



Exploring The Role Of Dalit Women In Leadership And Identity-Based Parties

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ABSTRACT

Democratization and increasing political awareness have led to the emergence and expansion of identity-based political parties. It is important to note that for Dalits, the issue of representation is crucial as they advocate for "self-representation" rather than being represented by other parties. They seek a party that truly represents them, as they strongly believe that other parties have co-opted them through patronage, which they deem unfair given their dedication and loyalty.

This article analyzes the three major identity-based parties - the BSP, the Dalit Panthers, and the DPI. It examines their formation, operations, representation approach, election manifestos, and welfare programs to assess whether they equally represent Dalit women as they do Dalit men.

Introduction

Identity means different things, but in this context, identity is seen as a source of mobilization used by the identity-based parties to construct their vote-banks and win support. Here, we are talking about the politics of caste, whereby caste is the identity by which people identify themselves and form associations. In this context, Dalit people have formed political associations to represent themselves. Caste is one identity; we are also talking about gender as the other identity. So, when discussing identity, we look at both *Gender* and *Caste*. As we know, Dalit women suffer on both counts- caste and gender. As Dalits, they face domination and oppression by the upper and middle castes. As women, they are placed lower than Dalit men, who have more opportunities to play a more significant role in politics and, hence, have more power in decision-making. Dalit women also encounter patriarchy within Dalit communities. Therefore, they face dual oppression, and both these forces work hand in hand to keep Dalit women out of politics.

Mainly, there are two views regarding Dalit women's exploitation: whether they are exploited more based on caste or gender. This is not to say that they are exploited by one factor only, but one factor which exploits them more becomes the critical factor based on which they organise themselves. Those who consider caste as an essential factor organize anti-caste movements; these movements call for the abolition of rigid caste-based structures, while others who consider gender to be more exploitative are likely to organize movements that challenge the patriarchal notions of society and see women as homogeneous category cross-cutting caste and class alliances. But in reality, it's challenging to see Dalit women at equal par with general women as Dalit women are triply exploited based on caste, class, and gender and face many more hardships than the general women.

Bela Malik also argues that while women in general suffer from oppression based on gender, upper-caste women discriminate against Dalits based on caste. In this context, a purely Dalit women's forum seems natural.¹ As we see today, on the one hand, anti-caste movements give importance to the caste dimension. On the other hand, the Indian women's movement commits the mistake of considering the category of women as a homogeneous one. Still, it has not been adequately sensitive to Dalit women's issues.

¹Bela Malik, 1999. Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression. Quoted in Hugo Gorringer, 2005. Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu.

This article examines whether the rise of explicit Dalit-based parties, i.e., parties whose social base and leadership are from the Dalit community, has helped Dalit women. Have they been given space? Do they get representation within their “own” parties or remain invisible? And one important thing, in the case of Dalit women, which is more critical- gender or caste, or do both come together to oppress them or do they work independently? In this regard, three necessary Dalit parties, the BSP, the DPs (Maharashtra), and the DPI (Tamil Nadu), are analyzed to understand their attitude toward Dalit Women and whether Dalit women have been able to play a role in these parties.

DEFINING DALITS

There are differences in the manner in which DPs conceptualised the term Dalit. The Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra (influenced by Marxism) conceptualized Dalits in terms of class and, therefore, included members of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who were exploited politically and economically.² As the Dalit Panthers movement highly influences DPI (Tamil Nadu), it also includes all socio-eco and politically exploited sections of the society. Both DPs and DPI mentioned women as an oppressed category, so they recognized them and included them in their definition of Dalits. On the other hand, BSP used the term strictly and only included those who were exploited based on caste (influenced by Ambedkar). For BSP, caste is the only reality. Thus, we can see a caste/class divide that differentiates their definition of Dalits. These two parties are ideologically different in their working style, as DPI is more militant and dominating than BSP. Sudha Pai rightly argues that the BSP is not a revolutionary party of change for the lower orders, as the Dalit Panthers professed to be at its inception. In contrast, it represents a reformist strand that has adopted the Parliamentary path of gradual social transformation.³ *A look at the above definitions makes it very clear that DPI and DPs have included women (as a separate category) in their definition of Dalit, while BSP has ignored the gender dimension in its definition.* Vivek Kumar gives two reasons why women cannot be a part of the Dalits category. Although women in India are exploited on class and gender basis, it's not a homogeneous category as caste plays an important role, and low caste women are treated differently from upper caste and also because the Indian Women's movement has not addressed Dalit women's question.⁴

NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

There is a considerable difference between cultures in these two parts of India. The South has a culture that is pro-women, and the North has a culture against women, and this culture has accordingly shaped the Dalit movements and the political parties.

SOUTH INDIA

Women occupy a better position in the South than in the North. The reasons are historical as well as socio-economic in nature. Tamil Nadu has witnessed a long anti-Brahmin movement beginning in the 1800s. However, it was RS Naicker and Periyar who radicalized the movement and gave greater importance to Dalits as well as women. The Self-Respect Movement was started to bring radicalism to society. The Self-Respect Movement – Suyamariyatai Iyakkam- was dedicated to the goal of giving non-Brahmans a sense of pride based on their Dravidianist past, which also meant a denial of the superiority of the Brahman and the Brahman's implicit faith in the system.⁵

In Tamil Nadu, the role of Periyar in the empowerment of women cannot be underestimated. He revolutionized Tamil society by initiating the “Self-Respect Movement,” which emphasized the equality and autonomy of women. Self-Respect weddings were celebrated without the assistance of Brahman priests. His Self Respect Movement brought many changes in the way women were viewed in TN. He disinvested the reproductive role of women within the endogamous/monogamous family and gave it a material viewpoint as he propagated marriage to be an extension of property relations. He also gave importance to women's choice by using contraception that helps them exercise control over their bodies and could also escape them from male domination. The movement challenged the “patriarchy” prevalent in Tamil Culture, which restricted women to the domestic sphere by making men the sole breadwinner who had the capability of earning money. The movement demanded that domestic work be accorded the same respect as wage labor and a paid service. It also

²Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panthers Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991).

³Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 12.

⁴Vivek Kumar, “Locating Dalit women in the Indian caste system, media and women's movement,” *Social Change* 39, no.1 (2009): 69.

⁵Eugene F Irschick, *Political and Social Conflict in South India: The non-Brahman movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 330.

initiated self-respect marriage, where an individual's choice was given preference over social and familial preferences, and it also encouraged cross-cut alliances and widow remarriage. Periyar's ideals still dominate Contemporary Dalit politics, but its radicalism seems sidelined.

Hugo Gorringer's study provides an example in his meeting with Katherine, a Dravida Kazhagam activist in Melavassell. He was introduced to her in a friend's flat, where she was nestled on the only chair in the room. She spoke boldly about the need to escape the patriarchal aspects of society. She emphasised that she was not wearing a *thali* (marriage thread that must not be removed) because she saw it as a symbol of oppression.⁶ The Dravidian movement began concerning marriage. Self-respect Marriages are still prevalent in Tamil culture and have the state's approval. The state also promotes them and gives the couples financial benefits to encourage them. But the Dravidian movement has lost its radical edge, so Dalits have moved out to form their own parties. Within them, the role of women is no longer as important.

NORTH INDIA

In the Northern states, upper-caste women were historically kept within the purdah, socially secluded, and distant from the outside world. She spends all her life within the house's four walls, and the public space is out of her reach and considered a male domain. It's the socio-cultural norms that justify patriarchy in the northern region. Land, considered the main asset, is always in man's name and is transferred from a father to his son. In this way, women are generally kept away from inheritance rights. This shows that women are given a secondary place in society compared to men. The inferiority of women to men is accepted in all the castes, but there are differences in the degree to which this is the case. Differences in region, caste, and class significantly affect the status of women, and these need to be considered.⁷ One important thing is that in the North, the position of even upper-caste women is poor, and the reasons are historical as well as socio-economic in nature. As far as the gender index is concerned, it is better in the south than in the north. Women in the South have better literacy rates, better health, and low sex ratios. As per Miller's analysis of sex ratios, infant mortality rates, and fertility figures, he calls the culture in the north a "culture against women."⁸ On the other hand, Dyson and Moore conversely argue that southern and eastern states have lower marital fertility, a later age of marriage, lower infant mortality, and also low sex ratios, which are the indicators to suggest a "culture pro-women."⁹ In the north, there are exogamic marriages whereby women are married outside families to far-off places, which is why they are not given property inheritance rights. In contrast, in the South, generally, marriages are held within a family, like with cousins and close relatives, and in most cases, women inherit property. In north India, cultural practices limit the contact between a woman and her natal village. Indeed, many parents regard their work as complete after the marriage and the costs incurred during that ceremony.¹⁰ On the other hand, in the south, east, and lower castes, "bride price" is a common trend, and as they are married in nearby villages, their family remains the primary source of support.

Another reason women in the South are accorded a better status than the North is that they play a significant role in agricultural production. In the south, there is more rice production, with a higher demand for female labor than wheat-producing northern areas. This shows that economic independence provides women with some sense of autonomy and agency. Thus, financial independence is one reason that has led to the comparatively better position of women in the south than in the north.

Now, we will look at the essential Dalit movements individually to see which identity (gender or caste) is prominent over the other. One thing to be noted is that these movements have transformed into political parties now.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN DALIT PARTIES DALIT PANTHERS

Dalit Panthers was founded in 1972 in Maharashtra by Namdev Dhasal. It was a revolutionary social organization that made use of arms and weapons to fight for the rights of the Dalits. It was inspired by the Black Panthers, who fought for the rights of the African Americans in the United States. This movement differed significantly from other Dalit movements because of its militant nature. The movement questioned the efficiency of the political system that has failed to achieve the objective of social equality and economic justice. The movement revolutionized society by over-emphasizing the importance of man making him the creator of his destiny, giving him the power to make decisions and bring change to society. It stressed that man is a

⁶ Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005)

⁷ Ibid, 222.

⁸ B. Miller, 1981. The Endangered Sex. Quoted in Hugo Gorringer, 2005. *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu*.

⁹ T. Dyson and M. Moore, 1983. On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy and Demographic Behaviour in India. Quoted in Hugo Gorringer, 2005. *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu*.

¹⁰ Ibid, 223.

rational and independent being not bound by religion and God. The movement aimed at structural change, not a reformist agenda, and was against the system of reservations and concessions. The Dalit Panthers have rightly perceived that what the oppressed in India need are not concessions, facilities, and reservations, but the establishment of Dalit Raj. Mere demands for concessions, elections and Satyagraha cannot revolutionise the social system.¹¹

Lata Murugkar, in her book "Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal," has looked at the history, structure, leadership, ideology, and program of the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra during the period 1972-1979. She has discussed how the socio-political, cultural, and economic changes in Indian history have made untouchables more politically conscious. As they were disillusioned with Hinduism, they converted to Buddhism and rejected the Gandhian patronizing term *harijan* and adopted the casteless term "Dalit" (downtrodden) and entered the political arena. The most important contribution of its members has been revolutionary literature, such as plays, short stories, and poetry, which directly attacked the caste system and cultural hegemony of Brahmins.¹² The Dalit Panthers are widely known for their violent nature. The party is against Hinduism and, therefore, made violent attacks on Hindu deities and famous heroes like Shivaji. Their violent activities have always met with state repression. Thus, it was clear from its activities that Dalit Panthers, as a political force, were focused on overthrowing the present social and political system. There was a strong connection between the movement and Dalit literature. The movement is the political expression of the spirit of protest and rebellion that is consciously developed through literature. The source of inspiration for Dalit literature is real life, the experiences of the Dalit community, in its totality. Believing that the entire socio-economic structure has to be overhauled, it refutes and rejects Hindu religion and its legacy, but not the humanist tradition.¹³ As we know the party has a strong relation with the dalit literature that is popularly known as protest-literature; which depicts a counter-ideology to the mainstream literature. It's essential to look at the dalit sahitya in Maharashtra, an important part of the Dalit Panthers organisation.

DALIT SAHITYA IN MAHARASHTRA

At the outset, it must be noted that Dalit Panthers has emerged from a group of young revolutionary writers and poets. The prominent among them are Namdeo Dhasal (founder of the organization), Raja Dhale, and J.V.Pawar, etc. All of them were protesting against the corrupt, self-seeking, faction-ridden, and poor leadership of the RPI. To start with, Namdeo Dhasal has been writing poetry and has published a small magazine known as Vidroha, which was affiliated with their left faction. His work is noted for its intricacy of language, fancifulness of theme, and explicit identification with the world's revolutionary tradition.¹⁴

Both the Dalit Panthers and Dalit Sahitya have reflected the advent of a new mahar- Buddhist elite who are much beyond the parochialism of the Ambedkar movement. Most of the Dalit Sahityiks studied in People's Education Society institutions, and they are highly influenced by the principles of Ambedkarism. Their sole source of inspiration for writing Dalit literature is Babasaheb. Dalit Sahitya as a literary genre began as a revolt against mainstream Marathi literature.¹⁵ It is a counter-ideology that aims to represent the interests of the Dalit masses irrespective of caste or community. Therefore, whenever the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan is organised, the Dalit Sahityiks protest against it as they see the sammelans as an insult to Dalit literature and attack them for upholding the caste system. Dalit Sahitya aims to expose the naked reality of Indian society that is the reality of people with low incomes, the exploited sections of the society that constitute the majority. It has also been observed that the relationship between the Dalit political leaders and the masses is less authentic and weaker than the bond between the Dalit writers and the Dalit masses. The masses don't feel connected with the leaders as they become corrupt and self-serving and fails to fulfil its promise of serving people experiencing poverty. Dalit Sahitya, as a counter-ideology, is intended to represent the interests of the Dalit masses irrespective of caste or community.

The Dalit Sahitya movement has met the same fate as the Dalit Panther movement in terms of splits and factions. Splits and the growth of factions have rived the Dalit Sahitya movement. There are three significant associations: the Dalit Sahitya Parishad, which is ostensibly Marxist in its orientation and is led by Baburao Bagul, the Asmita Darsha group led by Gangadhar Panatawane, and the Bauddha Sahitya Parishad led by Bhausaheb Adsul.¹⁶

BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY: AS A MOVEMENT TO A PARTY

Started in 1985, it began as a movement rather than a party. Today, BSP is a well-known, strong Dalit party and comes only next to Congress and BJP, but it was not the case before. In its earlier phase, BSP was a

¹¹ Moin Shakir, "Beyond the System," *Economic and Political Weekly* 9, no.16 (1974): 3.

¹² Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal*.

¹³ Shakir, "Beyond the System," 3.

¹⁴ Francine Frankel (ed.), *Dominance and state power in modern India- decline of a social order* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

movement for social change, and it has launched social organizations like BAMCEF, and DS4. Kanshi Ram, popularly known as 'Saheb' or 'Mannyavar' among the BSP cadres, is the founder of the BSP movement.¹⁷ BSP has evolved through various phases; it's essential to look at its journey from a social movement to a dalit solid party.

The All India Backward And Minority Communities Employees Federation

In 1971, Kanshi Ram and his colleagues established the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Minorities Employees Welfare Association under Poona Charity Commissioner.¹⁸ With the "welfare of employees" as the purpose in mind, it led to the formation of BAMCEF (The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation) as an employee organization. This organisation was significant as it provided material and human resources in the formation of BSP. There are several exciting trends about BAMCEF: *Firstly*, BAMCEF made the beneficiaries of positive discrimination "morally responsible" to help the movement gain momentum by extending support, especially financially. BAMCEF, in its own words, was conceived as a 'think-tank, a talent bank and financial bank' of the oppressed and exploited society to pursue its mission ahead.¹⁹ *Secondly*, BAMCEF kept its functions behind closed doors and let no one know about its moves, and meetings were also held at unknown destinations only known to its few critical members. These essential strategies helped in its success. However, as everything has an expiration date, BAMCEF also got fragmented as one group was not satisfied with Kanshi Ram's decision to launch BSP. This led to the split, with one group headed by Kanshi Ram helping BSP in electoral mobilization for the party. In contrast, the other group (the anti-political one) worked in the process of mobilizing Dalits for non-political but social welfare. The stated objectives of BAMCEF are comprehensive and non-political. As described in a BAMCEF publication by a senior functionary:

1. To provide hope and help to one's downtrodden society- which has been made to feel hopeless and helpless through the centuries-old tyrannies committed on it by the exploiters and oppressors in India.
2. To build, lay and strengthen the non-political roots of the oppressed and exploited society in social, economic, educational, cultural, scientific, trade, commerce and industry, which the tyrant class has wholly destroyed.
3. To become a perennial source of inspiration for the oppressed and exploited society by developing moral values for self and by exhibiting those values to the society as a model.
4. To create capable, committed, and genuine leadership.
5. To generate, develop and operate direction centers to guide the oppressed and exploited society.
6. To develop and provide resources and skills to the society for its amelioration.²⁰

DALIT SHOSIT SAMAJ SANGHARSH SAMITI

DS4 (Dalit Shosit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti) was established in 1981²¹. Through this organization, Kanshi Ram thought of expanding its social base by including Dalits other than government employees. It aimed to educate the Bahujans and make them conscious of their plight so that they could struggle for their rights and become politically active. Within three years, BSP was launched in the year 1984, making it very evident that DS4 was used as a platform to make dalits politically conscious to play a more active role in BSP. Thus, one could say that Kanshi Ram was a strategist who made every effort to make dalits politically assertive. In this light, it would not be wrong to say that BAMCEF and DS4 were the tactical tools used to ready the Dalits to fight for the more significant cause independently without the support of upper-caste parties. It is true that after a long time of being exploited as "vote-banks" by mainstream nationalist parties, the formation of BSP has given the Dalits a new hope. With its formation, Kanshi Ram also gave Dalits, OBCs, and Minorities a new nomenclature, 'Bahujans.' This also helped create new identity for these sections, especially for the dalits. He floated the argument that Bahujan constitute 85% of the country's population to concretize this identity. They have been suppressed, oppressed, and exploited by 15 percent of the upper castes.²²

Recently, the BSP in Uttar Pradesh has emerged as a significant mobilizing force among the Dalits in northern India. It has developed a confederation of OBCs, Dalits, Tribals, and minority communities under one title, Bahujan, conceived to bind them under one identity, aiming to establish ethno-cultural unity and a broader political base. The terms Bahujan and Dalit are now being used parallel to represent the cultural meaning of the newly emerging Dalit identity in northern India. Some 6,000 castes and communities are now included

¹⁷Vivek Kumar, *India's Roaring Revolution: Dalit Assertion and New Horizons* (Delhi: Gagandeep Publications, 2006).

¹⁸ Vicziany Marika and Oliver Mendelsohn, *The Untouchables Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ The New Messiah 1988: 5 Quoted in Pai, 2002.

²⁰ Mool Chand, 1992. The Bahujan and their Movement. Quoted in Sudha Pai, 2002. Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution.

²¹ Kumar, *India's Roaring Revolution: Dalit Assertion and New Horizons*.

²² Ibid.

within the Bahujan category.²³ BSP is considered the most crucial development in the politics of Uttar Pradesh as it gave the Dalits a new identity, and never before its formation did Dalits think of contesting independently, as whenever they contested, it was from upper caste parties. BSP was the first independent Dalit party (composed and run by the Dalits). For Kumar, the Dalit movement that was reduced to BSP is a roaring revolution that drastically altered the political landscape of U.P. as Dalits have come out from isolation to assertion. However, neither BAMCEF nor DS4 provided space to Dalit women as they viewed them as a weak and oppressed category capable of doing nothing. On the other hand, Kanshi Ram selected Mayawati, a Dalit woman, to head a Dalit party, and he was highly impressed by her oratory skills and fiery speeches. This has not happened in any other party, but BSP, but the question remains whether the coming of Mayawati has helped more Dalit women in politics.

SHIFT FROM BAHUJAN TO SARVAJAN

When BSP was established, it was a Dalit party that only included ex-untouchables as its social base. Still, it soon realized the limitation and expanded its base by including SCs, STs, OBCs, and Muslim Minorities and gave them the terminology of “BAHUJAN” as they accounted for 85% of the Indian population. They form the party, while the remaining 15%, including the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas, are the party's enemies and hence excluded from the party's organization. Initially, the party specified that it did not need the votes or support of these 15%. Under the electoral compulsion, when the party reached its stagnation point, it made a pragmatic decision to revive its social base by mobilizing the upper castes. As mentioned earlier, the party changed its ideology to one against Brahman/Brahmanism and called them Manuvadi. Still, with time, it changed that the party was never against Brahmin but against Brahmanism, which excluded the Bahujan Samaj from the socio-economic, cultural, and political spheres. The party declared itself as a Sarvajan party that is open to people of all castes; the party not only welcomed the upper castes in the party but also gave them leadership positions and provided them with adequate representation. To woo the upper castes, especially the Brahmins, the BSP became more open as well as democratic and arranged “Brahmin jodo sammelans” in many states and also formed “bhaichara-committees” intending to develop a harmonious relationship between the Brahmins and Dalits.

Looking at the current state of BSP, Sudha Pai rightly said that instead of breaking the caste system and bringing social change, it has made compromises with the same forces. She rightly questions whether BSP is a movement with an agenda for radical social change or a political party driven solely by the compulsion to achieve power.²⁴ For Kanshi Ram, political power is the most crucial element that could help the economic upliftment of Dalits and provide them with dignity/self-respect. The Dalit-Bahujan state can prevent Dalits from being oppressed and offer them a sense of self-respect, carry out ‘social engineering’ from above by introducing policies favorable to them, and prevent caste-based atrocities on Dalits and improve their condition in villages. What the BSP wants, therefore, is not reform of the system or more social welfare policies, as in the past, but a share in political power.²⁵ BSP has entered into temporary electoral alliances with parties like SP, BJP, and even Congress, showing that to capture state power, it was ready to compromise with its ideals, which shows BSP is an opportunistic dalit party and is no longer interested in destroying the caste hierarchy but satisfied in replacing Manuvadi forces (upper castes) with the Dalit-Bahujan Samaj in the state machinery.

BSP AND DALIT WOMEN HEROES

A grand Dalit political discourse was established during the initial campaign and the formation of the BSP in 1984. After 1990, changes were brought in the political language of the party. Apart from the old symbols and icons of Dalit movements, local traditions, caste histories, and myths dominated its hustings. A Cultural Awakening Squad was formed to present this discourse of the past through songs, theatres, and poetry to ordinary people. It was performed just before a political meeting to gather a large crowd to listen to the following political discourses.²⁶ In the 1990s, BSP tried to gain the grassroots support of all Dalit groups. BSP, a strong Dalit-based party, uses multiple mobilization strategies to form strong vote banks. One of its essential mobilization strategies is to revive its past and give it a new, powerful meaning. BSP has used individual female heroes and their heroic past stories to unify not only the Dalits but also the other sections of the society that could help them win elections and come to power. It's well-known that marginalized communities have always used myths, histories, and heroes of their past to challenge their present position in society and invoke feelings of worth and pride among their members. These myths, heroes of the past, etc, help the marginalized communities to gain self-respect and assert themselves politically.

²³Badri Narayan, “Demarginalisation and history: Dalit Re-invention of the Past,” *South Asia Research* 28, no.2 (2008): 172.

²⁴Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*, 1.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Narayanan, “Demarginalisation and History: Dalit Reinvention of the Past,” 179.

The BSP was the first to understand the significance of heroes as resources..... From the multitude of heroes of the various castes, the BSP picked out a few women heroes of the 1857 rebellion who were projected as symbols of Dalit identity and used to build up the image of Mayawati, the leader of the BSP. The success of the party's political strategy can be judged by the fact that Mayawati was the first Dalit woman to become the chief minister of the feudal, patriarchal, and caste-ridden state of the U.P.²⁷ Use of the heroic female figures of Jhalkaribai in the Bundelkhand region and Udadevi in the central area of Uttar Pradesh are examples of how local figures and histories are used for political mobilization by the BSP.²⁸ These historic female figures have been invoked to construct the image of Mayawati as a Dalit women icon who could revolutionize Dalit politics and bring social change in Dalit women's lives.

The question that becomes important is, are these myths, legends, heroes, etc, so powerful? Do they invoke feelings of pride and worth among its people? Do they help the people to mobilize and vote en masse? The answer to all these questions is YES. By glorifying the past, they feel pride and connect with their past because they think that they were not like this in the past; the glorious past helps them to come out from humiliation they had a past full of heroes and it also gives them the hope that the notion of pollution and untouchability might diminish with time and they will soon become a part of the mainstream society. In other words, using their own "cultural resources," they are challenging the cultural hegemony of the upper castes and asserting themselves. These songs and past stories have provided Dalit women with spiritual strength.

The above account very clearly shows that the Bahujan Samaj Party has used Dalit women's heroes to construct the image of Mayawati as an icon of Dalit women. However, it has not given them party tickets or essential positions in the party organization. The party has just used the Dalit women heroes as cultural resources so that the Dalit women could relate to and support the party.

Deconstructing The Image Of Mayawati As An Icon Of Dalit Women

In India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, Dalits have revolutionized politics and elected a famous Dalit woman, Mayawati, as its Chief Minister. It was for the first time in 1995 in the history of UP that a woman (particularly a Dalit woman) had come to occupy the most crucial post in the state. Since then, she became an icon for Dalits, especially Dalit women, and emerged as a symbol of their dignity and aspirations after years of oppression at the hands of the caste Hindus. Since then, she has come to power three more times, but Mayawati has still done little for the women of her community. This reveals that the caste identity is more important than the gender identity. My claim is that in contemporary Dalit politics, the issue of Dalit women is not adequately addressed. This raises the question of the credibility of Mayawati's leadership as when she said "*Mei Dalit Ki Beti hoon.....*" on the national scene; what's essential for her to do? Is it the Dalit or Beti identity? A look at the welfare schemes makes it very clear that there were hardly any welfare schemes for Dalit women as such, which denotes the fact that Mayawati did nothing substantially to politically empower Dalit women. She shattered the hopes of Dalit women by not giving them adequate representation and positions of responsibility in the party.

To maintain its social base with the party, BSP channeled government funds to give material rewards to its people by designing welfare programs aimed at their welfare. One such program was the Ambedkar Village Development Scheme, implemented in villages with a maximum Dalit population. Under AVDS, there were a total of 37 programs: the construction of link roads, rural electrification, construction of brick-paved road drains, rural sanitation program, the opening of primary schools/ building construction, and free boring, Integrated rural development program, Indira housing scheme, making clean drinking water available, Kisan pension scheme, Widow pension scheme. Pai states that the party has introduced a series of exclusively Dalit-oriented social justice policies in education, social welfare, employment generation, etc., the most important being the Ambedkar Village Programme, into which a large amount of state fund was channeled.²⁹ Although the party has helped Dalit men, Dalit women have been neglected in spheres of empowerment. It has also been the case that mostly, the beneficiaries of the positive discrimination have been Dalit men. At the party, Mayawati did not emphasize the gender dimension but always raised and addressed the caste question. This shows that the party has been playing on gender lines throughout, i.e., using Dalit women heroes to construct the image of Mayawati as an icon of Dalit women, using them as vote banks, seeing their political activity in terms of SEWA, etc.

BSP AND DALIT WOMEN ACTIVISTS

It becomes essential to see how Dalit women of BSP associate themselves with the organization. Manuela Ciotti very interestingly argues that several low-caste women activists she interviewed (within the BSP) resisted using

²⁷Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 15-16.

²⁸Naraan, "Demarginalisation and History: Dalit Reinvention of the Past," 179.

²⁹Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*.

the Dalit label for self-representation.³⁰ For them, Dalit is not the preferred term they want to be identified; they prefer Scheduled Castes (S.C.). They don't consider themselves as "asli dalits" (true Dalits) as most of the interviewees were from Chamar caste (it is regarded as the better-off caste than other low castes) and are married to government employees and this makes them feel that they are better than Dalits as they no more live in slums, they own some electrical appliances like a car, air conditioner, washing machine, etc., their children go to schools or colleges, they live in mixed neighborhoods. As a result of all this, there is a total transformation of the class, and they are no longer Dalits, but they are wise and educated. Ciotti very rightly states..... Women deny Dalit as a subaltern ontological condition on the grounds of this term's *disempowering* connotations. More importantly, women's narratives convey the idea of being 'non-suffering subjects' while often making remarks about their community's improvement.³¹

Another reason for their refusal to associate with the term Dalit is their anti-caste feelings. Moreover, they want to move beyond caste and be known as local leaders working with a political organization for the welfare of the Asli Dalits. The above account makes one wonder about using the term Dalit as the self-chosen term by the low castes. Is the term dalit the preferred term for all? If caste is not the problem for Dalit women, what is it?

DALIT WOMEN AND THEIR WRITINGS

There has been a debate going on for a long time about who has the right to write about Dalit's miseries. Whose writings will be considered Dalit writings? The answer to this question is a bit complex. It is said that writing by Dalits based on Dalit consciousness will reflect the painful experiences of Dalit people. Being born a Dalit alone is not enough to write Dalit poetry. Dalit consciousness is a critical factor in Dalit writing..... Writing by upper castes that express Dalit reality in terms similar to that by Dalit writers can be called sympathetic poetry. There is a unanimous view that only those who suffer oppression can adequately represent that oppression.³²

In the literary world, the entry of Dalit's writings has come a little late in the late 1980s, and as far as Dalit women's writings are concerned, it's a very recent phenomenon. It has taken a lot of time for Dalit women to come out of their miseries and exploitation and use their pens as a weapon to fight the oppression that they face because of caste-class-gender nexus.

With the coming of BSP, we see the rising political consciousness among Dalits and, consequently, an increase in the publication of Dalit books, journals, and articles in newspapers and magazines. Most Dalit writers started their literary careers by writing autobiographies, which made them read sensations daily. Omprakash Valmiki's Jonathan (1997) and Surajpal Chauhan's Tiraskrit (2002) are the two well-known Dalit autobiographies of Hindi, while Dalit women have written no autobiographies., like many other marginalized groups, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a flow of assertion and resistance in its own right.³³

In these two well-known autobiographies, Dalit women are absent. One example is the case of Dalit women, who are almost entirely lacking in *Joothan* and considerably so in *Tiraskrit*. Though the protagonist associates himself with other Dalit friends and the Dalit community, the 'We' that has come to mean 'all Dalits' is also decidedly male. The silence regarding Valmiki's wife's agency is one obvious example; Chanda only appears for brief moments in the narrative, once when she asks, 'You're not joking, are you?' in response to Valmiki's marriage proposal, again when she receives a theatrical award, and once more when the narrator describes her refusal to use the name 'Valmiki' herself. No insights into this character's reasoning, nor the different circumstances and restraints faced by Dalit women in general, are given in the narrative. *Tiraskrit* is an even more complex case since the examples of women exhibiting their agency are interspersed in the narrative with derogatory comments questioning the moral character of 'women.'³⁴ This makes it very clear that Dalit women have no place in Dalit autobiography, and when Dalit women are mentioned, they are mentioned without any personal agency.

WELFARE SCHEMES FOR DALIT WOMEN

BSP is a strong Dalit party aiming for social transformation and economic emancipation. In its appeal booklet, it has very clearly specified that the Party will specifically focus on the unique needs of the SCs, STs, OBCs, and minorities and will organize them to improve their condition.

The party also declared its aim to work for these downtrodden masses –

a. to remove their backwardness.

³⁰Manuela Ciotti, "Futurity in words: low- caste women political activists' self-representation and post-Dalit scenarios in north India," *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no.1 (2010).

³¹Ibid, 47.

³²Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, "Dalit women's writing in Telugu," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no.17 (1998).

³³Sarah Beth, "Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi: the transformation of pain into resistance,"

³⁴Ibid, 6.

- b. to fight against their oppression and exploitation.
- c. to improve their status in society and public life.
- d. to improve their living conditions in day-to-day life.

Looking at the party's election manifestos also makes it clear that the party has several welfare schemes for Dalit women. We will look at these schemes individually, such as Mahamaya Garib Balika Ashirvad Yojna, to better view them. The then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Ms. Mayawati, launched the Mahamaya Gharib Balika Ashirvad Yojana at her official residence on 15 January 2009. This scheme would benefit girls born on or after January 15, 2009. In 2009, Rs.900 crore was invested in the scheme to cover 4.5 lakh girls. This scheme is essential for empowering poor girls and helping them become self-reliant and independent. This scheme is basically for the BPL families of Uttar Pradesh. Under this scheme, the lump sum would be put as a fixed deposit or invested in the NSCs for 18 years after the girl's birth. The beneficiary girl would get an amount of Rs. 1 lakh only if she remained unmarried until 18 years. Only the first girl is eligible for the scheme. Second girl child would also be eligible, but not more than two. If the eligible family has legally adopted an orphaned girl and completes all the conditions, the girl would be taken as the first girl and benefit from the scheme. The only necessary condition is that the birth of the girl child should be registered.

Based on the principle of "Sarvajan Hitai, Sarvajan Sukhai," the scheme aimed to check the decreasing female ratio and girl foeticide, giving girls respectability and self-reliance. This will also help create constructive thinking towards the birth of girls in society, discouraging child marriage. Another scheme is Savitri Bai Phule Balika Shiksha Madad Yojna. Under this, the government will give Rs 25,000 and a bicycle each to the girls from families living

below the poverty line for their education in Classes XI and XII. To improve the literacy rate among Dalit girls, 52 082 cycles were distributed to make it easier for them to cover long distances in less time. Mayawati wanted the above schemes to be effectively implemented so that the girls are not considered a burden on their families. These schemes have been made to make the condition of Dalit girls respectable and ensure the education of poor girls. The above schemes make it clear that although there were schemes for Dalit women, these schemes did nothing to include them in politics. These schemes only gave them financial incentives but did nothing substantial to make them politically active. Under Mayawati's regime, Dalit women are underrepresented in its government and the decision-making process. Despite the positive discrimination, we hardly see Dalit women in politics as the primary beneficiaries have been Dalit men. It is Dalit men who take advantage of these reservation policies. Now, we will look at the other ethnic party, i.e., DPI in the South. Before we look at the party, it's essential to look at Tamil politics, which backward caste politics have always dominated.

POST- INDEPENDENCE TAMIL POLITICS

Post-independence Tamil politics is marked by the dominance of Backward Caste (BC) politics regarding parties representing their interests. This makes one suspicious that if there were parties representing backward caste interests, why did the marginalized communities form other parties like DPI? Harris answers the question by arguing that the egalitarian rhetoric has not translated into practice, and the incorporation of marginal groups into a system of state patronage does not equate to an extension of democratic participation.³⁵ The dominance of BC politics doesn't mean there was a total absence of other parties. Although Congress was strongly present in TN politics, its vote share was eroding, and regional parties like DMK (riding high on language nationalism) were taking over. 1967 was significant as Tamil Nadu became the first Indian state to elect a regionalist party by removing the so-called Congress as the party of consensus. This result made everyone believe that regionalism has taken over the "Brahmin era."

DMK came to power and ruled the state for almost ten years, but with time, the party lost its track and became highly conservative and personalized, and consequently, this led to its split and the formation of another party called AIADMK. Both parties dominated Tamil politics in the coming elections, but these parties became highly centralized and personalized and finally lost their radicalism and compromised with the Brahmanic forces. Over time, both parties abandoned their anti-centre and anti-Hindi positions, softened their anti-Brahminism....and failed to implement meaningful redistributive policies.³⁶ As both parties became highly conservative, the Dalits were disillusioned about their future, so they chose an alternative path and entered mainstream politics. This, as per Gorringer, was the biggest mistake of the Dalit movements, as it made them weak and ideologically bankrupt. He says, "The radical possibilities suggested by the initial foray into electoral competition have evaporated. Rather than reforming the institutions they entered, Dalit movements have been

³⁵J. Harris, "Whatever Happened to Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu?," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 40, no. 3 (2002).

³⁶Ibid.

institutionalized.”³⁷ There are two Dalit Parties in Tamil Nadu, i.e., Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT) and DPI. This chapter will look at DPI as the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu.

DPI

Under Thirumavalavan, highly influenced by the Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra, the DPI was formed in 1982. Since its inception, the party has been assertive and militant in its approach. The party believed in “A hit for a hit.”³⁸ The movement stayed away from mainstream politics for a decade, survived grassroots mobilization, and focused on its goal by following the ideal of radicalism. Soon, the movement made a pragmatic decision to enter mainstream politics and contested elections in 1999. The leaders emphasized that the decision was for the betterment of the Dalits as their people would represent them and have their party. It was also argued that the electoral boycott did not benefit the Dalits as the Dalits were voting for the other parties, and these parties were doing nothing for them but just exploiting them as vote banks. In other words, the reason that the leaders put forward in favor of entering the electoral arena was that as the Dalits were already voting for different parties, it was better if we (the DPI) contest elections and win elections and also because they thought choosing the democratic path would help them in the future. In other words, DPI realized that the Dalits were mistakenly casting their votes for the Dravidian parties as they would never protect them and forget about pursuing their interests. To widen its social base, like BSP, it also welcomed the other castes by offering them seats. PT initiated the trend. Hugo Gorringer argues that both the DPI and PT have attempted to broaden their social base by appealing to “Tamils” and dropping caste terminology from their titles (the DPI renamed itself the Liberation Panthers in 1999).³⁹

However, the movement activists did not welcome the decision, and the party lost many dedicated members. Their alliance with other parties like DMK and AIADMK at different times made Dalits suspicious of its intentions. Therefore, the party lost its mass appeal and radicalism and is finding it extremely difficult to justify its decision to enter politics. The party can also not balance its grassroots politics and state politics. The grassroots mobilization that effectively challenged local practices of untouchability and brought the DPI to prominence risks being overlooked in the face of political compulsions.⁴⁰

DPI AND WOMEN

As a movement, DPI has always supported women’s issues, promoted self-respecting marriages and inter-caste marriages, and has always preferred women’s choices and desires over socio-cultural norms. After entering mainstream politics, DPI has become institutionalized, more bureaucratic, and lost its radicalism. Both PT and DPI entered into the Tamil Protection Movement (TPI). TPI firmly believes in moral conservatism and ethnic chauvinism that is in direct conflict with DPI’s commitment to women’s rights. Addressing the Women’s Struggle Committee’s protest against poll violence, he went further: “Woman” is taken to mean being the handmaid of her husband; women have yet to enter politics. Whether it be the Communist party or the Dravidian parties, they see women as objects to be kept within boxes’ (speech, 1 November 1999).⁴¹

But now TPI, which believes in the “chastity of women,” has started imposing “moral policing” and, in a way, began restricting women’s choices and independence. This confirms the sense that the demand for women’s rights was a symbol of tokenism. It is pertinent here that none of the DPI candidates 2006 were women. Thirumavalavan said he would ‘sacrifice anything for the cause of Tamil’ (- Tamil.com 2004). Still, if the Tamilian ‘solution’ to exclusive identity neglects Dalit interests, it constitutes a ‘dramatic dilution of its [DPI’s] radicalism’ (Anandhi 2005: 4876). There is also a question mark over the extent to which an appeal to a translated identity can be mobilized, given the extent to which caste concerns have colonized the political sphere. Indeed, in April 2005, the joint PMK/DPI protests against the erosion of Tamil culture faltered in the face of two bye-elections (Venkatesh 2005). If the DPI’s radicalism is confined to nationalist chauvinism, what has political engagement gained?⁴²

³⁷Hugo Gorringer, “Taming the Dalit Panthers: Dalit Politics in Tamil Nadu,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 2, no.1 (2007): 52.

³⁸DPI lacked resources to sustain the movement and this sense of powerlessness attracted them to violent methods to make their presence felt in the areas. So the use of “violent rhetoric” was used to raise consciousness. In this way, there was a strong connection between violence rhetoric and presence of their movement.

³⁹Hugo Gorringer, “Taming the Dalit Panthers: Dalit Politics in Tamil Nadu,” 56.

⁴⁰Hugo Gorringer, “Beyond ‘Dull and Sterile Routines’? Dalits Organising for Social Change in Tamil Nadu,” *Cultural Dynamics* 22, no.2 (2010):114.

⁴¹Hugo Gorringer, “Taming the Dalit Panthers: Dalit Politics in Tamil Nadu,” 61.

⁴²Ibid, 67.

As the cases of violence against Dalit women were really high, there was a need for the protection of Dalit women. In 1999, the Women's Wing of the Dalit People's Front called for Dalit women to be armed for self-protection- a call taken up by other movements.⁴³

Most of the movements have a women's wing that addresses the problem of Dalit women only. But it is seen that the women's wing is also subsumed in the work of the party, and Dalit women's issues are sidelined and neglected. '*We are not a separate movement*,' Pandiyammal of the *Tamil Nadu Women's Liberation Movement* insisted, '*We are in the Liberation Panther Movement*, and we attend their meetings in groups of one hundred women or so'..... 'we campaign on women's issues too' (interview, 28 March 1999).⁴⁴

It has always been the case that women's issues have been accorded a secondary place in the party's decision; these are the issues of "low priority." Despite the centrality of women's rights in the ideological manifestos of the various Dalit movements, it was evident that the women's wings were an afterthought rather than a systematic attempt to raise the voices and profile of Dalit women.....Women's wings were more embedded in localities and sought to address immediate concerns and issues.⁴⁵

As far as Dalit women's writings are concerned, they mostly write on patriarchy prevalent within the society and against the discrimination that the upper castes practice against them. Still, none of the writings reflects their desire to be a part of decision/policy making, which affects them directly. Thus, all the Dalit movements accept the liberation/ empowerment of women in principle, but when it comes to giving them positions of responsibility, they hesitate to provide them with. Most Dalit activists want their women to stay home and support their men from behind. As far as DPI is concerned, its women's wing is very active in its work and provides women with spaces for negotiation and discussion, but it has no welfare schemes for its women.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE LIBERATION PANTHERS⁴⁶

The Liberation Panthers is a Dalit party in Tamil Nadu. The main aim and objective of the party is to uplift the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes, and also Muslims and Christians. It is a party that believes in caste annihilation and socialist politics. Before Liberation Panthers became a party, it was very militant and aggressive, but with its entry into electoral politics, it adopted the parliamentary method to resolve its problems. Liberation Panthers is one of the prominent supporters of "Tamil Eelam" and has been continually staging protests, demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc, to pressure the government to support its demand for a separate homeland. It is constantly struggling in connection to Eelam Tamil Politics in Tamil Nadu. Its famous slogan is "Tiger means Eelam; Eelam means Tiger," it has been going to Jaffna, delivering speeches, and participating in conferences. As far as the Women's Liberation Panthers is concerned, it also conducted "a just war hunger strike" in support of the Tamil Eelam.

As the party continues to support Tamil Eelam, people feel disillusioned with the party and receive criticisms for its growing distance from grassroots problems. They think the party is no longer interested in Dalit issues and remains non-interested in their problems. The party also believes in "Tamil Nationalism," which makes the party conservative in its approach towards women, which also widens the gap between the leaders and its members. Thus, it could be said that the party started with the purpose of caste annihilation but, under electoral compulsions, made compromises with the same enemy forces, diverted its attention from grassroots problems, and changed its stand on the women's question.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary politics, identity-based parties play an essential and determining role in national politics. Generally, these parties are the outcome of the discontentment of a particular section of people. Thus, they are formed solely to serve their people at the cost of others. All the parties, i.e., BSP, DPI, and The Liberation Panthers, have evolved from social movements aimed at social transformation and breaking the caste system to solid political parties dominating electoral politics. One thing of prime importance is how these parties have defined Dalits. As far as Dalit Panthers and the Liberation Panthers are concerned, they have defined Dalits based on class, while BSP defines Dalits *on a caste* basis. Therefore, DP and the Liberation Panthers have included women as a distinctive separate category in their definition of Dalits, while BSP has not considered women a separate category. The above parties have undergone significant changes to widen their social base and gain votes, as they thought gaining political power would help them achieve their aim. But the reality is far different from this. As they entered mainstream politics, they changed their ideology and compromised with

⁴³Hugo Gorringe, "Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu."

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶It must be noted that DPI changed its name to the Liberation Panthers in 1999 when it entered into electoral politics.

the enemy forces. The parties have become highly standardized and bureaucratic, losing their radicalism over time.

In terms of representation, they gave representation to Dalit men and committed the mistake of homogenizing the term Dalits. Under electoral compulsions, they have adopted the “policy of accommodation” and given their enemy forces a share to appease the other castes. As far as Dalit women are concerned, it's not that they are entirely missing from the party. They have been given party membership to make up the numbers. In other words, they are exploited as “vote banks” and are hardly given any positions of leadership and responsibility. Although the parties have women's wings, they are hardly seen as separate, autonomous movements. They have been assimilated into the broader Dalit movement, which aims to fight caste inequalities. In the party meetings also, Dalit women are discriminated against by their male party members, and the gender issues that affect Dalit women are hardly given any importance. The women's wing of the Liberation Panthers is stronger than the BSP and has more politically active Dalit women. Still, regarding welfare schemes for Dalit women, the BSP is in a better position than the Liberation Panthers.

To gain support among Dalit women, BSP and the Liberation Panthers have used different mobilization strategies to woo Dalit women voters. BSP used its glorious past and female heroes to construct the image of Mayawati as an icon of Dalit women. It constructed the image of Mayawati as a fearless, courageous hero who will fight for the rights of Dalit women and enhance their strata in society. But she didn't work at all for their upliftment when she came to power. For her, the caste question was more important than the gender question. She didn't give them any leadership positions but party membership so that they could make up the numbers in protests, demonstrations, rallies, dharnas, etc. This is not to say that there were no specific welfare schemes for Dalit women, but these schemes were to keep them in their place. On the other hand, DPI supported and encouraged self-respecting marriages. Still, when it came to giving equal importance to women's issues in the party, it gave them a secondary role. The party, as such, has no welfare schemes for Dalit women. The party didn't succeed in implementing social change. Over the years, BSP has become an opportunistic political party only interested in gaining power, while the Liberation Panthers have lost their radicalism and become more accommodative. Both parties have compromised their ideals, and there is an existing patriarchy prevalent in the party, which hinders the growth of Dalit women leaders and their interests in acquiring a prominent role. This leaves us with an important question about gender in politics. The question is whether these parties do not promote dalit women in politics or they promote them into politics but do not empower them? The answer seems a bit complex as we see that dalit women are not completely missing in these parties, they are there in the party organisations, and there are welfare schemes for them but the question that remains unanswered is that are these parties empowering dalit women? This question demands more research to look at the internal functioning of parties, how they are treated within the party organisation etc. In other words, it becomes very clear that the dalit women's rights is not of primary concern to the dalit movement and also the dalit women struggle goes almost unmentioned.

Thus, one could say that in contemporary times, we see greater participation of women in politics like in Panchayats and social movements where we see women challenging their subservient position in society and exercising their autonomy. The participation has been more at the local level than the national level. Now, women panchayat members are seen more focused on women's problems that affect them on daily basis and make them vulnerable. However, we hardly see dalit women in leadership positions; but we see them all over when it comes to making up numbers. They are seen in large numbers taking part in demonstrations and protests and this seems to be the only way by which they can make their opinions heard while the parties use them as “vote-banks” and do not offer those spaces of discussion and negotiation.

The truth is that in contemporary Dalit politics, Dalit women's issues and concerns are not adequately addressed, and the Dalit parties do not empower them at all.

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