
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 Brahmans 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 Brahmans, and the *shramanas*.

The Brahmans – 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 Brahmans, 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 Brahmans 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 Bharadwaj 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 kacle*: “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 Paraiyahs (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 Paraiyahs, 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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