
UNIT 1 DALIT WORLD-VIEW AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to introduce the complex nature of the Dalit life-world or world-view and the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. Dalit roots and resources are attuned move towards the dignified inclusion of all humans as co-humans. Even with limited socio-cultural space, their meaning-generating activities through various methods and dialogical efforts seek to create a new humanity built upon the foundation of egalitarianism. In this process of Dalit self-empowerment, how could the Philosophers become organic intellectuals with genuine solidarity with them? And here, by the end of this Unit one should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of Dalit world-view;
 - to look into the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives;
 - to have glimpses into the deconstruction and reconstruction of Dalit agenda;
 - to know the importance of the responsibility of the Philosophers walking with Dalits;
 - to explore into the intricacies behind philosophizing on the Dalit struggles for integral emancipation.
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1.1 INTRODUCTION

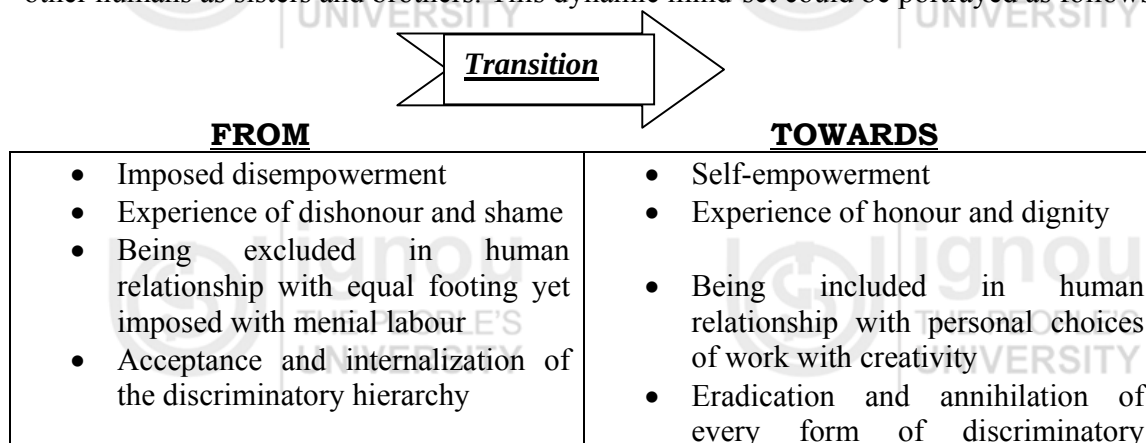
As long as the resources, public institutions, knowledge, assets remain undemocratic, the dominant groups, in any divided society, creates, sustains, and perpetuates an arbitrary hatred against the dominated groups. This has the advantage to the privileged groups to continue with their domination as a permanent feature. The Philosophers in India are not an exception to this. In this context, we realize that the Philosophers too are quite vulnerable when they face the emotionally charged expressions both from the caste-minded people as well as the caste-breaking Dalits. But the Philosophers of good will seeking to affirm the subaltern life can afford to take a credible step to evolve adequate strategies and programmes to walk with Dalits with their day to day struggles. They have to grapple with the fact that unless the nexus between the secular and religious institutions of society and casteism, and between the human mind and untouchability is broken, the prospects of constructing a new humanity on egalitarianism will become impossible.

1.2 DALIT WORLD-VIEW

The world-view or the life-world does not mean the stagnant cluster of ideas and concepts. It is a process of cognition and operative foundations of human subjectivity. The latent and active complexes of values and rules of knowing embedded in the collective and individual consciousness control the whole spectrum of perception, behaviour, decision and choices. Any human community in a given living context of nature and nurture could be predominantly nomadic, agrarian, or IT in life orientations. In the globalized context of the contemporary age, the life-world of human communities, including those of Dalits, seem to be a mix-up of nomadic, agrarian and IT components. The whole complex web of oral wisdom, written discourses, movie stories or television serials from the religions, cultures or literature of the native Dalit soil is already embedded in the depths of their collective consciousness along with the impact of their historical successes and failures.

Caste conflicts fragment the human society horizontally and human depths vertically. At the level of inner world-views of Dalits, some of the following aspects and manifestations of their conflict consciousness have to be philosophically explored into: assertive obedience, chaotic harmony, polytheistic monotheism, disorderly order, noisy contemplation, oral memory, revolting consensus, and restless composure. And hence to grapple with Dalit world-view with all its conflicting dimensions is a major challenge in philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. It could be undertaken through the critical reflection on the historical and down-to-earth process of dehumanization in the cultural, social and psychological milieu of Dalit life. Also the inherent inter-textuality operative in the Dalit world-view has to be identified in all its complexities. We realize that the perspectives of liberal and modernist values of solidarity, identification, oneness or liberation in general terms are too inadequate, when we are highly sensitized with openness towards the fabric of Dalit roots and resources.

The very Dalit existence with its struggles in history is passionately attuned to move its present wounded history towards a new possibility of building a new human community. The articulate and inarticulate agenda of this transition is from the state of imposed exclusion and humiliation to the possibility of conscious inclusion of others as co-humans with due human dignity with equal footing. In other words, Dalits are struggling to do away with the existing sad states of affairs while constructing a new moral order ensuring personal dignity to be celebrated with all other humans as sisters and brothers. This dynamic mind-set could be portrayed as follows:



• Denial of participation in decision-making everywhere • Being looked down upon as demerited beneficiaries of reservation • Deprived of land and other means required for decent life • Exclusion and humiliation as lesser humans with denial of human dignity and legitimate share of opportunities • Violent placement under the permanently stratified caste hierarchy with no possibility of upward or downward mobility • Mythological legitimization of the arbitrarily attributed status of the pure and the impure for the perpetuation of the privileges of the socio-cultural elite	hierarchy • Appropriation of participatory roles in every realm • Equal opportunities in every realm • Availability of the means needed for dignified life • Dignified inclusion as co-humans with due share of power and opportunities • Demolition of every trace of discriminatory hierarchy for ushering in an egalitarian ethos • Rational legitimization of the ethically achieved status by enabling the victims of casteism to humanise themselves even amidst conflicts
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These innate movements and inherent transitions could be construed as the springs of life flowing from the fertile soil of Dalit cultural location.

1.3 PHILOSOPHIZING FROM DALIT PERSPECTIVES

Philosophy engages itself in ideas, presuppositions, beliefs, concepts and contents of truth and the interpretations of them. Every attempt at doing philosophy has to begin with basic questions of problems of life and death. These are raised neither from the textual world of the tradition, nor from the rhetorical field of the Philosophers. They emerge from the particular human community, in our context from the community of Dalits, endeavouring to become a better one amidst many conflicts. That is why the process of philosophizing gets itself rooted in the on-going dialectical interaction between cognitive structures (cultural symbolism) and social structures (power relations). This fertile conversation is sought to generate new energies in transforming the present disorder into a new order in future.

This process of doing philosophy primarily addresses the question of transformation. It is the actual movement from the present state of affairs towards consciously creating new alternatives for bettering historical situations. This is at once a probe into the past, the query into the present, and the search into the future. This on-going exploration hovers over the visible and the invisible world, the empirical data and the truth seeking, concept and intuition. The transformation envisaged by the process of philosophizing is multi-dimensional- at once personal and communitarian, structural and collective, micro and macro. The ethical commitment for such transformation is the predominant feature of doing philosophy. This process of philosophizing

does not pretend to be evolving the final product of the contents of truth. Its multiple phases could be spelt out as follows:

- (1) Immersion, insertion, experience, praxis, reflected involvement or involved reflection
- (2) Analytical probe into the forces and sources of conflicts operative in the lives of people concerned (Dalits) affecting their cultural symbolic world and various power-structures
- (3) Meaning-generating activities through the on-going dialogical interactions between questions emerging from actual life situations and the life-promoting meaning-generating resources from various cultural soils
- (4) Alternative directions and orientations to be consciously traced by the people concerned (Dalits) as actors in the proximate and distant future

One need not assume that the process of philosophising traces the above four phases one after another in the same order. Each contains all the other dimensions in some degree or other. At every level, for sorting out the layers of consciousness, tracing the roots of the problems, identifying the meaning-generating potentials, and evolving the new paths of transformation, we need interdisciplinary collaboration with various social sciences.

By and large, the philosophical insights are articulated in a particular type of language understood only by the experts in the respective fields. Further, the technical language of elitist philosophical analysis too does not evoke much of appeal in the minds of the people (Dalits) on whose problems philosophical questions are raised. The alternative to this technical language is the symbolic dimension of popular culture. The need to explore the symbolism, myths, dreams, and visions of the ordinary people has to be emphasized. The operative world-views of the people concerned (Dalits) are to be identified in their ways of conceptualising realities and expressing them through proverbs, myths, rituals, performing arts. The world-views at work in the very language as both structure and performance definitely lead us into the foundations of the cultural world. Critical interpretation of the symbolic world may lead us to comprehend the cognitive structures and their functioning process towards production of various social effects.

The marginalisation of the Dalits could be perceived through the following patterns of practices:

- segregation of the living locations and burial grounds
- step motherly treatment meted out to them regarding their dignified participation in public events, social activities, community worship, or governing institutions
- denial of equal rights in marriage or burial ceremonies and car procession of festivals
- indifference and even opposition towards promotion of vocations to dignified services at the civil level and sacred premises of the worshipping places
- continuing the tradition of endogamy perpetuating the caste systems

By and large, these regular patterns of elbowing out Dalits from the mainline society is taken for granted as the habitual cultural praxis by the caste-minded people with their socio-economic powers operative in their respective locations. As the victims of the shameful practice of untouchability, the Dalits are subjected to lots of suffering as indicated below:

- The damage of human dignity with arbitrary attribution of permanent pollution as untouchables due to the practice of caste hierarchy.

- The contradiction between being wanted as menial executives and unwanted as people with equal footing.
- The inner conflicts between the personal desire for equal placement with others and the impersonal duty of being reduced to be lesser humans in the socio-political ladders.
- Conflicting expressions of the explicit consciousness (immediate agenda of survival) and the implicit consciousness (sustaining passion for collective human identity).
- When the achieved status is ridiculed and camouflaged by attributed inferior status.
- When multiple forms of day-to-day socio-psychological and politico-physiological violences are trivialized by routinization, naturalization or even legitimization by the media, bureaucracy or judiciary.
- The vicious cycle of behaviour due to depression or self-hatred resulting in fear of alienation and punishment.
- Ever carrying the heavy burden of initiating the painful process of reconciliation, at least for the short-term political alliances, with the anti-Dalit forces which are just above in the social pyramid of caste hierarchy.
- When Dalit ethical sensibilities are thrown overboard as eccentric claims for any regional, national or international discourse.

While scanning through all these sources, we realize that these sufferings are not inflicted by the Dalits upon themselves. And hence the classical ways of approaching the problem of evil (suffering) cannot be adequate while dealing with Dalit suffering.

Without attempting at a dialogue with the above-mentioned aspects of the Dalit world, there seems to be a general sense of fear psychosis operative in the minds of the caste-minded people. This might be expressed through the following ways: (1) indifference, (2) deferment, (3) transference, (4) co-option, (5) enticement, (6) coercion, (7) Self-defence, (8) pretension, (9) rationalization, (10) legitimization, (11) retribution, (12) proxy war, (13) Sloganeering solidarity. This fear may be fabricated due to the following explanations of arbitrary imagination: (1) Direct pollution, (2) Proximity with the hated object, (3) Possible role exchange in which the oppressed might eat into the present privileges of the oppressors, (4) Pre-empting the possible uprising of the oppressed with disproportionately vehement offensive, (5) Prevailing endogamy might give in to exogamy and thus a possible dismantling of the so-called orderly society. And consequently the Dalits are socially discriminated, religiously neglected, politically ignored, and economically pauperized.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the various aspects of the Dalit world-view?

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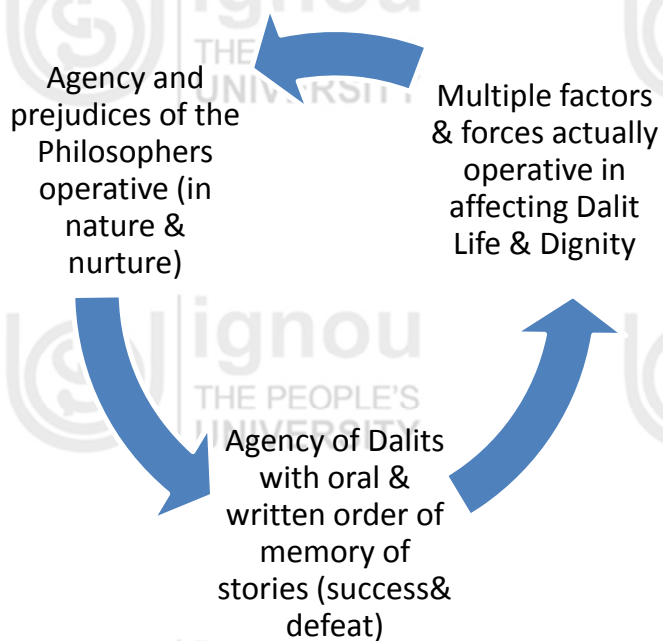
2) Spell out the phases of the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives.

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actual identity, and the fabric of the personality tempered both by nature and nurture, his/her ethical stand and commitment has to be adequately made explicit in the process of accompanying the Dalits. For anyone, who chooses to credibly accompany them, cannot have the luxury of supporting them from outside. Their own world-view has to be organically tempered by the ever-struggling and ever-exploratory world-view of Dalits. It is with this deep sense of genuine solidarity with them, the Philosophers are constantly challenged to play the role of compassionate midwife to Dalits who are undergoing the ongoing labor pain of delivering dreams of Dalit empowerment.

Besides the two poles of Dalit interpretation of the meaning systems (Dalits and the religio-cultural texts and textures), we need to take into account, the role and function of the third pole called *the enablers* of such hermeneutical dialogue. They could be the organic intellectuals (Philosophers) articulating the insights of interpretation with and on behalf of the Dalits. Every Philosopher claiming to be engaged in enabling the dialogue between the Dalits and the meaning systems could be a Dalit or non-Dalit by birth. But what matters is that these organic Philosophers, be it from the religious platforms or the secular academia, have to be brought under the serious scrutiny of hermeneutical responsibility. They have to be made accountable to the Dalit-world in its struggles to annihilate the virus of caste hierarchy. What could be the salient features of such accountability in the Dalit hermeneutics?

- There should be an on-going attempt on the part of the Philosophers (organic intellectuals) to identify and enter into the web of the inter-textual layers of Dalit consciousness. It has to be undertaken with genuine and growing proximity with the Dalits.
- An empathetic journey of solidarity into the Dalit world has to be undertaken by these enablers. It entails deep insights into Dalits native symbolic universe (religio-cultural resources).
- The enablers need to further dwell upon Dalit linguistic world with narrative patterns and poetic outbursts. The dynamics of their oral articulation and communication styles, historical perceptions through genealogies, myths and folklore is to be recognised. The animating dimensions of rituals and performing arts, traditional modes of encountering joys and sorrows, are to be grappled with.
- The complex process of Dalit identity-formation, both at the individual and collective levels, is to be perceptively located amidst imposed identities.
- An overall familiarity with the diverse ways of hermeneutical attempts from Dalit perspectives could help them avoid methodological dogmatism and doctrinal fundamentalism.
- Traversing through the intra-Dalit world and the intra-textual world of the religio-cultural resources does not suffice here. The inner world and the interior movements of the third pole, i.e., the organic Philosophers has to be correctly identified. Their mind-set, pre-understanding, and the texture of consciousness formed by their formal education, social location, economic placement and caste prejudices also play an important role in their attempts at hermeneutics.

- The attitude and outlook of the Philosophers towards the Dalits and the religio-cultural resources (say, the Vedas, Mahabharata, Quran, Dhammapada, Bible, Writings of Periyar or Ambedkar, Dharma Shastras), have to be openly manifested. Consciously chosen ideological sites and interpretative strategies are to be explicitly articulated.
- Care should be taken to ascertain the original agenda of such Philosophers to test their commitment to Dalit struggles.

No doubt, the subject(s) of Dalit interpretation of the religio-cultural resources is none other than the flesh-and blood person(s) from among the Dalits, and not primarily the Philosophers, even when they try to become organic intellectuals. At the most, they could play the role of the mid-wife empathetically enabling the 'Dalit delivery of new meanings' in dialogue with the religio-cultural resources.

1.5 DALIT PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

The Philosophers have to create a space for educating themselves to evolve new frame works for understanding the intricacies behind such conflicts with the following questions:

- What are the differences between the bruised ego of the caste-minded people and the bruised ego of the caste-negating Dalits?
- How to differentiate between the inflated ego with its insane desire for power and control over others and the deflated ego with its legitimate pursuit of becoming co-humans with others?
- What is the operative power discourse during conflictual exchanges between the caste-minded people and Dalits?
- In all these conflict situations from the struggling location of Dalits one has to ask this question: "How could one react in the way of *Ahimsa* prescribed by the leisurely class people, when one is reduced to be an object left to the whims of somebody else's ego, or lust for power?"
- Are the Philosophers sensitive enough in making their dealings and way of proceeding with Dalits transparent enough in this age of RTI (Right to Information Act-2006)?
- To whose pressure tactics do the Philosophers hasten to respond? And to whom they hesitate to respond with endless delay tactics?
- When Dalits act on misperception or deliberate choice what could be the ways of philosophizing? When the caste-minded people act on misperception or deliberate choice what could be the ways?
- Are the Philosophers well-equipped to discern the differences between the discourses on mass conversion and personal conversions to other religions as understood by the caste-negating Dalits and by the caste-fundamentalists?
- How are the condemnations against Dalit 'excesses' voiced by those habitually expressing their anti-Dalit denouncements are to be interpreted by the Philosophers?
- Against the on-going scourge of the untouchability, what are the concrete interventions by the organizers of and the participants in the grand philosophical conferences passing inspiring resolutions?

Dalit location is the consequent result of the conflict situation created by the following two factors:

1. Status Quoism (the arbitrary imposition and maintenance of caste hierarchy, and defiant refusal to demolish it.)
2. Demolition of Status Quo (the ethical need for annihilation of caste hierarchy and assertive building of human communities with egalitarianism)

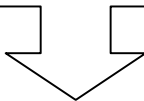
The world-view of status quoism is found among those beneficiaries enjoying the privileges reaped from caste hierarchy. Dalits on the other hand, seeking to wriggle themselves out of this oppressive system, have their mind-set and pre-understanding in terms of complete annihilation of it. This agenda is not mere subversion of converting the caste system upside down wherein the oppressed at present will turn out to be the oppressors in future and vice versa. Dalits, in the last analysis, do not demand the 'pound of flesh' from the caste people. Nor do they cry for the role exchange between the-oppressors-and-the-oppressed.

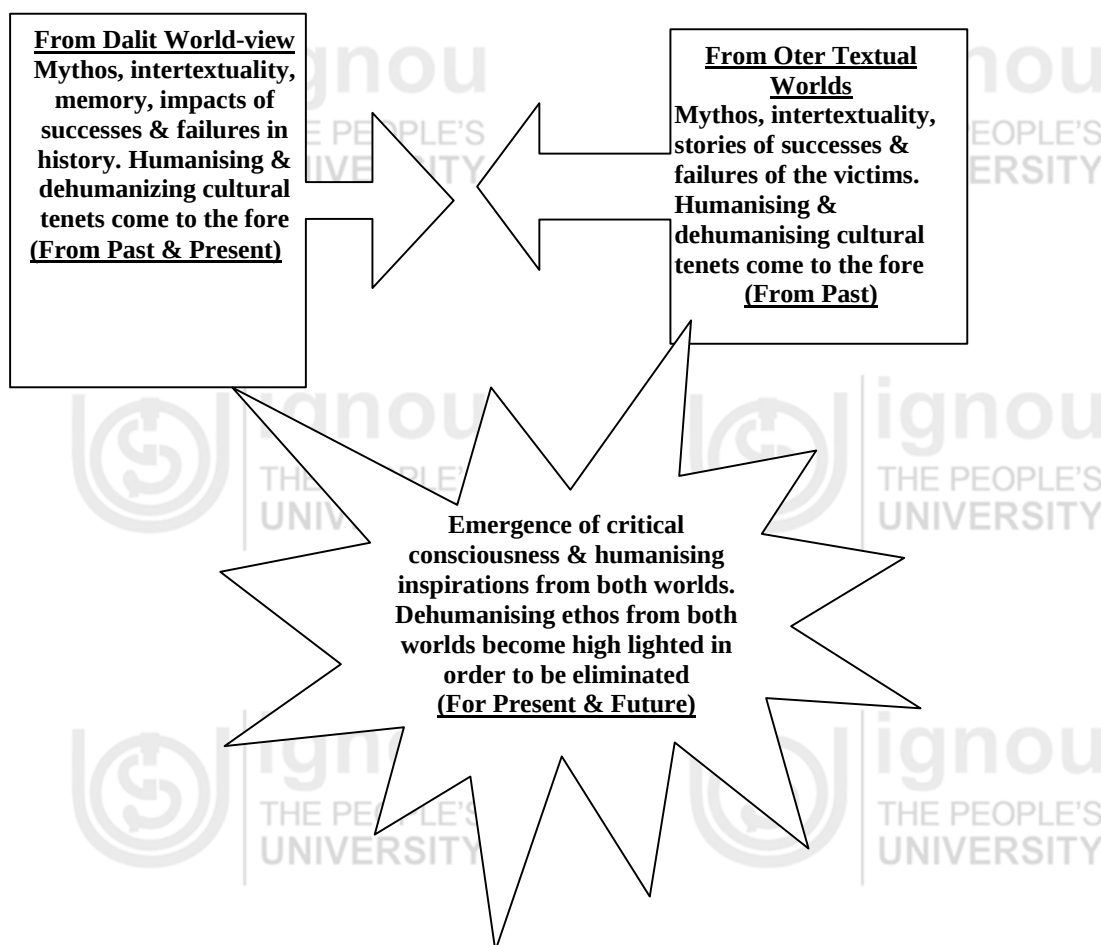
The existing Dalit discourses, ideologies, philosophies, theologies, strategies and programmes, by and large, seem to articulate the aspects of their deprivation (Dalits as Victims), or/and also of their assertion (Dalits as Subjects). Besides the labour from the Dalit manual power contributing to the welfare of the society, the passion for creating a casteless humanity is the unique Dalit agenda in building up the human community. Hence the existing Dalit discourses have to deepen their commitment and broaden the scope of their strategies to accomplish the desired result of integral Dalit emancipation. In other words, the Dalits themselves are challenged to extend their hands out of this Dalit-centredness to reach out to a broad-based Dalit discourse while deepening their commitment to their emancipation. What could be the role of Dalit solidarity with other communities of victims around them and across the globe? What are the practical implications of the role of Dalits as the community of community-builders?

Exploration into the new spaces for dialogue between Dalits and others (both at the intra and inter levels) is the need of the hour in constructing Dalit Philosophies. Hence the Philosophers need to trace the mythos, religio-cultural practices, ethical sensibilities, intertextuality, impact of the history of successes and failures of the Dalit communities in the past. This could help the present Dalit world-views to be articulately explicited. Similarly these aspects from the textual world of various religio-cultural resources are to be traced. Both of them are to be brought together for a meaningful hermeneutical dialogue.

It is through the prism of the present Dalit world-views in continuity with its past mythos, the ancient life-world portrayed in other textual worlds is encountered by the Dalits. In this process, the new possible world projected by rereading them is to be identified. That is to say that a future world is constructed through the present eyes in the light of the past world, both of the Dalits and other textual worlds.

**Two worlds in
dialogical
conversation creating
the meaning effect**





In the meaning effect thus created by the hermeneutical dialogue, the Philosophers could identify not only the humanizing inspirations but also the dehumanizing ethos from both the worlds. The life-promoting aspects could be appropriated and the life-negating aspects rejected from both the worlds. For instance, the strong sense of determination and historical consciousness of the prophetic voice of dissent to dehumanization and assent to rehumanization can be an effective antidote to the sense of determinism and magical consciousness prevailing in the Dalit world.

Some dimensions that need to find a place in the educative formation of the children, youth, and the people at large, both in the formal and non-formal education process could be spelt out as follows:

- Basic and advanced familiarity with Indian Constitution
- Basic Legal and Human Rights Education
- In-depth probe into native resources like Dhamma Pada, Grant Sahib, Ambedkar, Ramabai, Periyar, Ayyankali, Kabir Das, Iyothee Thass Pandithar, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Narayana Guru, Meenakshi Moon and others
- Dalit women's concerns and challenges and Dalit movements.
- Skill and capacity building training to handle conflict situation and to face the challenges of life and livelihood.

A genuine sense of Dalit solidarity seeks to work for unity and cooperation for the wellbeing, prosperity and the empowerment of Dalits. This could be done by the following 2 steps:

(1) Bringing together all the Dalits by building a shared consciousness of their identity, culture and history as well as to conscientize them to the future possibilities. (2) Gathering all the people of good will who recognize the plight of Dalits throughout history. People could never value feeling one with Dalits if they do not realize that the total emancipation of the whole of the humanity cannot be achieved without actualizing the total emancipation of the Dalits.

Attempts at creating Dalit Solidarity seeks to bring about unity not only among the Dalits who are kept divided but also unity between the Dalits and others. This process involves struggles to restore Dalits with their land and to work for their self-governance by affirming their power, freedom and dignity. The following strategies could affirm the gradual growth of the envisioned Dalit Solidarity:

- Conscientizing Dalits and others about the rich Dalit heritage (Dalit identity, Dalit history and Dalit culture)
- Building and furthering Dalit movements for struggle for emancipation
- Developing Dalit leadership
- Internationalizing Dalit issue

The unity of the Dalits cannot be achieved without underlining their common cause of emancipation from the oppression of the caste system. On the other hand, Dalit unity has to be worked out on the basis of affirming their common Dalit identity in relation to their history and culture. Developing Dalit leadership is essential requirement to build Dalit solidarity.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the salient features of the effective organic Philosophers working with Dalits?

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2) Explain the nature of Dalit location.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to dwell upon the complex nature of the Dalit world-view and the process of philosophizing from Dalit perspectives. Dalit roots and resources are attuned to move towards the dignified inclusion of all humans as co-humans with due share of power and opportunities without any trace of discriminatory hierarchy. The process of philosophizing from

Dalit perspectives have the following four phases: (i) Immersion, insertion, experience, praxis, reflected involvement or involved reflection, (ii) Analytical probe into the forces and sources of conflicts operative in the lives of people concerned (Dalits) affecting their cultural symbolic world and various power-structures, (iii) Meaning-generating activities through the on-going dialogical interactions between questions emerging from actual life situations and the life-promoting meaning-generating resources from various cultural soils, and (iv) Alternative directions and orientations to be consciously traced by the people concerned (Dalits) as actors in the proximate and distant future.

1.7 KEY WORDS

Dalit world-view: The whole complex web of oral wisdom, written discourses, movie stories or television serials from the religions, cultures and literature of the native Dalit soil is already embedded in the depths of their collective consciousness along with the impact of their historical successes and failures. The latent and active complexes of values and rules of knowing embedded in the collective and individual consciousness control the whole spectrum of perception, behaviour, decision and choices.

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UNIT 2 HUMAN VALUES AND MORAL OUTLOOK OF THE DALITS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to understand the Human Values and moral outlook of Dalits which are very much buried and unknown.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Dalit is the term which embraces all the oppressed who want to change oppressive situations. This section deals with people who suffer with the practices of untouchability. Every community has its own values and moral outlook. Every member of the community is expected to bear these values and moral outlook and abide by them. The values and outlook are also used to distinguish one community from the other. In our Indian context, caste identity dominates, and the other identities such as religion, language, class and territory play their own crucial role.

The values and the moral outlook of any caste is determined by the dominant groups and sections. The beneficiaries are normally those who determine these values and moral outlook. There will be losers or suffers because of these values and outlook. In a patriarchal society, men are the real beneficiaries and women are the victims. Similarly in a caste society, the upper and Dominant castes are the beneficiaries and the Dalits the victims. The victims have the tendency to break the norms and values and moral outlook. In the Indian caste context, Dalits are the real critics of the caste system and have developed and practicing their own values and moral outlook. However we cannot deny the fact their certain oppressive values of the upper castes are internalized by Dalits due to their close proximity or association.

2.2 CELEBRATING LIFE

Celebrating life is an ending war with death and suicide. Dalits have regard for life. They celebrate life. A pregnant mother is given care and receives more attention in Dalit culture. Like wise, child birth is welcomed and celebrated. A girl child is not discriminated. In fact the puberty is celebrated as the blessing for the family and relatives. There is no permanent or compulsory widow hood in Dalit culture. Dalit women are free to remarry. Dalit Culture affirms strongly the life of the human. It is therefore food and work that are central in dalit culture. Murders and suicides are less among Dalits. Dalits are celebrating life. Their celebrations are mostly communitarian in nature. Childbirth, puberty, marriage or annual deity worship, everything are celebrated by the village along with the family. Dalits both men and women dance in the funeral procession as a symbol of celebrating and honouring the deceased. They are able to celebrate life because the pains and sorrows of the individual is shared by many. They listen, respond and help the person to get over from the loss, and disappointment.

2.3 GOD AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between God and Human is an expression of comradeship in the spiritual Journey for Transformation in Dalit philosophy of life. In Dalit religion the Deities are both male and female. Most of the deities were once human either slain by the upper castes for transgressing the caste norms or lived for the welfare of the Dalit community. For example Madurai Veeran in South Tamilnadu was killed because of his marriage with the upper caste woman. It is the practice in Dalit culture that to elevate human to Godly status when their lives are worth to do so. In this situation we also need to understand that Dalits and their Deities are interdependent. Dalits believe that their Deities are protecting their life from oppression and bless their labour and the nature for sustenance. They do not expect their deity to do things in unnatural or super natural ways. For example in the conversation with the Dalit elders in a village, said it is impossible for God to stop the rain. Their understanding is that, God should not be understood as super power Hero, rather one who is in harmony with the nature. A story in Karnataka says that, the God in the forest is refusing to have roof on top, in solidarity with the homeless people who are worshipping him. In many villages the Dalit deities are humiliated and treated as untouchable by the upper castes. In few villages Dalits are fighting against the upper caste to redeem the Deities who are seized by them. Dalit and their Deities are journeying together, undergoing similar experiences in order to transform the society, to become a just, loving and compassionate.

2.4 SPRINGS FOR COMMUNAL HARMONY

Forgiving within the family may occur among the poor of few other backward castes too. But forgiving the oppressor seldom takes place among non-Dalits. We can even say that it is an exclusive characteristic of Dalits. Maruthappan, a Dalit, is a social worker. He was placed in his own village as a health worker, about twenty years back. Like any other village, untouchability was very much in practice here and Dalits tended never to violate it. When the matter was brought to the notice of Maruthappan's co-workers, they agitated and challenged the whole village to give up the practice. They also challenged Maruthappan to violate the norms of the non-Dalits. Maruthappan's wife Alageswari took the challenge and drew water from the water pipe meant for non-Dalits. The non-Dalits were shocked and as a result a social boycott was

imposed on Maruthappan's family. Maruthappan was very upset when even the village youth who were very friendly with him also took part in the boycott.

One evening as Maruthappan was approaching his village, he found the son of the village president, who was responsible for the imposition of the social boycott, sitting on the bound of the water tank, looking pensive. At first Maruthappan wanted to ignore him, but later he explained to him about the quarrel which he had with his father and his plan to move out of the village. Maruthappan discouraged the youth's plan and promised him that he would convince his father. He took him to his humble dwelling, which is nothing but a small hut. Maruthappan could have pressurized the youth further, to foster and promote permanent estrangement and hostility towards his father. But love, compassion and the spirit of forgiveness prevailed and motivated Maruthappan to impart only good to the oppressor. In this story we find that the spirit of freedom and forgiveness go hand in hand.

2.5 DALIT POWER OF FORGIVING

Dalits forgiving the non – Dalits is it not an expression of inability and powerlessness? This is true of few cases, but one cannot generalize. In many cases, Dalits use forgiveness as power to weaken the oppressive non-Dalits. Molayakavundanur is a village in Thirumalai Mannar District of Tamil Nadu where ten non-Dalit and forty Dalit families live. Though the non-Dalits from the minority, they did not desist from practicing untouchability towards Dalits. The problem arose when the non-Dalits objected to a Government plan to provide a water tap connection to Dalits. Dalits took the matter to the police under the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCRA). Normally the PCR sections are headed by non - Dalit officers who never take such cases seriously, except to demand some money from the accused. Quite surprisingly, in this case, the complaint was taken seriously and the non – Dalits were exposed to real trouble. When the non-Dalits realized the strength of the case against them, they pleaded with the Dalit leaders to withdraw the complaint. The Dalits gathered, discussed the matter and decided to withdraw the petition on the grounds that since they were nearing the completion of a forty day fast as a vow made to their God and would soon be going the temple, forgiveness therefore became obligatory.

2.6 FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE

Why are Dalit always ready to reconcile, even after their most difficult experiences with non-Dalits? Is it because of their dependency on non-Dalits for their life and livelihood? It is true that the Dalit's life and livelihood is very much dependent on non-Dalits. But this is not taken retaliation as their principle and weapons as their language. They are still hoping for the conversion of the wolves, for which they pay a heavy price. Moreover, Dalits long for the human relationship the non – Dalits deny them and they wouldn't like to miss the opportunity in achieving this.

Author very important reason for Dalit forgiveness is their repentant nature. Dalits are basically a repentant community. They would readily come forward to repent for any small act which had

hurt or caused damage to others. Unlike non-Dalits, Dalits do not worship daily or go to temple very week with offerings of coconuts, flowers and money. Dalit Gods or goddesses' festivals take place once a year, that too after the peace and reconciliation process within the Dalit community. During the festival the whole Dalit community gathers before the Deity and confess their sins in simple language 'Lord forgive our sin'. They do not use any ornamental words or set liturgy for confession. The sacrificial goat has to nod its head as a sign of the deity's acceptance. Until then, there will not be any celebration. Repentance and seeking the gods or goddesses' forgiveness is an important feature in Dalit festivals. Dalits maintain the nature of repentance and forgiveness in their daily life too. But non-Dalits on the other hand find it difficult to repent and forgive. They would either try to justify themselves or make the victim forget by receiving some compensation, or force victims to ignore the problem. They consider it humiliating to apologies to Dalits.

2.7 NON VIOLENCE: RULE OF LIFE

Dalit face, Murder, rape and all forms of violence for Past 1500 years in India became of untouchability. There is no racial or occupational reasons for the origin of untouchability. One has to keep in mind that the origin of untouchability is independent from that of caste. It originated about 4 CE. Dr.Ambedkar provides two main reasons for the origination of untouchability they are, as the untouchables were Buddhists who did not accept the Brahmin supremacy. Therefore one of the main roots of untouchability lied in the hatred and contempt, which Brahmin created against those who were Buddhists. The second reason he gives is that the untouchables who were the Broken men continued the habit of beef eating. Is there any other existing human community which suffers with such disability for a sustained period of one thousand six hundred years? In that are Dalits submissive? No, certainly Not. Dalits are protesting against the evil practices of untouchability. They are basically a non-violent group and have kept non-violence as the rule of life. Dalit continue to fight against untouchability using non-Violence means. It is unfortunate threat to the Indian society and the west of the world have fielded to acknowledge their power of non-violence. Using non-violent means Dalits have safeguarded the lives of the non-Dalits, but they are paying a heavy price for loading non-violence as a rule of life.

2.8 JUSTICE, LOVE AND COMPASSION

Justice, love and compassion are the expression of mutual challenge and support. Justice love and compassion are inseparable in Dalit culture. A true dalit will not support a corrupted Dalit leader or person because he belongs to his caste. This type of leaders would face opposition mainly from Dalits. Justice question will always arise in the contact of oppression and exploitation within and without. Like wise, love and compassion are very much part or Dalit culture. When justice love and compassion are in conflict with each other Dalit will give select compassion. There are stories in every Dalit hamlet where they have kept compassion in the place of justice.

2.9 COMMUNICATION OF THE EX-COMMUNICATES

It is a protest to the purity-pollution practices. The concept of purity-pollution controls the thinking and behavior of non-dalits. They always suffer with the fear of pollution and thereby lay many restrictions for themselves to come into contact with others and food. Their women at home are secluded during the periods of menstruation, puberty childbirth etc. Dalits do not have the fear of pollution and therefore associate freely with all those who encounter. Dr. Ambedkar in his book 'who are the untouchables' where they have come from, defines untouchables as broken men. He states that they were the constitution of the defeated tribes, and the run away tribes. It has to be noted that those who are living outside the village are not homogenous people. They are the mixture of many tribes and cultures. This gives them the courage and motivation to accept any stranger without any fear. They also receive happily those who are excommunicated by the caste people for so many reasons; such as inter-caste marriage. Their houses of dalits are very small and they do not permit them to practice purity-pollution rules within and without. Dalits love human free association, relationship which includes communality, marriage.

2.10 VALUE OF DRESSING

The Dalits have developed a culture of cultivating the aesthetic value of multiple colours in dresses, as the seven-colour rainbow is highly respected among them. Loving the nature and its colour becomes a value. Unfortunately, the Hindu Brahmanism worked out the dress code and used it as an oppressive instrument against the people in constructing a subtle and suppressive aesthetic value around the dress code, in a way people wear and the colours of the dress they wear. This false philosophy constructed around clothes was used as a suppressive method to humiliate the productive masses, with hegemonic and subordinating structures on colour of dresses and method of wearing them. The Hindu God is constructed to love a particular colour, saffron, and to wear in a particular way. The *sanyasis* are said to be lovers of that colour. A religion that prescribes one particular colour destroys the aesthetic culture of people. Hindu Brahmanism constructed its philosophy and spirituality around the colour of clothes. The colours and modes of dressing are constructed with hegemonic and subordinating motives. The contemporary phenomena of politics of colour gets reflected in the brutalizing saffron colour as a symbolic of the Hindutva ideology validates the caste hierarchy. In contrast to dehumanizing nature of the food culture and dress code of Brahmanism, Dalit communities dwell in the realm of science of wearing clothes and the aesthetic values of beauty. (Ilaiah 2009, 73-74)

Even in the construction of Hindu *sanyasi* culture, a hegemonic status is kept up. From the Dalit perspective, a *sanyasi* is one who does not believe in washing clothes and cutting hair. The so-called spiritual bath of the Brahmanism does not talk of cleaning the body. A Telugu proverb states, *Brahman snanam vadalani banka*, the Brahman mode of bath is not meant to clean off the dirt on the body, but is meant to only satisfy the spiritual ego. The Brahman bath is that which lasts only for few minutes as a Brahmin does not take bath for the sake of his own health. Pouring water on one's body is by the belief that very wetting of his body satisfies God. In contrast, Dalit mode of washing the clothes is for satisfying both the temporal needs of health and economy and the spiritual needs of absolute cleanliness (Ilaiah 2009, 74-75)

2.11 LABOUR AS FOUNDATION OF LIVING

Besides the labour from the Dalit manual power contributing to the welfare of the society, the passion for creating a casteless humanity is the unique Dalit agenda in building up the community. Hence the Dalits, through their very struggles are the community-building community. And the existing Dalit discourses have to deepen their commitment and broaden the scope of their strategies to accomplish the desired result of integral Dalit emancipation. In other words, the Dalits themselves are challenged to extend their hands out of this Dalit-centredness to reach out to a broad-based Dalit discourse while deepening their commitment to their emancipation.

For anyone, who chooses to accompany the Dalits, cannot have the luxury of supporting them from outside. Their own pre-understanding has to be organically tempered by the ever-struggling and ever-exploratory preunderstanding of Dalits. It is with this deep sense of genuine solidarity with them, they are constantly challenged to play the role of compassionate midwife to Dalits who are undergoing the ongoing labor pain of delivering dreams of Dalit empowerment.

Possibility of creating Dalit Solidarity to create a new order of humanity built on the foundation of egalitarian values. Every brand of discriminatory exclusion and inequitable hierarchy is sought to be demolished by Dalit sensibilities.

2.12 DALIT AESTHETIC CULTURE

In the Dalit social living, women have played a leading role in the construction of a society's aesthetic culture. All the patriarchies have suppressed the role of women, but Dalit have upheld their values. From the decoration of household, physical beauty of the children along with their well-being, to their mental and physical growth, activities of women are evident. In the process of washing clothes, especially of washing of all clothes of the entire village, there is a cultural and aesthetic activity more than mere economic activity. Neatness and cleanliness not only have health value, but also have an aesthetic value. The *Dhobis* have made individual beauty as well as social beauty their objective. The collective beauty of the village takes shape only when the whole village is clean in terms of clothes that the people wear. The *Dhobis* have constructed an aesthetic consciousness among the village as it is evident in a Telugu proverb: "A village that does not have a *Chakalis* [washer community] is a village of ugliness." (Ilaiyah 2009, 75)

2.13 LET US SUM UP

Human values and moral outlook of dalits is liberating in nature. It gives importance for human freedom, equality and community. It is therefore rules and rituals do not have control over their thinking and action. They are basically rebels therefore. Violation especially against unjust orders is inherent in them. They also encourage and extend solidarity to those who struggle against injustice. Dalit struggles are mostly non violent.

2.14 KEY WORDS

Forgiveness , Repentance , Love , Justice , compassion , Non violence , Equality and community.

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UNIT 3 DALIT AESTHETIC OUTLOOK

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Along with significant aspects of general and Indian aesthetic theory, the unit intends to present a more detailed outline of the nature and contribution of the art, music, cultural forms of Dalit tradition. Most part of the unit is a summarized idea of Kancha Ilaiah from his *Post-Hindu India*. We acknowledge greatly the contribution of this great analyst and thinker in the contemporary period to have unearthed and articulated values and world-view of the Dalits.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics as a science of arts is a distinct branch of philosophy. In Indian Dalit context it is more than mere the art-appreciation and art-experience. In its etymological meaning, the term 'Aesthetics' in Greek, means literally 'sense-perception.' From its initial meaning of science of sensitive cognition in the field of Arts, Aesthetics came to be recognized as 'philosophy of art. In the Indian context, it generally refers to the art-appreciation and art-experience of art forms. Aesthetics is thus understood as an appreciation of the arts. Generally, 'art' is defined as the use of the imagination to express ideas or feelings. Fine Art is the forms of art, painting, drawing, architecture, music, poetry and sculpture that are created to be beautiful rather than useful. Aesthetics is the philosophy dealing with the understanding the existence of beautiful things and human response to beauty. The issues arising out of artistic activities and human reaction to them and the intellectual activities connected with them are dealt in Aesthetics. The emphasis is on the notion of beauty.

3.2 AESTHETIC RICHNESS OF DALIT TRADITION

Aesthetic richness of Dalit tradition is expressed in Dalit art forms which are indigenous dance, poetic and drama forms. Combination of many art forms such as poetry, music, dance, painting and sculpture, instrument-making, pottery are founding the Dalit way of life. Dalit culture is expressed itself through art forms. All the forms of the fine arts are present in Dalit life. Aesthetical study of an indigenous art form of Dalits is enriching and challenging. Indian Aesthetics is generally confined to norms of philosophical aesthetics as presented and handed down by brahmanical tradition in both oral and written forms. Aesthetics in philosophy is the study of the feelings, concepts and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts. Aesthetics is concerned with questions such as what is a work of art, work of art successful, art be a vehicle of truth, art work expressing the feelings of the artist, communicating feelings, arousing feelings, purging or symbolising feelings. Every art form reflects the society in which it is produced. The artists share the beliefs and attitudes of his fellow people and exploits and reproduces the themes and forms that he finds current. (Varghese 2008)

Dalit aesthetics is the culture of celebration. It expresses creativity, aesthetic richness in artefacts, and brings in harmony in music. They are expressed in the drum, illumination with light, burning crackers, appealing colour in costumes, all-out drink, imitating heroes / heroines, loud conversation, dancing in total abandon even during the funeral processions. There is a spirit of 'here and now,' with rootedness, immediacy, down-to-earth realism in Dalit aesthetics. They are the fruit of frequent physical association with sweat, blood, mud, seeds, sprouts and plants.

3.3 DALIT EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION OF BEAUTY

In Aesthetics, the artwork becomes a vehicle of beauty. The response towards the artwork from human beings form another aspect. In human response to any art work the artist who acquires the beauty and conveys it through his own expressions. There are those who observe those expressions and enjoy them. In understanding aesthetics it is usually said that Art or Fine Art is to do with things that are created to be beautiful rather than useful. There is it is theorized that aesthetics is more interested in the existence of beautiful things and the human response towards this beauty, rather than usefulness of the art form. The usefulness of art is least considered, as it is said, in aesthetical discourse. In Dalit aesthetic outlook it may be deeper than the normal understanding. What is beautiful is what is useful. All useful things in human life are beautiful. Usefulness of things is not separated from life as such. Life is beauty and full of beautiful things that are useful for living. (Varghese 2008)

3.4 COMMUNITARIAN AESTHETICS

Looking at the aesthetics of the Dalits may be viewed as the anthropologists' interest in inferring much about social structure, history and values of the societies and cultures. Classification of art forms may reflect a classification of societies. (Sparshott 1963). In Dalit aesthetics the artists are communitarian. They express their own understanding of Beauty conveyed through community art works. Those who enjoy the art work are also the community. The enduring art-product is

occasional, with its own date and place, when it is produced by an individual. The art-product of a community and the aesthetic object is beyond time and space. Once the art-product expresses the experiences of a particular society, through the proper understanding and appreciation of that art-forms any spectator can experience the same feelings of the society. Dalit art-forms enable one enters into the experiences of others and to have more intense and more fully rounded out experiences of one's own. Dalit aesthetics is communitarian. Expression of the community in the art-forms is evident. Through aesthetical study of the analysis of a particular art-form, one is able to reach the society that produced and to philosophise the feelings and experiences of that particular society. Spector-performer dichotomy is very thin in Dalit aesthetics.

3.5 SPIRITUALITY AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Recent Dalit history shows a tremendous change in their perception of themselves, the world and the dominant caste people. Today they make greater strides in every aspect of life with a very loud and clear assertive tone. By and large, the people elevating themselves to the upper echelons of the discriminatory caste hierarchy, tend to resist any integration of oral stories or written traditions from various cultures, religions, or literature of other people into their belief systems. These mild and articulate forms of resistance might be along the lines of their obsession with tall truth-claims or refusal to give up their powers and privileges of the high-caste leisured class. Dalit aesthetics has not risen out of leisure, but of labour and way of living. The native religio-cultural resources, belief systems, stories, traditions and rituals are quite often well integrated and incorporated those of the organised religions with written scriptures, creedal formulae, or cultic practices. In other words, the great traditions from various origins are quite naturally inter-textualized with the little traditions of the Dalit soil. But at the same time, the textual world of the so-called high caste people cannot claim primacy, monopoly or supremacy over the Dalits in generating meaningfulness for their life of struggle for establishing a caste-free humanity.

From the written sources of Indian aesthetics usually dominated by Brahmanical ideology, poetry, drama and music are identified as three art forms enhancing the study of art-experience elevating from the physical plane to a spiritual one, calling it as *rasa*-experience. The development of literature in Indian Aesthetics written tradition, is centred on *Natya-sastra* of Bharata. It has the description of characteristics of poetical works, *kavyalakshanam*, different types of dramas, *natakas* and music, *dhruvas*. Bharata gives the famous definition of *Rasa* in the aphoristic (*sutra*) form, referred to by the Aestheticians as '*Rasa-Sutra*' "*vibhava-anubhava-vyabhichari bhava-samyogaat-rasa nishpattihi* – The *rasa* is established by the combination of the determinants, *vibhava*, consequents, *anubhava*, and transitory emotions, *vyabhichari bhava*," There are commentaries to this treatise and the available one is that of Abhinavagupta. (Kindly, refer the unit on Indian Aesthetics also for further details on the above.)

Theory of *rasa* is the quality which arises out of both the art work and the response of the spectator. The art work is the expression of internal beauty of the Absolute and on the part of the audience it leads to ecstasy, *ananda*. *Rasa* becomes identical with the infinite, and the goal of the aesthetic experience becomes being 'one with' (Varghese 2008)

Sometimes this is called as ‘meta-aesthetics’ that is the transcendental nature from the physical plane to a spiritual plane through the art-work. Abhinavagupta speaks of siva as the universal self with nature of luminosity, consciousness and bliss. The universal energy, *sakti* is inseparable from Siva. Since the bliss nature of self is concealed due to impurities like ego, the art form becomes instrumental in removing the obstacles and bliss of the self gets manifested.

Dalit thinker Narayana Guru, although influenced by Vedantic ideology, present aesthetic theory that the sense of beauty enjoyed is one *Atma* or self, that manifests as the object, instrument and the enjoyer. He terms the subjective enjoyer as ‘*ahanta*’ and all the objective enjoyables as ‘*idanta*’. In the moment of enjoyment, he says, there is forgetting of the subjective and the objective conditioning leading to oneness of the self. It is a mysterious way of the self and is the relative process of God and an artwork. He talks about the horizontal kind of beauty-experience, that is, the experience of beauty is an enjoyer-enjoying and enjoyable. He considers that in both the beautiful and the ugly, the enlightenment is nothing but the unfolding of one *ananda-atma*. For him, the entire universe of enjoyment of Śiva is comparable to an epic conceived by a poetic genius. He speaks of both ecstasy and mystery in nature that reflects in art-works. (Kindly, refer the unit on Indian Aesthetics also for further details on the above.)

3.6 ART OF LEATHER-MAKING

Although the Hindu socio-cultural myth around leather being considered unclean and anti-divine material, in Dalits’ life, leather economy is totally different. Processing of leather was central to human existence and development. Culture and art forms are grown around a synthesis of agrarian production and village-centric production. In the act of peeling off of the skin from the carcass and converting it into leather there is techno-economic, proto-scientific process and creative philosophy. The procedure for the transformation of skin into leather and of leather into a commodity needed a mind that cuts through the myth of leather being impure. It is achieved over thousands of years in the community with mind-boggling experimentation with animal bodies and methods of peeling the skin off the bodies. They kept experimenting, proving and disproving until a common theoretical formula could emerge. Verifiability in this experimentation is opposed to the ritual mode of brahmanical spiritualism. The efficacy of ingredients like salt, bark, lime is established in turning the wet skin into sustainable leather. People used their memory to transmit the formula to future generation verbally, as oral tradition.

The leather bags, buckets and ropes, which were the primary requirements for the farmers are the products of this knowledge system. Peeling the skin without making holes in it from the dead body of the cattle involves certain skills like cultivation of hand and knife usage skills in a highly advanced way. The art is taught not by merely theoretical but practical method of training and being handed down from generation to generation. The scientific role of salt in keeping the wet skin from rotting was a great discovery in tanning. The process of salting, dipping in *tangedu* water, soaking in lime and washing is the normal way of treating skin to change into leather. The odd odour and release of pollutants generated during the process of ‘leatherization’ have a purpose of making a commodity for human welfare, as found in any modern technological production. Unfortunately, Brahmanism labelled it untouchable and socially isolated.

Nevertheless, ironically made use of leather products for musical instruments and developed aesthetic theories.

The use of hands and wooden stick to separate skin from the body without tearing the skin are done skilfully before knives were commonly used. The development of instruments to make leather into agrarian usable commodities like leather ropes, bags, and *chappals* and shoes and finally musical instruments show the great interaction among different professionals like farmers, Dalits, carpenters, iron smiths. The shaping of leather instruments was a process of creating, re-energizing and developing the human essence. It is a transcendental experience of giving shape and birth to a new shape. The whole art of leather work is creating a new thing from the body of a dead animal. In the art of *chappal* and shoe making, there involves a careful study of the foot and the toe. (Ilaiyah 2009, 31-42).

3.7 INDIAN MUSIC AND DANCE: DALIT CONTRIBUTION

From the Dalit perspective, language, song, music and art were not developed for leisure. It is contrary to the popular notion injected by Brahmanism. Music and art are organic expressions of the process of labour and production. Dalit philosophy is that work and song, *pani* and *pattu*, are part of life. Song and dance became a part of human existence. They are meant to lighten the burden of work and to re-energize people so that they could get back to creative and productive work once again. They are cultural instruments emerged in the productive communities and are part of organic process of expression of human productivity and creativity. A production process is not a social process, but a creative process, as it needs to discover and rediscover the instruments of production and the instruments to sharpen human skills and sensibilities in human interaction with nature. (Ilaiyah 2009, 42-43)

Dappu or *parai* (drum), is entirely made of leather and wood. A strip of wood is bent to form a ring, with a leather rope that holds both ends together. Holes are made in the wooden ring asnd a highly processed piece of leather is stitched onto one side. As the leather dries, it becomes taut and produces a musical sound at the slightest touch. The playing of the instrument is an artistic process as it is slung over the shoulder with a leather rope and with a very thin stick in the left hand and a big stick in the right, beaten in a rhythmic manner. The playing of the *dappu* is a collective process. The *dappu* produces a melodious sound that spreads across the vast area, making the social atmosphere very sacred and sensitized. The village environment in the company of green crops, mild breeze and bid singing, the music of the *dappu* produces a social collectiveness. It is used as an instrument of public announcements, *dandora*, and as a tool of mass communication, especially of festivities or death of someone in the village. It calls for social participation in the individual life events.

By its music the community becomes alert and brought to its cultural orgasm. It is an instrument producing music for the excitement, pleasure and relaxation of all communities. It is at the heart of any social event, weddings, in house warming functions, in festivities of birth and lamentations of death. *Dappu* becomes a social mobilizer, an instiller of the energy lost in the routine work of production and reproduction, relieving people of their physical fatigue and mental stress. It serves an enormous social purpose. In funeral processions, it reminds the

mourners of the cyclical process of life. After the mourning the dead and pondering over the futility of life, all return back to life involving in production and procreation in the face of inevitability of death. The *dappu* music reminds people that the feeling of *vairagya*, detachment from everyday life and renunciation, is not to last long. Everyone is to come back to life as production and procreation are fundamental and necessary part of life. The philosophical implication of *dappu* music is that it brings people back from the depths of despair and restores to everydayness of life, without minimizing loss of life, reality of death and sorrow. (Ilaiyah 2009, 44-45)

3.8 DIVINE SYMBOLISM AND THE DRUM

In drum, *dappu* or *parai*, there is a new ground of conceptual reimagining the relationship between Dalit religion and society. It is a Dalit discourse proclaiming the factuality and fecundity of Dalit socio-historical reality. In Tamil Nadu, A Dalit community is called as *pariyars*, as name derived from the instrument they have, *parai*, and whose occupation was drum-beating. The drum is their unique creative and constructive text of resistive and emancipatory religious discourse. The sound of the drum is a fitting counter image to the caste Hindu conception of word in a historical setting in which the *paraiyars* were severed from the sacred word. Secondly *parai* sound represents the functional power of Divine, an agent of Divine power, which resists the co-optive tendencies of dominant caste Hindus and to empower the collective subjectivity of the subaltern community. Using it as a religious symbol they claim that they are the indigenous people of South India. It is symbolically expressed through the drum. It is retained as memories of the ancient heritage, culture and religion of the *paraiyar*. (Sathianathan Clarke 1995)

The sound of the *dappu*, is used to sustain the social spirit of all. The sound is considered pure and used for divine and spiritual purposes by all, even by Brahmanical castes too. The Communist school of thought deployed the *dappu* for political propaganda and cultural movements and is very important to bring about a change in the social value of the maker and the player of *dappu*. There is a grand cultural narrative in the history of the *dappu*. The art historians of India, dominated with Brahmanical backgrounds, missed out on that grand narrative. (Ilaiyah 2009, 46)

The drum is related to the mediation of Divine power, which is the form of wisdom that is prior and complementary to the spoken and written sacred word. It symbolizes the centripetal dimension of orality in a dominantly literary-based context. Drum as it gathers together the strivings of subaltern communities, as an organizing symbol, represents the various features of the mode of thought and representation of morality. Drum conjoins both material and spiritual aspects of the mediation of Divine Blessedness. Religious symbol of drum provides an experiential making and sounding of the Divine. More than as an organizing symbol it is a religious symbol. The drum as medium of Divine human communication invokes, contains and dispenses divine power to society. The drum is an instrument of linking the subalternity of communities for resistive and emancipatory communal affirmation that exemplifies the solidarity of the human and divine in their resistance of human and demonic forces. The drum is a symbol of manifesting and managing corporate suffering. (Sathianathan Clarke 1995)

3.9 DALIT SONGS AND DANCES

In expressing beauty, Dalits are far more better than others in using the human body as the medium of communication. In dance it is very expressive.

Playing the musical instrument, singing and dancing are not an individual activity among the Dalits. Everyone right from a child to old persons knows how to play the instrument. The sound of the drum itself makes everyone to singing and dancing. Dalits allowed subsequent social intercourse to take place in dancing and singing. They have sustained and developed the process of humans entering into social intercourse with spiritual sanctity and social interaction. Dalits combine several skills and arts with them in dancing and playing the *dappu*. Many of the musical instruments of India used by many communities, have their roots in Dalit leather technology and designing skills. The *dolu* and *jaggu* the Yadavas use have a kinship with the *dappu*. Art, music and culture deriving from the Hindu worldview center on love, lust and violence, and images that are involved in such processes. The brahmanical instruments are played to express these emotions do not create egalitarian cultures but is based on individual-centred pleasures. In Dalit aesthetics there is a scope for liberation and *dappu* music and song have a communitarian appeal. In the present context of emancipation and identity formation of the Dalits, the *dappu* has become a powerful symbol for decasteization and egalitarian values. The social mobilizational ability of the *dappu*, is to be recognised as it still commands the consciousness of the Indian villages. In the cultural realm Dalit singing and dancing along with their indigenous musical instruments play a key role in challenging the hegemonical forces and play an important role in the socio-cultural and ideological struggle for independence. The *veena* and *murali*, were projected as cultural instruments of inspiration and national cultural symbols by powerful cultures. The Dalit aesthetics expressed through *dappu*, singing and dancing have a tremendous potential to rebuild the scientific spirit of the nation. (Ilaiah 2009, 47-48).

3.10 DALIT SKILL OF WEAVING

Dalit skill of weaving is a great discovery of making the method of weaving cloth. They are the earliest producers of cloth although the cloth production went through several stages in India. In the beginning, jute cloth was produced then the cotton cloth and finally silk was woven. The knowledge of weaving all three types of clothes and building up the relevant technologies for their production was developed by the Dalits. The brahmanical knowledge system refused to recognize cloth production as a significant skill. Dalit aesthetics recognizes and brings out this great knowledge system and the skills involved in it. Producing cloth is not merely at the level of consumption. Clothes in Dalit aesthetics are seen as necessary to human existence and well being, which is just contrary to semi-naked aesthetics of brahmanical gods and *sannyasis*. (Ilaiah 2009, 62-63)

3.11 DALIT UNDERSTANDING OF BODY

Dalits have a definite philosophical position of the human body, whether living or dead. Their discourse on the human body signifies a positive attitude. They believe that all human bodies are

constituted of flesh and blood, and they are not untouchable. All the bodies are touchable and all living bodies have a language and a psychology. All these can touch and exchange goods, commodities and ideas with one another and live in a state of social unity. For Brahmanism some bodies are spiritually different from others, and exclude and distinguish them from others. There is no rational basis for this exclusivity. Dalitism with its broader philosophical and humanitarian worldview, came to the rescue of the rest of the society by their timely disposal of the dead bodies, showing tremendous courage in removing the dead even during epidemics of cholera and other dreaded diseases. All such life-saving labour processes and scientific thinking are to be valued hugely and paid highly. The dalit regarded the human body composed of earth, water, fire and air and on burial these different elements in the body mix with the corresponding elements in nature. The chemical decomposition of the human body, in turn, re-energises the soil. This method of disposal of dead bodies provided to be an invaluable source of information both from archeological and anthropological point of view to understand the evolution of the human society in India. In contrast, Brahmanical Hinduism favoured cremation of the dead that destroys the possibility of a serious examination of the human skeletons and skulls that are available underground post-burial. Cremation is a cunning means of destroying the evidences of a violent process of killing, giving severe punishments like breaking of limbs, cutting off the tongue and nose etc. There is no evidence left for further generations to consider in cremation. Moreover, the cremation is unscientific and polluting. In Brahmanism, there is a lame excuse like cremation does not consume land and therefore economical. The dead are not considered as ghost in Dalit understanding. The weeping for the dead and sharing the sorrow of the family is connected with act of burial. (Ilaiah 2009, 63-66)

3.12 CHAKALATWAM: WASHING CLOTHES TO RESTORING BEAUTY

The Dalit community that washes the clothes of the whole village is the only community where women lead the creative humanitarian work and cultural process. In contrast to Hindu mode of life where women could not play any significant role in the society, Dalit women have vital role in the social process of washing of clothes. Professional cloth-washing involves washing all kinds of clothes. They have a unique culture and a sense of service which could be termed as *chakalatwam*. It is the social process of collecting dirty clothes from house to house, carrying them to the *dhobi ghat*, washing and drying them up. They have a social responsibility. Discovery of soil soap to wash the clothes must have been the earliest in the world. This ordinary soil soap is a specific soil that has light brown colour and contains the chemical character of a detergent. It, on touching, produces a burning sensation and washes dirt off one's hand at once. Mixing of this soil with water and dissolving it completely, the *dhobis* dip the clothes in it and heat up the water. Before settling upon this soil as the best, the *dhobis* must have gone through a process of experimenting with several kinds of soil which have less chemical elements. It was a process of elimination of the not so useful soil soaps and adaptation of the most useful soil for the purpose of washing the clothes clean. This process needs not only the ability to search for a soil that contains detergent quality, but also a comparative grasp of various kinds of soil and their qualities. The second major breakthrough in the process of washing was the process of heating the clothes after they are dipped in the water with soil soap. This enabled the killing of germs that carry diseases from person to person, as clothes are collected from many persons and put them together.

Prevention of spread of germs is the greater contribution by the *dhobis* by discovering the method of heating. It is the result of scientific thinking and the struggle of *Dhobis* to invent new technologies to develop the human health. Discovering and improving the use of soil soap and the process of boiling technologies and methods of using them are done with process of observation and analysis with creativity. This development of health science is not an act of superstition, not of religion but a process of negotiation with reason and faith. In fact, this is true spiritual philosophy of washing of dirt and restoring the beauty and health. It is a contribution of *Dhobis* with a philosophical notion of health, economy and the aesthetics of human life, and its relationship with nature as a whole. (Ilaiah 2009, 69-72)

3.13 CULTURAL AESTHETICS

The philosophy of washing one's body or one's clothes is rooted in the developed notion of human health. Good health and social cleanliness are part of health science. From the art of wearing clothes evolved the health science. One dimension of this is the basic health of human beings which is related to the consumption of food and washing one's own body. Second dimension is that of cleanliness of clothes. Wearing clothes is meant for both the protection of the human body and for increasing the human productive energy. Ideological constructions evolved around these two dimensions in the human history. The type of clothes people wear and the method of wearing them becomes the concept of beauty and other aesthetic notions. The cultural aesthetics is constructed around clothes; in the way people wear their dresses and the kind of colours they choose and the kind of cleanliness they maintain. From the Dalits the aesthetics of wearing clothes came into being; at the level of weaving, at the level of stitching and at the level of cleaning. But for this communities, the notion of aesthetics of dress would not have been evolved in India. (Ilaiah 2009, 72-73)

3.14 LET US SUM UP

The unit dealt with the concept of beauty, skills and art from the Dalit perspective and culture. More than spiritualizing the art, dance and music, Dalit Aesthetics dwells on the ground realities coupled with their way of life. The prominent feature of its aesthetics is communitarian and participatory than individual pleasure and bliss. As many Dalit intellectuals try to affirm and assert the intrinsic value of Dalit culture against the century long systematic destruction of Dalit Aesthetics by the dominant ideologies of Brahmanical Hinduism. However, one has to be very conscious in identifying and developing Dalit Aesthetics not by searching for the written documents but in the experiential life stories and oral traditions of the Dalits. From the oppressive tradition, strong tendency to construct concept of Beauty and fine arts from the Brahmanical perspective has influenced many. The general notion of Dalit being dirty, shabby, untidy, indecent, rough and not refined, is the outcome of Brahmanical construction. However, beauty of Dalit culture is yet to be manifested with larger scope.

3.15 KEY WORDS

Dappa: Muscial Instruments used by Dalits in all major event. *Parai* or drum.

Chakalatwam: Social Process of washing of clothes – a unique culture and a sense of service which could is termed as *chakalatwam*.

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UNIT 4 DALIT ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL OUTLOOK

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit gives a condensed version and a symbol of the “Dalit” political and economic philosophy. Apart from theorizing on political and economic outlook of the Dalits, the aim of the unit is to picture the concrete ideas and activities of Dalit intellectuals and activists from the ancient time to the contemporary period. It would serve as also a preamble for the fourth block of this course namely Dalit thinkers in India.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Besides all critical analysis on society and dominance, Dalit political and economic outlook has a vision of a society free from oppression and equal sharing. It defines something to strive for, and in contrast, stigmatizes the existing order as one with taxes, torture, inequality, hierarchy and walls set everywhere forbidding entry. Doing away with all this and creating an egalitarian society can sum up the aspirations of the subaltern.

To define the term ‘Dalit,’ here we will follow the definition of one of the first organizations to popularize the term- the Dalit Panthers. Their manifesto defined dalit as including the Scheduled Castes, adivasis, peasants, workers, agricultural labourers and all socially oppressed sections. We shall use “dalit” to mean all the subaltern caste-oppressed groups, including broadly those now called Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs. Broadly these are the socially and culturally excluded sections through the ages. “Dalit economic and political philosophy” will be that which defines the forms of oppression, especially caste oppression in society, fights it, and seeks to project a different future. We will then look at its various forms throughout Indian history, beginning with the ages in which caste was just barely coming into existence. We will survey the following:

- debate between the Brahmanic and “shramana” traditions in the first millennium BCE;
- the formation of new aspirations to social and economic equality in the medieval and early modern period, especially through the bhakti movement;

- the development of new theories during colonialism and using the new techniques of historical and social-economic analysis provided through colonialism;
- the expression of economic and political aspirations during the first decades of India's independence;
- the rise of new forces and new problems with the era of globalization (beginning about 1990)

This section will cover traditions up to and through the colonial period.

4.2 THE SHRAMANA TRADITION

“*Shramana*” means striving, and *shramanas* in the first millennium before Christ (or “before the Common Era”, if you want to be politically correct) were people who had left their home, went wandering in the forests, wilds and cities also to search for the truth about life and the universe. They included many groups, sects and varieties of opinion. The most famous were the Buddhists, the Jains, and the materialist “Lokayata” followers of Charvak. But they also included many groups who have now disappeared but were important for centuries, for instance the Ajivikas.

The period was one of immense economic, social and political turmoil. The invention of iron had helped to raise production in agriculture; this in turn gave birth to new trade and commerce, to the rise of cities, and to new kingdoms. There was a contestation of political forms – particularly the older *gana-sangha* oligarchies, with their traditions of democracy at least among the ruling clan, and the newer more centralized kingdoms. (The Brahmins tended to identify with the kingdoms, but the *shramana* tradition had perhaps even a stronger basis among merchants and traders, who were interested in an open society). There was a sense of growing inequalities and oppression, a feeling that the whole world was being shaken up. It is no wonder that the theme of one of the most famous discourses of Buddha was fire: “monks, the whole world is ablaze.” In fact, a new class society was coming into existence, and it was perhaps an open choice as to what kind of society it would be. Extremely different models and aspirations were being put forward by the two contending traditions – the Brahmins, and the *shramanas*.

The Brahmins – or at least a section of them—wanted a society based on the laws of caste, or *varnashrama dharma*, that is a society in which Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras each did their duty and the proper sacrifices were performed to the deities. They proclaimed the Vedas as the sacred texts, and they proclaimed their own authority as interpreters. Other members of the three top varnas, or the “twice born” (where did this term come from? The fact that they went through an initiation ceremony in which the sacred thread was put on, made of different material for each of the *varnas*) had the right to read the Vedas, but only the Brahmins could interpret and teach them to others. This would be a closed society, “harmonious” if all accepted their position and hoped for change only in a next birth; stable; limited. In contrast, people of the *shramana* tradition wanted an open society and denied the principles of *varnashrama dharma*. They mocked the expensive sacrificial ceremonies and proclaimed a religion of the mind and heart.

The Buddhist texts, even more than the Sanskrit ones, give us an idea of this debate. In the *Vasettha sutta* of the *Sutta Nipata* there is the story of a young Brahman, Vasettha, who goes to Buddha and asks him, “My friend Bharadvaj and I have been having a debate: what makes a Brahman – he says seven births in a Brahman family; I say righteous action. So is it birth (*jati*) or action (*kamma*)?” This backs up Ambedkar’s early argument that the Brahmans were the first to form themselves into a caste – and also shows that there was a debate about this among the Brahmans themselves.

The Buddha, of course, answered by denying any caste (*jati*) distinctions among human beings and saying a human was defined in terms of his or her behaviour. He did not call for a purely equalitarian society – this was not on the “social agenda” of the time; but within the *Sangha* which he set up there was communist equalitarianism, and in society at large there was to be openness but no caste.

In another important text, the *Sigolavada suttanta*, a young merchant Sigola is taught that correct behaviour is more important than rituals. Between master and servant (*das-kammakara*) and between husband and wife, there might be inequality, but there should be reciprocity. For instance a servant should be provided with a share of luxuries consumed by the master, given leave, and proper pay. In return he will rise before the master, sleep after him, serve him willingly. Similarly, the merchant is ordered to gather wealth without destruction, as a honeybee takes honey without destroying the flower; and divide his wealth into four parts, living on one, saving one, reinvesting two. “A very high rate of capital accumulation,” as one commentary had put this. And rulers were taught to be righteous, to provide money to the poor, seed to the farmers, pay to bureaucrats and capital for merchants. It was all in all a prescription for a very “modern” welfare state, in contrast to the feudalism of *varnashramadharma* promoted by texts like *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*.

4.3 BHAKTI AND ITS POLITICAL ECONOMY

In the fifteenth century the great Dalit poet-saint Ravidas wrote a powerful song celebrating the vision of an earthly Utopia: Begumpura, a “city without sorrow”:

*The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,
No taxes or cares, nor own property there,
no wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture.
Oh my brother, I’ve come to take it as my own,
my distant home, where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
where none are third or second—all are one;
Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,
those who walk beside me are my friends.*

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 32)

What Ravidas was celebrating was a classless society – no “third or second” but “all are one” – and a casteless society: he is a “tanner set free” who can walk wherever they wish, not banned from certain streets or squares because they are “untouchable.” It is a society without political oppression (no “taxes or cares” but all is “secure”) and without economic property. And it is a society that is wealthy and prosperous.

There is a famous poem by Tukaram which goes as follows:

*I've not a single fraud
to infatuate the world.
I sing hymns that please and praise your qualities (refrain).
I don't know how to show
herbs or instant miracles.
I've no followers to dispense
stories of my holiness.
I'm no lord of a hermitage,
no habit of holding on to land.
I don't keep a shop
for idol worshippers to stop....
(Tukarambavancya 1973, 272)*

This makes clear a characteristic of the radical *bhakti* sants – as opposed to the more orthodox, including Ramdas, Vallabhacharya, and others. That is, they had no institutional support; no maths, no landholdings, no crowd of disciples to support them. Instead, they depended on their own labour. Whether Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Namdev, Chokhamela, Janabai, they worked as weavers, labourers, petty merchants, maidservants etc., and they composed their beautiful songs and poems. The spirit of radical *bhakti* celebrates this: they were householders, not world renouncers. This wide and essentially labouring background of the *bhakti* radicals was theorized in the earliest of the movements, the Lingayat movement in Karnataka near the Maharashtra border founded by Basava.

The radical *bhakti* movement also projected a society of equality. The early Lingayat movement challenged one of the most severe prohibitions of Brahmanism – *varnasamkara*, marriage between two people of different castes. Basava had arranged a marriage between the son of a dalit and the daughter of a Brahman disciple. The two parents were brutally executed by being dragged behind elephants, and when an uprising broke out in the kingdom of Kalyan, the Lingayats were driven out. While no later movement was close enough to political power to celebrate (at least publicly) intermarriage, the vision of equality continued and was practiced in all other respects. Ravidas' “Begumpura” was cited earlier; this was echoed in Tukaram's vision of Pandharpur in which disciples danced together on the river sands, forgetting caste and varna, falling at one another's feet, all sharing the same food. Kabir was a severe critic of Brahmanism and the practice of untouchability:

*“Worship, libations, six sacred rites,
this dharma's full of ritual blights.*

*Four ages teaching Gayatri, I ask you, who won liberty?
 You wash your body if you touch another,
 tell me who could be lower than you?
 Proud of your merit, puffed up with your rights,
 no good comes out of such great pride
 How could he whose very name
 is pride-destroyer endure the same?
 Drop the limits of caste and clan,
 seek for freedom's space,
 destroy the shoot, destroy the seed,
 seek the unembodied place"*
 (Ramaini 35 - Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh 1986)

Thus, the themes of radical bhakti were: labour, equality, love, change of heart rather than ritualism. There was a strong anti-brahmanism running through the movement, expressed by so many of the sants. And many of them also faced repression: Kabir was, according to several stories, brought for trial before the sultan. Tukaram was murdered (the evidence is circumstantial but quite good; see A.H. Salunkhe, Vidrohi Tukaram, *Marathi: Tukaram the Rebel*, Pune: Gopal Mokashi). As we have seen the early, radical Lingayat movement was severely repressed even though Basava had been a minister in the kingdom.

The movement flourished for several centuries and could not be destroyed by this repression or brahmanic propaganda. In the end the Brahmanic strategy was changed to cooptation, a process that came to dominate in the 18th century with "hagiographers" such as Priyadas in north India and Mahipati in Maharashtra giving acceptable, brahmanic stories of the saints. These are the ones prominent today in the internet, so students beware. Sikhism, which was able to fight successfully for independence from Muslim repression and Hindu absorption, nevertheless betrayed Guru Nanak's ideals when Ranjit Singh's kingdom was formed in the 18th century: shudra Jats could attain equality, but not the Dalit followers who had been so prominent earlier.

The bhakti movement failed in one important respect: it could project a vision of equality and freedom and attempt to practice it, but it could not give a historical and sociological analysis of why inequality existed. It opposed Brahmanism, but could not dissect the foundations and support for Brahmanism. This had to await a more scientific analysis which began to be formed when India came in contact with the modern world, industry, scientific thinking – through colonialism.

4.4 THEORIZING SUBALTERN INDEPENDENCE

Colonialism brought with it new opportunities for the subaltern. It meant "national slavery" yet a very partial liberation from domestic enslavement to Brahmanism. In many ways, of course, it strengthened caste domination. Railroads and new methods of communication provided opportunities for the elite to consolidate their hold; they flocked to English-medium schools and filled the lower echelons of the bureaucracy. (Iyotee Thass wrote about this very sarcastically) – "As a result of some earlier good deeds, the British rule having appeared, these brahmanar have

rolled up and thrown away all the Vedas, Puranas, *Smritis* and Bhashyams devised for making a living; and learning now Vedas of high court jobs, *Smritis* of Revenue board employment, Upanishads of Akbari office jobs and Bhashyams of municipal office employment, are in prosperous living” (Iyothee Thass, 2001: 31).

The British, in fact, depended on Brahmans for running the country, for providing them information about the “Hindu” customs that their courts enforced, for data for the caste-and-tribe gazetteers and censuses they were publishing. The colonizers were not inherently interested in social reform. And, after 1857, a kind of fear took over, and many retrogressive steps were taken – for example, excluding Dalits from the military, where they had been serving faithfully for decades.

Nevertheless, some new openings were there, some dalits and OBCs could gain entry into the schools; could get into less caste-linked professions. There was migration overseas; the subalterns worked as plantation labourers and in thankless jobs, but some could make new opportunities out of this as well. And a touch of “enlightenment” going on could stir the air. Missionaries often provided information about the dalit and other excluded social groups; they passed on this along with generous doses of Christianized egalitarianism to the Dalits themselves. Many could take advantage of this to grapple with their own enslavement and develop new theories of liberation. Among the most prominent of these in the 19th and early 20th century were Jotirao Phule, a Mali (gardener) of western Maharashtra, Iyothee Thass, a Paraiya (dalit) of Tamilnadu, and Swami Acchutanand, a Chamar or Jatav of U.P. These were the great predecessors of Dr. Ambedkar, who brought Dalit economic and political philosophy to its height.

Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) was educated first in his village, then in Pune, a city which had been formerly the capital of the Brahman-dominated independent regime, but which was at that time the centre of cultural and political stirrings. While he was for a time inclined to nationalism, he quickly became disillusioned with its Brahman leadership, and instead embarked on a career as social reformer intending to awaken the “Shudras and Ati-Shudras” to their slavery and their destiny. His initial efforts involved starting schools for untouchables and girls in 1849 and 1951. Then in 1875 he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj or “Truth-Seekers” society, his answer to the various Prarthana and Brahmo Samajes which he continuously mocked. Its purpose was to encourage the education of both boys and girls and fight priestly domination, especially by organising social-religious ceremonies without them.

His first book, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) was published in 1873, giving what was to be his life-long critique of Brahmanism. This introduced Phule’s use of the “Aryan theory,” which in a sense he turned upside down just as Marx had turned Hegel’s notion of history upside down. The European-Indian elite version saw the three top varnas as descended from Indo-European “Aryans”, the shudras and dalits from the backward indigenous habitants. The elite combined this was a notion of the early Vedic period as India’s “golden age.” Phule reversed this, seeing the “golden age” in the prosperous, egalitarian society of the original inhabitants, with Aryans as brutal conquerors enslaving the conquered people permanently through the use of caste which denied them education and civil rights. Bali Raja – remembered by Maharashtra farmers with the

saying *ida pida javo, Balica rajya yevo*, “let troubles and sorrows go and the kingdom of Bali come.” – provided the symbol of this golden age.

Phule’s second major work, *Shetkaryaca Asud* (“The Whipcord of the Cultivator”), gives an all-around critical analysis both of the existing Brahman-dominated society in India and of British colonialism. Phule has been depicted by upper-caste nationalists as a supporter of the British; *Shetkaryaca Asud* shows how erroneous this is. It shows British exploitation and links it with Brahmanism, and thus in a sense is a forerunner of later Marxist notions of a “comprador bourgeoisie” (or “feudal classes”) which provided the foundations for imperialist control.

The bureaucracy is depicted as the greatest exploiter of the “Shudra and Ati-Shudra” farmers; but as Phule makes clear, the bureaucracy itself has a dual character. Under colonial rule it is not simply British but rather an alliance of the “lazy indolent white English government employees” and the “cunning Arya Bhat-Brahman black government employees.” Both ensured themselves “excessive pay and pensions.” The English, who were fundamentally lazy and ill-informed about the country they ruled, simply let the Brahman bureaucrats loot the peasants in their name, while ensuring sufficient funds reached England itself in the form of debts incurred and taxes passed on. Brahmans extorted bribes, and from quarrels in the villages instigated by the cunning Brahmans, factions were created among the peasantry, fights incited, and once the case went to court all the clan of Brahmans at every level united to loot both sides. Between taxes, cesses, octroi and all kinds of funds extorted from the peasants, the loss of land to its takeover by the Forest Department so that “peasants had not even an inch of land left to graze even a goat”, the failure to do anything to develop agriculture, and the actual cheating of Brahmans on all sides, the masses of people were being ruined.

Shetkaryaca Asud discussed the way in which the peasantry and artisans were ruined by foreign competition, and criticized the loans taken from European “moneylenders” for irrigation schemes for which the farmers were overcharged and still did not even manage to reach water to the fields. At the same time, however, he attacked the usual solution of nationalists, swadeshi, or the boycott of foreign goods. Phule saw this as simply a plot designed to maintain Brahmanic control. For him, in contrast to the Brahman elite, exchange and trade with other lands were foundations for development and for building understanding among peoples; in fact cutting off such commerce between peoples was one of the means Brahmans had always used to maintain their power. The solution to the problem of competition, he insisted, was rather education, and access to technology. This was a major theme of Phule, and was embodied in his famous verse at the beginning of *Asud*, “*vidyavihin mati geli; mativihin gati geli; gativihin vitta geli; vitavihin sudra kacale*: “without education wisdom was lost; without wisdom development was lost; without development wealth was lost; without wealth the sudras were ruined.” Thus, Phule argued for compulsory universal primary education, with teachers trained from among the “Shudras and Ati-Shudras” themselves, and with a course of studies that included both simple Marathi and training in agriculture and artisanship.

Though Phule’s was an all-around approach, political and economic as well as cultural, he ultimately came back to religious and cultural themes. His critique of Brahmanic Hinduism attacked not only the caste divisions that it created and maintained, but also its ritualism and what we might call the mumbo-jumbo of its festivals and stories. The first chapter of *Shetkaryaca Asud* is a scathing description of the various festivals throughout the year, as well as

the life-cycle rituals of a good “Hindu,” which are used by each and every Brahmanas to claim gifts and food – another “Brahman feast of ghee and goodies”. All of the *avatars*, even Rama and Krishna who were being popularized as the arch-typical models of the ideal Hindu, were ferociously criticised; and so were the Vedas, particularly in his final book on his alternative religion, the *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (“Book of the Universal Religion of Truth” in Phule's translation again).

4.5 IN SEARCH OF THE PAST: IYOTHEE THASS

Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) was a Tamil Siddha physician, raised as a Vaisnavite. He interacted with the political leaders who were part of the Congress movement, but he was not drawn to Saivism or to their reformism. After disillusionment with the Congress, being told that Siva, etc and other “high caste” gods were not from him, after rejection of his raising the issue of temple entry, he began to turn to Buddhism. In 1898 he and his friends met with Sir Henry Olcott of the Theosophical Society – not to investigate theosophy, but with a request to meet Ceylonese Buddhist leaders. This led to a voyage to Ceylon, when Iyothee Thass went with two companions in July 1898 to Colombo and were given the *Panch Shila* as a form of initiation by one of the Sinhalese Buddhist leaders.

Thus began “Tamil Buddhism.” It was not interpreted by Iyothee Thass not as “conversion” but rather as a return home: he argued that Indian dalits were originally Buddhists from the time of king Ashoka who had been degraded for their attachment to the faith and thrust into a state of slavery. Thus, they told the Sri Lanka Buddhists, they were hoping simply to recover their original faith. Iyothee Thass argued that in fact the Sakya Paraiahs (a subcaste) were descended from Buddha’s Sakya clan; his organization was called the Sakya Buddhist Society – and the term “Sakya” retains an appeal for Tamil dalits even today. The movement grew, not only in Tamilnadu but also in areas where the Dalit Tamil diaspora was strong – in Burma, South Africa, Sri Lanka, among coal miners in Bihar and gold mine workers in the nearby Karnataka district of Kolar. The base was Paraiahs, but a significant number of men and women from other castes also joined the “noncaste Tamil Buddhists.”

Iyothee Thass resembled Phule in emphasizing an early indigenous society of peace and plenty, disrupted by Aryan incursions. However his analysis of the mechanisms of this was different. Where Phule had stressed violence and conquest in his interpretation of history, Iyothee Thass emphasized infiltration. The original inhabitants of India, he argued, had been Buddhists; the “Vedas” were their rules of moral conduct. Their great and wise men were known as brahmanas. When the invaders came, the Mlecchas, they conquered not by the force of arms but by stealth and cunning. They appropriated the name “Brahman” for themselves; they claimed that the Vedas were their holy books – and they gradually spread the ideology of caste and birth ascription. Their conquest was one of ideas.

The period of Tamil Buddhism and the publication of *Tamilan* was that of the *swadeshi* movement, the first great upsurge of Indian nationalism which had been provoked first by the proposed partition of Bengal. The pages of *Tamilan* are filled with mockery of the *swadeshiites* – who were seen as frauds in their claims to represent a national unity. As he wrote in October

1908, “It is sheer injustice to clamour that driving away the British government of such heroism and ideals [as to save all kinds of people during famines] men of no heroism or ideals should rule...If we seriously analyze the enmities of religious divisions, caste divisions and language divisions and consider deeply the political strategies and administrative tactics required to bring about unity among these, we would realize that the present rulers – the British – are like father and mother to us, they are our moral deities, and they are our friends in need, and we would look for means of stabilizing their rule and following their ideals and character and conducting our own affairs accordingly” (cited Aloysius, 1998: 67).

However, British rule had its flaws in that. The British also yielded to Brahman cunningness. Iyothee Thass noted that in the early period of colonial rule, it was the so-called Paraiya who had entered first into the army, into the hospital service and even administration, clearing jungles and deserts and laying roads, shedding their blood in the service of defence, developing the country. They worked in hospitals where Brahmans first remained aloof due to their hesitation to touch the sick of lower castes. It was only later, in the realization of how prosperity could come through the new professions, that Brahmans and other high castes entered and displaced the “non-caste Dravidians” (Iyothee Thass, 2001: 61-2). In this way, the dominance of Brahmans under colonialism was seen as an emerging reality, reflecting the jealousy and self-interest of Brahmans and the compromising tendencies of imperialism. Thus, colonial exploitation was for Iyothee Thass as for Phule one of collaboration between a British and a Brahman elite.

The backwardness of agriculture under colonialism was seen as part of unproductive landlordism; this itself was a result of casteism because Brahmans refused to handle the plough or engage themselves in manual labour and relied on the labour of the field Paraiya for these services. In turn, the Paraiya who did the actual work had no control over land and was prevented by all kinds of manipulation and force from winning or maintaining it. Thus Brahman landlords would own hundreds of acres of land without cultivating it, and still claim adjacent land belonging to the Dalit poor, appropriating it through their influence with government administrators. Thus, Iyothee Thass had a full-fledged analysis of colonialism. He and his followers placed their hopes not simply in national independence, but in an equalitarian transformation of society, a Buddhist Commonwealth.

4.6 SWAMI ACCHUTANAND AND THE ADI-HINDU ANALYSIS

Another variation on the Non-Aryan theme was offered by Swami Acchutanand (1879-1933), a Jatav (Chamar) activist from north India. He was self-educated in many languages, a wanderer and an activist of the Arya Samaj for some years. But he got disillusioned when he realized the extent of casteism still practiced even in Arya Samaj-run schools, and instead began organizing first Jatavs in the early 1920s and then an “All India Adi-Hindu Mahasabha” from 1923. This taught the familiar ideology of the original inhabitants enslaved by conquering Aryans and their ideal society destroyed – now the Swami renounced thoroughly his Arya Samaj heritage. But a speciality of their effort was the attempt to combine it with a radical interpretation of bhakti: bhakti, which preached self-reliance and equality, was the “Shudras. For centuries you have

been slaves. For centuries we have had to tolerate tyranny. Now the time to think about these centuries past. Now is the time to change all these past centuries.”

4.7 LET US SUM UP

These, then, were the men and movements who had been predecessors of Ambedkar. When Ambedkar formulated his philosophy, he could draw on a broad Indian tradition of economic and political philosophy that contended with the inequalitarian brahmanic tradition. Beginning with Buddha and the *shramana* (“striving”) movement, continuing through the phase of radical bhakti in the medieval and early modern period, and climaxing with the efforts of Phule, Iyothee Thass and others during the colonial period, these intellectuals proclaimed the possibility of establishing a casteless, classless enriched utopian society.

4.8 KEY WORDS

Sramana : Indigenous tradition including *ajivikas*, materialists, Jaina and Buddhists traditions.

Tamil Buddhism : A Dalit movement Iyothee Thass initiated in the 1900s to return home as he argued that dalits were originally Buddhists.

4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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