

From Panthers to Political Dalits: Revisiting the Legacy of Dalit Panthers in India

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Abstract

The Panthers had created a rupture from the earlier pattern that Ambedkar has strategized to integrate the Dalits as one of the important political subjects of the modern nation state. The Panthers deviated and invested in two radical ideological traits; the Civil Right Movement in the US (including the Black Panthers' Party) and radical Marxism (Indian Naxalite movement) to transform Ambedkar's social theory into an aggressive brand of transformative politics. The Panthers showed open discomfort with the given liberal model of democratic politics and attempted to shift the traditional Dalit political ideology into a revolutionary force. Though the Panthers' innovations have impressed the urban Dalit youths and intelligentsia, it failed miserably in forming a concrete political alternative at the regional or the national level. I have concluded that, with the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Dalits were introduced to an improvised liberal political agenda, different from the earlier variants of Ambedkar's participatory politics and the Panthers' militant rhetoric. It shows that the Dalits are more convinced and engaged with the liberal-democratic model and consciously refute the militant and radical methods for political actions.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Dalit literature, BSP, radicalism, naxalism, Maharashtra, pragmatism

“We will build the organization of workers, Dalits, landless, poor peasants through all city factories, in all villages. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on the people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the Dalits. The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust. To

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eradicate all the injustice against Dalit, they must themselves become rulers. This is the people's democracy. Sympathizers and members of Dalit Panthers, be ready for the final struggle of the Dalits." (*Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, 1973)

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the nation had started witnessing a widespread disillusionment among the marginalized sections against the political rhetoric of development and social justice, offered by the ruling elites. Various fragments of society (women, peasants, students, *adivasis* (tribes), etc.) whom earlier had posed their faith in the progressive developmental agenda of the state had started their independent movements to articulate an organic opposition towards achieving a substantive form of social democracy and economic justice (Sangvai, 2007, p. 111). The Dalit Panthers (DP) emerged in such widespread turmoil of the new people's movements in the 1970s. From its notable emergence in the poor urban alleys of Mumbai till its downfall in the late 1980s, in a very short period of time, it has achieved a cult status with a remarkable impact in restructuring the conscience of the subaltern communities, especially of the urban Dalit youths. It has articulated one of the most daring and militant political ideologies for the socially marginalized groups that disturbed the political establishment with its revolutionary zeal and alternative language of resistance. However, within a decade, such an impressive force is relegated to the margins with only some memorials available in the literary-folk traditions in Maharashtra. In the contemporary Dalit discourses, there are only a handful of cultural activists that may claim to have carried the radical legacy of the Panthers.

This article investigates two questions. First, it examines the rupture that the Panthers had created in the earlier strategies and political program that Ambedkar had initiated to integrate the Dalits¹ as the important political subjects of the new nation state. The Panthers combined two radical ideological traits; the Civil Right Movement in the US, including the Black Panthers and the radical Marxism (Indian Naxalite movement) to transform Ambedkar's social theory into an aggressive brand of transformative-revolutionary politics. The Panthers showed open discomfort towards the liberal democratic politics and judged it as a system that serves the interest of the social elites. Therefore, the Panthers opined that a complete uprooting of the 'bourgeois-Brahmanical' institutions is a must to insure justice against the social maladies and economic injustices. Though the Panthers overtly legitimized the idea of romantic militancy as an appropriate form for the emancipatory struggle, it failed to engage the Dalits into its revolutionary program or even in building a popular mass mobilization of the downtrodden people. Within a decade of Panthers' arrival, its radical euphoria collapsed and the organization became defunct.

¹Dalit is a political term, mainly used as a synonym to represent the Scheduled Castes (regarded as 'Untouchables' in the traditional Brahmanic Hindu social order). Jyotiba Phule used this Marathi word to name the most marginalized social groups and it was later adopted by Ambedkar to represent the same in his journalistic writing *Paddalit* (crushed under feet), *Dalitoudhdhar* (Dalit emancipation) etc. Literally it means crushed, broken or oppressed. Dalit Panthers provided it a positive and dignified meaning by placing it against the given political identities like Gandhi's *Harijan* (God's people) and other socially degraded low caste identities.

Second, I have argued that Panthers' sudden decline showcases that the Dalit masses were ill prepared for such an aggressive brand of political activism. Instead, the liberal-democratic format for political participation remained the preferred choice of the Dalit masses. Especially in the case of Uttar Pradesh, it is visible that distinct from the Panthers' appeal, the Dalit politics under the leadership of Kanshi Ram reinvents the relevance of democratic politics by adopting improvised social strategies and would soon emerge as an influential mass movement. I have concluded here that with the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Dalits were introduced to a new language of political presence, different from the Panthers' variant. After witnessing the shortcomings of classical Ambedkarite politics and the utopia of Panthers' militant rhetoric, the BSP initiated new strategies for political mobilization, introducing the Dalits as new leaders in democratic battles. The party was successful in creating a new 'political Dalit' that is more convinced and comfortable with the idea of achieving political power through a greater politicization of the social identities, rather than the aggressive and separatist methods presented by the Panthers.

From Passive Liberals to Lumpen Proletarians: The Origin of the Dalit Panthers

The Context

Ambedkar introduced the Dalits as compulsory participants in the new democratic institutions. It was a revolutionary turn as the modern constitutional legality promoted the ex-Untouchables as significant participants in state power and provided opportunities for their economic mobility. In the first two decades of the new republic, the Dalits showed their uncritical allegiance to the political system with a poised hope in the national project of political and economic development. The Congress party utilized the Dalit constituency as its natural ally in winning the elections over the heightened agenda of social justice but hardly awarded the Dalits influential positions in political and state institutions. The new realm only produced a handful of self-engrossed Dalit middle class individuals with a declined sense of self-respect and lack of political ambitions. On the other hand, the vast Dalit majority remained excluded from the benefits of political developments and capitalist growth and suffered under precarious social and class conditions.

The post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership also remained passive as its party, the Republican Party of India (RPI) had limited organizational strength and lacked innovative strategies to build impressive political mobilization.² Very soon factionalism popped up within the party on flimsy issues, allowing the Congress party to appropriate the disgruntled Dalit leaders. An influential RPI faction formed electoral-alliance with the Congress party and its leadership turned into a 'client' to the dictates of the 'patron'

²In the late 1960s, the Republican Party of India (RPI) under Dadasaheb Gaikwad did mobilize peasants and Dalits on crucial issues of land rights but soon failed to remain united as the sole political heir of the Ambedkarite legacy.

leadership (Jogdand, 1998, p. 1072). Importantly, the socio-economic context remained almost unchanged for the majority of the Dalits as the rigid upper caste hegemony continued as a regular norm. Dalits face visible discrimination and atrocities and were condemned to survive under poverty and ghettoized locations. The Panthers emerged as a reaction to the growing atrocities (Teltumbde, 2020). Though the Dalit political class raised these issues, it lacked the commitment, honesty and courage that could have led the masses towards a better social and political arrangement.

The Panthers emerged as an attack over the widespread pessimism attached to the Dalit identity in the post-Ambedkar period. It evolved in the early 1970s, at a juncture when the independent political capacities of the Dalits (under RPI) had little impact and it mostly operated as a submissive force under the dictates of the Congress party. In the absence of a vibrant political alternative and ideological merit, DP was welcomed as the true harbinger of the conscious Dalit subjectivity.

The Panthers was sporadically established in Mumbai in 1972 by a bunch of newly educated Dalits, young artists, poets, unemployed youths and social activists mainly to articulate a critical militant Dalit response without fear and compromise.³ It was poised to build an ideological response against the social elite hegemony, insensitive and corrupt political and bureaucratic order and also against the opportunist, stooge-like behavior of the Dalit leadership (Murugkar, 1991). It evoked a new language of protest based in the rooted experiential episteme of the social wretchedness and class exploitation, arguing that the question of poverty was misplaced in the contemporary Dalit movement (Omvedt, 2011, p. 77). It stood distinctively from the mainstream Dalit political movement and its ideological goals as it wanted to place the Dalits at the centerstage of political deliberations by bringing the issues of rape, violence and atrocities in the mainstream discourse.

The DP movement was one of the most imaginative exercises within the Dalit discourse. It promoted a radical Dalit agency to draw a political roadmap different from the conventional liberal model of democratic politics adopted by the post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership. It proposed a militant rejection to the integrationist ideals of nationalism, secularism and constitutional justice to promote a romantic vision for the future, imagining the downtrodden mass as the ruling class. The Panthers gave an élan that only after the complete overthrow of the caste system, alongside a call for the reforms in modern institutions (as it protects the interests of the social elites), would real justice to the poor and the Dalits will be achieved.

The Activism of the Wounded Souls

The first few years of the DP activism were marked by sudden mobilization of youths over the growing incidents of caste atrocities, rapes of Dalit women and social violence/boycott of the caste Hindus against the poor Dalits.⁴ The incident that

³Raja Dhale, J.V. Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Avinash Mahatekar, Latif Khatik, Baburao Bagul and Bhai Sangare are recognized as the leading collective behind the forming of the Dalit Panthers on 9 July 1972 in Siddharth Nagar, Mumbai.

⁴The incidents of Dalit women being paraded naked by the dominant caste Hindus of the village have hovered over Dalit consciousness. The case of Dalit boycott in Bawda and sexual assault

brought the Panthers into the limelight of Maharashtra's politics was the anti-Dalit Worli riots of 1974. The Panthers had decided to boycott the *Bombay Central (North) Parliamentary bye-election* to protest the growing cases of caste atrocities (Jogdand, 1991, p. 82). The DP's Public meeting at Ambedkar Maidan, Worli on January 5, 1974 was disturbed by anti-social elements from the nearby upper caste localities. The miscreants started hurling 'stones and soda bottles' from the neighboring buildings causing injuries to the people and created a situation of riot and conflict. The police reached there immediately only to protect the interests of the dominant castes. The police mercilessly lathi-charged the gathered people (including women and children), fired teargas bullets and also arrested numerous Dalits, while taking 'virtually no action against the perpetrators of violence' (Mody, 1974, p. 44). DP leaders Raja Dhale and Latif Khatik were arrested along with 19 DP activists.

The situation of riot continued in the following days as the police assisted the rioters in unleashing a long violence in the predominantly Dalit residential location of BDD chawl (colony).⁵ On 10 January when the DP organized a peace procession at Parel, demanding inquiry over the biased role of the police and immediate release of the DP leaders, it was further attacked by Shiv Sena activists, resulting in clashes in which a DP activist, Bhagwati Ramji Jadhav, was killed on the spot.⁶

A year before the Worli riot, the Panther as an organization came into news over a fiery article in a Marathi magazine *Sadhana* by Raja Dhale. It denounced Independence Day (15 August) as "Black Independence Day" (Kala Swatantray Divas) and made strong comments against the national flag questioning the legitimacy of independence over the pretext of growing atrocities against Dalit women (Dangle, 1992, p. 253). The Shiv Sena and Jan Sangh (party which was a precursor to the current Bhartiya Janata Party) demonstrated at the *Sadhana* office demanding Dhale's apology (Rao, 2009, p. 189). Members of the Panthers' overwhelmingly endorse Dhale's line and observed that year's Independence Day as the Black Day. Further, DP leader Namdeo Dhasal was also arrested for making inflammatory remarks on the same issue. The radical and aggressive tone of the article was debated heavily amongst the Dalits, along with the concerns over the arrests and atrocities against the Dalit activists. This event and later the Worli riots brought the Panthers in the mainstream political discourse of

on two Dalit women in Brahmangoan (both in 1972) was discussed significantly within the Panther's circle. The inability of the political class that represents Dalits (mostly RPI) to deliver justice to the victims has further motivated the Panthers to think about direct mass actions.

⁵The Maharashtra Government set up a judicial enquiry committee over the Worli-Naigaon Riots, headed by the then Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court, S.B. Bhasme. He submitted his detailed report in 1976, mentioning the close connection between the police, the upper caste lumpen gangs and the Shiv Sena activists in instigating and prolonging the violence and atrocities against the neo-Buddhist Dalit community.

⁶*Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* published a news report of the same incident. It gives a detailed account of atrocities committed by the upper castes under the patronage of Shiv Sena and the police personnel. It is also mentioned how the growing might of the Panthers were seen as a threat to the political establishment. (See "Attack on Dalit Panthers" *EPW*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Jan. 19, 1974)

Mumbai.⁷ The Dalit residential colonies of the city (Dadar, Parel, Worli, Naigaon, Taddev, Bhiwandi) became central locations for demonstrative actions. It created several situations of conflict, especially against the assertions of the Shiv Sena which was equally struggling to establish its political base in the same region (Rao, 2009, p. 189). The DP also measured itself as a compatible and capable force that could challenge the Sena's lumpen chauvinism through counter violence.

In both cases, the involvement of the Shiv Sena as an arch rival to the Dalit cause made the conditions violent and conflicting. The DP leadership showed its readiness to counter such attacks and converted the political battle into a street fight between two caste gangs. It presented the Panthers as fearless and aggressive law-breakers, resembling the heroic persona of 'angry young man', different from their corrupt and passive political counterparts. Though their political acts and actions are not admired by the general masses, including the Dalits, the Panthers were able to promote themselves as a serious and committed group for a greater moral cause. Very soon, the Panthers became a state-wide phenomenon with a loose but widespread network of *chhavnis* (branches), influx of new members, indulging in a series of socio-political acts, organizing processions and public meetings to highlight the precarious conditions of the Dalits.⁸

Compared to the Sena, the Panthers hardly achieved any significant form of organizational structure and mostly remained mobile and active whenever cases against Dalit atrocities appeared in the newspapers. The DP activists would visit the site of the atrocity and try to mobilize people for demonstrative action. The speeches would be infused with rhetoric of violent revenge, social tension and coercive pressure tactics.⁹ Such acts, for the first time introduced the Dalits as capable beings who wanted to end caste oppression without direct support from state institutions.

Literature as Everyday Life

No! No! No!

A Triple rejection,

To your economic, social, political, mental, religious, moral and cultural pollution

You ever-living, ever luminous sun!

⁷Excerpts taken from Raja Dhale's interview, telecasted on a Marathi News Channel (*Jai Maharashtra*) on the 40th anniversary of the Dalit Panthers.

⁸In 1974, it is estimated that there were 25,000 DP members, mostly the neo-Buddhist Mahars (Deliege, 1999, p. 170).

⁹Namdeo Dhasal narrated one such incident to a Marathi news channel. In Bhugaon, a Dalit pregnant woman was raped by the upper caste landlord's son. She committed suicide the next day. Dhasal immediately mobilized close to 2000 people in Pune with petty arsenal (hockey sticks, lathis and swords) and barged into the village to give justice to the victim, against the failure of the police and politicians. The Panthers encircled the house of the culprit and decided to give the final judgment over the rape case by burning the whole house. However, they were stopped by the local MLA, and with the promise of immediate relief and fair judgment the Panthers withdrew their violent protest.

Your every touch brings a contagious disease.
 But I am a new sun
 Independent, self-illuminating,
 Possessed of new spirit
 I reject your culture.
 I reject your Parmeshwar (The almighty) centered tradition.
 I reject your religion-based literature.
 ...
 I have taken into account the unceasing battles.
 I may bend but I won't break.

The DP movement influenced the Dalit writings and added a radical and militant fervor to its language. The above-mentioned poem by V.L. Kalekar, a Dalit poet, depicts the conscious contempt against the Hindu caste order and the readiness to counter it. It reflects the confidence and courage of the Dalits as the vanguard of socio-political change. The Dalit literature groomed new idioms and expressions against the standard, morally loaded aesthetics and sophistication represented in mainstream Marathi literature. It created a realistic imagery about the unheard and unseeable Dalit lives in the rural and urban ghettos and introduced readers to the hidden filth and degraded living conditions, like that of Mumbai slums, prostitutes and the excluded Dalit *bastis*.

The autobiographies, stories and poems revolve around the theme of extreme caste atrocities, cruelties, humiliated personalities, powerlessness, forced prostitution and perpetual despair in Dalit's everyday world (Zelliot, 1978, pp. 84–86). In the plays of *Dalit Rangbhoomi* (DP's theatre group), the artists would consciously enact the brutal rape incidents or the scenes of lynching/murder of the Dalits, not to sensationalize the issue but to depict the everyday inhumanity that rules the Dalit living spaces. The classical expediency of socialist-liberal analogy appeared too sophisticated and alien to address the precarious and degraded living conditions of the Dalits and therefore writers and poets (like Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar and Baburao Bagul), Intellectuals (Raja Dhale and Arun Kamble) and public speakers (Bhai Sangare) utilized harsh and even patriarchal/filthy tones available in the daily colloquial vocabulary, to voice frank and fearless opinions.

Panthers' major influence in the social discourse is to present the Dalit as an aggressive social identity that is ready to confront adversaries with violent means. The new 'Dalit-self' rejected the passive, downtrodden, unintelligent identity to cherish a new modern consciousness as a robust free being. The Panthers' literature envisaged an enlightened community that treats each individual with dignity and provides them equal access to the entitlements of a modern society. It was a resurgence of a sovereign 'Self', liberated and motivated for complete social transformation. For example, Dhasal's 'Dalit Panthers' Manifesto' that outlined the organization's ideological goals,

refused the material doles that the benevolent liberal state offered to the Dalits, as it made them submissive to the authority of the social elites. Instead, the Panthers were poised to claim the whole system:

We will not be satisfied easily now. We do not want a little place in the Brahmin alley... We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but at a system. Change of heart, liberal education, etc., will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution. (See Joshi, 1986, p. 146)

The literature provided them an accessible platform to express their sentiments and vision without fear and prejudice. The Dalit writings became a tool to conceptualize and imagine the socio-political sphere different from the given order. The poetry, prose, essays and the biographies centered over the Dalit wretched life is not only pessimistic and dark narrations of their sufferings but simultaneously it projects a visionary human agency of Dalit consciousness, eager to revolutionize the crippled, violent world into a liberated space for human equality and peaceful co-existence (Shaikh, 2021, p. 15).

The Radical Political Ideology

Panthers improvised the Dalit identity as a poised collective adjective. They tried to reach out to a larger section of struggling people, offering them an ‘hermeneutic ability’ to recover the historic meaning of the past (Guru, 2001, p. 98). The Panthers provided modern and materialistic significance to Dalit identity and crafted a ‘proud’ Dalit-self, ready to engage in the democratic deliberation as a free person. Such aspiration rejected the bracketed and humiliating denominator like the Hindu *asprushya* or Gandhi’s *Harijan* (Zelliot, 2001, p. 130) and invited the ex-Untouchables to view themselves as torchbearers of a revolutionary movement. Panthers redefined the political ideology for Dalit emancipation by evoking Ambedkar not as a mere parliamentary social democrat but as a crusader for a complete revolutionary praxis.

DP was inspired by the ongoing civil rights movement by African Americans in the US. However, the Panthers were more inclined towards its radical version. For example, the aggressive Black Panthers movement during its radical phase, showed its antagonism against the passive non-violent, assimilationist model proposed by Martin Luther King Jr. and other white reformist leaders. The Dalit Panthers drew inspiration from the early works of Black Panthers leaders and cultivated its image as a radical revolutionary and in their performative texts showed readiness to even adopt violent means for self-defense. During a crucial phase of the radical Black Panthers movement, certain leaders questioned the possibility of an alliance with the White radicals and liberals (Middlebrooke, 2019) and criticized the assimilationist affirmative action policies (Meister, 2017, p. 21), the DP also advocated critical distrust

towards the democratic politics in India and called for its complete transformation. They suggested a rediscovery of the independent cultural and religious merit rooted in the newly gained Ambedkarite consciousness (Shaikh, 2021, p. 19).

The Marxist socio-political movement further influenced the DP. The rise of the socialist countries under the leadership of Communist Russia was also imagined within the Dalit discourse as the inevitability of Marxist doctrine towards achieving a complete proletariat international revolution by the working classes. In India, because of their most disadvantaged position, the Dalits can relate directly to the proletariat imagination (especially in the Naxalbari movement) with an organic capacity to wage revolutionary struggle. However, within the Dalit discourse, Marxism is interpreted not only as a class-specific political theory but also as a tool to understand how the ruling social elites have re-structured the caste system and retained their dominant control over major institutions of power.

Influenced by Militant ‘Black Power’ ideology and Radical Marxism, the Panthers bonded Ambedkarite principles to develop a new indigenous language of revolution, emancipation and justice in India. Powered with a new language of social revolution, they fearlessly reprimanded the polity for protecting the class-caste interests of the social elites and even called the Independence of the nation a farce against the downtrodden masses. It looked at the political power with Rosa Luxemburg’s sense of ‘internal colonialism’ and termed the Brahmanical elites as the new brown masters of the black Dalits and Adivasis slaves.

The Panthers adopted a militant language of resistance and opposition against the inclusivist rhetoric of the passive civil rights movements, political democracy and constitutional justice (Slate, 2012, p. 130). The DP followed this political line and improvised the language of social protest, using violent contempt against the feudal-Brahmanical order. The Panthers had an overt suspicion towards the integrationist social justice model and on occasion argued to launch a revolutionary struggle to establish a socialist order.

On its normative aim, the Panthers claimed that all the oppressed groups who suffered religious and economic exigencies must be unified as ‘Dalits’ and thus offered a new indigenous nomenclature for the proletariat masses in India.¹⁰ It was a grand imagination of creating a collective notion for the oppressed groups with a radical adherence to political ideologies that promised revolutionary transformative objectives. The Panthers created a complex mosaic of varied revolutionary ideas mainly to carve a distinct space in the bourgeois democratic milieu. In this respect it departed from the socialist-liberal elegance that Ambedkar had adopted to characterize the Dalit politics.

¹⁰The Dalit Panther’s Manifesto published in 1973 is an important document that shows the ideological imagination that the intellectuals have offered. It defines Dalit as “A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the land-less and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion.” (See Joshi, 1986, p. 145)

The Panthers departure towards the Left and Marxist praxis soon became the reason for ideological conflicts as sections amongst the Panthers (led by Raja Dhale) decided to stick to the canonical features of the Ambedkarite movement (peaceful struggles, Buddhism and demands for constitutional rights) and regarded the Dhasal faction as a sporadic 'infantile disorder'. Navayana Buddhism was pitched as a competent theological model against the rigid Brahminic society and looked upon the wider anti-caste movements to generate organic ideological resources. The debate produced a rich anthology over caste-class relationship and hoped to see a promising convergence of Marx and Ambedkar to evolve a revolutionary political ideology.

The Churning and the Decline

The Slippages and Factionalism

DP was a poorly conceived organization with no financial resources, social capital or political support. Soon the Panthers witnessed factionalism over ideological issues between Dhasal and Dhale (Marxist versus Buddhist) and the growing criticism from the RPI leadership. Also, the leaders and the activists were often booked and harassed by the police, which began to affect the activists. As there were no resources to contest the police cases in the court, the fear and threat of police action often demoralized the activists from taking part in the protest demonstrations.

After Indira Gandhi's sudden declaration of Emergency (1975-77), one Panthers' faction collided with the socialist movement (influenced by JP Narayan) and opposed the imposition (Dighe, 2013), whereas the Left leaning DP leader, especially Namdeo Dhasal supported Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime (Rao, 2009, p. 350). There was widespread disturbance and indiscipline within the DP (like the hostile accusations between Dhasal and Dhale), and only at certain local levels, the Panther showcased their organizing capacities through militant protests and mobilizations, especially to organize protests against the cases of caste atrocities. For example, in 1977, a handful of DP activists demanding special safeguards to the Neo-Buddhists had courageously disturbed a huge political rally of the then Home Minister Charan Singh at Shivaji Park in Bombay. However, on most occasions it remained a defunct political force and only sporadically showed its presence.

In late 1978, a major faction amongst the Panthers under the leadership of Gangadhar Gadhe joined the greater Dalit struggle for the renaming of the Marathwada University after Ambedkar, popularly known as Namantar Andolan (Movement for Renaming). The DP aggressively campaigned for the cause and faced heavy police repression. This movement received unprecedented media coverage and activists felt the need to build a national Dalit organization. In March 1979, the Bhartiya Dalit Panthers (BDP) was formed in New Delhi, aiming to launch new branches in the northern state of India, Uttar Pradesh (UP).¹¹

¹¹The first president of BDP, Bapurao Pakhhidey wished to attach the DP activism with the political front of RPI in UP, however because of internal differences and petty politics, the

The Panthers emerged again into political news in 1987 with the publication of Ambedkar's writings *The Riddles of Rama and Krishna*. The Shiv Sena reacted heavily against the text as it contains critical remarks against the Vedas and depicts Hindu deities with objectionable narratives. The Sena called for its ban, mobilized the dominant castes and decided to publicly burn the volume (Joshi, 1992, p. 50). It was countered by Panther activists, resulting in large incidents of street fighting on streets of Bombay. Like earlier, the Panthers mode of protest during this event too was instant and aggressive. Especially in Mumbai, the remnants of Panthers tried to build their presence against the growing fear and threats of the Shiv Sena, however nothing much was achieved and it soon collapsed. Founding leaders of the Panthers (like Dhasal and Dhale) adopted various political options, contested elections or worked in the literary field.

The Reasons for the Collapse

This unique exposition of radical alternative was short lived and at the beginning of the 1990s it completely collapsed. The activism of the Panthers was not a planned strategic exposition towards achieving petty bourgeois political objectives but in contrast it was reactionary, disturbing, sudden and sometimes even violent acts of resistance. It operated with a deepening urge to break away from the conservative social bondages, economic exploitation and absence of the Dalits in dominant political locations. However, there was no match between their utopian ideological goals and the practical circumstances in which the Panthers were operative. Hence, the Panthers tried to achieve a grand task without preparing its own ground for such a huge battle and thus periodically declined as a movement. Anand Patwardhan's mega documentary 'Jai Bhim Comrade' depicts the decline of the robust Dalit political consciousness, its loose camaraderie with the Left ideology and the uneven, unethical nature of the Dalit political class in providing leadership to the real cause. He comprehensively showed the actual pathological condition of the Dalit movement today and succinctly criticizes it for remaining distanced from the radical tone of Ambedkarite-Left alliance only to play a second fiddle to the feudal-bourgeois political outfits.

In general, assessment for the downfall is seen in the incapacities of the young leadership to mediate between the ideological planks under which the movement must operate. The infamous 'Dhasal-Dhale clash' eventually converted into personal accusations that resulted in the faction in the Panther movement (Omvedt, 2001, p. 153). Both groups contested the primacy of ideological orientation that should dictate the political and emancipatory strategies of the movement. Dhasal indicated his open allegiance with the Communist Party of India (CPI) and insisted on collective struggle against class and caste exploitation. On the contrary, Dhale opted for the Buddhist conversion movement as an exclusive Ambedkarite strategy that has the capacity to dethrone the Brahminical hegemony to carve a new religious and cultural identity of

BDP was officially dissolved in 1990s, allowing its members to take their political calls independently. (See Jaoul, 2007, p. 191)

the Dalits. Dhale eventually expelled Dhasal from the Panthers in October 1974 (Rao, 2009, p. 192).¹² Further, the attempts to forge an ‘Ambedkar-Phule-Marx’ alliance by political outfits like Sharad Patil’s Satyashodhak Communist Party and Bharat Patankar’s Shramik Mukti Dal introduced new players in the caste-class debates in Maharashtra. It tilted the balance of political debate more towards class perspective, making the Buddhist agency a mere social phenomenon.

The second response about the decline claims that the leadership, intellectuals and the audience for the DP’s activism remained restricted within the Mahar and the neo-Buddhist communities. The Panthers presented an abstract unity of all the Dalit castes including the Adivasis, however the other sub-castes within the Dalits (Matang, Mang, Chamar and Mehtar) in Maharashtra have shown little interest in joining the Panthers. At their respective local activism, the residents (including Muslims) regarded the Panthers as passionate and righteous campaigners for justice,¹³ however it has not transformed the stereotype that DP has remained an exclusive Mahar movement.

The third critical assessment argues that the leaders of the DP opted for more liberal alternatives and accepted the dictums of political democracy. The leading activists and leaders opened their independent political shops only to bargain for petty profits from the big political master of the Congress party (Wankhede, 2005). Further, the breakup of RPI in multiple factions divided the activists of the Panthers. Its linkage with the factions of RPI and failure to provide political alternatives during elections delegitimized their character as the real voice of the poor Dalits. Further, the DP also failed in forming political or social alliances with other struggling groups (rural Dalits, Adivasis, working classes, Naxal movement and Muslims) and hardly developed a comprehensive synthesis on the ‘class-caste’ ideological debate (Guru & Chakravarthy, 2005, pp. 146–47). The popular agitation built against caste atrocities, for students’ fellowships, reservations and employment soon dried up in the absence of a competent mobilizer, the needed resources and organizational strength.

Finally, it is observed that Mumbai, one of the most important locations of Panthers activities, came under the direct threat and control of the regional parochial political party, the Shiv Sena. Mumbai politics was dominated by the communal-parochial leadership, which clamped down heavily against Dalit activism and on many occasions restored police brutalities including killing innocent Dalits in police firings. The fragmented DP is restricted to operate only in the Dalit ghettos under the fear of retaliation and police atrocities. It remained vibrant at the literary front with its philosophical content, but its radical posturing as street fighters died down suddenly after the 1990s. Further, those who remained committed to the revolutionary political

¹²Interestingly, Namdeo Dhasal joined the Shiv Sena and became an early proponent of the ‘Shiv Shakti-Bhim Shakti’ political alliance. The other leader, Raja Dhale had earlier collided with one faction of Prakash Ambedkar’s RPI (Bahujan Bharip Mahasangh) but later launched his own organization, Phule-Ambedkar Vichardhara. It showed that those ideological debates were not the central issues by which the DP started vanishing from the public sphere.

¹³Contursi A. Janet has conducted comprehensive fieldwork on the Panthers’ movement in Maharashtra between 1985-86 and has mentioned this aspect about the activists, especially in the Bhimnagar slum of Pimpri-Chinchwad district. (See Contursi, 1986)

culture of the movement have been haunted and harassed by false police cases and tagging them as Naxalites as indicated in recent incidents.¹⁴

The above-mentioned reasons have qualified merits to understand the decline of the DP movement in Maharashtra. However, it is still unconvincing to accept the fact that at today's juncture there is almost no one in Maharashtra to claim the heroic imagination that the Panthers envisaged as a revolutionary strategy for social emancipation. I would argue that though Panthers created a successful rumble in the socio-political atmosphere, it was never seen as a serious challenge to the political establishment. The romantic and utopian radicalism of the Panthers was short lived mainly because of the impractical assessment of concrete political conditions based on certain canonical principles. The adventurist Class-Caste international alliance for complete revolution or the fanatical over-assessment of imagining India as 'Prabuddha Bharat', both undermine the other democratic credentials in which society operates. The Panthers created a greater valorization for a casteless-classless society emphasizing heavily on the idea of caste antagonism. Such extreme criticality towards the usage of caste identity in the political field further arrested their capacity to think in a more imaginative way about how to indulge other social identities in the struggle. Here, with the emergence of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, produced a new dynamic alternative that challenged the utopian considerations of the Panthers with a more rational and practical political arithmetic.

The Post-Panthers' Dalit Politics: The arrival of BSP's Political Pragmatism

Distinct from Panthers' zealous and radical approach towards democratic politics, Kanshi Ram adopted a liberal standpoint to build the Dalit movement. This model emerged as a subtle critic of the Panthers' program and ideas, evoking innovative strategies to build a new innings of Dalit politics.

To find a viable political alternative, Kanshi Ram initially experimented by building a trade union style organization, identical to the non-political assertion of the DPs, called the Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) in Pune in 1973. Simultaneously, he also formed a 'quasi-political party' called Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangram Samiti (DS4: Committee to fight for the community of exploited and oppressed) in 1982 in Maharashtra mainly for agitational politics and to spread political awareness among the Dalits (Sudha Pai, 2002, p. 109). DS4 was motivated to spread awareness about Ambedkar's political ideology, especially in areas where people are 'ignorant about the life and mission of Ambedkar' (Kanshi Ram, 1982, p. 125). Both socio-political experiments by Kanshi Ram were intrinsically built on the model earlier championed by the Panthers in Maharashtra,

¹⁴The prosecution of cultural activists (Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali) of Kabir Kala Manch under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act is one such incident. The state has branded them as absconding Naxalites. Anand Patwardhan's documentary 'Jai Bhim Comrade' has considerably highlighted the plight of these activists.

to assert an aggressive communitarian identity of the Dalits, initiating campaigns, mobilization and agitations to engage the socially deprived masses.¹⁵ However, Kanshi Ram also learned that such ‘agitational’ politics was not yielding good dividends in the electoral democracy and therefore changing the nature of political activities became imperative.¹⁶ BSP is the result of such deliberation.

With the rise of BSP in 1984, the celebrated political term ‘Dalit’ now has to contend with a new popular collective term called the ‘*Bahujan*’ (literally the “majority mass”). It connotes a discursive front of socially marginalized communities and religious minorities that purports to ‘challenge the majoritarian claims of an aggressive Hindu nationalism’ (Ganguly, 2002, p. 332). In the post-Ambedkar period, this imaginative new political slogan emerged as a comprehensive tool to organize the socially marginalized groups as a new democratic force against the other nationalist formations. Kanshi Ram presented this vision by giving a practical road map of social revolution based on the idea of social engineering. The idea of *Bahujan* was one of the most imaginative political categories, which he coined to overturn the dominant generalisation that sees the Dalits as the submissive participant (through reservations) or aggressive claimants (pressure tactics through the agency of agitation, like the Panthers). *Bahujan* identity is crafted as a democratic political alliance between the politically deprived caste groups under the leadership of the Dalits. It elevates the Dalits as a master category in the formation of *Bahujan*, leading the coalition of all the deprived social communities to challenge the conventional ruling elites. This alternative based on a majority-minority dichotomy (*Bahujan* versus the social elites) though mimics the classical Marxist category, improvises it with Gramscian cultural attire, making it suitable to the Indian context.

BSP enthralls the Dalits as the leading agents of democratic change and builds dynamic aspirations for political power within them. Panthers, on the other hand, has this hypothesis that political power will be inaccessible to the Dalits (due to the demographic limitations and incapacity in resource mobilizations) and only by forcing the establishment with radical overtones, can the Dalits improve their conditions. BSP’s sharp electoral ascendancy in Uttar Pradesh proved that the Panther’s hypothesis is untenable as it established the Dalits as a significant force in mainstream politics. Thus, the BSP departed from the canonical objectives of the DP and provided new ideological goals, a powerful organizational capacity and robust aspirations to challenge the ruling establishment.

¹⁵In 1983, DS4 organized a ‘unique’ ‘100 days Social Action Campaign’ in which hundreds of cyclists under the leadership of Kanshi Ram traveled all over India (thirty-five districts/ seven states/3000 km.) campaigning against caste atrocities and mainly to promote Dalits as a new independent political force of national stature. A cycle is utilized as the new weapon of the poor to organize democratically in public places. (See Joshi, 1986, pp. 109–117)

¹⁶BAMSEF was strategically created by Kanshi Ram to build a financial resource and ideologically oriented cadres with the support of strong middle class government employees. With it, he launched DS4 mostly to mobilize the Dalit sections. His first attempt to contest the Assembly Elections (1982) in Haryana on 46 seats had minimal success.

BSP undermined all the three canonical values that the Panthers stood for during the days of activism and drifted comprehensively from social questions towards a political agenda. First, the BSP valued and granted political space to the caste identity rather than building a hypothetical ‘enlightened’ community through Buddhist conversion. Buddhism appeared as a blockage in creating a social platform of the *Bahujan* that represents various aspirations (social, economic and political) of the marginalized groups, whereas Buddhism suggests an exclusive new social identity, traditionally related to the Mahar caste.¹⁷ Second, the BSP stood away from the ‘Leftist’ model of aggressive politics of agitation, political vendetta through street violence and symbolic protests for gaining immediate socio-cultural benefits from the state. The party also showed restraint in politicizing the cases of Dalit atrocities, caste discrimination and non-fulfillment of reservation quotas in government jobs. It hardly presented any flashy charter of economic demands or even argued that distribution of land will resolve the issues of poverty and marginalization. The BSP had no affiliated mass organizations based on professional/communal or caste affiliations and even distanced itself from the functioning of the BAMCEF.

Finally, the BSP further showed political aversion to the intelligentsia and the middle-class values of political correctness. It remained distanced from the populism created by the media, academic disciplines and also from building a superior ideological merit in the battle of political ideas. Instead, it invested in building a quasi-secretive strategic plan for mobilizing the Dalit masses by utilizing an indirect mode of communication specifically related to the given caste/community.¹⁸ Dalits were framed as new political masters who can manipulate, converse and pragmatically use the democratic subjects for political gains without any recourse to ethical judgment. The BSP advanced the ‘political Dalit’ as a matured agent, different from the Panthers’ modes that emphasized on the emotive caste exclusivity and militant resistance.

Conclusion: Examining the Appropriate Revolutionary Model

The Panthers produced new revolutionary ideals different from the liberal-bourgeois passivity offered by Dalit politics and the accommodative nationalist rhetoric of the social elites. It imagined a militant political alternative against the hegemonic appropriation of social and political assets by the upper caste elites and its lackeys. The unemployed urban youth became the new aggressive voice of the movement that employed street protests, mass agitations and emotive speeches to produce a militant socio-political consciousness amongst the Dalits. The language that the Panthers had introduced was inspirational and radical but was also stuffed with rhetoric of religious proximity (Buddhism) and anti-constitutional violent jargons (Radical Marxism). Such complex duality with unclear political guidelines failed to capture the Dalits’

¹⁷Kanshi Ram established ‘Buddhist Research Center’ exclusively for religious activities and to keep the political sphere secular by not mixing in religious activities (See Kanshi Ram, 1982).

¹⁸Badri Narayan in his extensive study of oral history, folklore, myths and local traditions demonstrated that the BSP has developed an indigenous model of mobilization by creating and politicizing local caste heroes. (See Narayan, 2006)

political imagination and distanced them from Panther's revolutionary endeavor. The Dalit masses instead, trusted the liberal-constitutional framework and showed more inclinations towards the political parties that raise their concerns in the field of electoral democracy.

Though the Dalit Panthers movement appears as an unsustainable revolution, it emerged as a political catalyst that announced the arrival of the Dalits as a dynamic political force. Kanshi Ram, by establishing the BSP, groomed the Panthers' idea with liberal values and inspired the Dalits to play a central role in power politics. The BSP borrowed the political ethics and social consciousness from the DP but instead of giving it more radical revolutionary attire, it adopted a prolonged strategy of democratic participation and political mobilization. Kanshi Ram's reformed socio-political alternatives suited the Dalits' political claims and allowed them to escape the Panthers' radical rhetoric. The BSP appeared as the competent political party of the Dalits, with an Ambedkarite vision and concrete political objectives. It soon sidelined Panthers' rhetorical and romantic claims to convert the Dalit masses as radical revolutionaries of the Marxist-Maoist brand. Instead, with the BSP's pragmatic and politically correct ways, the Dalits returned to the Ambedkarite canons, following the liberal progressive path against the Panthers' call.

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