal rallied behind the Marxist party in Kerala for their socio - cultural and economic liberation. As against the ritual status reversal of the Dalit cultural, rituals the non-Dalit cultural rituals affirm the status of its members. For example, the calendrical celebration of the *savarna* temple feast affirms the status of the priestly class. A strict separation of the pujaris and the devotees is ensured during the ritual celebration. It is also an occasion for the people to get legitimized their position in the secular society. The dress, the mode of transport are all used to affirm one's position in the secular society.

(ii) Liminal of Dalit Culture ritual Vs. Permanency of Non-Dalit Culture rituals

Liminal means, a situation of license during which anything can take place, because all norms of day to day life are relaxed. Dalit ritual celebrations in general are liminal. Particularly in the *theyyam* celebrations several devices are used to relax the social norms and to give the whole celebration an air of enchantment to shed all inhibitions and controls. In the *potten theyyam*, *potten*, literally means, "idiot", "deaf and dumb", or "loafer". This entitles the *theyyam* to speak out whatever comes to his mind, and in utter abusive language. The liminal situation is totally

absent in the Non-Dalit Culture ritual celebrations. Normlessness which is the determining element of the liminal state during which anything can take the place is absent in the celebration of Non-Dalit Culture rituals. The celebration of Eucharist of the Christians, for example, is highly regimental leaving no space for normless situation.

(iii) Ludic of Dalit Culture ritual Vs. Rigidity of Non-Dalit Culture rituals

The ludic (playful) nature is integral to liminal stage. The *potten theyyam* is a perfect synthesis of playfulness and seriousness. Though the playful utterances of the *theyyam* evokes laughter in the devotees, he is heeded seriously. The ruling mood of the Non-Dalit Culture celebrations is one of rigidity. A spiritual person in Non-Dalit Culture is a rigid person. The more unemotional one is the more socially acceptable he becomes. During the Id celebrations for example of Muslims, no playfulness is tolerated. The movement and gestures of the main functionary are designed to communicate rigidity.

(iv) Dalit Culture Ritual Reflecting Social Process Vs. Non-Dalit Culture Ritual Enacting Individual

Dalit cultural rituals reflects the social process. The change in the social organization reflects in the ritual celebrations. For example, the *theyyam* celebrations were affected by the abolition of landlordism in the post independent era. The manner of celebration and material used in make-up and decoration are affected by the rapid social change that took place along with the freedom struggle. There is nothing unusual about it, because Dalit cultural rituals are so much one with the day to day life of the people. Whereas the non-Dalit cultural rituals are not so much affected by the corresponding social change. They do not embody the social process of the people who perform them. Though, shaped as part of a social process it got solidified and fixated at one point of time; from then on it is an endless repetition unaffected by the social happening. Christian Eucharist celebrations, or the republic day celebrations of our country are some of the examples.

(V) Social Catharsis Of Dalit Culture Rituals Vs. Individual Fulfillment Of Non-Dalit Culture Rituals

Dalit cultural rituals are designed in such a way as to create a catharsis effect in the performer as well as the participants. The Dalit Culture rituals are generally organized to spend a full sleepless night. The shortest celebration takes twenty four hours. Sleepless night spend in rhythmic movements such as drumming, dancing, and singing leads the participants to a crowd catharsis. For example the *theyyam* - the rhythmic dance, the characteristic features of the painted face of the deities, and torses, the elaborate headgears, the personification of the qualities of gods, the ritual offering of birds and animals, the trance of the *theyyam*, all induce in the entire crowd into a participatory trance. The rising crescendo of chanting, the sound of jingling anklets, the rhythmic and deafening musical accompaniments comprising drums punctuated by shouting and yelling of the *theyyam*, the spirited expressions of the trance from head to foot make the entire crowd erupt in frenzy of rhythmic fervour, the whole spectacle of sound, movements, colour leaves a lasting effect on the participants (J.J. Pallath).

The non-Dalit rituals are repetitive short celebrations mostly lasting an hour or so. People have no time to spend on long celebrations nor are they physically prepared to spend a sleepless night in celebration. Even in a crowd, individuals remain isolated and what they look for is individual fulfillment. The secular rituals such as university convocation, swearing in ceremony of public offices, the Mass and Friday Prayer of Christians and Muslims respectively are also illustrations. The people, therefore, take to artificial means to undergo the personal catharsis which is very much a need of any human organism.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Give some characteristics of Dalit and non-Dalit cultural symbols.

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2. How is luminal situation related to normlessness?

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2.6 VALUES OF DALIT FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

The following table gives a rough idea of the values of Dalit life, folklore and cultural expressions (Pallath 2001)

Values Of Dalit (Lunar) Culture	Values Of Nondalit (Solar) Culture
Socio-Economic Values	
-Person is of prime importance. The relation between person and society is complementary. The other is a friend.	-Individual well-being, private interest, private property, denial of social dimension, the other becomes a rival.
-Co-operation: Instead of competition co-operation . Every Persons' good is in the development of each and each ones good is in the well-being of all, love takes the place of aggression.	-Competition: the one who asserts aggressively survives, as a result aggression, physical, moral psychological becomes socially respectable value.
-Freedom is realized in and through every person, not by the elimination of some members.	-Freedom is the possibility to pursue one's individual end. In reality it is the freedom of the high caste to exploit the Dalit.

-Equality and justice are the basis of the social order. Talented persons are recognized; after his/her death the surviving members do not enjoy prestige on his behalf.	-Equality is taken as the opportunity two physically and culturally unequal competitors to fight. Distinction is made under birth, race, place, religion and language; and are permanent.
-Goods are treated as the gift for the well-being of the society and rated according to the humanizing quality of it. Quality is important than quantity. How useful to the society is more important than how beautiful.	-Goods are meant for individual consumption and consumption is everything in life. The value of a person is equated with the goods he/she possess. You can have whatever you want with money, thus money is the universal value.
-Needs are spontaneous, according to the rhythm of nature.	-Artificially created needs. Needs are created among the unwilling mass making use of the support of sex, family, religion and even God.
Religious Values	
-Feminine qualities dominate.	-Dominating quality is masculine.
-Dominating Deity, Bhagavathi (Goddess).	-Father (God) dominated.
-Importance to Earth and Earth deities.	-Importance to Sky and Sky-gods.
-Movements during religious function, predominantly spiral in the form of dancing.	-Linear in the form of standing and sitting.
-Long celebrations, at the end of which the entire congregation goes through a catharsis	-Short celebrations at the end of which congregation becomes unconsciously tense which leads to aggressive nature.
There is blend of Iudic and ascetic in the cultic celebrations.	-Only ascetic with an exaggerated emphasis to fallen state of humanity which leads to unnecessary guilt feeling.
-Rituals show openness towards absorption and integration of new things and a general tolerance towards unfamiliar.	-Rituals are rigid repetition of the familiar and a general suspicion of and intolerance towards the unfamiliar.
-Ritual celebrations are an extension of nature.	-Ritual celebrations have little to do with nature and realities of life.

-Ritual expresses social protest and helps resolution of it.	-Social tensions are created through discrimination in ritual celebration.
-The Dalit Culture is said to be more Unitive, imaginative, Cosmic, Mythic and Intuitive.	- The complex culture is said to be more Dualistic, Reason-oriented, Personal, Historic and Discursive.

2.7 FEATURES OF DALIT FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

As indicated by Samy (2006) Dalit history reveals that the Dalit community had a rich folklore and culture of its own. Here, Dalits who are the children of the soil found ways of expressing their identity through folk arts and classic arts in oral and written forms. But these rich cultural treasures were stolen from them by oppressors. Their cultural heritage was desecrated and destroyed and a foreign culture was imposed upon them. The upper caste oppressors saw to it that the Dalits would never produce a culture of their own. The others ingeniously used the art form and the various traits of their culture to oppress and dehumanize the Dalits. Thus culture which is supposed to give a meaning system and value system to a society was made into an instrument of oppression and domination. This manipulation of culture to dehumanize the Dalits has continued down unabated through the centuries even till today.. The Dalits have neither the money power nor the political clout to make their voices heard. It is the upper caste that determines what the Dalits should think and how he should act and how he should see his status in the society. By the use of electronic media and the print media, the upper caste society has successfully preserved its dominance and has tried to convince the world that the so-called low caste people are indeed low people. What is even more outrageous is the attempts to make the Dalits themselves believe and accept that they are low and worthless only to be despised and cast out to become the outcasts. Important characteristics and functions of all the traditional folklore that has been transmitted for centuries together in the forms of oral narratives, songs, music, tales, proverbs myths, legends, ballad, lullabies, Field songs, performing arts are as follows (Samy 2006).

- a) Explaining the agony and the sorrow of their life styles.
- b) Trying to communicate to their community members in a subtle way
- c) Seeking consolation for the sufferings.
- d) Expecting a change that will liberate them.
- e) Directly or indirectly call for the unity among them.

In the state of Tamilnadu there were local Dalit heroes among the Dalit communities. These individuals either man or women would have tried to counter the dominance of upper caste people and got killed in doing so. These individuals become a hero and in due course the Dalits make them as their gods. There are many ballads sung in praise of these heroes. These ballads will express their anger and in the same time induce the new generation to take up the role of the deliverer. The ballads will begin with the details of birth and family details .Good qualities of the

hero will be brought out and the cause of his death will be mentioned and sadness will prevail at the end with highlighting the loss of the hero.

As landless labourers the Dalit women will sing in the paddy fields while transplanting the seedlings. Every day life situations will be represented in their songs. Mocking the landlord satirically can be noticed in their songs. Those mocking elements may not be easily understandable for an outsider whereas it is communicated for enjoyment among the labourers. Fear prevents them from making direct mockery. The lullabies sung by the Dalit women express the state of their livelihood to their infants. Mostly all forms of traditional cultural expressions are derived out of their day to day living conditions. Whether it is ritual or non ritual they recorded the ordeal of Dalits and longed for the attention of their own communities as well as others (Samy 2006).

An individual or a community's identity, attitude and patterns of behaviour are formed and expressed in the forms of arts and aesthetics is not merely by the environment, in which one is part of, but importantly developed through the attitudes of significant others. It is this significant others that play a crucial role in the formation of one's identity. In other words an individual's self understanding and estimation would not develop in vacuum. It rather develops in mutuality of interaction and essentially depends on others treatment. With this understanding we can look in to the pride and dignity of the Dalit artists. For many educated Dalit youths believe that practicing of Dalit art forms bring shame and insult to their identity. The art folk drumming in pan Indian scale is connected mainly to Dalits and tribal communities. Since the folk drums are made out cow skins this art form was considered as something low and impure by the upper caste people.

Drumming –A tool for liberation:

The emergence of Dalit liberation movements and other Dalit political parties and NGOs working for the upliftment of Dalits have given a new impetus for the art of drumming. Drumming for a social change is the new way of expressing their art form in various festivals held in India. No more it is considered as funeral music but music of liberation. The vibrations that it brings help them to arouse their feelings of agitation and recording their expression through their cultural resource. This folk drumming has the tremendous effect of crowd pulling at public meetings and gatherings. Their singing, drumming, strumming and dancing are re-defining their perspective. On the other hand alternative communication like third theatre, street theatre, puppet show, etc., is also widely spreading. Dalit's search for alternative media is in fact the search for a counter-culture that will stand as a paradigm to protect human existence; re-write history and evolve a new culture of love and caring. Let this be a historical milestone from where we reiterate our march towards equality and justice, self-respect and harmony. Below we mention briefly two Dalit Art forms from Tamilnadu (Samy 2006).

Paraiyattam OR Thappaattam The most striking and vibrant art form is the folk dance known as *paraiyattam* or *thappaattam* in Tamilnadu. The *Parai* acquired the name *Thappu* based on the action of beating on the instrument *Parai*. *Thappu* is always associated with beats and its dance. The uniqueness of *Thappaattam* is that both the player and the dancer are same. The beats of the Drum and the movements of the body meet in unison so as to become an expressive dance-form.

Karagaattam Karagam is a folk dance with musical accompaniment, performed balancing a pot on the head. Traditionally, this dance was performed by the villagers in praise of the rain goddess Mari Amman and river goddess, Gangai Amman, performed with water pots balanced on their heads (Samy 2006).

2.8 THE DANCE OF DEFIANCE

The unique music of the Dalits has long been viewed by high-caste elites as a degenerate culture born of an essentially 'impure people'. Their presence and cultural practices are viewed as polluting by people of high status. Many intellectuals dismisses all music not made by people of high caste. Many elite still hold on to the following sentiments: 'There is folk music and classical music. Carnatic music is scientifically organized, folk music is not so ... people who are not properly trained just sing out of emotion, enthusiasm. Folk music can be sung by any child. Quacks. Carnatic is not like this, you need a talent.' ' (Silvermanm 2001)

Despite the prejudice of people of high caste, those at the lower level of the Hindu hierarchy are reclaiming their music. It is becoming a source of powerful resistance, the basis of new and revolutionary identities. As Dalit women come together to share and find solutions to their problems at meetings of self-help groups in villages throughout India, they learn that they are not to blame for their individual problems. They become 'conscientized'--in the term coined by Paolo Freire, the Brazilian revolutionary educator--to the fact that their problems are rooted in an oppressive social structure.

Sagamarie is a vital woman with a ready laugh. This energetic Dalit leader describes how she mobilized Dalit voters through staging a procession led by Pariyar drummers. Gathering crowds as they travelled through dusty streets and laneways, the procession united Hindu, Muslim and Christian Dalit villagers on the way to the voting booth. As the procession passed by the well-built or 'pukka' houses of the rich, upper-caste families of the more salubrious quarters of the village, the musicians, men and boys threw themselves into wild, spontaneous dances in front of the ever-growing crowds. The frenetic dance of defiance was a display of Dalit identity, pride and strength. Excitedly she recounts the triumphal march: 'A big procession ... house to house to collect the votes, then vote time. I have a feeling inside me that I will win.' (Silvermanm 2001)

The challenges are great and opposition to Dalit culture and rights means that Dalit activists have a long struggle. They are fighting back. Born into marginal existences they increasingly assert their human rights. They are by far the largest group amongst the fifth of India's population who live in extreme poverty and destitution. Condemned to labouring in the fields of high-caste families in return for a subsistence diet, millions are undernourished and exploited by landowners, officials and moneylenders.

2.9 LIBERATIVE DALIT CULTURE

Over the last two decades, the South Asian landscape has experienced a resurgence of untouchable voices challenging the dominant social, economic, political, cultural, and epistemological structures, and questioning the traditional mechanisms of oppression. Even though Indian society and its traditional institutional structures have been critically interrogated throughout its history, the perspectives from the most oppressed sections of the society, like the Dalits, did not form a part of mainstream intellectual discourses and analyses (Mangalam 2011).

The contemporary upsurge of Dalits in Indian cultural and political mainstream, therefore, not only challenges the existing historical and sociopolitical scholarship on South Asia, but also tries to provide new epistemological alternatives by bringing the ideas and articulations from the margins to the core in the rewriting of history, culture, and politics. Dalit articulations provide new ways of understanding and interrogating the notions of caste, colonialism, nationalism, democracy, equality, and freedom. The uniqueness of Dalit literature perhaps lies in its ability to give meaning to and capture the anger, oppression, and exploitation embodied in poignant and yet powerful literary and cultural expression.

Further, Dalit art forms have always been a counter-hegemonic discourse and it's only the academicians and the middle class intelligentsia, who have failed to understand it as such. Social organisations who are working for a change are beginning to explore the possibilities of using both traditional and contemporary Dalit art forms in educating the masses. Especially the use of street theatre has gained momentum in the last two decades for creating awareness among the people about the atrocities committed against Dalits.

In order to develop an integrated development pattern, it is necessary to recognize the importance of Dalit wisdom and technology (and culture) and incorporate them as the basis of all development. Dalit Wisdom is wisdom and technology which a people develop for their living in accordance with their habitat ensuring its balanced use. The modern development styles compel people to follow a life-style that is destructive of natural resources through over exploitation and that this alienates people from their respective environment. The Dalit wisdom and technology which ensures optimum use of the natural resources and so eco-friendly leads us to a development that is sustainable (Pallath 2001).

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Name four important characteristics and functions of traditional folklore.

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2. What is the uniqueness of Dalit literature?

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2.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have seen the rich traditions of Dalit folklore and culture and their specific communitarian roles. We have indicated the liberative function they serve in humanising Dalit and non-Dalit communities.

2.11 KEY WORDS

Folklore: folklore consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales and customs that are the traditions of that culture, subculture, or group. it is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared.

Cultural analysis: culture, in very general terms, the way of life of a people, hence a way of thinking, of viewing things, of comforting one's self, common to a society: the special mode of being human of a people.

Liminal: Liminal means, a situation of license during which anything can take place, because all norms of day to day life are relaxed. Ludic or playful nature is part of luminal sphere.

2.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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UNIT 3 SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF DALITS

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
 - 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Social Location of Dalits
 - 3.3 Dehumanization through Exclusion
 - 3.4 Denial through Exploitation
 - 3.5 Defacement through Elimination
 - 3.6 Towards an Adequate Response
 - 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
 - 3.8 Key Words
 - 3.9 Further Readings and References
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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit— to familiarize the students with the social problems of almost 20% of the Indian population treated as untouchables, who in the contemporary history call themselves as Dalits. Having explained about their social location, it proceeds further how they are dehumanized through exclusion, denied through exploitation, and defaced through elimination from the main stream of the Indian caste-ridden society. While dwelling on the claims of protecting their human rights, it explains how, in practice, they are treated with the attitude of indifference and callousness. By the end of this Unit one should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of the social location of the Dalits;
 - to grapple with the process of dehumanization ;
 - to perceive the stories behind the denial of space;
 - to recognise the process of defacement;
 - to reflect on the ways of facing the problem of untouchability adequately as co-humans with them.
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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Even while the human history claims to have entered the new era of the third millennium with much fanfare, the atrocities against the Dalits in India remain unabated. They are treated as untouchables and ill-treated as lesser humans and non-humans. And thus about 165 million people (16 percent) of the Indian total population (1100 million) are relegated to the margins of Indian caste-ridden society. This figure does not include those Dalits who are Christians and Muslims, who could be approximately 25 million.

Though the Constitution of India has outlawed the practice of untouchability in any form as a criminal offence, the disadvantaged Dalits are ostracised from and even persecuted in the day-to-day life of Indian society. Even the remedial measures of reservation of the jobs and the educational privileges did not suffice to undo the injustice done to the Dalits.

This atrocious situation creates a lot of suffering in the hearts and the minds of the Dalits. When they undergo all these untold miseries, the non-Dalits and the government machinery, by and large, treat Dalit suffering, very often, with mere lip-service. Their evasive approach and callous attitude add insult to injury. Even the legitimate self-assertion of the Dalits to establish their human dignity seems to provoke the caste-ridden society to step up its repression against them. This again dehumanizes them and deepens their wounds. And Dalit suffering is further intensified.

3.2 SOCIAL LOCATION OF DALITS

On March 11, 2000, seven Dalits were burnt alive in Kambalapalli village in Kolar District of Karnataka for having refused to be subservient to the whimsical norms of the so-called upper caste people. On July 6, 1999, a 42 year-old Dalit woman was gang-raped and burnt alive near Kanpur of Uttar Pradesh by the so-called high caste people. This was supposed to be the 'punishment' for her son's 'crime' of having tried to get married to the daughter of one of the culprits (cf. The New Indian Express, Chennai, July 7, 1999). The connivance of the local police personnel at this week-long atrocities by the influential high caste people against the family members of the victim is highlighted in this brief news item titled "Dalit Mother Raped for Son's 'Criminal' Affair".

On the eve of its 50th anniversary of the Republic Day (January 26, 1999), India witnessed a cold-blooded massacre of 23 landless Dalit labourers including a 60 year-old woman and 10 year-old child in Shankarbigah village of Jehanabad District of Bihar, by the private army maintained by the powerful land-owning high caste people. It was a well-planned operation with a clear purpose: to terrorise the landless and the Dalit population of the area into submission so that they did not dare to resist the domination of landlords and rural rich over the social and economic life of rural Bihar.

The nexus between the caste-minded landlords and the callous government machinery is highlighted in many parts of the country (cf. S.K.Mishra, "The Caste War in Bihar", The Hindu Magazine-Chennai, February 21, 1999). Enlisting the names of the private armies of the land-owning caste people, it further throws light on the dynamics of the retaliatory measures undertaken by the leftist Naxalite groups against the landlords for initiating the spiral of violence through such atrocities against the Dalit labourers.

When Dalits- Murugesan and Mooken- were elected president and vice-president, respectively, of Melavalavu Panchayat, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu 'reserved' for the Dalit candidates through the democratic process, they were not only not allowed to function as people's representatives but also not allowed to live. On June 30, 1997, they were murdered along with four other Dalits in the broad day light by the intolerant caste people. They were 'punished' with death for participating in the election and getting elected. Their sin was their low caste- Adi-Dravida - and they showed the temerity to contest. (cf. G. Mathew, "The Meaning of Melavalavu", The Hindu-Chennai, September 30, 1997)

These are but the sample manifestations of untouchability ruthlessly practiced across the length and breadth of the Indian sub-continent which remains under the grip of caste with its

exclusiveness, hierarchy and its ineluctable fragmentation of civil society'. The brutality to which the Dalits are subjected to in contemporary India is portrayed by the Asian Human Rights Commission (1997) as follows: "During these 50 years of survival after independence from the colonial powers, the Dalit situation has not improved. It has, in fact, become worse which is borne out by the fact that every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day, three Dalit women are raped; every day, two Dalits are murdered; every day, two Dalit houses are burned down."

The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1997) has recorded the following details: "Between 1994 and 1996, a total of 98,349 cases were registered with the police nationwide as crimes and atrocities against scheduled castes. Of these, 38,483 were registered under the Atrocities Act. A further 1,660 were for murder, 2,814 for rape, and 13,671 for hurt." These are but the recorded crimes against the Dalits. But the Human Rights Watch rightly observes that the actual number of the abuses against the dignity and protection to the personhood of the Dalits will be presumably much higher than these registered cases. It is due to the powerlessness of the Dalits and the callousness of the administrative machinery of the government.

E. Zelliot observes as follows: "Untouchability remained firmly ingrained in spite of sporadic reformatory measures taken from time to time. The problem found much needed attention in the course of the freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. He found it against human dignity. It is an excrescence in Hinduism. It is 'a blot on Hinduism' and 'a sin against God and man'. This drag on Hinduism constituted a poison, a snake, a canker, a hydra headed monster, device of satan, a hideous truth." While commenting on the approach on Gandhi, N. Prasad says that he "convinced the orthodox Hindus that there was no sanction in the *shastras* for this inhuman social practice. He wanted to bring an attitudinal change among the caste Hindus by creating guilt consciousness in them as they had been ill-treating their brethren for centuries. This is an ingenious way he wanted to bring about social change without disturbing social harmony." Critiquing the co-option of the Dalits into the fold of casteist society through minor incentives, Ambedkar observe that "....buying, benumbing and drawing the claws of the opposition of the untouchables which [Gandhi] knows is the only force which will disrupt the caste system and will establish real democracy in India". The co-option of the Dalits into the casteist society takes place by the subtle process of benumbing their consciousness and purchasing their loyalty by way of distributing 'petty gifts to petty untouchable'.

When they are called as the Harijans (children of God) by the reformatory circles, they feel it as a condescending label with the overtone of mere lip-service; and when tabled as the 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) by the administrative circles, they find it as an empty slogan with bureaucratic indifference. And as a revolt against every type of names given to them by others, a vast majority of these oppressed people, having reached a new level of political awareness, prefer to call themselves as 'Dalits', irrespective of various linguistic affiliations or sub-caste groups, across the sub-continent. They are systematically (1) dehumanised through exclusion, (2) denied through exploitation, and (3) defaced through elimination.

3.3 DEHUMANIZATION THROUGH EXCLUSION

The traditional divide between the 'higher' caste as clean and the 'lower' as unclean segregates the Dalits from the rest of the society as the untouchables. This has to be seen against the backdrop of the idea of religious impurity. A learned judge of the Allahabad High Court had his chambers "purified" with the sacred water from the River Ganges, because they had earlier been occupied by a Dalit judge (cf. "LS Concerned at 'purifying' act by HC judge", The Times of India, Bombay, July 23, 1998). The caste, as a system, does not include the Dalits as part of its whole. They are divided from the rest of the society and condemned to live outside the borders of villages, in *cheris*, colonies and slums. This geographical, social and political ostracisation creates in them a sense of alienation from the rest of the humanity except through the menial jobs violently or subtly assigned to them through certain cultural norms.

Being divided by the ulterior motives of the caste people for maintaining their status quo, a mutual sense of distrust and suspicion is created within the Dalits. It expresses itself in terms of divided allegiance to the caste groups even for minimum incentives. This process of being divided among themselves is rather a serious menace in eliciting the Dalit liberative potentials as a unified front to fight against all the dehumanising forces. This constant experience of mutual distrust and intra- divisions injected into the Dalit psyche, makes them vulnerable as split personalities with the resultant dependence on alcohol, the mega images of the cine actors and actresses and political leaders.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Explain the social location of the Dalits.

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2) Write on the process of dehumanization of Dalits through exclusion.

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3.4 DENIAL THROUGH EXPLOITATION

Exclusion is thrust upon the Dalits both by casteism in collusion with the globalisation, liberalization and privatization. Now the Dalit situation has become worse by reason of the onslaught of the Trans national Capitalist process of globalisation in the contemporary scenario. The paltry sum given to their hard manual labour imposed on them is often justified under the claim that they are unskilled. Of all the types of manual labour imposed on the Dalits, the most abominable one is the manual scavenging. In fact, the Dalit scavengers are exposed to serious health hazards and treated with callousness by the administrative bodies of the government (cf. "Enslaved by Tradition: The Manual Scavengers of Vidisha", The Hindu, 16, December 2010).

Dalits are excluded from the fabric of the Indian society through the system of religious purity and pollution. Equal status in social relations and worship, ownership of property and decision-making on the political plane is denied. In other words, they are dismembered from the society and delimited from access to the divine. This, in short, is an outright denial of due share in the resources of life, human dignity, respectability in social life and sometimes even the right to exist.

Though the state has the Constitutional Rights to make the special provisions for the SCs and STs, reservation has not been made applicable to the Judiciary, Private Sector, the Defence Department (the country's largest employer), certain minority institutions etc. (cf. J. Desrochers, "Broken Promises & Dalits Betrayed", Integral Liberation 4- March 2000). His brief presentation sums up the This Black Paper (*Broken Promises & Dalits Betrayed*- Secundrabad: NCDHR, 1999) is a collective expression of Dalit rights and a critique of the Indian state for failing to adequately fulfil these rights in the areas of livelihood, education, land and labour, life and security, reservation and employment, and male-female equity.

Despite the Special Recruitment Drive of 1996-1997, a large number and percentage of backlog vacancies remain in the Central Government, the Banks and the Public Sector. To assess how the high positions in the bureaucracy are out of the reach of the Dalits and how the menial jobs are readily allotted to them (cf. National SC/ ST Commission Report 1996-1997).

Backlog Vacancies Meant for the SCs and STs		
Services	Number	Percentage

A. Central Government		
Group A	369	74.84
Group B	438	51.34
Group C	3133	55.87
Group D	873	45.70

Total	4811	54.30

B. Banks	272	45.10
C. Public Sector	2642	88.18

The political reservation and job reservation for the Dalits have helped a minority among the Dalits in certain quarters. But, by and large, the experience of the politico-economic and socio-cultural disabilities by the Dalits are basically the same. And especially in the case of those converted to the other religions, it is even worse than that of those under the label of Hinduism.

3.5 DEFACEMENT THROUGH ELIMINATION

Dalits are defaced by being kept in a state of illiteracy, subservience and insecurity. The dynamics operative behind the process of defacement of Dalits is explained as follows: "If the proletarian consciousness is essentially rooted in material deprivation, and caste consciousness is rooted in status deprivation. Dalit consciousness is a complex consciousness which encapsulates

deprivations stemming from inhuman conditions of material existence, powerlessness and ideological hegemony”.

The Dalit reality is a painful existence. In India Dalits are social outcasts, economically impoverished, politically powerless, and as a corollary to these, they are skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, subservience, hopelessness, despair and abasement. It is slavery and a social death. When they are forced to live under such nightmares in slums and ‘cheris’, when their daily experience tells us that almost nowhere in society are they respected and wanted, nowhere are they granted the ordinary dignity, deference and courtesy accorded to other human beings, we begin to doubt our own inner worth and dignity. They begin to doubt and question whether they and their families really merit no respect from the caste people than we receive today. These nagging doubts and a deep sense of no-people and no-place have sown seeds of a pernicious self-and-group hatred and self pity.

And consequently their social mobility towards other non-traditional occupations, housing facility, access to education and sharing of power is not invisible. But in comparison with the caste people it is marginally moderate. Where some individual mobility is possible, the burden of caste may weigh more heavily on the lower- than on the upper-caste person. In certain contexts, caste might matter more for Harijan than for Brahmin intellectuals as race seems to do more for black than for white intellectuals in the United States.

In the face of these atrocities, whenever Dalits sought to assert their rights, there was a backlash from the feudal lords resulting in mass killings, gang rapes, looting and arsoning in view of teaching them a lesson to accept oppression. Even the oppressed lots among the non-Brahmin sectors (Backward Castes-BCs) isolate the Dalits in fighting their common enemy i.e., the casteist hegemony. Ambedkar says as follows: “It is obvious that these three classes [Dalits, Shudras, and Tribals] are naturally allies. There is every ground for them to combine for the destruction of the Hindu social order. But they have not come together.....the result is that there is nobody to join the untouchable in his struggle. He is completely isolated. Not only is he isolated he is opposed by the very classes who ought to be his natural allies.”

The Dalits are condemned to engage themselves in religiously polluting and socially demeaning occupations i.e., scavenging, handling the dead bodies of the humans and the animals and human refuse, besides the hard physical labour required in agriculture, laying roads or building houses. The maximum labour is extracted from the ill-fed bodies of the Dalits for a minimum wage. Identification of the persons of Dalits with the means of the labour and especially with the socio-cultural “pollution” attached to them, deface the Dalits as human beings. K.R. Narayanan, even as the President of India who happened to be a Dalit, has not escaped the curse of being labelled as “An Untouchable” during his official visit to a foreign state as appeared in the headlines of *Le Figaro*, a renowned daily in France. Of course the editor-in-chief tendered his apology for having portrayed the state guest from India as “an Untouchable” (cf. “French Editor Apologises to Narayanan”, *The Hindu- Chennai*, April 20, 2000).

All the same, one cannot easily set aside the fixation even of the foreign press persons in associating the Dalits with untouchability as heard or learnt from their Indian counterparts. If this is the defacement encountered by the learned statesman of the stature of K.R.Narayanan as

the Head of the State in India, one can imagine the severity of the humiliation faced by the poor and illiterate Dalit labourers in the Indian society. The state of these enslaved Dalits condemned to natal alienation and social death can be outlined as follows: “The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized. This process of social negation constitutes the first, essentially external, phase of enslavement. The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing.”

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Elucidate the denial of due space for Dalits through exploitative practices
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- 2) Explain the process of defacement of the Dalits in the caste-ridden society.
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3.6 TOWARDS AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE

By and large, in public discourses, most of the upper caste people deny any discrimination of Dalits. They tend to remain evasive even when pointedly queried about the existence of caste discrimination. But in the face of legitimate Dalit attempts to demand right wages, to own lands, to build houses or to independently exercise their franchise as per their own choice, the upper caste people cause obstructions to them even to the extent of burning their properties and of attacking them with lethal weapons. The typical evasive approach, callous attitude and antagonistic disposition of the upper caste towards the Dalits are blatantly seen in the government machinery also.

According to the Indian Constitution the practice of "Untouchability" in any form is a forbidden offence and a punishable crime. Also the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955 is further geared towards annihilation of untouchability and integration of the Dalits into the main stream of the society. Apart from these provisions, the SC/ST prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 was brought into force to check atrocities against the Dalits. And hence there have been certain landmark judgements in the law courts upholding the rights of the Dalits afflicted by the social system of casteism and prejudices based on untouchability.

But in actuality, Dalits are on the receiving end during the atrocious encounters, in spite of the protection guaranteed by these legal provisions. After the National Public Hearing on the several cases of the atrocities against Dalits, the panel of independent nine-member jury has sharply criticised the dubious role of the State and the inadequacy of the Judiciary as follows: “the State is continuing to perpetuate violence against the Dalits; colluding with the dominant castes in

several areas in all the states and it fails to implement all the relevant laws and rules. The judiciary has not responded to the violation of the rights of Dalits with adequate sensitivity and urgency.”

With regard to the Dalit situation in India, one is forced to conclude with pain and anguish that “Dalit beating is a way of life here”. K.R. Narayan, the former President of India records his regrets on how the Constitutional provisions to promote the Dalits are made to be ineffective in the following manner: “Untouchability has been abolished by law but shades of it remain in the ingrained attitudes nurtured by the caste system. Though the provisions of reservation in educational institutions and public services flow from our constitution, they remain unfulfilled through bureaucratic and administrative deformation or by narrow interpretations of these provisions.”

Despite the onslaught of their humanity and undergoing the ordeal of dehumanisation due to caste hegemony, the Dalits have been all along refusing to be cowed down by the Brahminic onslaught of their humanity. “They have established their lives on the solid foundations of resilience, inclusiveness, equality, justice, peaceful coexistence, liberty and community living.” Perhaps, that is why, there are manifestations of the stepped up Dalit self-assertion which in turn is sought to be silenced through the increase in number of the atrocities against them.

Over the years of their struggle the Dalit yearnings have realized that their attempts at ending the atrocities and claiming the jobs are in view of addressing the core issue of the abolition of the very caste system. They also realize that by playing the leading role they will be poised for gaining power and human dignity.

This realization among the Dalits was much articulated during the tenure of V.P.Singh as the Prime Minister of India during 1989-1991. This was the period which witnessed the organisation of the Dalits in alliance with the oppressed non-Brahmins (Backward Caste people) against the backdrop of the Mandal Commission recommendation. This process of the rise of consciousness takes place to various degrees by numerous Dalit movements and organisations across the sub-continent of India. The operative dynamics behind these movements are varied at different levels. The alienation and disintegration of the Dalit identity take place at all levels: physical, psychological, cultural, moral, social, political, economic and spiritual. But the deep-seated hope within the battered consciousness of the Dalits seeks to undo the atrocities meted out to them down the centuries. And hence, Dalits constantly undergoing the humiliation in the hands of casteist hierarchy and hegemony, are said to have ‘a contradictory consciousness’: “one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and critically absorbed.” This is quite much reflected not only in their day to day lives but also in their efforts to express their voice of dissent in order to revolt against the very caste system. Dalit expressions of protest against the imposed caste consciousness could be observed in their life spectrum with wide ranges from mild forms of opposition up to articulate forms of subversion. The following three forms are some of their direct or indirect ways of communicating their legitimate wrath against their oppression.

- (1) By way of imitating the behaviour and the socio-cultural practices of the so-called caste people, stepping up ostentation in celebrations or dissociating themselves, like the caste people, from those Dalits still in the lower level of access to economic resources and educational opportunities.
- (2) By way of avoiding immediate conflicts or postponing open confrontation, migrating to another locality, opting for conversion to another religion, defecting to another political party or keeping vigilance over the execution of the reservation policy, they work out ways and means of mildly opposing the effects of the caste-system.
- (3) Being proud of their Dalit identity, they assert themselves by occupying lands and other opportunities in life. Discovering their cultural roots, heritage and their liberative potentials, they do not shy away from manifestly celebrating them. All these efforts seem to openly defy and dismiss those systems that promote caste consciousness and to demand self-rule by disobeying the norms imposed by caste system.

With regard to the expression of self-identity and self-assertion of the Dalits, one cannot expect uniformity. Because, Dalit culture is an acquired and constructed system of collective self-representation, communicated by means of multivalent symbols held together in a loosely organised pattern, which have expressive, directive, resistive and affective functions for a human community.

At the symbolic level, there is a wide spectrum of Dalit responses to their oppression with the process of Sanskritisation on one extreme and of an outright de-Hinduisation on the other. At the secular level, the great personality of Ambedkar seems to have captured the collective Dalit imagination as their liberative symbol especially in the recent past. And further, the native cultural expressions of Dalits like Parayattam (dance with drums), which has been associated only with funeral and hence dismissed as inauspicious by the elite in the casteist society, is now acclaimed by Dalits as the enthusing mode of celebration of life during their gatherings or festivals. Sanskritisation is “the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, ‘twice born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community”. This is how Dalits tend to handle their own symbolic world with the spirit of an upsurge of self-assertion as against the elitist expectation of uncritical assimilation of their casteist values.

At the social level, the Dalit oppression and Dalit self-assertion could be said to be at war with each other. Perhaps, that is why, in contemporary India, one comes across the phenomenon of increasing atrocities unleashed against the Dalits by the anti-Dalit caste groups seems to be prevalent. This conflict-ridden situation is attributable to the stratified caste structure having come under strain because of the increasing assertiveness of the traditionally oppressed sections, the growing tendency of the political class to play upon the caste equations for partisan ends has inevitably resulted in the sharpening of the caste divide.

This seems to be perceptively recognised in the Presidential Address of K.R.Narayanan to the Nation during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Republic Day (1997) of India. He has

rightly diagnosed some of the reasons for the contemporary social unrest. “Many a social upheaval can be traced to the neglect of the lowest tier of society, whose discontent moves towards the path of violence. Dalits and tribals are the worst affected by this.”

There have been spirited campaigns against caste system and untouchability across the country. The nine-member jury engaged in the National Public Hearing on several cases of atrocities against Dalits insists that “the National Human Rights Commission and the international community should recognise that caste, as an institution itself, is a source of violation of human rights. Therefore, it must be treated on a par with the existence of racism and apartheid.” The President of India, who happens to be a Dalit, also emphasises that the Dalit Rights are part of the issues related to Human Rights, in the following words: “It seems, in the social realm, some kind of counter-revolution is taking place in India. It is forgotten that these benefits have been provided not in the way of charity, but as human rights and as social justice to a section of society who constitute a big chunk of our population, and who actually contribute to our agriculture, industry and services as landless labourers, factory and municipal workers. These are the signs that our privileged classes are getting tired of the affirmative action provided by constitutional provisions.”

The Dalit situation in India could be portrayed in the words of K.R. Narayanan as follows: “Self-regarding purity and righteousness ignoring others has been bane of our culture. It has created the gulf in our society between people even with regard to the basic needs and fundamental rights”. But the Dalits are not prepared to remain as mute spectators of their being dehumanised, denied and defaced. With their awakened consciousness, they assert that nothing short of total destruction of caste system will ensure the restoration of their humanity. In consonance with this spirit, the Charter of Dalit Human Rights, while envisioning the empowerment of Dalits, proclaims its mode of proceeding in the following manner:

Whereas Dalits in India have the capacity to transform our pains and struggles into power, our efforts are:

- to establish our lost Humanity, Dignity and Security
- to establish ourselves as daughters and sons of this soil, queens and Kings of this soil, rulers of this soil since this is our soil
- to assert ourselves as a people, claiming that it is our Earth, an earth that is Dalit in character
- to assert our aspirations for self-governance with Dalit leadership to change power equations in economic, cultural and political positions.

While being the silent victim of the casteist hegemony, Dalits undergo the suffering due to segregation and alienation; and further while revolting against it, they undergo the suffering due to repression and elimination. To be a Dalit or to refuse to be a Dalit is to suffer. To become a human being on a par with others from being a Dalit is to suffer. And hence defining ‘Dalit suffering’ might be a difficult task. But recognising it from the ground reality of the Dalit world might not be a difficult task. Even while browsing through the mass of concrete data on Dalit suffering, the discourses of the Dalit informants’ subjective understanding of ‘their’ experience is a quite heart-rending. Irrespective of these discourses, one could even surmise that suffering could come through loss of property, loss of persons, through illness, violence and fear. And

hence the objective existence of exploitation, exclusion, elimination thrust upon the Dalits cannot but unsettle the minds and the hearts of even the casual spectators with regard to Dalit suffering.

And Dalit suffering is not a discourse dwelling upon the problem of evil in general terms with abstract concepts. It is not meant to be an agenda for discussion in those intellectual circles with an attitude of absolute indifference claiming to be objective in approach. Dalitness is the 'problem of evil' imposed upon the Dalits by their co-humans. Because they are reduced to be lesser humans, non-persons or non-people, it is the problem of life and death for the flesh-and-blood persons of Dalits. They suffer and they have to suffer, because they are forced to struggle for identity, dignity and full humanity. And in this struggle, what the Dalits encounter, very often, is the experience of despair and dejection from the repeatedly crushed hopes of their emancipation. Their incessant attempts to draw the curtain on the tragic drama of their dehumanisation often seem to end up with defeat and depression. And consequently the Dalit suffering poses an existential and cognitive problem of meaninglessness.

This situation of Dalit suffering has to be adequately responded to both by the Dalits as sufferers and by others too with a sense of human solidarity with them. Such an exercise of responsibly handling of the problems of Dalit suffering might serve them to cope with the demands of their on-going struggle towards human dignity and emancipation.

In this background, as responsible co-humans with the Dalits, the task we assign for ourselves, is to create a conducive atmosphere for realizing integral Dalit liberation. In our opinion, this can be achieved by way of sharpening the conflict between the Dalit oppression and Dalit assertion and of consciously ushering in the stepped up efforts along the line of Dalit revolt. In this process the liberative potentials on the plane of religio-cultural realm, play a significant role in evolving a faith-vision to cope with the demands of on-going Dalit struggle. In the backdrop of the faith-vision, the Dalit perception of their own alienation and social death on the one hand, and their assertion and revolt against them, on the other, will be further sharpened.

- What is the meaning and the role of suffering imposed upon the Dalits when they undergo the experience of segregation and alienation from other human beings?
- How should one understand those types of suffering as the result of their legitimate self-assertion and revolt against the dehumanising social death caused by caste-oppression?
- Can Dalit suffering produce hope?
- While joining hands with the Dalits, how can others seek to strengthen and enable them to encounter these experiences of suffering and pain in their on-going struggle?
- How could the agony and pain of undergoing the suffering-both due to unjust oppression and the righteous revolt- be transformed into liberative impetus to persevere in and keep up their Dalit struggle towards liberation?

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the Dalits expressions of self-assertion?

.....

2) Reflect on the problem of suffering undergone by the Dalits.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

The caste, as a system, does not include the Dalits as part of its whole. They are divided from the rest of the society and condemned to live outside the borders of villages, in *cheris*, colonies and slums. This, in short, is an outright denial of due share in the resources of life, human dignity, respectability in social life and sometimes even the right to exist. The Dalits are condemned to engage themselves in religiously polluting and socially demeaning occupations i.e., scavenging, handling the dead bodies of the humans and the animals and human refuse, besides the hard physical labour required in agriculture, laying roads or building houses. Dalit suffering is the 'problem of evil' imposed upon the Dalits by their co-humans. And in this struggle, what the Dalits encounter, very often, is the experience of despair and dejection from the repeatedly crushed hopes of their emancipation. In spite of this atrocious culture of casteism, they are hopefully asserting that a casteless society is possibly and positively created.

3.8 KEY WORDS

Dehumanization through exclusion: the rejection of the human dignity of the dalits as unwanted creatures for the human society

Denial through exploitation: the extraction of labour from the dalits in the menial jobs while not allotting the due wages

Defacement through elimination: the imposition of menial jobs and relegating the dalits as permanently polluted

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UNIT 4 IMPACT OF SCIENTIFIC CULTURE AND GLOBALIZATION ON THE DALITS

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Scientific World-View and Culture
- 4.3 The Challenge of Enlightenment
- 4.4 The Impact of Globalization on Dalits
- 4.5 Economic Globalization and India
- 4.6 Cultural Impact of Globalization on India
- 4.7 Education for the Dalits
- 4.8 Philosophy of Liberation
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Key Words
- 4.11 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To familiarise the students with the impact of scientific culture or temper and globalisation on the life of Dalits.
- To see the liberating potential in scientific way of life and globalisation as an economic and cultural phenomenon.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The word Dalit has been defined differently by different people. Normally non-Dalit writers and intellectuals have invented its root in Sanskrit and considered its meaning as broken, crack, split and as adjective, they have given this word the meanings of burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed etc. But for Dalits the meaning of this word is qualitatively different. The word was popularised by the Dalit Panther Movement, when they adopted this term as an act of confident assertion, rejecting Mahatama Gandhi's nomenclature of Harijan, children of God. Dalit Panthers defined this word in their 1972 manifesto as: "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the land-less and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion." Noted Dalit Laureate Gangadhar Pantawane comments: "Dalit is not a caste, Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism." In this unit, we first see the scientific culture and then study the impact of globalization (including democracy and education) on the life of Dalits.

4.2 SCIENTIFIC WORLD-VIEW AND CULTURE

Our worldview can knit together various notions, and therefore understanding a worldview requires analysis of its component parts. Stripped to its minimum, a scientific worldview consists

strictly of falsifiable components. Such a worldview, based solely on ideas that can be tested with empirical observation, conforms to the highest levels of objectivity but is severely limited in utility. The limits arise for two reasons: first, many falsifiable ideas cannot be tested adequately until their repercussions already have been felt; second, the reach of science is limited, and ethics, which compose an inevitable part of any useful worldview, are largely unfalsifiable (AAAS 1990).

Seen thus it relieves people of the dogmatism and fundamentalism of organized religion or any other domineering system, which has traditionally played a central role in defining the status, role and dignity of human beings. The basic tenets of scientific culture are as follows: The World Is Understandable, Scientific Ideas Are Subject To Change, Scientific Knowledge Is Durable and Incomplete, Science Demands Evidence, Science Is a Blend of Logic and Imagination, Science Is Not Authoritarian, Science Is a Complex Social Activity, Generally Accepted Ethical Principles.

To conclude this section we may hold that scientific culture and temper enables one to respect humans as humans, irrespective of their origin, birth, religion and culture. In this sense, scientific temper has led to humanism and humanistic ideals, which does not allow any human being to be exploited on account of their class, caste or gender.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Name three tenets of scientific world-view.

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2. What is meant by saying that “science is a complex social activity.”

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4.3 THE CHALLENGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

In our culture, the aftermath of the scientific revolution spilled over into a new movement known as the Enlightenment, centered particularly in France but with adherents throughout the Western world. Enlightenment thinkers continued to support scientific advance. The 18th-century Enlightenment may be represented as a new way of thinking about mankind and the environment. The main proponents of this intellectual movement, the philosophers, were primarily men of letters - men like Voltaire, John Locke, Denis Diderot, Barol de Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau - but their views can be traced back to the scientific revolution of the previous century. The discoveries of Galilee Galileo, Johannes Kepler and Isaac Newton in

physics and cosmology revealed a universe that was infinite, yet governed by universal laws that could be discovered by the human intelligence.

The philosophers were convinced that all creation was similarly rational, so that it was possible for man to uncover laws which regulated society, politics, the economy, and even morality. Once understood these laws would teach mankind not only what we are, but what we ought to be and do. The Enlightenment tried to apply the scientific methods to the study of human society, sketching the modern social sciences. The basic idea here was that rational laws could describe social as well as physical behaviour, and that knowledge could be used to improve policy. More generally still, the Enlightenment produced a set of basic principles about human affairs. Human beings are naturally good and can be educated to be better. Reason was the key to truth, and religions that relied on blind faith or refused to tolerate diversity were wrong. Enlightenment thinkers attacked the Catholic church with particular vigour. Progress was possible, even inevitable, if people could be set free. Society's goals should center on improvements in material and social life. Enlightenment thinkers showed great interest in technological change, for greater prosperity was a valid and achievable goal. Coercion and cruelty could be corrected, for the Enlightenment encouraged a humanitarian outlook that was applied in condemnations of slavery and war.

The Enlightenment, summing up and extending earlier intellectual changes, became an important force for political and social reform. And it ushered in a new vision of the future, which forecast the end of absolute monarchy. Philosophers of the Enlightenment thought they had discovered a simple formula for perpetual human happiness. They sought to deliver individuals from restraints so that they could act freely in accordance with their natures. On the one hand, the formula promised that pursuit of self-interest would benefit society; on the other, it promised that a free human reason would produce sound moral judgments. In other words, individual freedom permitted the operation of natural laws. Believing they had learned these laws, eighteenth-century rationalists thought they had found the secret of never-ending progress.

Respect for rational philosophy was largely derived from the successes and popularity of science. The surprising discoveries of astronomers produced a new view of the individual's place in the universe; in his law of gravitation, Newton supplied mathematical evidence for their perspective. His laws, along with the other laws of science, suggested that human reason operated effectively only when it was interpreting sensory experience. Material reality was accepted as the only reality. Therefore, the natural laws affecting human society were also considered as basically materialistic (Lewis 1992). So the Enlightenment challenged the absolute domination of the human body, mind, and spirit of human beings (Lewis 1992).

From the evils of 'despotism, feudalism, clericalism' the main people of the Revolution adapted the watchword of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', drawing on notions from the Philosophers and the Enlightenment. Many important documents of the Revolution (The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1793, the short-lived French Constitution of 1791 and indirectly the Indian Constitution of 1950) owe debt to the enlightenment (ThinkQuest). Such a world-view that enlightenment definitely challenges the society to treat the Dalits with respect. Since enlightenment places the worth of human beings on his reason and not on their birth, it is easy to see how Dalits can benefit from such an attitude.

4.4 THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON DALITS

Globalisation is the new buzzword that has come to dominate the world since the nineties of the last century with the end of the cold war and the break-up of the former Soviet Union and the global trend towards the rolling ball. The frontiers of the state with increased reliance on the market economy and renewed faith in the private capital and resources, a process of structural adjustment spurred by the studies and influences of the World Bank and other International organisations have started in many of the developing countries. Also Globalisation has brought in new opportunities to developing countries. Greater access to developed country markets and technology transfer hold out promise improved productivity and higher living standard. But globalisation has also thrown up new challenges like growing inequality across and within nations, volatility in financial market and environmental deteriorations. Another negative aspect of globalisation is that a great majority of developing countries remain removed from the process. Till the nineties the process of globalisation of the Indian economy was constrained by the barriers to trade and investment liberalisation of trade, investment and financial flows initiated in the nineties has progressively lowered the barriers to competition and hastened the pace of globalisation, which is both economic and cultural.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Who were some of the pioneers of Enlightenment?

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2. Name some of the negative factors of globalization.

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4.5 ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION AND INDIA

India opened up the economy in the early nineties following a major crisis that led by a foreign exchange crunch that dragged the economy close to defaulting on loans. The response was a slew of Domestic and external sector policy measures partly prompted by the immediate needs and partly by the demand of the multilateral organisations. The new policy regime radically pushed forward in favour of a more open and market oriented economy (Balakrishnan 2004).

Major measures were initiated as a part of the liberalisation and globalisation strategy in the early nineties. It included scrapping of the industrial licensing regime, reduction in the number of areas reserved for the public sector, amendment of the monopolies and the restrictive trade practices act, start of the privatisation programme, reduction in tariff rates and change over to market determined exchange rates.

Over the years there has been a steady liberalisation of the current account transactions, more and more sectors opened up for foreign direct investments and portfolio investments facilitating entry of foreign investors in telecom, roads, ports, airports, insurance and other major sectors.

The liberalisation of the domestic economy and the increasing integration of India with the global economy have helped step up GDP growth rates, which picked up from 5.6% in 1990-91 to a peak level of 77.8% in 1996-97. Growth rates have slowed down since the country has still been able to achieve 5-6% growth rate in three of the last six years. Though growth rates has slumped to the lowest level 4.3% in 2002-03 mainly because of the worst droughts in two decades the growth rates are expected to go up close to 70% in 2003-04. A Global comparison shows that India is now the fastest growing economy just after China.

This is major improvement given that India's growth rate in the 1970's was very low at 3% and GDP growth in countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Korea, and Mexico was more than twice that of India. Though India's average annual growth rate almost doubled in the eighties to 5.9% it was still lower than the growth rate in China, Korea and Indonesia. The growth in GDP growth has helped improve India's global position. Consequently India's position in the global economy has improved from the 8th position in 1991 to 4th place in 2001 (Balakrishnan 2004).

Despite this progress, poverty remains one of the most serious international challenges we face. But the proportion of the world population living in poverty has been steadily declining and since 1980 the absolute number of poor people.

In short, economic globalisation has intensified interdependence and competition between economies in the world market. This is reflected in Interdependence in regard to trading in goods and services and in movement of capital. As a result domestic economic developments are not determined entirely by domestic policies and market conditions. Rather, they are influenced by both domestic and international policies and economic conditions. Therefore, economic globalisation is a two-edged sword: while it is beneficial sometimes, it can also cause devastating harm, particularly to the Dalits.

4.6 CULTURAL IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON INDIA

Democratic Spirit

One of the positive significant features of globalisation is the spread of democratic ideas, not merely in the running of the state, but also in daily activities. In general the term "democracy," refers to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making. Truly, democracy concerns

collective decision making, by which decisions that are made for groups and that are binding on all the members of the group (Christiano 2006).

The equality required by the definition of democracy may be more or less deep. It may be the mere formal equality of one-person one-vote in an election for representatives to an assembly where there is competition among candidates for the position. Or it may be more robust, including equality in the processes of deliberation and coalition building. “Democracy” may refer to any of these political arrangements. It may involve direct participation of the members of a society in deciding on the laws and policies of the society or it may involve the participation of those members in selecting representatives to make the decisions.

Authority and equality are important in exercising democracy. It is assumed that failing to obey the decisions of a democratic assembly amounts to treating one's fellow citizens as inferiors. And this approach establishes the authority of democracy by claiming that the inequality involved in failing to obey the democratic assembly is the most important form of inequality. It is more important to treat persons as equals in political decision making on this account than it is to treat them as equals in the economic sphere. The idea is that citizens will disagree on how to treat each other as equals in the areas of substantive law and policy. It is the purpose of democracy to make decisions when these disagreements arise. Democracy realizes a kind of equality among persons that all can share allegiance to even when they disagree about many matters relating to substantive law and policy. Since democracy realizes equality in a highly public manner and publicity is a great and egalitarian value, the equality realized by democracy trumps other kinds of equality (Christiano 2006).

The conception of democracy as grounded in public equality provides some reason to think that democratic equality must have some pre-eminence over other kinds of equality. The idea is that public equality is the most important form of equality and that democracy, as well as some other principles such as liberal rights, are unique realizations of public equality. The other forms of equality in play in substantive disputes about law and policy are ones about which people can have reasonable disagreements. So the principle of public equality requires that one treat others publicly as equals and democracy is necessary to doing this. Since public equality has superiority over other forms of equality, citizens have obligations to abide by the democratic process even if their favored conceptions of equality are passed by in the decision making process.

Of course, there will be limits on what citizens must accept from a democratic assembly. And these limits, on the egalitarian account, must be understood as deriving from the fundamental value of equality. So, one might think that public equality also requires protection of liberal rights and perhaps even the provision of an economic minimum (Christiano 2006).

Globalization as a cultural phenomenon, we welcome, not as an economic exploitation. Another related byproduct of globalization is respect and tolerance of others in their own uniqueness. This is especially applicable to religion, where every religion is respected and none is considered superior. So applying the principles of free market, each one is encouraged to choose the religion of his or her choice. Such an approach respects religious freedom of both religions as well as the individuals.

4.7 EDUCATION FOR THE DALITS

One factor, connected with scientific culture and globalisation, which benefits Dalits is education. Some of those who study development see education as a means of improving social welfare through economic means. Education expands the knowledge of possibility to poor individuals, and is often a necessary factor in providing incentive to escape poverty and social oppression.

Development projects focused on increasing access to basic education, rather than ones that increase capital to improve current levels of education, ensure government is able to know that the benefits of these programs are experienced by all, rather than a select few. The rates of return for primary education exceed those of secondary and university levelled education. It is therefore of greater value for governments to focus first on increasing access to primary education before moving onto to increase levels of education. By focusing development on a human-capabilities approach, governments and aid organizations are able to increase the number of people with the fundamental skills of reading writing and arithmetic. Such skills allow individuals to communicate, argue, count, and problem solve so that they are able to become more aware and in control of their own lives. This allows them to better deal with problems in their everyday lives including taking a loan out from the bank, defending them in a court of law, escaping unhealthy personal relationships or avoiding jobs which would expose them to unsafe working conditions. Even the value of holding a basic education is in itself a frequently overlooked asset. Education has had an independent effect on life expectancy, increasing the age for educated individuals (Fraser 2010).

Need for Dalit Education

The 1991 census of India reported that Dalit communities were one of the least literate social groups in the country, with only 30% of Dalit children recognized to have basic reading and writing skills (Nambissan 1996). These high levels of illiteracy are a result of insufficient access to primary education. Reasons proposed for this low primary education rate amongst the Dalits have ranged from blaming family values to universal acceptance of social behaviour. In reality, it is a history of constant oppression and missing incentives that have been the reason why India's lowest caste has struggled to take advantage of public education programs.

For centuries, the Dalit population of India were forbidden from gaining access to education. Originally reserved for upper castes only, the denial of conventional education to Dalits was designed to prevent them from increasing their quality of life and to highlight caste divisions. Then, during the 1850s, the British began the long process of increasing the accessibility of education to all citizens on India (Fraser 2010).

Signed in April of 1850, the Caste Disabilities Removal Act theoretically abolished all Indian laws which challenge the rights of those who are members of any caste or religion. This was the first step towards social equality within India. It was also the beginning of a series of attempts to increase accessibility to education for members of the Dalit caste. To coincide with the signing of the act, the Indian education system became accessible to every member of society. However, one hundred and sixty years after the Dalits were granted permission to attend schools, the

primary education rates of the Dalit population compared to those of upper castes remain as low ever.

A historical back-drop of mistreatment and class hierarchies has provided little incentive for the Dalits to pursue education. Throughout the 1800s and into the mid 1940s, conditions for Dalit children within the Indian education system were very poor. Due to discrimination from higher castes, the Dalits did not feel comfortable attending schools. Dalit children were required to sit outside the school, listening on the veranda while those in higher castes would be taught inside. Teachers, who refused to touch the Dalit children even with sticks, would throw bamboo canes as undeserved punishment while children of other castes were permitted to throw mud. The Dalit children, who knew retaliation would result only in increased abuse, would be essentially scared into not attending school. Of the limited number of Dalit children who were attending school, the majority were male; a trait which continues even today (Fraser 2010).

The 1948 independence of India prompted an increase in responsibility for the government to promote the economic and educational interests of the lower castes and to protect the Dalits from social injustices and exploitations. The 1950s saw improvements in the number of schools being built in India, as well as the amount of money being allocated towards primary education programs. The efforts being put forward by the government lost momentum over the next few decades however, as the rate of primary schools being constructed slipped from 5.8% in the 1960s, to 2.1% during the 1970s, and eventually down to only 1.3% through the 1980s (Nambissan 1996). This was complemented by a shift in funding from primary school education to middle school education.

Between 1983 and 2000, improvements in access to education for all of India have been made, although the difference between education rates for Dalits, especially females, and those in higher castes remained constant. In the seventeen year period, enrolment rates for Dalit boys grew from only 47.7% to a meagre 63.25%. When compared to those males in upper castes, enrolments jumped from an already relatively impressive 73.22% to 82.92%. Even poorer results were observed when looking at the female Dalit enrolment rate, which inched from 15.72% to 32.61%, when compared to their upper-caste counterparts whose enrolment climbed from 43.56% to 59.15% (Desai & Kulkarni). The education gap can also be understood to translate through the entire schooling system, with the proportion of Dalit to non-Dalit success remaining at a constant low rate through primary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling. Although large improvements have been made to increase enrolment rates in India, statistics show that there has been little progress in decreasing the education gap between castes.

Development Programs for Education

When discussing methods which seek to improve enrolment rates, it is important to analyze which circumstances prevent Dalit children from attending school. A family's financial situation plays a role in whether or not they are able to afford to send a child to school. This is a major contributor to low Dalit enrolment rates since Dalits have considerably lower incomes than those in upper castes, and therefore have a hard time paying the basic fees for education. Distance also plays a key role in determining a child's ability to attend school. Because Dalit homes are often located outside of a village, it is more dangerous for Dalit children to travel to and from school

by themselves without risking assault, sexual abuse or abduction. Moreover, teachers at the schools are often members of upper castes who set low expectations for the Dalit children and rarely seek to provide them with a positive learning environment. There are many factors that act as obstacles for Dalits attempting to gain a primary education, and which many development methods have attempted to overcome.

The Indian Government has attempted many different strategies to help increase the incentive to receive education for Dalit children. Earlier strategies focused on finding ways to give Dalit children an education without exposing them to the harshness of upper castes. As time progressed and the caste system began to weaken in India, there was a greater shift towards equalizing society so as to provide safer and more positive learning environments. Since gaining its independence, the Indian government has continued to make progress on improving the quality of life for India's lowest caste.

Often, governments try to bring in international assistance in dealing with a national crisis like severely low primary enrolment rates. Prescribed to the Indian government by the World Bank, the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) was designed to increase primary enrolment rates within India. The goal of the program is to reduce differences in enrolment between gender and social standing to 5%, and to decrease the dropout rate to 10%. The DPEP receives the majority of its funding from the World Bank. It envisages the formation of local committees that oversee the hiring and management of Para-teachers. These Para-teachers are trained teachers hired by the DPEP program to fill growing vacancies in primary schools. They are hired on a short term basis but are offered extended terms as an incentive to perform well. They are a low-cost alternative to permanent teaching staff and their performance is often higher due to increased incentives (Fraser 2010).

A smaller scale, and more capital based approach to development and increasing primary enrolment rates is the allocation of additional textbooks to a community. In developing countries, textbooks are often the only basis for a curriculum in a subject. If a school is not able to purchase its own textbooks, then knowledge resources will be limited. By increasing the amount of textbooks, development projects are attempting to increase the ability of schools to take in more students and they hope that additional resources so that performance in school will increase. Increasing access to text books has assisted in increasing the quality of education despite having little or no impact on enrolment rates.

As Fraser (2010) reminds us, there have been many attempts over the past one hundred and fifty years to help increase the quality of life for the Dalits of India through development focused on enrolment in primary education. Education provides individuals with the means to increase their income and to engage in economic activities. In addition, it can help empower individuals to lobby for social change through political activism. The lack of incentives to pursue education for the Dalits of India can be traced back to a long history of mistreatment and oppression. Still occurring today, caste harassment makes teaching environments unstable for caste children, it places caste homes on the outskirts of towns so that children have greater distances to walk to school, and it economically suppresses the Dalits so that they are unable to pay for their children's education.

Many suggestions, both traditional and modern, have arisen on how to go about resolving issues surrounding Dalit primary enrolment. Night classes and all-Dalit schools provided a safer learning environment for the Dalits, but did not address any issues of caste conflict. Twentieth century policies helped officially decrease some of the animosity and inequality between groups so that the Indian government could have a greater focus on national primary enrolment rates. Larger operations, including the DPEP cooperative project with The World Bank failed to resolve some of the grass-root issues which discouraged Dalits from attending school. Funding increasing supplies of textbooks to Indian schools do not address any of the core reasons as to why dalits are not attending school. Instead of increasing enrolment, additional textbooks only had an effect on increased performance levels. Providing free deworming medication at school has proven successful both in increasing the health of children which prevents absenteeism, and in increasing enrolment levels. Minor increases in incentives for Dalits to pursue primary education have been beneficial, but not sufficient in equalizing the enrolment gap between the Dalits and others. In order for significant progress to be made in increasing the primary enrolment rates of Dalit children, development organizations must continue to explore varying levels of incentives and pursue national social equality in India.

English Education

India is often touted as a “knowledge power.” The role of English education popularised by Lord Macaulay (1800-1859) has significantly contributed to the education of Indians in general and Dalits in particular. English education was introduced by the British with the twin purpose of impressing upon the natives the value of western thought and of preparing them for taking up jobs to assist in the administration of the country. The first protégés were Hindus and there developed a Hindu middle class (Rajesh Kochhar). Moreover, the Indian economy and culture of today is significantly influenced by the English that the British has introduced and which Indians have adopted. It is hoped that English will further contribution to the development of Dalits, since it acts as a means of getting out of their own culture and milieu.

4.8 PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION

For the Dalits a philosophy or way of life that promotes respect for human dignity and enhances over all liberation is worth pursuing. Such a philosophy can work miracles in the self-concept of Dalits and the larger Indian population. It may be easier to start our reflection on philosophy of liberation, based on “Liberation Theology,” a movement in the South America around 1950s, interpreting the Christian scriptures through the plight of the poor with Marxist principles. Slowly, Liberation Theology has moved from the poor peasants in South America to the poor blacks in North America. We now have Black Liberation Theology being preached in the black community. It is the same revolutionary, humanistic philosophy found in South American Liberation Theology and has no more claim for a scriptural basis than the South American model has. False doctrine is still false, no matter how it is dressed up or what fancy name is attached to it. In the same way that revolutionary fervour was stirred up in South America, Liberation Theology is now trying to stir up fervour among blacks in America. Coming to the Indian Dalit Christians, some of them have formulated a Dalit theology as a theological reflection rooted in the understanding that God is struggling with the Dalits for their liberation, that He is on their side. It seeks to instill a sense of pride in their identity. (Ambrose Pinto).

Since Liberation and Dalit Theologies can be applied only to Christian communities, some thinkers are focusing on evolving a Philosophy of Liberation, which may be applied all people, irrespective of religions. It stresses on the uniqueness and dignity of human beings, irrespective of their religious background. It also asserts that every social structure, including religion, can have a liberative or enslaving effects on us. It is up to us to discover the liberative potential and to reject the dehumanizing effects of social structures.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Which was the first step towards social equality in India?

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2. What was the purpose of English education in India? Who introduced it?

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4.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the impact of scientific culture (including enlightenment) and globalisation (democracy, education, etc.) on Dalits.

4.10 KEY WORDS

Globalisation: globalization is the tendency of businesses, technologies, or philosophies to spread throughout the world, or the process of making this happen.

Enlightenment: A philosophical movement of the 18th century that emphasized the use of reason to criticise previously accepted doctrines and traditions and that brought about many humanitarian reforms. Closely connected to humanism and science.

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