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# UNIT 15 ASSERTION OF DALITS AND BACKWARD CASTES

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## 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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During the past few decades there has been an assertion of the dalits and backward classes in India. The latter are also known as the other backward classes (OBCs). Through such assertions these groups have seek to strive for social and cultural autonomy, self-respect and dignity, and demand a share in the political power. They are playing very dominant role in politics of several states. In the recent past they have become a formidable components of the power structure in the national politics. In this unit you are going to study the assertion of dalits and backward castes in India, the reasons for it and its impact on the politics and society in India.

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## 15.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

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### 15.2.1 Dalits

Dalits is a term generally used for the ex-untouchable castes, which have been identified as the Scheduled Castes by our constitution. They form a large number of castes and have been involved in the low ranking occupations like leather work, scavenging and agricultural labourers. Land reform measures did not benefit them. However, a large number of welfare programmes have had varying impact on them in different parts of the country. Despite the handicap in benefiting from the welfare policies of the state, there has been improvement in their conditions.

Reservation in the educational and political institutions have given rise to the emergence of an articulate group among them. This group articulates their problems. This also indicates towards a process social transformation, which has taken place in India. But the social transformation has shown uneven patterns in the country. In large areas of the country, especially the rural areas, dalits continue to face indignities and humiliations.

Despite the comprehensive provisions in the Constitution of India, the fight against dalits' discrimination is yet to be won. Dalits continue to suffer from the menace till date. Marc Galanter laments: "The Constitution sets forth a general programme for the re-construction of Indian Society. In spite of its length, it is surprisingly undetailed in its treatment of the institution of caste and existing group structure in Indian society."

Even the provisions provided by the law of the land have proved ineffective in most of the cases. Article 17 of the Constitution had abolished "Untouchability". The provisions of affirmative action contained in the Constitution have become redundant in some cases. The entire private sector is under no obligation to do social justice to dalits. Dalits' demand for reservation in the private sector faces stiff opposition from several powerful and articulate groups.

### **15.2.2 Backward Castes**

Backward Castes are also known as backward classes or the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Our constitution identifies those social groups as OBCs, which are educationally and socially backward. This categorisation includes those groups among the OBCs, which are not necessarily backward politically or economically. That is why a large number of the castes identified as OBCs are quite influential in politics and economy, especially agriculture in different states of India. Unlike dalits, OBCs is a more differentiated category. It includes the intermediary land owning castes as well as the landless service castes. The land owning middle or intermediary castes are mainly Jats, Yadavs, Gujars, Lodhs, Kurmies in the north India, Marathas and Patels in Maharastra and Gujarat and Reddies, Kammas, Vokaliggas and Lingayats in South India. It is these castes which are the most assertive among the OBCs. Socially belonging to the middle or intermediary castes, they have benefited from the land reforms and green revolution. They also own the maximum resources and land in rural society. Some of them have even diversified into non-agricultural economy. Thus their sphere of influence cuts across the towns and the villages. They form significant component of the market economy relating to agriculture.

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## **15.3 ASSERTION OF DALITS**

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Post-independence period in India has seen assertion of dalits in India. This assertion can be divided into three phases – the phase of Republican Party of India; the phase of Dalit Panther and the phase of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Since this assertion took place after the death of Ambedkar all these phases belong to the post-Ambedkar dalit movement. The focus of dalit movement in the preceding period had been on the temple entry, restoration of self-respect, and getting reservation for the dalits in the political and government institutions. The post - Ambedkar dalit movement took the multiple forms—socio-cultural, economic and political. Due to their assertion dalits have been able to get the recognition as a distinct social and political group. Their assertion is reflected through various ways i.e., foundation of social, cultural and political organisations, conversion to other religion and increasing political participation.

A number of factors account for the assertion of dalits. The most important of these are the rise of an educated and articulate group among them, the expansion of mass media and most importantly the impact of ideas and life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on them. The process which denotes the impact of life and ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been conceptualised as Ambedkarisation by Jagpal Singh. The sub-sections 15.3.1, 15.3.2, 15.3.3 and 15.3.4 deal with dalit assertion with the examples of the Republican Party of India, Dalit Panther and the Bahujan Samaj Party, and left and dalit question.

### **15.3.1 The Republican Party of India**

A few years before his death Dr B.R. Ambedkar founded the Republican Party of India (RPI). This party aimed at amelioration of the socio-economic conditions of dalits and the poorer classes and to enable them to capture political power. After Ambedkar's death the RPI was strengthened by an emergent educated middle class of dalits. The RPI became popular mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in the 1950s and 1960s. In Uttar Pradesh it even contested elections in 1960s and became a force to reckon with. In UP the RPI forged an alliance of dalits, Muslims and the OBCs. But it lost its popularity after 1960s as some of its prominent leaders got accommodated in the Congress party. In Maharashtra the RPI was split into several groups, marked by ideological and personal differences.

It is important to note that the RPI worked among dalits on two fronts – political and cultural. The political front included mobilisation of dalits to participate in elections. Though the RPI ceased to exist as a significant political force after the 1960s, the work done by it had its impact on the cultural field. Influenced by Ambedkar, a large number of his followers converted to Buddhism. Those who were influenced by Ambedkarism and Buddhism played significant role in spreading Ambedkarism among dalits. In fact, the process of Ambedkarisation was initiated at that time. This contributed to the assertion of dalits in following decades.

### **15.3.2 The Dalit Panther**

Influenced by Marxism Ambedkarism and Negro literature a group of dalit intellectuals founded Dalit Panther in Maharashtra in 1972. It was basically a movement of dalit intellectuals, which contributed to generating consciousness among dalits to a significant extent. It attacked the Hindu Caste system through literary activities, debates and discussion in homes, offices and public places. An incident was the main cause for setting up the Dalit Panther. Dalit Panther was named after the Black Panther of USA. The incident was related to a controversy published in by dalit writers in a magazine *Sadhna*. Dalit Panther also launched a movement for renaming of Marathwada University after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It was constrained by the confinement of its base to Urban areas. It also suffered multiple splits on the ideological and personal bases.

### **15.3.3 The Bahujan Samaj Party**

The rise of BSP in last two decades of 20<sup>th</sup> Century in north India, and becoming Chief Minister of its leader Mayawati thrice in Uttar Pradesh symbolises the empowerment of dalits in India. The rise of the BSP is part of the process of dalit empowerment, which started in the post-independence period. Founded by Kashi Ram, on April 14, 1984 the Bahujan Samaj Party aims to empower the majority section of the society or bahujan samaj – dalits, OBCs tribals and minorities.

According to the understanding of the BSP, the minority high castes in India – Brahmins, Rajputs and Banias have exploited the bahunjan samaj. The former have used their votes to rule over the bahunjan samaj. The bahunjan samaj should capture political power as it forms the majority of the population, and in democracy the majority should rule. When the bahunjan samaj captures the power, it will not need help from the minority high castes. Rather it will condescend the help to the high castes. Before the formation of the BSP, Kanshi Ram had mobilised the middle classes employees belonging to the scheduled castes, other backward classes and minorities through All India Backward and Minority Employees Federation (BAMCEF). He changed it into DS4.

In Uttar Pradesh the Bahujan Samaj Party was able to mobilise the bahunjan samaj in collaboration with the Samajwadi Party in 1993 assembly election, which enabled it to share power with its alliance partner, the Samajwadi Party. Following its estrangement with the Samajwadi Party, the BSP allied with the BJP thrice in Uttar Pradesh to head the government. The governments headed by the BSP leader Mayawati identified Ambedkar villages where dalits formed a substantial population, in Uttar Pradesh. Special programmes were introduced in the Ambedkar villages for the over all development of these villages, with main focus on dalits.

Dalit assertion through BSP is, infact, continuation of a process which had started in the late 1950s and 1960s. However, the BSP's initial strategy to forge an alliance of the bahunjan samaj could not succeed. All major constituents of the bahunjan samaj, which formed the social bases of the BSP initially – the OBCs, the Muslims and a section of the non-jatav- dalits got separated from the BSP within a few years of its having shared the power. The first instance of the disintegration of the social base of the BSP was the split within the BSP and SP alliance.

Though the major constituents of the bahunjan samaj which formed the social base for the BSP have got separated, the BSP has become strong political force. Through the BSP dalits can bargain to share the political power on their own terms and conditions. Besides, the BSP has changed its strategy of caste mobilisation. It no longer adheres to its earlier strategy of mobilising the bahunjan samaj. It now believes in mobilising the sarva samaj (all castes including Brahmins, Rajputs and Banias). That is why the BSP gives its tickets to the high castes also. With its strong base among dalits, it is able to get additional support of high castes as well by allotting tickets to them.

### **15.3.4 Left and Dalit Question**

Dalit assertion has also taken place through the mobilisation by the left especially the in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and parts of some other states. The naxalites have taken up the issues of dual exploitation of dalits – caste exploitation and class exploitation involving issues related to self-respect, exploitation of woman, wages and land reforms. The naxalites are not averse to using the violent means to get their demands conceded. PWG (People's War Group), Party Unity, Indian People's Front are some of the naxalite organisations, which work towards dalit assertion. They are countered by the high castes and landlords' organisations like 'Lorik Sena' or 'Bhoomi Sena' in Bihar.

The major left parties – the CPI(M) and the CPI did not feel, till recently, special the need to mobilise dalits on the caste question. For them dalits were constituents of the poorer classes, which face economic exploitation. These parties felt that improvement in the economic conditions of dalits will also result in the abolition of social discrimination. The CPI(M)'s Party

Programme in para 5.12 clearly mentions: “The problem of caste oppression and discrimination has a long history and is deeply rooted in the pre-capitalist social system. The society under capitalist development has compromised with the existing caste system. The Indian bourgeoisie itself fosters caste prejudices. Working class unity presupposes unity against the caste system and the oppression of Dalits, since the vast majority of the Dalit population are part of the labouring classes. To fight for the abolition of the caste system and all forms of social oppression through a social reform movement is an important part of the democratic revolution. The fight against caste oppression is interlinked with the struggle against class exploitation.” However, in the context of assertion of dalits and backward classes, even these parties have reconsidered their position. Like others, they also feel that along with the class issues, the caste should also be given special consideration while devising the policies for dalits.

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## **15.4 ASSERTION OF BACKWARD CLASSES**

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### **15.4.1 North India**

Assertion of backward castes in North India is basically assertion of middle or intermediary castes, i.e., Jats, Yadavs, Gujars, Kurmies, Lodhs, etc. in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana. The lower backwards – the artisans and service castes do not show the kind of assertion which the intermediary castes have shown. However, Karpoori Thakur, who belonged to the service castes, barker, had become chief minister of Bihar twice. But his catapultation to the chief minister’s post was not indication of the assertion of service castes and artisans. He, infact, represented the intermediary or the middle castes. During the first two decades following independence, the representation of the backward castes was much less as compared to the latter period. From the 1970s these castes have come to dominate the politics in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They not only constitute the larger number of the legislators and ministers in these states, they also now play decisive role in formation of the government at centre.

The credit to mobilise the backward castes in north India during the post-independence period actually goes to Charan Singh. Though his caste, Jat was not categorised as an OBCs in Uttar Pradesh till 2002, he identified himself with other backward classes like Yadavs, Kurmies, Lodhs and Gujars. He understood the political significance of these castes. While he was a member of the Congress, he carved out a special place for himself as the leader of the backward classes. He chalked out his strategy for this purpose meticulously. During the 1950s and 1960s, he visited the districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh quite frequently to address the peasants belonging to backward classes. He apprised them of the role played by the Congress, in which he had a decisive role, in making them the proprietors of their land as a result of zamindari abolition; he attended and addressed the meetings of the backward classes; he opposed the Nehru’s idea of cooperative farming and imposition of cess on agriculture etc. Apart from the land reforms, these groups also benefited from the green revolution introduced in the 1960s.

Charan Singh’s strategy to mobilise the backward classes displeased some high caste leaders within the Congress. The latter accused Charan Singh of favouring the backward classes and as a result alienating the high castes from the Congress. The differences within the Congress resulted in the defection of Charan Singh from Congress in 1967 and formation of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal by him in 1969. This happened at a time when Congress was defeated in eight states, and formation of the government led by the non-Congress formations.

This enabled Charan Singh to emerge as an independent leader of the backward classes in north India. For the first time he gave maximum representation to the backward classes in his ministry. Along with efforts of Charan Singh, the socialists influenced by Ram Manohar Lohia also mobilised the backward classes. The coalition of backward castes came to be known as AJGAR (Ahir, Jat, Gujars and Rajputs) in north India. Similarly the backward caste coalition in Gujarat was known as KHAM (Khartiyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims). The merger of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal and the Sanyukta Socialist Party in 1974 brought the Gandhians, Socialists and Charan Singh together. These gave ideological cover to the backward class mobilisation and assertion in north India.

Backward classes formed an important section in the Janata Party. Issues of backward classes, rural sector and agriculture got special focus of the Janata Party government during 1977-1980. One result of the backward castes' assertion was appointment of Mandal Commission, for identifying the backward classes. The implementation of Mandal Commission Report by V.P. Singh's government in 1989 shows the culmination of the process of backward caste assertion. The criterion of including among the other backward classes those classes which are socially and educationally backward, and timings of its implementation resulted in the anti-mandal agitation.

These developments indicate towards the assertion of the backward classes. The backward classes are accommodated in different political parties: some parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh are largely identified with the backward classes.

### **15.4.2 South India**

Backward castes' assertion in south Indian States – Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra started much earlier to that in north India. It had its root in the non-Brahmin movement or the self-respect movement which was led by E V Ramaswami Naicker popularly known as Periyar in the 1920s and 1930s. The legacy of Periyar was carried forward by C.M. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi and several of his followers. It aimed to demolish the Brahmins' domination in culture and public institutions. It attacked cultural symbols identified with Hinduism or Brahminism, preached atheism against the belief in God.

The backward classes' aspirations and ideology were articulated through the political parties like the Justice Party, the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kagham), ADMK (Anna Dravida Munneba Kagham) and AIDMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kagham). Besides, there exist a large number of smaller parties of the backward classes in south India: the DK, forerunner of the DMK, was the first in the post-Independence India to begin a major agitation for backward caste reservations in the erstwhile Madras province in 1950. During the 1950s – 1960s the backward class assertion assumed the form an ethnic movement, which demanded a separate state for the dravidians. The Madras government issued the first such order in 1951, which ultimately led to the appointment of the First Backward Classes commission after a long period when DMK government came to power in 1967. The commission was appointed in 1969 and submitted its report the following year. The DMK accepted the Commission's recommendations to raise the existing reservations for the backward castes and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Unlike in the north, the backward caste assertion in south India has included all sections of the backward classes – the intermediary castes and artisans and service castes. The backward classes are divided among different political parties, which seek to espouse the backward class causes. They dominate in politics and economy of the south Indian states. Their assertion has eroded the influence of the high castes. That is why unlike north India, the south India did not evoke any opposition to the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report.

### **15.4.3 Organisations of Backward Castes**

A large number of backward class associations appeared in the post-independence period. Marc Gallanter observed that by 1954, there were 88 organisations in India, which articulated the interests of the backward classes. The most important of these existed in North India. These were UP Backward Classes Federation and Bihar State Backward Classes Federation. These two organisations merged on 26 January 1950 to form All India Backward Classes Federation (AIBCF) by the efforts of Punjab Rao Deshmukh. The AIBCF had split into two groups – one adhering to the Congress ideology and another Lohiaite socialism. The former was represented by Punjab Rao Deshmukh and the latter by R L Chandpuri. R L Chandpuri formed Indian National Backward Classes Federation (INBCF) on 10 November, 1957.

These organisations sought to get the reservation for the OBCs and empower the them in order to overthrow the 'Brahmin-Baniya Raj'. The organisations contributed to the rise of consciousness of the OBCs. This consciousness, coupled with the result of land reforms and adequate numerical strength led to the assertion of the OBCs. However, AIBCF had become defunct by the 1970s. But a generation of the backward classes had already emerged on the political scene, which became more effective during the Janata Party regime (1977-80). It was due to efforts of this section of the OBC leadership that the Janata Party government had appointed the second backward class commission, known as Mandal Commission named after its chairman B P Mandal. The implementation of Mandal Commission Report in 1989 in seeking to introduce 27 per cent reservation for the OBCs in the government jobs changed the contours of Indian Politics.

The present phase of backward classes assertion is a sequel to their assertion in the years surrounding the achievement of independence of the country from colonial rule. This had led to the appointment on January 29, 1935 of the first backwards classes' commission known as the Kalelkar Commission, which was headed by Kaka Kalelkar. Purpose of Kalelkar Commission was to determine the criteria to identify socially and educationally backward classes in India, in order to enable the government to introduce policies for their betterment. But there were differences among the commission members on the criteria which was to be followed to determine the backward class status of a community; one section supported the caste as a criterion, another class. The Kalelkar report was presented to the central government. But the government decided against introduction of reservation to the backward classes. Kalelkar report, however, occupied a prime place in the agenda of the backward classes' organisations. They demanded appointment of another backward class commission. The appointment of the second backwards class commission, i.e., Mandal Commission, was a result of it.

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## **15.5 SUMMARY**

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We have studied in this unit that the dalits and OBCs have become assertive and politically dominant in India during the post-independence period. Although their assertion is more visible in the recent past, the process of their assertion had started much earlier. The policies of the state, emergence of conscious sections among them and ideologies like Ambedkarism, Lohiaism and urge for political and social recognition can be accounted for their assertion. However, their assertions have not been uniform across the country. But dalits and OBCs have become political and social forces to reckon with.

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## **15.6 EXERCISES**

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- 1) Discuss the socio-economic condition of dalits and OBCs in India.
- 2) What factors have contributed to the assertion of dalits?
- 3) Write a note on the assertion of backward castes in India.