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## Introduction

### *Dalit Discourse in the New Millennium*

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The rapid economic and political shifts that have taken place in India in the last three decades have brought about considerable change in the lives of Dalit citizens. This is not to suggest that the social pyramid has been turned upside down as Dalits continue to face discrimination on everyday basis. Some level of progress across domains, however, is amply visible. The political assertion of the 1990s has brought about change in self-perception and renewed self-confidence. Similarly, some degree of economic mobility has made at least a section of Dalits better off than they were a generation ago. There has also been a spate of academic writings on Dalit movements and politics in the recent past, which has brought 'Dalit Studies' to the mainstream. Yet the academic lens to study Dalit social and political reality has largely remained the same, rooted in the static axes of oppression and the oppressed. Through the chapters in this volume, we present a much more nuanced picture of key changes and contemporary challenges in Dalit politics beyond existing frameworks. While the immediate post-independence period has not been ignored, our focus is on the dawn of the new millennium, which not only constitutes a defining phase in Indian politics, but also in the cultural, social, and political life of Dalits. The central argument that binds this volume is that in the backdrop of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ascendance to power at the national level, Dalit politics has acquired a more complex character which necessitates revisiting many scholarly formulations theorized earlier. We are witnessing the emergence of a new political economy; there is a need to make sense of what this means for the Dalit movement and political parties, and how they have reacted to it.

The rise of the BJP under Narendra Modi has received some serious scholarly attention. For example, Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot's (2019) edited volume addresses the construction of Hindu nationalism, the 'deep' majoritarian state, right-wing hegemony, and their impact on disadvantaged sections and minorities.

Similarly, a collection of essays edited by Vaishnav (2019) analyses the BJP's 2014 victory, its core ideological beliefs, economic policy, and impact on secularism. Scholars have also reflected on the changes in the national party system following the rise of the BJP and tried to make sense of the new India that has emerged – a good example of which being Niraja Gopal Jayal's (2019) edited volume on the 're-forming' of the nation, which has a section on Dalit politics. However, we argue that despite this proliferating literature, there has been little sustained and comprehensive effort to trace the new directions in the economic, political, and cultural life of Dalits in the new millennium. We suggest that new forms of aspirations, everyday anxieties, and occasional protests signify this multifaceted churn: rising aspirations for faster economic and sociocultural mobility, and anxiety not only against atrocities, but also frustration and disillusionment over lack of employment and opportunities, in the new polity and economy.

In the 1990s, issues of identity, social justice, dignity, and self-respect drove both mass and electoral Dalit politics. In contrast, we argue that Dalit thinking on self-identity and ideology, aspirations and mobility, discourse and protest, and their reflection and translation into politics, in the new millennium, is undergoing a fundamental change. Two significant developments underpin the transformations in Dalit politics: globalization and cultural changes. While earlier the notion of identity was central to the functioning of Dalit politics, we are witnessing a move from the desire for social justice to material advancement. The former has not disappeared, as it retains immense value for Dalits, but the latter has presently come to occupy greater centrality. Simultaneously, cultural changes amongst sections of Dalits may be linked to their desire for inclusion within the saffron fold of the BJP. While some may argue that this is merely an electoral move, the possibility of deeper underlying ideological changes needs greater exploration. These developments have created a division between a small, but influential, better-off, educated, upwardly mobile middle class, and the poorer and marginalized sections of Dalits. This class division overlaps with, and accentuates, traditional sub-caste divisions and demands for power within the community and movement or party and competition for state-provided reservation, employment, and welfare.

These identity-related and ideological shifts among Dalits, the decline of Dalit parties, and the divisions these changes have produced are reflected in politics. They have created internal fractures in the Dalit movement, leading to feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity over both ideology and political action. A shift towards the BJP is also simultaneously mirrored by strident protests against the party, providing greater evidence of these fractures. In the vacuum created by the decline of older Dalit parties, new Dalit organizations have emerged to protest

against the the myriad atrocities and discrimination – the Bhim Army in Uttar Pradesh (UP) led by Chandrashekhar Azad, the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) in Maharashtra led by Prakash Ambedkar, and the Una Dalit Atyachar Samiti in Gujarat led by Jignesh Mevani, among others. Do these organizations represent the crisis facing Dalit politics today or do they embody new forms of regeneration following the eclipse of the older Dalit parties? Whether these leaders have the capacity to carry their mobilization forward and create a strong movement or political parties remains to be seen.

This new churn has also created greater awareness of sub-caste identities among Dalits. However, there is no pan-Indian Dalit discourse. And therefore generalization across the subcontinent is unwarranted. Dalit politics in the Hindi heartland states of UP and Bihar is different from that of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, or West Bengal. There have been historically marked differences between these regions in terms of ideology and movements, though Ambedkarism as a form of resistance has come to occupy centre stage across India. Such an iconic status for B. R. Ambedkar has not come overnight. He is unique in his accomplishments and continues to be a role model for many. The desecration of Ambedkar's statue anywhere is a good enough reason for the community to march together. Ambedkar has acquired a god-like status among Dalits – millions observe his birth and death anniversaries. Ambedkar's role as a champion of the community, and his advocacy that led to the creation of a 'schedule' of untouchable castes under the Government of India Act of 1935, continue to be significant pillars in a pan-India creation of a Dalit identity. Thus, even though Dalits remain divided on the basis of various regional, social, economic, and political factors, Ambedkar, having created a community, has naturally become its totem.

Drawing on the chapters in this volume about multifaceted aspects of Dalit social, economic, and political experiences, we suggest that the hallmark of Dalit politics arising out of the crisis in the new millennium is along two axes: *aspirations* and *anxieties*. These refer to rising aspirations for faster economic and sociocultural mobility, and anxieties translated through a discourse of protest not only against atrocities, but also against frustration due to joblessness and lack of improvement in material conditions. Using this frame, the chapters in this volume grapple with transformation and change in Dalit reality on multiple fronts in the new millennium - electoral politics, political economy, popular culture, ideology and identity, representation, and discrimination. The attempt is to explore Dalit reality in the new millennium in the most holistic manner possible, broadening our horizons to interrogate major aspects of Dalit experience. All these aspects, in our opinion, are linked together in complex ways, and such an integrated approach would be immeasurably more helpful than the hitherto preferred isolationist approaches.

## Shifting Patterns of Electoral Politics

A central feature in the new millennium has been a marked shift in Dalit electoral politics and voting preferences. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the Hindi heartland (especially in UP and adjoining border districts in other states) that was able to consolidate and gain the support of a sizeable section of Dalits. In recent years, we are witnessing the collapse of strong Dalit parties such as the BSP as a considerable section of Dalits is moving towards the BJP. But the pattern of Dalit electoral preference is not the same across the country. Although Dalits form a substantial portion of the population in Punjab, they have not moved towards the BJP and instead divided their support among the Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress), the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and the Akali Dal. The rise of the BJP in West Bengal, however, relies on a Dalit support base to a large extent (Verma, 2021).

It is in the Hindi heartland, particularly in UP, that a substantial section of Dalits in search of a political alternative has shifted towards the BJP since 2014, mostly from the smaller and poorer non-Jatav sub-castes. This substantial contribution of Dalit support helped the party obtain an absolute majority in 2014 and 2019 at the centre as well as in the 2017 and 2022 assembly elections in UP. There is now good evidence to suggest that a significant portion of BSP's Jatav voters have too shifted towards BJP in the 2022 assembly elections. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, following the decline of the BSP, the Congress gained a modicum of the Dalit vote. On the other hand, in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where Dalit assertion has historically been important, it is the regional parties that have retained the support of the Dalit population. These patterns suggest that no single party can claim to have the support of Dalits.

The question of why Dalit electoral behaviour has undergone a remarkable change remains controversial. Some scholars have argued that during the campaign for the 2014 general elections, the BJP under the leadership of Modi deftly combined communal polarization, which provided the party a Hindu vote bank, and promises of rapid economic development, which attracted a large segment of the population across caste groups. Also, the use of social media to create the image of Modi as an ordinary tea seller who climbed the ladder of his political career with hard work to become the prime minister, the messiah of the poor and disadvantaged, may have attracted a segment of voters towards the BJP (Pai and Kumar, 2015). Added to this was the use of nationalism plank emanating from increased tensions with Pakistan on terrorism-related incidents as well as India's military response. These national security issues dominated the 2019 election campaign.

Another viewpoint is that while polarizing Hindutva and muscular nationalism are important, what enables Modi and the BJP to win are the pro-poor policies of the government, and the ability to identify the basic amenities that are required by needy voters, formulate appropriate schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Saubhagya Yojana, Ujjwala, Ayushman Bharat, Jan Dhan Yojana, and more, and ensure last-mile delivery. This has been accompanied by the able marketing of these schemes, as being part of a massive welfare state (Aiyar, 2019), just before the elections. Introduced in and widely implemented after 2014, information on these schemes was disseminated through huge digital and personal outreach by BJP workers. Prior to the 2019 elections, the BJP's campaign made efforts to reach out to almost 22 crore (220 million) poor beneficiaries, including Dalits, using socio-economic census and the Aadhaar<sup>1</sup> database (Mehrotra, 2019). The BJP's campaign team made sure to remind these beneficiaries that the central government, headed by prime minister Modi, should be credited for these schemes.

A further explanation is that the BJP laboured for more than two decades to make itself acceptable to the community. Its 'conversion' process started slowly with embracing Ambedkar and even defending reservations (Narayan, 2021). Therefore, one may argue that before Dalits turned pro-BJP, the BJP turned pro-Ambedkar, at least in rhetoric. By using such strategies, the BJP has been attempting to spread its footprint from the Hindi heartland to the rest of the country. This aim was visible in electoral campaigns by BJP leaders including the prime minister, most notably in the 2021 elections in West Bengal, which has a substantial proportion of Dalit population. Only the future can tell how this process will unfold. Having embraced Ambedkar, will the BJP remain unaffected by his transformative ideas and philosophy? The successes of the BJP, and its strategies, aims, and ambitions in different states, are discussed by the contributions in this part.

**Rahul Verma** and **Pranav Gupta** use electoral and survey data to examine the reasons underlying the increasing preference for the BJP, particularly among smaller Dalit groups. Their study shows that in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, the BJP gained nearly one-fourth and one-third of Dalit votes, respectively, mostly from the upwardly mobile, urban, educated middle classes. While Verma and Gupta point out that the steep decline of the BSP, the loss of popularity of BSP leader Mayawati, and emergence of new Dalit organizations have provided room for the BJP's growing popularity, they also point out how, together with the personal popularity of Modi, it is the increasing ideological alignment between the BJP's ethno-political majoritarianism and the views of the BJP's Dalit supporters that has increased preference for the BJP among Dalit voters. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that Dalit politics is under considerable

stress, throwing up assimilative and challenging tendencies; any one of these could prevail and determine the future of Dalit politics.

Based on a reading of the scholarly literature on Punjab and West Bengal, **Dwaipayan Sen** addresses an interesting puzzle: why, despite containing some of the largest Dalit populations among the states in India, has neither region given rise to explicit Dalit political assertion? The reasons suggested are multiple fissures of political–ideological preferences, lack of capable Dalit leadership; absence of an ideology that would appeal to all sections; hegemonic dominance of non-Dalit groups, and class, occupation, and caste differences. While the BSP has a modest presence in Punjab, no political formation has developed among the Namasudras or Rajbanshis, the two largest Dalit castes, in West Bengal. Yet both states have experienced different forms of cultural assertion by Dalits. Sen concludes that the presence of a large number of Dalits does not necessarily mean its translation into the political arena, but as there are shared socio-economic and political exclusions, the possibility of formation of wider, counter-hegemonic solidarities continues to exist.

**Sudha Pai** analyses the decline of the BSP and its impact on Dalit politics during a period of right-wing hegemony, in the context of changes in UP after 2012. These shifts are explained by using the lens of a new relationship between caste, development, and electoral politics, which has effected a move from identity politics towards material aspiration. But it has also created fragmentation: large-scale, protests against atrocities, and yet increasing electoral support by the non-Jatavs for the BJP. Arguing that a *normative and political* crisis is facing the Dalit movement, Pai holds that while older norms lack credibility, Dalits have not been able to organize resources for renewed action.

While much has been written on the rise of a Dalit middle class, aspirations for upward mobility, and entering the democratic process, there is little exploration of how Dalit parties raise funds for elections. **Michael A. Collins** attempts to fill this gap by examining the obstacles that recently launched Dalit-led parties face in mobilizing resources, organizing election campaigns, and representing Dalit interests, and shows how these challenges impact their representative capacity. Using the tools of interviews and ethnography, Collins analyses the campaign finance experiences of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in Tamil Nadu and shows how first-generation Dalit politicians negotiate the dilemmas of democratic politics.

Taking these arguments forward, **Abhinav Prakash Singh** explores the factors behind the shift in Dalits' electoral preferences in favour of the BJP in the Hindi heartland. Some of the long-term reasons are the decline of Nehruvian secularism and reassertion of India's essentially Hindu character with the rise of the BJP.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliate organisations in the past, too, have made efforts to attract Dalits by promising greater access to mobility, cultural capital, and political power. Yet Prakash points out that this politico-cultural relationship remains tenuous; the larger, influential, and assertive Dalit sub-castes have not come into the fold of the pro-BJP sections among the Dalit population. The sustainability and furtherance of the subaltern Hindutva project depends on providing faster economic advancement and greater political representation to larger numbers of Dalits.

## Popular Culture, Discourse, and Protest

Popular culture, both historically and in present times, has played a key role in the social and political life of Dalit communities across the country. Beginning in the colonial period, when consciousness of low-caste identity arose, the discourse based on Dalit popular culture took numerous forms: songs, music, dramas, and then the celebration of Ambedkar's birthday. Over the past few decades, this culture has been increasingly expressed through the symbolization of Ambedkar beyond his role as a community leader, and more as a representation of Dalit-ness. Therefore, it is very common for educated Dalits to buy and read his writings and speeches. In fact, at most Dalit gatherings his books are on sale, and they do sell. His impeccable dress code and liberal outlook towards life make him an evergreen role model for the community. Today, the rise of social media has provided a new platform to spread his ideas to a much larger audience. Films, art, and Dalit writings have also provided an avenue of self-expression, an alternative to upper-caste thinking and beliefs. The aim of these forms of popular culture over the years is twofold: to spread the message of Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, and to emerge as a form of protest against upper-caste domination.

In north India, particularly in UP, Dalit popular culture has spread through a process of Ambedkarization – that is, growth in the political and cultural consciousness among Dalits, particularly Chamar–Jatavs, of their low-caste status and in knowledge about the teachings of Babasaheb Ambedkar (Singh, 1998). This took one of the earliest forms during the late colonial period through the celebration of Ambedkar's birthday by the Chamar–Jatavs of Agra, who prospered due to the leather industry (Lynch, 1969). Kanshi Ram gave this form new life through his cultural organization, the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4), using cycle rallies and *yatra* songs as a form of political-cum-cultural protest against upper-caste rule (Joshi, 1986). And Mayawati later used iconography, when she became the chief minister of UP, installing 15,000 statues of Ambedkar all over the state.

In Tamil Nadu, until the 1980s, Periyar was the only major icon among Dalits. However, there has been a growing recognition of Ambedkar as a leader and symbol. Statues, posters, and nameplates bearing Ambedkar's image have proliferated in *cheris*, schools, and colleges; Dalit organizations have fought for public space to put up cultural symbols such as flags and posters and carry out processions (Gorringe, 2005). The emergence of vibrant Dalit literature, which portrays a new feeling of confidence and fresh thinking on questions of nation, democracy, citizenship, and development, has been equally important (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011). Similarly, in Punjab, the Dera movement has generated new programmes and literature similar to the process of Ambedkarization in UP (Jodhka, 2010).

Of late we are witnessing the rise of a separate Dalit media to express feelings and desires – for instance, Dalit Dastak, Dalitsong.com, and Dalit Camera capture narratives, public meetings, songs, talks, and discussions on Dalit issues 'through untouchable eyes'. A rich debate has also emerged on how Dalits are, and should be, represented in Indian cinema, and more so in Bollywood where few films have depicted Dalit struggle for dignity and self-respect. However, over the last two decades, and particularly with the rise of the Dalit public sphere, cinema is being used to express Dalit cultural identity and as an agency of protest. This is truer of regional language films, a good example of which being Telugu cinema following the atrocities at Karamchedu and Chundur in the 1980s–90s (Misrah-Barak, Satyanarayana, and Thiara 2020).

Along with popular cultural expression, *protest* is also part of the Dalit discourse and requires analysis. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed mainly social protest against atrocities, driven by social conflicts when upper and backward castes found that Dalits had improved their economic position, evident in better housing and ownership of white goods, and attempted to assert dominance through arson, murder, and violence. More recently, we are witnessing increasing frequencies of protest by the community, not only against atrocities but also arising out of frustration due to joblessness and lack of improvement in material conditions. Ironically, established Dalit parties are on the margins of these protests, while new Dalit organizations are at the centre.

Arguing that music has been an important component in bringing about sociocultural–political consciousness and change among the Dalit masses, **K. Kalyani** and **Satnam Singh** throw light on the role played by the DS4 and evaluate the role of cultural resistance in the success of the early BSP movement. Discussing the musical practices, instruments, and singers of the DS4, it provides interesting ethnographic accounts, particularly of the active agency of little-known women Bahujan singers, their motivations, and their lifeworld.



Moving to popular cinema, **Prashant Ingole** shows how the re-energization of anti-caste cultural politics is introducing change in India's largest 'cultural industry'. Discussing the portrayal of the caste question, Ingole argues that mainstream cinema largely falls in the category of castelessness, while the cinema of the oppressed follows the anti-caste perspective. He points out that anti-caste political resistance is now represented through music and cinematic articulation. Juxtaposing mainstream music and cinema with alternative music and cinema by Dalits or Bahujans, he offers critical insights into the capacity of anti-caste music and cinema to create counter-cultural spaces and articulate resistance.

In the 1990s, globalization created aspirations for better jobs and salaries in the private sector among educated Dalit youth, who had so far looked to government employment alone. **Swadesh Singh** examines the process of representation of Dalits in the private sector, especially in new media. He explores the impact of such representation based on content analysis of three Hindi newspapers (Lucknow edition) and through interviews and discussions with journalists.

From varied forms of cultural assertion, we move to analysing Dalit protest, which **Amit Ahuja** and **Rajkamal Singh** argue is pure 'protest politics'. Using an event-based dataset of protest activity at Jantar Mantar in Delhi, India's most prominent designated protest site, between 2016 and 2019, they demonstrate that Dalit protest activity differs sharply from that of upper castes. Dalits are far more likely to organize caste-based protests and ally with other caste groups with their demands more likely to be hierarchy contesting, whereas upper-caste protest activity is more likely to be hierarchy preserving. Their findings suggest that caste-based protest activity is reflective of the effects of caste hierarchy; caste disparity, and not caste difference, still informs Dalit politics.

## Transformations in Identity and Ideology

Identity and ideology have occupied centre stage in the consciousness of Dalits, from the colonial period and beyond. In post-independence India, the Republican Party of India (RPI) and the Dalit Panthers in the 1960s, particularly in Maharashtra, popularized the ideology of Ambedkar – drawing on Ambedkar's symbolizing of the transformative power of modern secular education and a visionary leader who understood India well. It was only in the 1990s, in the Hindi heartland, that the BSP, both as a Bahujan movement and as a party, created a new and radical identity and counter-ideology to the *varna* system, one of 'Dalit' and 'Ambedkarism', respectively (Pai, 2002).

But as studies have shown, identities are in constant flux and are being re-fashioned, with consequences for democratic politics (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Analysis of Kanshi Ram's legacy and movement suggests that Bahujan identity and consciousness did not penetrate into all sub-castes. Consequently, following the decline of the BSP in the decade of the 2010s, the break-up of the constructed identity of 'Dalit' has once again brought to the forefront the dominance of the better-off and leading section of the Jatavs, with smaller sub-castes emphasizing their separate social and cultural identities. While not completely setting aside their Dalit self-identity and ideology, large sections of the smaller sub-castes now aspire to be part of the larger Hindu identity. One of the chief instruments employed by the Hindu right in attracting these groups has been that of providing them greater cultural space within the larger Hindu identity, religion, and society and appropriating Dalit historical icons, myths, and leaders (Narayan, 2008).

The weakening of the larger identity of 'Dalit' has created ideological divisions among the community, splitting them into the Ambedkarites and the Hindutvawadis, groups close to the BSP and the BJP, respectively. The Ambedkarites are further divided on the ground, with some in western UP are looking for other options with the decline of the BSP, such as the Azad Samaj Party of Chandrashekar Azad, formed in 2015. Yet the ideas and writings of Ambedkar remain at the centre of Dalit identity and ideology as all groups claim his legacy, attempt to shape his ideas in their own conception, and ideologically appropriate him for their own political and cultural mobilization, among others. The appointment of Ram Nath Kovind, a Dalit from the smaller Kori sub-caste, as the president of India in 2015 also aided the party's efforts to make further electoral gains within the community.

In this backdrop, there are also several cases of historical divergences in ideological formulations of Dalit identity in many parts of the country. For example, a number of Dalit organizations, some of them radical in outlook, espousing both Marxism and Ambedkarism, emerged in Tamil Nadu following clashes with backward castes in parts of the state.

These ideological shifts by Dalit organizations or parties raise some seminal questions. Why do some Dalit groups perceive Hindutva as an unyielding agent of oppression, while others perceive it as a vehicle of social and economic progress? How deep is the internal fragmentation within the Dalit community over Ambedkarism and Hindutva? The contributions in this part make an attempt to capture the nuances and complexities of different dimensions of contemporary Dalit ideology.