

The Bir Sunarwala: An Uncharted Dalit Land Movement of Haryana, India

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Abstract

Dalits are the lowest social group in the Indian caste hierarchy, formerly known as 'untouchables'. They have been subjected to centuries of discrimination, violence and continue to face widespread social exclusion and economic deprivation. In rural areas, Dalits are often forced to live in segregated quarters and are denied access to common resources such as wells, temples, schools and land. They are often forced to do the most menial and degrading work, such as manual scavenging and cleaning toilets. This exclusion and humiliation are rooted in their lack of access to socio-economic capital, namely, land. As the world's primary source of wealth, land plays a significant role in the life of rural communities, transforming into a socio-economic reality. Dalits are historically landless; in this outbreak, they participated in various land movements to access land. Landless Dalits and other agricultural labourers fought alongside peasants for better wages, land ownership and to end the practice of forced labour. However, Dalit struggles always remain subordinate to peasant struggles. In this context, this study examines Haryana's rarely documented and majorly unknown Dalit land movement that took place in 1973 at Bir Sunarwala village of Jhajjar district of Haryana. Additionally, this study seeks to highlight the significance of the Bir Sunarwala land movement within the broader framework of the Dalit movements in India.

Keywords

Bir Sunarwala, nazul land, Dalit movement, land struggle, social movement

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Land and Its Importance

Land has been the most crucial source of power and authority for centuries. Dalits were historically deprived of landholdings. According to Ambedkar, “Religion, social status, and property are all sources of power and authority, which one man has to control the liberty of another” (Ambedkar 1979: 45). The caste system and the practice of endogamy restrict property to a particular caste and social group with traditional inheritance and restrictions. Due to these caste regulations, Dalits were subjected to bondage labour and experienced extreme poverty. They were unable to purchase land due to lack of resources. Ironically, even if they have money, they are prohibited from buying land in various parts of the country. For instance, the *Land Alienation Act* of Punjab of 1900. It stated that Dalits were not permitted to own land, even if they had the capacity, because they were not recognised as agriculturalists. They were forced to work as landless labourers (Ambedkar 1989: 23). Ambedkar called these caste-generated problems primarily economic in nature. In this context, stressing the importance of the economic empowerment of Dalits, he gave the reference of Yudhishtira from Mahabharat:

When the army of Kauravas and Pandavas came face to face on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Yudhishtira saw Bhishma, Drona and other great persons on the Kaurava’s side. He thought he should go and seek the blessing of those elders. Therefore, he kept his arms on the ground and went to them. They had to bless Yudhishtira. However, they realised their position, and before Yudhishtira could ask them why they were with Kauravas, knowing fully well that they were on the wrong side, they replied out of shame that man is a slave of money; money is nobody’s slave. This being the truth, O King Yudhishtira! Kauravas have bonded us with money. The same situation is with untouchables (Jadhav 2015: 65).

Such is the power of money, and the same is true for land, particularly in rural areas. Land is an important asset that indicates the economic position and serves as a proxy for social and political strength (Sridevi 2020: 207). Since the so-called ‘upper-caste’ monopolised land and other resources, Ambedkar termed the Dalits as under “corporate bondage” (Kumar 2020: 40). In this vein, Ambedkar recommended the formation of a Settlement Commission to build distinct villages for Dalits (Kumar 2020: 49). He argued that the key to raising the social standing of the Dalits is possible through their economic independence. To improve their lives, the government must provide them land. He stated:

Unless and until doors are open to them where they can find gainful occupation, their economic emancipation is not going to take place. They are going to remain slaves, if not slaves, serfs of the land-owning classes in the villages. There can be no doubt on that point at all. Now, Sir, out of these gainful occupations I personally feel no doubt that the most important thing on which

government ought to concentrate is the giving of land to the Dalits. They must be settled on land so that they might obtain independent means of livelihood, cease to be afraid of anybody, walk with their heads erect and live fearlessly and courageously (Ibid.: 41).

It was anticipated that by implementing these remedies, cultivable wasteland, government land, forest land, and pasture would be redistributed to Dalits, resulting in two interconnected outcomes: landholding would provide a source of livelihood and a reasonable income for Dalits in village society, and land ownership would eventually lead to Dalit's economic independence from rural society (Ibid.: 51). Ambedkar wants state assistance in the execution of these reforms. He observed that:

If the state refrains from intervention in private affairs, economic and social, the residue is liberty. But...to whom and for whom is this liberty. Obviously, this liberty is liberty to landlord to increase rents, for capitalists to increase hours of work and reduce the rate of wages...In other words, what is called liberty from the control of state is another name of dictatorship of private employers (Ambedkar 1979: 425).

Research Methodology

This research adopts a historical method to unwind the movement. To collect data from Parliament Library, Lok Sabha Debates and Haryana State Legislative Assembly Library, an archival method is applied. To ensure inclusivity and accuracy, snowball sampling is used to trace the participants who played pivotal roles in the movement. Additionally, the interview method is judiciously applied for the collection of insightful narratives from participants about the movement. Furthermore, thorough content and textual analysis were used to extract relevant information from newspapers and movement-related pamphlets.

Dalits and Land: An Envisioned Utopia

The implementation of the Indian Constitution in 1950 created a new political and social landscape in India. One of the most pressing issues facing the new government was the need to redistribute land in order to establish parity among different social classes. The Constitution itself enshrined the principle of land reform in both the Preamble and Part IV of the Constitution, which pertains to the Directive Principles of State Policy. Furthermore, land reform has been incorporated into the Ninth Schedule to expedite and facilitate the smooth implementation of diverse legislative measures (Mohanty 2001: 3857). However, the process of land reform proved to be long and arduous. Over the years, various committees and commissions were established to study the issue and recommend policies. Despite these efforts, land reform has not been fully implemented in India. This is due to several factors, including the resistance of large landowners, the lack of political will, and the issue's complexity.

It was observed that Dalits were not part of debates on land reform initiatives. They were kept aside, landless, in poverty and unemployed. The deeply entrenched intersectionality between land and unemployment in the life of Dalits has been shown through various studies. G. Nancharaiyah's analysis of land records in the village of Kanchakoduru over the years 1930, 1948, 1965, and 1982 revealed that for the year 1930, the Brahmins controlled 77 per cent of the total land, non-brahmins about 21 per cent and Dalits only about 2 per cent of the whole land (Sridevi 2020: 176). Dalit households work primarily as casual labour in agriculture and non-agricultural chores, accounting for 52.6 per cent of total working households, compared to 21 per cent for non-SC/ST/OBC households (Ibid.: 170).

Similarly, in 2000, just 16 per cent of all Scheduled Caste (SC) households cultivated land as owner-cultivators, compared to 41 per cent of non-SC/ST households. Taking farm and non-farm activities into account, only 28 per cent of SC rural households have some access to capital assets, compared to 56 per cent of non-SC/ST households. Inadequate access to agricultural land and capital gives SC employees no choice but to turn to manual wage labour. As a result, there was an extraordinarily high level of (manual) wage labour among SC. In metropolitan areas, one-third of SC are casual labourers, compared to only 7 per cent of non-SC/STs.

NSSO 70th Round Report on Household Ownership and operational holdings—2013 shows that SC, who make up 20.06 per cent of total households, own just 9.2 per cent of total land, which is less than half of their proportion of total households, while non-SC/ST/OBCs, who make up 23.23 per cent of total households, own 32.03 per cent of total land (Ibid). These statistics show that caste is still perpetuated, increasing inequality and unemployment.

In such conditions, the idea of land reform captivated Dalits, but implementing the land distribution process failed. The working group on the development and welfare of Dalits during the eighth five-year plan (1990-1995), in their report (August 1990), observed that "agricultural ceiling laws have merely been a failure. As against the estimated availability of surplus land of about 30 million hectares, only a little over 7 million acres have been declared surplus and only 4.5 million acres of land were distributed to about 4 million beneficiaries" (Ibid). Consequently, the Dalits did not reap the benefits of land reform as the deeply ingrained caste system vehemently resisted any attempts of reform. The resistance from dominant castes hindered the fundamental underpinning of equitable land distribution, leaving the Dalits further marginalised and excluded from the transformative effects of land reforms.

The Case of Haryana

Haryana's case is no exception when it comes to the pursuit of land reform. This failure can be traced back to the overwhelming control exerted by the dominant caste of Haryana, i.e., 'Jats' over political power, further consolidating their economic and social dominance. As the primary owners of more than 80 per cent of the state's land, Jats have effectively monopolised the benefits stemming from both the Green

Revolution of the 1970s and the ongoing urbanisation and industrialisation processes (WSS 2014: 33). This exclusive access to resources has entrenched their position, making it increasingly difficult for Dalits to challenge their status and leading to a perpetuation of inequality and disparities in the region. Jats constitute the single largest caste group, with 24 per cent of the population of Haryana. Dalits are the next largest group at around 20 per cent. Nevertheless, 86 per cent of arable land in the state is under Jat ownership, and Dalits hold less than 2 per cent of land (Ibid.: 24). Land ownership and control of a large amount of land in the state provided Jat's social superiority and enabled them to control the labour of those lower in the caste hierarchy. Jats exercise authority over the *shamilat* (common) lands in the village, which, by law, should be accessible to all community members for various purposes such as cattle grazing, playground activities, and festivals. However, Jat-controlled panchayats often employ the strategy of fencing off the *shamilat* land, either as a form of social boycott or to force the entire Dalit community out of the village.

Landless Dalits work as 'Siri' (bonded labourer) in the fields of Jat landlords. An oft-quoted saying at Jat Chaupals is: "A Jat who has not tasted his *siri's* wife and daughter is not a true Jat" (Ibid). Caste violence and sexual abuse against Dalit women have been the primary methods to suppress the Dalit community and firmly place them in their assigned position at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. This pattern of abuse serves as a tool of control, ensuring that the Dalit community remains oppressed and subjugated, unable to challenge the prevailing social order. A recent dreadful incident occurred in Bhagana village of Hissar district of Haryana, where Dalits demanded their right to access *shamilat* land for their livelihood to gain autonomy from the oppressive control of Jats. In a horrifying act of 'retaliation', perpetrated primarily by the powerful Jats in Haryana, four innocent Dalit girls from the Bhagana village were abducted and brutally raped. The incident is a tragic reminder of the systemic injustices and violence faced by Dalits striving for equality and justice (Chakravarti 2018: 170). For months, Dalits protested at Jantar Mantar, seeking land outside Bhagana village due to intimidation in their hometown. Such social silence is a routine play in the life of every Dalit. As rightly put by Ambedkar:

Untouchable has found himself greatly handicapped in his struggle for free and honourable life. The Hindu has the Police and the Magistracy on his side. In a quarrel between the Untouchables and the Hindus, the Untouchables will never get protection from the Police or justice from the Magistrate. The Police and the Magistracy are Hindus, and they love their class more than their duty. But the chief weapon in the armoury of the Hindus is economic power which they possess over the poor Untouchables living in the village (Ambedkar 1991: 420).

Due to lack of socio-economic power, Dalits are victims of exploitation, subjugation and humiliation in all walks of life. Against this grim backdrop, Dalits waged a relentless struggle, pouring their very lifeblood into the fight for access to land as a means to attain a life of dignity and respect.

Dalit Land Movements Across India: Their Necessity and Significance

Dalit land movements are a series of social movements that Dalits have waged to secure land rights and abolish discrimination against them in the land market. One of the earliest and most crucial Dalit land movements was the Mahar Watan Movement, launched in Maharashtra in the early twentieth century. This movement was led by Ambedkar, who argued that Mahars, a Schedule Caste, had a historical right to the land they had been cultivating for generations. The movement eventually secured land rights for Mahars and served as a model for other Dalit land movements. Many Dalit land movements across India have happened decades since the Mahar Watan Movement. While they have achieved varying degrees of success, they have all played a role in raising awareness of the issue of landlessness among Dalits and demanding that the government must take action to address this issue. Through relentless struggle, Dalits were able to secure land rights in states such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and several others. These Dalit land struggles were fairly documented and recognised. Some of the most notable Dalit land movements include:

Bihar's well-known Bodhgaya Land Movement (BGLM). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the oppressed Dalits and other historically disadvantaged castes revolted against the Mahant (Priest). The Mahants of Bodhgaya Maths controlled a vast expanse of land, around 9,500 acres, blatantly violating Land Ceiling laws. At this time, the simultaneously surging tide of the JP movement acts as a catalyst. Through their struggle, the Bahujans of Bodhgaya secured the rights to more than 1,000 acres of fertile, well-irrigated land. Notably, among these lands, a remarkable 110 acres were specifically registered under women's names, highlighting their unwavering dedication and fortitude (Chowdhury 2020). This decade-long youth-led movement was the first in the history of social movements to have successfully secured land rights for women, mostly Dalits.

Similarly, Operation Bhumi Dakhal Dehani (giving possession) was a significant land reform initiative undertaken in the state of Bihar in 2007 under Jitan Ram Manjhi, the first Dalit chief minister of Bihar. Various camps were set up in villages, and police and tax authorities helped Dalits take possession of the land. It aimed to address historical injustices in land distribution. It sought to reclaim land illegally occupied by dominant caste landowners, that was allotted to Dalit communities. When the operation was completed in 2018, around 40,000 families, 25 per cent of those eligible—were still without land due to litigation (Gokhale 2019).

Operation Bhumi Dakhal Dehani sought to rectify disparities by identifying and reclaiming land wrongfully taken from Dalits. The initiative intended to provide land security and tenure rights to Dalit families, uplifting their socio-economic conditions and reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and oppression. However, it is essential to note that despite such rigorous efforts, challenges persisted in the implementation process. Political and socio-economic resistance from dominant caste landowners often obstructed the full realisation of land rights for Dalits. Additionally, bureaucratic

inefficiencies and corruption posed further hurdles in the successful execution of the operation.

Similarly, Dalits in Punjab's Sangrur district, where 90 per cent of Dalit farmers are agricultural labourers, occupied 6,475 hectares of unoccupied land in 2014 and demanded titles. Punjab has India's most significant Dalit population. They have accused the state of not enforcing regulations that reserve public land for Dalits to cultivate and housebuilding. The Zamin Prapti Sangharsh Samiti (movement to gain land) organisation started a protest and warned the state it would intensify its protest drives if the land is not legally granted to them (Moudgil 2019). Eventually, they reserved the promised panchayat land.

These movements of Dalits for their rights and emancipation extended well beyond the boundaries of North India, reaching into the realms of the South as well. Throughout the country, Dalits engaged in numerous remarkable movements, each carrying the weight of their collective aspirations.

The Dalit's in Andhra Pradesh mounted a struggle in Dosapadu Village between 1956 and 1995, where the government granted 105 acres of land to 45 households from landless Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh's Dosapadu hamlet for their social upliftment. Unfortunately, wealthy landlords took over the property and converted it into aquaculture ponds. Against it, with the assistance of the Communist Party of India (CPI) worker wing, Agricultural Workers Union (AWU), the victims launched a land struggle in 2007 and ensured their rights (Cariappa 2022). Likewise, in Kerala, in 2007, Dalits and Adivasis occupied parts of a 25,000-hectares rubber plantation in Chengara, Pathanamthitta, where 93 per cent of Dalit farmers are farm labourers. They criticise the state for faulty land reforms. The reforms only included intermediaries like renters, who were an historically privileged caste, not farm labourers, who were Dalits or Adivasis. The reforms excluded plantations from giving up extra land. The landless could not receive large estates like Chengara (Sreerekha 2012).

All these movements have faced significant challenges, including lack of government support, opposition from historically privileged caste landowners, and caste violence. However, they have also achieved significant successes in securing land rights for thousands of Dalits. Undoubtedly the landscape of academia and mainstream literature in India extensively documented these remarkable movements and registered the profound nationwide impact of Dalit activism. However, amidst this comprehensive coverage, Haryana's Bir Sunarwala Dalit land struggle remains shrouded in obscurity, neglected by the mainstream narrative. Not only was this pivotal movement left out of the public discourse, but a conspicuous absence of any comprehensive study on its significance and the subsequent socio-economic upliftment of Dalit beneficiaries. The magnitude of this oversight becomes apparent when considering the monumental impact the movement had on the lives of Dalits in the region. The battle for land rights symbolised their resolve to break free from oppression and presented a beacon of hope for a dignified existence. Perhaps, the lack of scholarly attention and media coverage has hindered a broader understanding of the movement's nuances and significance in

empowering Dalits socially and economically. It is crucial for this historical chapter to be thoroughly explored, analysed, and brought to the forefront, not only to honour the struggles and sacrifices of those who fought for justice but also to shed light on the transformative outcomes it yielded for the Dalit community.

This article is an effort to rectify this historical oversight and undertake comprehensive research on the Bir Sunarwala Dalit land struggle, which is imperative. By doing so, we can illuminate a significant aspect of India's socio-political landscape, celebrating the resilience and tenacity of the marginalised while learning valuable lessons about pursuing social justice and equality for all.

Bir Sunarwala Land Movement of Haryana

In 1953, the Punjab Government, Member of the estimate committee Chaudhary Chand Ram, with the help of Chief Minister of Punjab Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, passed an order to give *Nazul land* (i.e., government land utilised for non-agricultural purposes like construction, road, market, or any other public use, or issued on long-term lease) to landless Dalits. It was given on lease, and a co-operative society was formed to allocate land between 72 villages in united Punjab. In continuation of this process, in 1965, the Punjab Government allocated 2,596 acres of Nazul land to landless Dalits in Bir Sunarwala village of Jhajjar district (now in Haryana).

Astonishingly, in July 1973, it was dispossessed in the name of the establishment of 'Sainik School' and 'Seed Farm' under the Chief Ministership of Bansi Lal (Secretariat 1973: 244). There were around 151 Dalit families whose livelihoods were attached to that land. They worked on the land as tenants. Against this government order, the Republican Party of India (RPI) launched a satyagraha. However, when RPI felt it was not gaining momentum, they asked Chaudhary Chand Ram to lead this struggle. Chaudhary Chand Ram was a well known Dalit leader of Haryana. On the request of RPI and as a matter of pride of the community, he led this satyagraha with the pledge on August 1973 in the Ambedkar Bhawan, Delhi, "Either I will get the land of my people and go alive to Haryana, or my dead body will go to Haryana" (Ram 2007: 2). He formed the Harijan Sangharsh Samiti and started a satyagraha on 27 August 1973, along with 27,000 followers in Delhi. Satyagraha lasted for 113 days, in which more than 25,000 satyagrahi were arrested and put into the jails of Aligarh, Patiala and Tihar Jail in Delhi. Many people lost their lives in this land struggle (Ibid).

As observed in the statement of Member of Parliament Jyotirmoy Bosu on 22 December 1973;

I want to make a submission. I had talked to Home Minister, and I had written 19 letters to Hon'ble Speaker that 25,000 Harijans of Haryana had been arrested, and three of them died in the jail, and five women gave birth to children in the jail, and they were not treated as patients but as prisoners and subjected to inhuman treatment and no blankets and no quilts were supplied to them, and no charpai were supplied to them. And yet this government claims to be a great friend of the Harijans (Secretariat 1973: 168).

Police atrocities also took place on the Dalits of Bir Sunarwala. As one of the participants of the movement, Ranbir Singh narrated:

When the order was passed to take back the land of Bir Sunarwala, police started their intervention in the cultivated land of Bir Sunarwala. Then people used to plough their fields with camel and oxen. In that intervention with police brutality, one camel was killed in Bir Sunarwala. Against the government's order and police brutality agitation started on Delhi's Wellington Crescent Marg (Now Mother Teresa Crescent Road), where hundreds of people participated in this agitation. It was the time of monsoon, and we protesters continued the agitation on heavy rainy days; for subsistence, we ate jamun, and sometimes meals came from villages, but we continued our agitation in such harsh days.

Eventually, Government came on the table. Then Member of Parliament, Buddha Priya Maurya, came to the site of the protest and assured the protesters that you would get your land back, and he requested the protesters to stop the agitation...then one person raised a voice that we would not go anywhere. We have nothing left for livelihood; the government snatched our land, and the police even killed my camel. In such a tense agitation, Buddha Priya Maurya again reassured that kindly have faith in the government and that you would surely get your land. On that promise, the agitation ended.

However, after some months, when the government took no action, then the full-fledged movement was started from Dr Ambedkar Bhawan, Panchkuiya Road, Delhi, under the leadership of Chaudhary Chand Ram on 27 August 1973. The entire movement was completely peaceful and based on the value of Ahimsa. However, due to the intensity of the agitation, protesters were put behind Bars. Three people died in Jail; they were entitled to *shaheed* (martyr), and a huge *morcha* (protest) was carried out with their dead bodies on the roads of Delhi. Meanwhile, Bansilal, then chief minister of Haryana, came to Haryana Bhawan Delhi. Subsequently, hundreds of protests from Harijan Sangharsh Samiti encircled Haryana Bhawan with the slogan "*Mangi Roti Mil Gai Jail, Ye Dekho Indira ke Khel*" (We asked for bread, got jail, watch this play of Indira). A huge backlash happened, and we (protesters) were arrested and put into jails. Various leaders supported us in jails, like Dr Abas Malik (RPI), Khadak Singh (Jan Sangh), and Swami Agnivesh (Ex. Education minister of Haryana). Dr Abas Malik gave a speech to us in jail and stated, "*Ghabraiye Mat Agitation Jaari Rahega*" (Do not worry, the agitation will continue)."

It is exciting to note that Chaudhary Chand Ram's wife, Smt. Durga Devi was always there in this entire movement. Such was the devotion of our leader to the community. When the agitation was at its peak, police came to arrest Chaudhry Chand Ram at night, and we protesters burned the fire as it was the

time of winter. And we told the police, “*Hum Apne Neta Ko Leke Bahot Satark Hai*” (We are cautious about the security of our leader), and the police went back without arresting him.

Finally, this struggle ended with the intervention of Indira Gandhi and Central Minister Buta Singh on 22 December 1973, the land ownership of 2,596 acre land was assured to these Dalit Tenants. As stated by then Home Minister Shri Ram Niwas Mirdha in the Lok Sabha:

I am glad to inform the house that according to the statement issued by Shri Chand Ram, the agitation has been withdrawn. This statement was issued after consultation with the Chief Minister, Haryana, who in his statement agreed to refer these demands to an ad hoc committee to be appointed by him. As regards Vir Sonarwala (Bir Sunarwala), the Chief Minister of Haryana has stated that all the 151 evicted Harijan families would continue to be allowed to cultivate the land in the village of Vir Sonarwala until it is possible to provide them with alternative cultivable land on the basis of permanent ownership rights (Ibid.: 169).

With his relentless struggle, Chaudhary Chand Ram provides land in Bir Sunarwala and various parts of Haryana, including Chandnagar and Faruknagar. Chaudhary Chand Ram was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1952 and the Punjab Legislative Council in 1958. He became Minister of State for Harijan Welfare in 1962 and Welfare and Justice Minister. As a minister, Chaudhary Chand Ram displayed unwavering dedication toward Dalit empowerment within the Haryana State Assembly. Championing the rights of Dalits, he fearlessly raised his voice, calling for equitable land rights and opportunities for their progress. Recognising the serious need for socio-economic upliftment, he took significant steps in allocating panchayati land to Dalits across various districts in Haryana. In many ways, his vision and actions mirrored the spirit of Ambedkar, who also ardently advocated for the independence and self-reliance of Dalits. Chaudhary Chand Ram’s efforts went beyond mere rhetoric; he worked tirelessly to ensure that Dalits could live with dignity and autonomy as a land-owning class.

Bir Sunarwala’s struggle fulfilled the constitutional vision for land allocation to landless Dalits for their upliftment, but it did not get due space in the mainstream. Though there were various newspapers in Haryana during the phase of this movement, especially *The Tribune* and *Haryana Tilak* but none of them covered this historic land struggle of Dalits. Fortunately, Chaudhary Chand Ram, in his lifetime, started and edited various newspapers like *Naya Samaj*, *Kamau* and *Jagta Insaan (1954-2015)*, which documented this movement. These newspapers covered various issues of disadvantaged sections at that time when no major media talked about the plight of the Dalits.

The Bir Sunarwala land movement distinguishes itself from other Dalit movements in various noteworthy aspects. First, it witnessed a massive participation of protesters,

with over 25,000 individuals being arrested during the course of the movement. Second, the entire agitation unfolded in the nation's capital, further adding to its significance. Last, despite its historical importance, the Bir Sunarwala land struggle continues to remain relatively obscure in the broader context of Dalit movements.

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