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**DALITS' CHANGING CHALLENGES:  
PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL DISCOURSES AND NEW  
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

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# Dalits' Changing Challenges: Progressive Social Discourses and New Communication Strategies

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## Prologue

This contribution is framed and presented a little differently than what is usual to Indian policy researchers, planners and administrators. Instead of assessing specific policy research issues or implementation problems faced by the State leaders and governing functionaries, the following discussion dwells on a set of major *background* cultural, psychological and political forces surrounding the changing Dalits – and the resulting new challenges. In fact, these challenges should now concern Dalits (i.e. the erstwhile Untouchables for this exercise) as much as their counterpart Indian public policy researchers, planners, and the civil society, including the NGOs, local Dalit community leaders and social reformers. This exercise posits that a Dalit-centred focus now has to be at the core of policy researchers' stance as well, returning to Dalits full social initiative and political agency to chart their own best course of development in modern India. It means to let – and help let – Dalits view and bring themselves socially, morally and politically together as an *all-India community*, rather than be those internally divided “caste” (*jati*) clusters or politically exploited voting-bank pawns.

At the heart of such a change (and its responsibilities) lies the Dalit generated initiative of community mentoring, self-monitoring and economic improvement, *both* with as well as without the help of the State. Once so approached, Dalits expose us, at one level, to their

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ongoing the Dalit-Dalit, Dalit-Hindu and Dalit-and-non-Dalit dialogues in India, and, at another, to the expanding Dalit social aspirations and experiments, especially within a democratic – and now globalizing – India. As a vast Indian community (16.2% of India's population in 2001, numbering more than 166 million) still in search of social empowerment and justice, the Dalits, as we will see later on (section V), now raise a meaningful dialogue at the global level.

This exercise, accordingly, will approach Dalits' changing social and political challenges by remaining focused on Dalit, and by letting policy relevant social meanings and political messages emerge as implied messages. This attempt encourages policy researchers, planners and even policy philosophers to think in a way sympathetic to the Dalits' challenges to forge a foundationally positive moral self-identity and a self-assured politico-economic effort in India. In many ways, the following discussion culturally unpacks what many perceptive policy analysts may now already sense immanent but yet find that information too nebulous and "slippery" or unconventional to grapple with.

Such a new initiative would link up fitfully with independent India's Constitution as well as its framer Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (e.g. see his writings and speeches edited by Moon 1987). This paper argues that the roles of regional Dalit (or Dalit-focused) saints, social leaders, thinker-writers, reformers, and social analysts have been increasingly valuable during the last half of the twentieth century. The resulting "Dalit literature" often has very insightful readings on – and practical clues about – the suffering Dalit's heart, mind and social pulse (on some references to and social readings and uses of Dalit literature, see Omvedt 1995; Dangle 1992; Anand and Zelliott 1992; Khare 2003, 1984; and in Hindi, see Valmiki 2001). There is much of signal consequence here for the concerned Indian policy researchers, social planners and governing elites, including those now leading the rising private sector. The time is opportune for such a convergence, particularly since some perceptive economists, policy researchers and social scientists (both non-Dalits as well as Dalits) now look beyond the established economic and social developmental indicators, to acknowledge the

changing Dalits' self-assertion.<sup>1</sup>

Such self-assertion of Dalits now seeks, let us remember, a foundationally positive Dalit moral and social identity, along with full politico-economic enfranchisement by modern India. To investigate both, this paper must examine the "inside" as well as the "outside" of the Dalit world in each other's terms. We begin with the necessity for Dalits to step out of the emotional straightjacket that the long accumulating anger and angst have produced. Not only must they step out, they should transform it into the ways yielding engagement with other Dalits and all other non-Dalits in Indian society. To do so would be to build genuinely further on the Ambedkar-drawn progressive social, economic and political markers in independent India's quest for social justice. Next, to exploit effectively the emerging new political spaces and socio-economic opportunities, we argue that Dalit families, neighbourhoods and communities need to redirect their maximum social and emotional energy on identifying and tackling their own intra-community social and moral challenges. And the centre of this challenge is to forge a *foundationally positive moral self-identity and an enduring intra-community dialogue*. This requires of the community to look within to identity and differentiate between the Indian (especially the caste Hindu) notions of the "lack" (i.e. something that one is said to lack "innately") and the "loss" (i.e. something that one lost over time but could regain with effort).

To reject the first and recover the loss is to start on the road to genuine Dalit community regeneration. And to do so is also to reject abject dependence and move increasingly towards self-reliance by developing a focus on self-help within the community. These preceding steps, this paper argues, create enduring room for forging a proactive moral identity and for looking beyond the vicious cycles of victimhood and self-victimization. Not only that, the Dalit discourse becomes capable of meaningfully comparing "notes and experiences" with other similarly

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent helpful discussion of "the Dalit question" for spelling out the needed policy reforms in India, see Debroy, Bibek and D. Shyam Babu 2004, including their introduction, pp. 1-6. In the same volume, Thorat, an economist, repeatedly alludes to the Dalit-centred, Dalit conscious initiatives; see Thorat, 2004a; 2004b.

positioned major Subaltern groups, even on the other side of the world (in the US).

Viewed from another direction, this mentoring and monitoring involves, as we will discuss, the cultivation of a multi-step culture of self-help, enabling new Dalits not only reclaim moral courage as a social capital but thereby also generate a qualitatively new profile of economic and political capital in the new century. By doing so, Dalits should be able to see and counter better the antagonistic non-Dalits' exploitative interests and strategies (especially in the globalizing India). It is only within the ethos of a morally positive Dalit self-image and stout self-help social strategies that the new challenges that the Indian privatization and its new work ethic throw can be met.

### **I: Transforming Angst and Anger, Engaging the Wider Society**

At the beginning of the new century, Indian Dalits are perhaps poised better than ever before to intensify an open-ended communication as much within their own communities as across the Dalit and non-Dalit divide, and especially by making the Indian civil society take notice of their needs and demands. Dalit leaders, on the other hand, need to take increasing advantage of the socially aware segments of the Indian mass media. At the core of this new effort must stand today local Dalit community leaders, ready to look *both* socially inwards and outwards for gaining added social attention and representation. The goal here is twofold: to let ordinary Dalits openly share concerns among themselves, and to assert moral and civil parity within the wider Indian society. To do so is also to erode those customary caste-based social dependencies.

No documentation is needed to underscore the social fact that Indian Dalits, especially those poor and living in remote villages, still continue to face entrenched social discrimination, exploitation, and injustice. The long identified basic cause of the Dalit's moral and spiritual degradation is still predominantly the Hindu caste system, based on the continuing force of its four-fold *chaturvarna vyavastha* or the *varnasrama dharma*. Since this is still at the back of the lived social reality in vast India, we get a sobering look at what Ambedkar's signal mid-century leadership has changed, and what still socially challenges.

Though we now have greater awareness of what is morally right vs. morally wrong in the caste system, the people's practices still lag behind. Here, the work of the local and regional Dalit reformers, leaders, political activists, and writers has been substantial, but yet much more is needed. If the discriminatory "system" still survives at the grass-root social level, the enormity of the challenge at hand is underscored.

Some Dalits despair that it is impossible to change the caste Hindus' heart, while others harbour a deepening social anger as well as anxiety. Here the anti-caste Hindu sentiment gathers most, draining Dalit social hope as well as personal initiative. Dalits' social communication falls off among their own as well as with the outside world, increasing the feeling of separation, deprivation and oppression. Ordinary Dalits more often tend to withdraw inwards, rather than take on their opponents and adversaries. But this is not only source of Dalit anxiety. Many uncaring and selfish Dalit leaders also distinctly contribute to it, especially when they play their divisive politics based on short-term power gains. While trumpeting in public their allegiance to Ambedkar's ideals, ideas and heritage, including Ambedkar's slogan to "annihilate caste," these leaders, ironically, reinforce casteism among the Dalits — upper-caste style. Parroting Ambedkar's name on politically crucial occasions is good enough for such leaders, while making the ordinary Dalit increasingly bitter, despondent, socially isolated and cynical. If Ambedkar has now become a national icon, with ever more garlanded statues appearing in cities and towns all over India, this is also where most often Ambedkar's "followers" now stop.

In such a situation, who must take the lead in showing Dalits how to handle their anger, despondency and angst in constructive a way? How might ordinary Dalits redirect their self-wounding anger and angst? Excepting stray beacons of hope, no newly organized major regional or all-Indian Dalit initiative is visible here, especially since those small but effective political and governing Dalit elites are found standing on the sidelines. On the other hand, if some committed local and regional Dalit writers, activists and reformers try to fill in the void with their cry for justice, their marginal social, political and economic clout in the wider society stands in the way. Still, in some parts of India (e.g. Maharashtra, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh), these informal leaders have

highlighted the Dalit struggle, very often by pivoting their works on that “angry, unbending Indian male Dalit.” Representing the hardship, discrimination, humiliation and injustice in life, this Dalit figure (a mixture of Dalit experience and imagined activism) carries a smouldering heart, fiery gaze, bitter memories, and a biting language. And it is around him thus that most short stories, poems, autobiographies, or even a novel must weave their yarns (Macwan 2004 [1987 in Gujarati]). These expressions, constructed by Dalits to serve the Dalit’s quest, sometimes carry the rudiments of how to re-channel that welling up Dalit anger. If a strategy of disengaging from (or striking against) the wider callous society finds expression in such works, some suggestions for reengaging the Dalit society are also there. The Dalit challenge now is to retackle their emotional straightjacket, until it challenges and engages the wider Indian society for – and on – Dalit terms.

A related strategy is to break loose of that no-change or change-all Dalit approach to Indian society and social change. For centuries, Dalit leaders and reformers have expected from the caste Hindus “a change of heart,” but since no such change has occurred, Dalits feel a deepening hopelessness despite recent changes. Under such a social and moral reasoning, however, Dalits and non-Dalits tend to entrench and confront each other at a deeper level, even while, in practice, trying to make the best of the changes underway. Under such a split response, neither the Dalits nor non-Dalits care to seek new and different channels of social communication; each side depends on “the government” (the omnibus ruling *sarkar*) to bring about all the needed change. A change in approach is sorely needed here, guided by the Dalits’ as well as the non-Dalits’ volunteer efforts towards changing their interdependent socio-economic needs and shared future moral aspirations. Similarly, it may be a far better practical strategy for both the communities to distinguish today *several grades* along the negative, the overtly accommodating yet discriminatory, and a genuinely shared progressive location within their social worlds. And this strategy should not spare the hostile upper caste Hindus, challenging them to open up socially and morally to be counted in a globalizing India.

Such upper caste groups, however small in size, become particularly crucial when they prove in practice their sincerity of purpose. Major Dalit saints, reformers, writers, and leaders have played distinctly valuable roles here in the remote as well the near past (e.g. for accounts of some local saints, literati, leaders and reformers in north India, see Khare 2003, 1998, 1984). Simultaneously, Dalits need to recognize the fact that in today’s globalizing world non-Dalits are also facing many new challenges, and that to succeed Dalits and non-Dalits need to change in relation to each other in India, securing their own distinct practical interests. The Dalits and non-Dalits are here competitors in many ways, but are *not* enemies.

Approached this way, Dalits today, especially as India is now fast changing under economic privatization and globalization, must find ever new ways of communication to engage and challenge the non-Dalits on their own grounds. But to be able to do so, Dalits would need to communicate ever more among themselves, forging interrelated, stable regional interest communities of their own. Many crucially creative moral keys and cultural initiatives may lie hidden there, and nowhere else. Even the most ardent non-Dalit protagonists can do little here until Dalits themselves are ready to initiate earnestly their own social and moral makeover. Until Dalits question and monitor themselves and mentor their own in family and community, they cannot frontally challenge their recalcitrant non-Dalit counterparts.

## II: Tackling Intra-community Challenges

However, since nobody else will (or can) do this for them, Dalits must seriously look “within” and among themselves to remove (or more realistically reduce) the most crippling Dalit social weakness of dependency as well as self-doubt. But as a crucial and far reaching social turn-around, it hides many new (or reframed) challenges for Dalits. The *first challenge* is not only to transform and redirect the feelings of raw, stifling anger into community caring and healing strategies, it is also to start sincere intra-community dialogues suited to increase social interdependence and unity. Though socially and psychologically a very hard exercise, it, foremost, requires discovering new ways on how *not* to blame first either oneself (i.e. one’s Dalit

status and its Dalit-ness) or the other members of one's own community.

Here also appears the need to find a way, as Henry Louis Gates (2004) had found true for the Black achievers in the US, to quarantine and unlearn the oppression rather than constantly internalise it. Unless done so, the oppressed engage in forms of behaviour that foremost hurts them. In India, it most centrally means to find ways to sever – or at least weaken – the entrenched links maintained between one's personal karma, the birth-given lowest caste status, and the inscrutable, unalterable presence of God in life. To do so would be not only to lift the stifling shadow the Dalit anger casts on Dalits, it is also for Dalits to break loose of that self-blaming, self-wounding and self-justifying vicious cycle long in place.

But for such a change to start where it matters most, the *second challenge* for Dalits is to focus foremost and in a sustained way on the daily care and welfare of their own families. This means attending to *all* the family members, including those youngest, the oldest, the most vulnerable, and the marginalized. At core of this initiative is to let all Dalit family members, male and female, young and old, the breadwinner and his/her dependents, to relate to and communicate with one another, especially under disease, scarcity, trauma and violence. Among those most persistent yet socially unspoken are unemployment, hidden hunger and malnutrition among women and children, male drunkenness, domestic discord and violence, and abandoned (women-led) families. These Dalit social problems are all too well known but they are, under the ever changing vote-bank electoral politics, most often neglected or ignored, and hence rendered worse. Under such conditions, the Dalit intra-family communication becomes extremely limited, strained, painful and fragile.

On the other hand, Dalit families, like all other Indian families, customarily communicate only along the socially shared gradients of age, gender and kinship position, once the breadwinner's social primacy and authority are recognized. Yet, the effective lines of cultural communication are far more limited – and complicated – within an extended Dalit family. If some authority figures must be heard, then there are several others in the family who remain silent, passive and

marginalized. The purpose of the second challenge now is, however, to heal the ruptured and reach the most obstructed for reducing the “deaf zones” in Dalit family and community communication networks. To restore these channels of communication within Dalit family, especially across the parents, relatives and children, is also to initiate inculcation of a *positive* moral and social self-image across the young and the old.

The *third challenge*, accordingly, is to seek *foundational change* in Dalit self-definition and identity. Looked against the reality of the prevailing Indian caste system, this goal is perhaps the hardest to achieve but the most desirable one to insist on. And the challenge here is not to stop until a foundationally positive moral and social Dalit identity is fully viable in everyday social practice, and up and down the entire Indian society. Here the Dalits' strongest allies now are the democratic Indian polity and civil society, and the underlying deeply plural and tolerant social-moral tendency to accommodate those opposed. However, as independent India has already shown, such “good” tendencies and sentiments alone are not sufficient (nor powerful enough) to ameliorate Dalits' condition. Something more is directly needed from today's Dalits: Foremost, it is Dalits' commitment to exploit every opportunity available to educate themselves as well as *all* their children. To do so is not only to open the Dalit *self* in a new way, it is also to discover the “good, compelling reasons” to discover and own the foundationally positive moral, social and political contents for the Dalit self and community. And to do so is also to the needed ground for acquiring competitive competence, efficiency and social resilience within now a challenging and globalizing India. As the Dalits had discovered during the last century, Ambedkar had laid the foundation of such a direction, but the core, sustained effort is still needed for erecting the new edifice.

To return to this foundational work of resurrecting the Dalit's morally positive self, we need to take a closer look at what Dalits find wanting. Still placed within the strong frame of caste reference, the Dalit self- and social identity are still found struggling against the two overwhelming odds. If one concerns the “lack” with which Dalits are basically found to suffer, the other reflects the “loss” over the time and

history. The Indian caste system, especially the Hindu *savarna vyavastha*, imposes “lack” on Dalits via the inescapable rules and cycles of karma and rebirth. The mythic past and the historical information tell Dalits, on the other hand, what they originally were and what they lost, over time, socially, culturally and in religious-moral standing. Since a foundational change still eludes the Dalits in India, and since Dalits perhaps hold the clearest mirror to modern India’s moral, social and political failures, we must comment, however briefly, on the “lack” and the “loss” still afflicting Dalits.

*Tackling the “lack” and the “loss”:* If, as already stated, the “loss” refers to losing (over time) whatever Dalits had as theirs, then the “lack,” under Indian caste logic, starkly refers to whatever Dalits “innately” did (and could) *not ever have*. Indian Dalits still find their *positive* moral, spiritual and social self-identity clearly separated and imprisoned within these two notions and their supportive social forces in a very fundamental way. Viewed from within the *varnasrama dharma* (i.e. in the morally ordained four-class and four-stage life passage) order, Dalits lack such karmic, religious and ritual “merit” by birth that they cannot remedy it by their individual or collective actions alone during this life time.

But today neither the modern Indians’ nor the Dalits’ (nor even the enlightened caste Hindus’) interpretation and discussion of this “lack” has to stop at this point. In modern context, if somebody lacks something, appropriate concerted effort is made until it is acquired. The roots of this response lie deep in human mind. In psychoanalysis, as Jacques Lacan had shown sometime ago, “lack,” among other things, evokes the “structuring function” of desire, of a “want-to-be” (Lacan 1977: 29). Further, a feeling of “lack” lets the subject confront “the other,” and it, in fact, deeply impacts *both sides*, not only one. A similar modern stance was integral to Ambedkar’s approach to Indian caste society, seeking and creating political and economic room for the Indian downtrodden, particularly Dalits, demanding what they “wanted-to-be.” Ambedkar had set this pace-setting twentieth-century political Dalit discourse by the early thirties (for excerpts from the eloquent and consequential statement at the Round Table Conference in London, see Keer 1995 [1971]: 149-158). The subsequent national, regional and

local Dalit reformist social, political, and moral calls have essentially echoed the original (for a discussion at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Indian Constitution, see Khare 2003: 71-93; see also Jain, Palsetia and Wagle 2003).

As Ambedkar’s had warned more than seventy years ago, the roots of the “lack” and “loss” for ordinary rural Dalits (the disempowered majority), however, still run very deep. Here the reach, shouts and slogans of modern Indian metropolitan politics have still been largely impotent, making rural Dalits still feel the loneliest and most enfeebled. These notions of “lack” and “loss” are still undoubtedly, let us remember, integral to the inequitable caste system’s moral and political armoury. Unless consciously separated and worked against, the notions of “lack” and “loss” feed into each other; the innate lack engenders irrecoverable loss and the latter entrenches lack. The Ambedkar inspired Dalits must particularly work against this slide, making ordinary Dalits learn how to uproot the “innate” lack from their midst by the sheer force of their committed personal initiative.

For doing so, a focus on the self-help, where both mentoring and monitoring go hand in hand, needs to develop.

### III: Developing a Focus on Self-help

The “dependency challenge,” though widely identified and increasingly politically exploited in recent decades, is perhaps still most difficult for Dalits to surmount. Since Dalits today need aggressive preparation and effective practical strategies to secure their share from the wider society, here new social learning is as important for them as is an unlearning of whatever has socially kept them divided and weak. Most importantly, the Dalit youth must now clearly see how their major interests significantly shift as India rapidly privatizes and globalizes. This emerging India is distinctly – and qualitatively – different than the one launched immediately after independence in 1947. The criterion of acquiring competitive competence by one’s own hard work, rather than dependence on traditional patrons, rises to the fore. Such an effort demands – and forges – a correspondingly different Dalit identity with distinct social attitudes, efforts and approaches. The simplistic, easily politicised Dalit and non-Dalit political and/or religious antagonism is

now woefully inadequate. There is a crying need here to take the post-independence Ambedkar politico-economic heritage forward, with new Dalit imagination, integrity and commitment.

*Self-help social stance:* The closest social allies of Dalits in such an endeavour are now their own educated youth, along with enlightened community reformers, writers and leaders. Working as much more than a cheering squad, they must help devise, build and sustain that socially positive and historically proud self and community image. Though the wheels of change may turn slowly from within the rural Dalit community, it is also true that whatever gets done well here socially seeps in and stays. A less dependent Dalit voice might also be similarly reconstructed. In towns and cities, however, the Dalit literature, however spotty and uneven by availability, makes its contributions to this voice. Although non-Dalits and the society at large still scarcely know about this Dalit creation, it has been slowly but surely gathering its role within Dalit communities during most of the twentieth century. At the minimum, these create grounds for the self- and community pride to rise by an imaginative re/construction of community memory (of both good and bad by the old and young, and by men and women). Though largely born of the Dalit anger and angst and still mostly confined to Dalit audience, this literature is nevertheless a psychologically necessary and socially and politically meaningful step in the Dalit social recovery.

*Three kinds of self-help:* The Dalit literature, though still mostly in the narrative (story telling) mode, already implicate the three essential kinds of self-help. The first one impresses itself whenever (and wherever) Dalits suffer from intolerable deceit, exploitation and control in such circumstances that they can do something themselves, including just a protest. After all, the true, searing stories revolve around such experiences, encouraging the Dalit reader to kindle that inner fire to claim to *be* better in life. The larger goal here is to raise that positive innate moral, social and spiritual worth of the Dalit in foundationally unconditional and equal terms. The second kind of self-help appears when Dalit writers, poets and reformers portray the self-worth of a Dalit man, woman and child so unquestioned in idea and essence that the community members would feel inspired to challenge the oppressor, and to devise their own strategies to heal their wounds and inspire the young.

The preceding two are the essential steps to help Dalits inculcate themselves the third and the most vital type of self-help at the beginning of the new century. This kind starts and ends with that Dalit self-confidence that openly accepts the new and unpredictable challenges of both the open market and open society. Since the latter are led by the criteria of competitive individual merit, competence at work and efficiency, the challenge is seen as an opportunity for Dalits to be no less than the best. However, this step does *not* imply slackening up on the current government entitlement programmes for Dalits. These programmes are still too crucial to the demands for social justice, a transparent social accountability, and that level-field fairness in workplace. The new century's Dalits now have to work on both the sides the work street to become competitive on their own, whether it is the national electoral politics, the places of education and employment, or the rising private industry. These challenges demand of Dalits a new proactive focus.

*A proactive focus:* Foremost, a proactive focus helps Dalits convince themselves that their vital practical interests and social destiny are *now* in their own hands, and not with their opponents, tormentors or the hidden others. This new focus also nurtures the conviction that Dalits can socially help – and mentor – each other without being dependent on anybody else, because they are *not* anymore the abject “lowest” and hopeless social other. The full implications this realization has a therapeutic effect on Dalits, particularly the educated and city employed youth. Among other things, they realize that they do not have to be so perpetually resentful and alienated from the larger society that they cannot but be only the self-stifling, self-suffocating community wrestling with unending gripes, rancour, blames and counter blames. The implications of such a step are much more.

In such a self-reliant focus, Dalits' opponents, adversaries and exploiters receive “a return social challenge” after every major conflict of interest confrontation, allowing Dalits to move beyond symbolic protest marches or some empty political sloganeering on certain ceremonial occasions. This proactive approach of Dalits also helps them weaken not only the caste Hindu created negative social and moral placement “boxes,” but



also get out of those psychological prisons that Dalit victimization and victimhood have created.

#### **IV: Forging a Proactive Moral Identity, Moving beyond Victimhood**

Viewed from the Dalits' side, they need to re-imagine themselves in the new century beyond being just the persecuted, exploited and victimized. Not only with a positive self-identity, but Dalits now must seek to claim the right to generate a positive moral economy by their ideas, actions and achievements. To do so is to lay the foundation of a Dalit conceived and Dalit run moral and ethical empowerment in daily life, and it is to deny the unjust Hindu caste order (*savarna vyavatha*) at its source what it values (and fights for) most – its inherent moral and spiritual superiority and authority. More and more Dalits now already look in life what *they know* is morally right and what they find is socially due and dignified. The Dalit demands increasingly are for “a life with social honour” and “a deserved and just reward for my work.” To disregard these is to insult the Dalits in a new way. To recognize such positive claims (now supported by the law of the land) is to affirm their inalienable moral-social dignity.

Given the forces of today's Indian civil and populist politics, the preceding expressions and concerns must next acquire the widest public expression and acceptance. Required efforts are on the anvil. A positive Dalit assertion is, for instance, sought now by organizing the “World Dignity Forum.” According to a newspaper report (see *The Hindu*, 2004), the Forum, launched first in January 2004, is now an organization “working against casteism and racism...to assert dignity as a universal concern without any distinction of caste and creed,” with December 5 to be identified every year “as World Dignity Day and International Day of Dalit Struggle.” The chosen date, we are told, recalls “the death anniversary [on December 6] of Ambedkar and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, underlining the importance of the struggle of secularism and for the dignified existence of the minorities...”

This Indian civil society's quest to ensure the Dalits dignity and fair play must be now linked up with that already discussed ordinary Dalits' firm moral and social sensibilities for fairness in everyday life. The two meaningfully dovetail while pursuing the shared goals of morally

positive self-worth and social dignity. Given today's Indian social and political reality, the “World Dignity Forum” speaks for the Dalit community as a whole, whether rural or urban or international. The quest for unqualified moral dignity and unquestioned social self-worth and honour are shared everywhere. The modern civil and indigenous approaches become genuinely proactive only when the Dalits' inalienably positive moral claims come straight from them, representing unflinchingly *all* their own.

Equally importantly, a truly “World Dignity Forum” working to secure the due rights to all Indian Dalits (i.e. the Indian Untouchables and other such oppressed groups as the tribes, bonded labourers and women) must open itself up to major meaningful developments occurring among “the oppressed” anywhere in the world. Approached this way, Indian Dalits living in India and abroad share meaningful experiences and join their struggle with those socially oppressed anywhere else in the world. Whether the Indian Dalit experiences are culturally and historically convergent or just parallel, either way the Indian Dalits' struggle for inalienable dignity, both within India as well as internationally, gets underscored.

To broad base our discussion, let me next allude to a few instructive comparative messages and meanings recently emanating from the experiences of “the oppressed” living on the other side of the world. I refer here to some relevant social experiences and initiatives of African Americans in the US. Within a generally Dalit-focused stance of this paper, the purpose of such an allusion is clearly to illustrate, within a comparative world-wide forum, salient exchanges feasible across the Dalit-Dalit, Dalit and non-Dalit, and Dalit and the other oppressed (or Subaltern) elsewhere in the world.

#### **V: Entering a Meaningful Global Dialogue**

One of the most meaningful implications of the contemporary Dalits' self-empowering strategies is that it seeks to compare its condition with those others in the world similarly situated. Once so viewed in broad comparative historical and socio-political terms, Dalits quickly realize that their condition is neither historically unique nor socially and politically isolated. In fact, the marginalized tend to generate and suffer

from a shared set of social, economic and political disadvantages. Put another way, the self-worth seeking Dalits can today meaningfully compare themselves with similar others. And to do so is to break open another layer of that vicious social isolation and dependency syndrome. Once so approached, Indian Dalits and African Americans in the US learn how (and how far) the caste and servitude in India and the race and slavery in America have long shaped these two peoples "located a world apart." The social suffering they inflict on their people via politico-economic discrimination, domination and exploitation is similar. Yet, at another level, we must recognize the sociological and historical fact that caste and race developed differently, with different guiding religious conceptions, social-ritual practices, and moral underpinnings.

When a shared dynamics of human suffering and the search for social justice are concerned, let us briefly pursue a few Dalit relevant social issues, conditions and meaningful messages via the Black-on-Black discussions in America. The latter represent intra-community dialogues among African Americans, the counterpart of the Dalit-on Dalit dialogues discussed earlier. With both the sides facing similar human/social problems of suffering (and of the denial of human rights), both sides try to acquire a proactive social, political and moral instance to improve their own and their children's lot.

However, it should be obvious that the purpose of such a comparison is illustrative and limited. We do so without importing any crude and unworkable imitations from the either side, since, after all, Dalits are the Dalits in India and African Americans are the blacks in America. Nor, equally importantly, is there a room here for false and self-deluding pretences in the name of the "uniqueness" of Indian Dalits. While open to learn from the others elsewhere, Dalits in India must seek the solutions suited best to their genius, social situation and the cultural past. Yet, they broadly share similar social, economic and political dynamics while pursuing in their own countries, for instance, their "community heritage and history," "self-monitoring and mentoring initiatives," and "extending community responsibility."

1. *Celebration of the community heritage and history:* Foremost are

those events that collect, imaginatively interpret and effectively communicate across the generations one's community's heritage and history. Such knowledge and its representations are sources of positive self-empowerment. The Blacks in the US, for instance, now nationally observe (in schools, libraries and other local and regional civic organizations) "Black History month" in February every year. To do so is to celebrate the distinct value of the black heritage in the US and its outstanding pioneers.<sup>2</sup> Sociologically, the marginalized must do so in a democracy to assert their place and voice. The Dalits in India have done so ever more by celebrating the anniversaries of major saints (e.g. Raidas) and political leaders (e.g. Ambedkar or other major regional leaders). For Dalits, the next step might be recall and share their heritage more within the Indian civil society and its educational institutions. Complementing their religious traditions and celebrations, the new Dalits might imagine definite public ways to highlight nationally (and to educate *all* Indians) about their distinct Dalit heritage, Dalit accomplishments and Dalit aspirations. Given the Indian social challenge, such a step would require substantial dedicated work. But the payoff would be equally substantial: It will help forge an all-India face of the Dalit community.

Put another way, the intra-community disunity and the community-neglecting politics of Dalit leaders are perhaps the two most costly developments facing the post-Ambedkar phase of Dalit social struggle. A Dalit heritage and achievement focused cluster of annual activities and observances within Indian public culture could be of signal (and socially multiplying) value here, provided such activities are carefully conceived and enacted without falling prey to political infighting and exploitation for narrow selfish gains.

Similarly, if, for instance, the Blacks in America can periodically gather together to take stock of where they now are (*vis-à-vis* when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968), there are no less cogent

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<sup>2</sup> In 1926, Dr. Carter G. Woodson started a "Negro History Week" in the second week of February, since it included the birthdays of both Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. At the Bicentennial of the USA in 1976, the week-long observance was extended to the entire month of February, and today it has become a nationally important event to observe for American educational institutions and civil organizations

reasons for Indian Dalits to assess where they are in 2005, after 1956, when Ambedkar, the Dalits' prime mover, had died.

2. *Self-monitoring and community mentoring initiatives:* At the core of this initiative is the realization: "If we Dalits do not help ourselves, nobody else will do it for us." Here is once again a message that Dalits and black Americans share just by the force of their social location and its dependence politics. Given a strong emphasis in America on private initiatives, volunteerism and philanthropy for worthy social causes, the blacks must raise their own voluntary civil organizations and privately funded development initiatives. The sufferers and seekers of social justice must band together to do more for themselves, beyond what the US government or the states can do for them. Thus, today, major black leaders like Colin Powell, Bill Cosby and Jesse Jackson step forward to champion for the black causes, with the money, organization and manpower volunteered or privately raised by programmes. If such examples could instigate Dalits to inculcate a few India-suited self-help initiatives for (and within) their own communities, they would discover a valuable tool for social empowerment. The effect of such an effort would multiply of some money raised this way was used to institute earnestly mentoring and monitoring the Dalit youth (i.e. both men and women).

Dalits this way might also launch a new way to defeat those age-old caste-imposed ways of dependence, deprivation and helplessness. Most importantly, not only that dependence-creating "sarkar-should-do-all-for-us" mantra would weaken, but it would also loosen that underlying age-old chain of the raja-sarkar-sahib-malik dependence.

3. *Extending community responsibility:* Extending "informed" community responsibility is a hard – and often controversial – subject for any community in a modern society, since the issue involves a give-and-take of the extant rights and obligations. It is many times harder for the marginalized and the oppressed, given their meagre social and moral assets within the surrounding larger society. However, the changing times increasingly demand of the Dalits to pull themselves up here with all their resources. At the core of this demand stands the social and political challenge to let those hundreds of divergent,

discordant and dispersed local and regional Dalit *jatis* come together until they emerge as a *major all-India community of shared voices* in the twenty-first century. Creating this new sense of togetherness is a crucial social challenge for the Dalits indeed in the face of divisive local castes (*jatis*), the regional differences and the rural-urban differences. Here, the pioneering Dalit mind must be fully open to the meaningful messages coming locally from the next door, and to those coming from across the oceans. In today's world, connected by the Internet, instant communication for a modern Dalit leader is just a click away.

Today, sociologically as well, Indian Dalits and African Americans in the US might be found staring at very similar "community issues" and their politics. This might be particularly true when apportioning social responsibility, blame or guilt across the majority and minority communities in a democratic society. For instance, the famous black entertainer Bill Cosby was recently involved in a major social controversy. It started when he told "young black 'knuckleheads' to shape up and black adults to get serious about their parental responsibilities" (Raspberry, 2004: A19). This thought did not come from the blue. Other major black figures, including intellectuals, were already engaged on the issue. For instance, Henry Louis Gates, a professor at Harvard's African and African American Studies Department, and his book, *America behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans*, were recalled in a similar context in March 2004 by Courtland Milloy, a *Washington Post* reporter. While writing his column on "Black Achievers," Milloy highlighted the issues of direct social responsibility the black community owed itself (Milloy, 2004a: B1). Gates had argued even for "a new civil rights movement *within* the black Community." One of the persons in his study had remarked on the matter, "It is all about long-range thinking." "The secret to success lies in preparation." (Milloy, 2004b: B1).

In fact, the issue of taking direct responsibility by the oppressed would immediately raise a similar major social and political controversy in India as well. Given the past of social discrimination and injustice

towards these groups in the US and India, the modern social and political reasoning would also be very similar at both places. William Raspberry succinctly put it on behalf of African Americans: "...since our problems are born of white racism, white people must assume responsibility for fixing them." Further, reducing the "white guilt" might not only take "the white people off the hook," but it might also blame the blacks for "a *cultural* failing," to employ Raspberry's phrase. As Raspberry insightfully further observes, American blacks face an additional blame – that their failure is wilful. In India, since Dalits similarly find caste Hindus most of all responsible for their centuries-old moral and social degradation and economic and political exploitation, Dalits could not let the caste Hindus be easily off the hook. If the caste Hindu's were still to lecture Dalits to be more responsible for their destiny, it would be met by derision and protest.

The final point of Raspberry lights up the positive side of the African American social reality. And once again, the observation applies to both communities. He says that some in black community find their way even "under the worst of circumstances," while "most of us have to be taught how to act even in our own interest." In parallel, Dalit community has produced its stars and achievers despite all the adversities and deprivation. Many Dalits still succeed despite facing enormous adversity, discrimination and suppression, while many more do so with the government help. To a liberal academic, no Dalit wilfully wants to remain deprived. But the larger political issue and the debate hardly go away. The struggle of the oppressed still needs to address the root causes. If Ambedkar's groundbreaking ideas here come to the fore for Dalits, it is Martin Luther King Jr's seminal thoughts for the black struggle in America. Raspberry recently (2005: A17) quoted King on how in the struggle of the oppressed "there must be a rhythmic alternation between attacking the causes and healing the effects." Similar, once again, is the situation Dalits face today. They cannot win, as this paper argued, only by remaining the perpetual moral, social and political victim. They also need to find ways to heal their wounds, even while attacking their oppressors and oppressors' unjust tools.

## VI: Concluding Remarks

The preceding discussion focuses on the sociological and historical fact that Dalits of the twenty-first century India face qualitatively changing social, economic and political challenges. There is now a crying need to assess what Ambedkar left them with in 1956 and what they have been able to acquire – and *become* – since. Coolly and calmly, Dalits need to ask themselves where (and how much) they have gained and recovered or stumbled, lost and wounded themselves during the last five decades. By the Dalit-focused social and moral reasoning pursued here, we find that Dalits, foremost, still have to become an all-India social, economic and political community. And this only they can do; nobody can do it for them. Here the government (*sarkar*), its reservation policies, the "development programmes," and the legal and political protections can only encourage and facilitate the Dalits; they cannot fully change the Dalit society on behalf of Dalits.

The Dalits must still make the core, major effort, with ever better education, to recover and remake their innately positive self. Nor can a government set the course for that Dalit being and becoming that is intertwined with Indian civilization. To be on their own, they need to learn not only more about their past, they also want to find ways to talk, educate and care ever more among (and for) their own. Dalits must begin here with their families, local relatives, *mohallas* and castes (*jatis*), and work doggedly until they can forge a trans-regional Indian Dalit identity and community.

Once school education, self-monitoring, mentoring of the young, and the care of the family converge with committed work ethic, Dalits would be ready to face all the new challenges a globalizing India can throw the Dalits' way. Here, an honest self-criticism and self-evaluation is the oppressed group's most reliable and enduring ally. Gates (2004), while writing about his findings on the black achievers in the US, recently reminded the blacks what Martin Luther King Jr, had to say on the point: "It is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of high maturity, to rise to the level of self-criticism... [which means] critical thinking about ourselves as a people and the course we have charted or failed to

chart...” (quoted in Milloy, 2004b: B 1).<sup>3</sup>

However, a major public policy challenge still remains. Here the main concerns are those we started with: How does one translate – and reformulate – the preceding cultural ideas, concerns and challenges to suit policy researchers’ and policymakers’ languages of discourse, decision making and implementation? How does one make policy researchers, planners and decision makers so genuinely receptive to the emerging Dalit presence, expressions, actions and aspirations that they translate in action? While I must leave this task to those closer to policymaking (and promoting) circles, some basic changes and priorities are now hard to ignore by *both* Indian governing elites as well as Dalits. Each side now carries distinct responsibilities. Conversely, neither side can have a free ride any longer. This is because those in politics now well know that Dalits are indispensable to democratic Indian polity and its power structure. Equally clearly, next, the governing elites must realize that Dalits’ quest for economic parity and social justice, with personal and social honour, cannot be postponed any longer. Here, Indian policymakers must constantly learn as much about and respond to the ongoing “winds of change” within “the Dalit heart and mind,” as among themselves.

Correspondingly, Dalits are now challenged to think and act outside “the box” they have been in for so long. This “box,” thick with accumulated anger, angst and unmitigated social hurt, now challenges Dalits to open up among themselves, as well as towards all the others in Indian society. To face these two social challenges together by Dalits is to unify Dalit community and to open up new grounds for an innately positive moral and social identity. And this is also to become so self-confident that Dalits can become purposefully self-critical on the one hand, and, on the other, break the chains of upper-caste dependence and domination by becoming openly competitive and efficient within today’s globalizing India.

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<sup>3</sup> Such a reference in 2005 should have no room for that worn-out, defensive Indian remark: “Oh! We have our own great thinkers and leaders, and our Dalits have their own unique problems. There is no need to import here foreign ideas and experiences.” In fact, such a response shows its emptiness more than anything of substance.

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