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the Bhopal Conference**

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DALITS AND NEW ECONOMIC ORDER

Some Prognostications and Prescriptions from the Bhopal Conference

By D. Shyam Babu

Today as ever Dalits¹ remain a marginalized section of the society. In absolute as well as relative terms, the 'former' Untouchables and Tribals find themselves at the bottom of most human development indices. A predominant majority of them live in villages; they tend to be mostly poor and illiterate. Coupled with their economic dispossession, the perception among the society of their 'inferior' status reduces them to second class citizens. Thus, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation and violence become order of the day. This familiar story has got a new twist since 1991. Whereas earlier the community could look up towards the government and civil society for support, the economic policy shifts in the 1990s and post-Mandal intolerance in the society have created a situation in which either Dalits don't exist or they don't matter.

In rural areas, according to National Sample Survey (55th Round), 61 percent of SC households and 49 percent of ST households are classified as agricultural and other labourers.² "The National Commission on Rural Labour estimated Agricultural labour to be around 110 million or 73 percent of the total rural labour with nearly half belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes..."³

The asset-less population among Dalits is far more than those among the other sections of society. This section is uneducated and lives at the mercy of dominant castes for employment and sustenance. It is irrelevant whether they are 'literate' as that status is unlikely to help them socially or economically. And anti-povevny programmes have mostly passed them by. Emphasising the obvious, a recent Planning Commission publication concedes: "In general, most [human development] indicators show a lower level of attainments for women and for people residing in rural areas. The attainment levels for the Scheduled Castes and

¹Dalits', a Marathi word, means 'broken-people' and is used by many to denote India's Untouchables or Scheduled Castes (SCs). But, of late, the term has come to be, identified with both SCs and the Scheduled Tribes (STs). In this paper, as in the Bhopal Conference, the 'Dalits' is used in the latter sense and, where emphasis is needed, both categories will be mentioned.

²National Sample Survey 55th Round (July 1999 - June 2000), *Employment Situation among Social Groups in India, 1999-2000*. Report No. 469 (New Delhi: NSSO, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, July 2001), p.21.

³*Report of the Second National Commission on Labour* Vol. II (New Delhi: Ministry of Labour, 2002), p.76.

the Scheduled Tribes are also lower than others on the available indicators.’’⁴A small educated section has benefited from affirmative action policies such as scholarships and job reservations. But its reliance on the State (for jobs) is total. Therefore, it came as a jolt to the community that, with the State withdrawing from most economic activity under liberalisation and the jobs in government shrinking, the new economic policies ushered in a new era of denial.

While acknowledging the 'progress' that the country accomplished during the last fifty years, Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany highlight how that progress has not made any difference to Dalits:

The post-Independence regime has failed to bring about a systematic redistribution of resources in favour of those at the bottom of society, and it has also failed to pursue a consistent, albeit non-radical, strategy of supplying 'basic needs' (health, education and simple welfare) to the poor. Supplying basic needs would not have transformed the condition of the Untouchables — the evidence from Kerala tends to prove this — but it would have made a powerful difference. In failing to overcome or sufficiently ameliorate poverty the regime can be said to have failed the Untouchables.⁵

There are studies substantiating the point of Mendelsohn and Vicziany that in well-off states too Dalits are worse-off. For example, using the UNDP's methodology for its Human Development Index, Bruce Corrie has constructed a 'Dalit Child Index' for 15 states to highlight the development of the community. He takes into consideration "the material, physiological and social environment of the Dalit child" and his findings are at variance with conventional view of development. Having taken 'social environment' as a factor, Corrie puts "Kerala's progress in a much more modest light than the scholarly literature portrays" and says:

The major difference in the Dalit Child Index is that we explicitly take into consideration the social environment of the child, which is missing in the other indexes. Failure to take the social environment into account will give a terribly misleading picture of progress. We can clearly see this case in the experience of Dalits in Gujarat. The poor social environment of Dalits clouds all other environments of the child.⁶

⁴ *National Human Development Report 2001* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, March 2002), p. 11.

⁵ Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 147.

⁶ Bruce P. Corrie, *The Dalit Child in Indian States: A Human Development Profile* (Saint Paul, MN: Roy Wilkins Center Policy Brief, Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, Concordia University, 2001). ([http://people.csp.edu/corrie/policy%20Briefs%20\(WCAR\)/The%20Dalit%20Child%20in%20Indian%20States.doc](http://people.csp.edu/corrie/policy%20Briefs%20(WCAR)/The%20Dalit%20Child%20in%20Indian%20States.doc))

DALIT CHILD INDEX⁷

STATES	INDEX
Himachal Pradesh	0.66
Haryana	0.65
Punjab	0.63
Andhra Pradesh	0.61
Gujarat	0.28
Karnataka	0.58
Kerala	0.52
Tamil Nadu	0.32
Orissa	0.48
West Bengal	0.42
Rajasthan	0.41
Uttar Pradesh	0.39
Madhya Pradesh	0.31
Bihar	0.30

Dalits are conscious of the new situation, though. But no serious attempt could be made to address the problem due to three reasons. First, the community failed to produce a leader comparable to Dr. B.R Ambedkar, whose appeal cuts across caste and regional barriers. Needless to add that this problem has been plaguing the community ever since the death of Dr. Ambedkar and not a new factor. Second, the collapse of the single-party-dominated multi-party system created fragmentation and confusion in national politics, and no party is politically motivated to take up the developmental issues affecting Dalits. The third reason is the extensive schemes of affirmative action ('reservations') produced hopes in the community that its emancipation and empowerment were just a matter of time. The so-called 'bondage of reservations' made them complacent, always expecting the government to protect their interests. Therefore, the new situation produced despair and helplessness among the community.

A related point is that so far most educated Dalits have gone into government services where, apprehensive of reprisals, they feel discouraged to speak for the community. Government service usually results in moving out of one's area or state in many cases and language and sub-caste problems work as a hindrance to any concerted effort. Moreover, there is a natural tendency that once someone from the discriminated group comes out of his traditional area that person concentrates more on his immediate interests, not that of the larger community. Yet another issue is the entry of Dalits into teaching in higher educational institutions has been dismal compared to other government services. This has robbed the community of intellectual leaders who could have better articulated the community problems.

Thus taking place as it did, soon after the Durban Conference against Racism and

⁷ *ibid.* One significant exclusion is Maharashtra for which, according to Corrie, data are not available.

Racial Discrimination and also at a time when the words such as ‘Dalits’, ‘welfare’, ‘social justice’ etc., were out of India's political lexicon, the Bhopal Conference of Dalit activists and intellectuals was an attempt to redefine the Dalit question and also to find community's place in the changing politico-economic environment. This paper is intended to make a critical appraisal of the Conference, its contribution to the Dalit discourse and criticisms on its format and strategy. To be fair to the reader, it must be said that the author was intimately involved in the Bhopal Conference and hence his conclusions may be subjective. But a honest attempt will be made nevertheless to put the issue in perspective, taking into consideration several criticisms of it.

Section I describes the Context in which the conference took place. Section II examines the Bhopal Conference, its format and focus. Section III analyses the Bhopal Document which was distributed among the participants *before* the conference to set the agenda of the conference. Section IV scrutinises the Bhopal Declaration which is the essence of the whole exercise. And, the final section critically analyses the outcome in light of the motives of two groups — activists and the government that were involved in organising the conference. An attempt is also made to sum up criticisms of various sections on the Conference, Document and Declaration.

I: THE CONTEXT

The defeat of the Congress Party in 1989 parliament elections — second time since Independence — is a watershed in Indian politics. Like in 1977, the second defeat too was followed by ascendancy to power of political parties whose main social constituency was middle castes also known as *Shudras* or Other Backward Classes (OBCs). During 1977-79, the Janata Party government, the first non-Congress government appointed the Mandal Commission (headed by B P Mandal, and hence known as Mandal Commission which submitted its report in 1980) to recommend benefits from affirmative action policies to OBCs. But the Janata Party government collapsed before it could implement the recommendations. That task was naturally taken up by the second non-Congress government in 1990. This had implications for Dalits.

The announcement to implement Mandal recommendations in 1990 sparked off unprecedented backlash⁸ among upper castes. To begin with, there had been latent opposition to affirmative action to even Dalits though it was tolerated since Dalits' claims could not be countered. Moreover the upper castes under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had vowed in the Poona Pact⁹ of 1932 to strive for the socio-economic development of Dalits. That promise remained unfulfilled and also forgotten, but elite became accustomed to affirmative action policies for SC/STs. But the case of backward classes was different. Their claim was based on relative

⁸ ‘Unprecedented’ only in scale and the support the agitation received from the elite. Interestingly, anti-reservation agitations in the past, in states such as Bihar and Gujarat, were largely spearheaded by the OBCs who have now become the beneficiaries of reservations!

⁹ The pact was concluded between Dr. Ambedkar and the upper castes whereby the former agreed to abandon his demand for separate electorate for the Untouchables in favor of reserved seats and the latter undertook to work for the welfare of the Untouchables. The signing of the pact was preceded by fast-unto-death by Gandhi who was vehemently opposed to separating the Untouchables from the Hindu 'fold'.

deprivation and the Mandal decision was seen more a symbol of their political assertion. Moreover, unlike Dalits and Tribals, according to Dipankar Gupta, "OBCs are not without assets... Large sections of the OBCs are economically powerful as they are substantial land owners and cultivators. By using this all important asset they can get to others [education and jobs] without reservations or affirmative action."¹⁰ Gupta also highlights the pernicious nature of extending affirmative action benefits to well-off sections such as OBCs:

It is not just that Ambedkar's programme envisions the removal of untouchability and with it the undermining of the caste system in public life, but it is also about creating assets among those who have none... quite unlike the Ambedkar model, the Mandal recommendations cannot logically demand the undermining of caste distinctions either. Caste in the case of the Mandal Commission is an important political resource to be plumbed in perpetuity. The Mandal programme, therefore, is not in the spirit of enlarging fraternity, as the Ambedkar's proposals are.¹¹

The Commission's recommendation was interpreted thus that, in addition to the 22.5 percent existing reservation for the SC/STs, the OBCs would get nearly 50 percent, bringing the total reserved jobs/ benefits to more than 70 percent.¹² Therefore, the Mandal decision was proved to be the proverbial last straw. And total opposition to affirmative action policy was a natural consequence.

The subtext to the Mandal episode was total absence of unity between Dalits and OBCs, who now find themselves in the same basket as the beneficiaries of affirmative action. The votaries of the Mandal recommendations came to be known loosely as 'social justice' front, though they represented OBCs. Initially, Dalits too found social justice slogan attractive and even supported the anti-Congress coalition. But the experience in 1990s, as far as Dalits are concerned, was anything but satisfactory. The OBC coalitions at the Centre and in some northern states failed to offer anything to Dalits. Moreover, the partnership in Uttar Pradesh between Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit party, and Samajwadi Party (SP), an OBC party, prematurely ended in acrimony and violence.¹³ The lesson for Dalits is that in politics or social life, they have no natural allies.¹⁴

Yet another factor affecting the community is the radical changes in economic

¹⁰ Dipankar Gupta, "Positive Discrimination and the Question of Fraternity: Contrasting Ambedkar and Mandal on Reservations," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), Vol. XXXII (31), August 2, 1997, p. 1977.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1977-78. In fact, L R Naik, the only Dalit member in the Mandal Commission, submitted a dissent note against the commission's recommendations. He argued for splitting the 27 percent quota into two — lower OBCs and higher OBCs.

¹² The Commission recommended only 27 percent of reservations for the OBCs so that the total quota would not exceed 50 percent as stipulated by the Supreme Court, which has become the policy now.

¹³ See, Sudha Pai, "Dalit Assertion in UP: Implications for Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), Vol. XXXII (37), September 13, 1997, pp. 2313-14.

¹⁴ D. Shyam Babu, "Dalits Have No 'Natural' Allies", *Financial Express* (New Delhi), August 20, 1995.

policies. From 1991 onwards, the so-called liberalisation policies started dismantling the old regime of State-driven economic management with the stress on a dominant role for public sector. Dalits regard liberalisation drive as elite's response to the assertion of lower castes/ classes, though it may or may not be possible to establish the cause-and-effect logic. Christophe Jaffrelot says:

The upper castes are losing ground in the political sphere and in the administration but the liberalisation of the economy — which coincided with the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report — has opened new opportunities for the upper castes in the private sector, and hence they may no longer regret their traditional monopoly over the bureaucracy being challenged.¹⁵

Therefore, the national consensus over the need to uplift Dalits, through affirmative action and other policies, was broken mostly due to the Mandal effect and new economic policies reflect that fact. Pertinent to the issue is the question, posed by Surjit S. Bhalla and Ravinder Kaur: "If the SCs and STs are the 'poorest' of India's poor, have they benefited from fifty years of affirmative action and of poverty alleviation programmes?"¹⁶ The answer has to be in negative, given the magnitude of poverty and the number of the poor among the community. However, most scholars argue that the situation could have been worse had there been no affirmative action and other developmental policies. It appears, at least to Dalits, that mostly ineffective policy regime — insofar as Dalit emancipation is concerned — has been replaced by no-policy regime under liberalisation for the new economic policy is silent on the question.

The new economic policies implicitly rely only on 'indirect' approach to poverty eradication. Bhalla and Kaur classify poverty alleviation policies into 'direct' (government action) and 'indirect' (economic growth) groups. As liberalisation's core belief is the effectiveness of market, it may be called an indirect approach.¹⁷ To begin with, it has had adverse effects on the community.¹⁸ The retreat of the State from most economic activities means that Dalits' only avenue for socio-economic betterment is getting narrower day-by-day. One visible area is the dwindling job opportunities in government.

¹⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 494.

¹⁶ See their paper, "Poverty in India: Towards New Policies", in Shubhashis Gangopadhyay and Wilima wadhwa, eds., *Economic Reforms for the Poor* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2000), p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁸ See Bhalchandra Mungekar, "India's Economic Reforms and the Dalits: An Ambedkarian Perspective," *Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture* organised by Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee, Department of History & Economic History, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK., March I, 2002.

Employment in the Public Sector

(Lakh persons as on 31 March)

By Branch	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Central Government	32.95	32.53	33.13	32.73	32.61
State Governments	74.85	74.58	74.58	74.60	74.25
Quasi-Governments	65.35	64.61	63.53	63.26	61.92
Local Bodies	22.44	22.46	22.59	22.55	22.61
Total	195.59	194.18	194.15	193.14	191.38

Source: *Economic Survey 2002-2003* (New Delhi: Government of India), p. S-49

This process has almost coincided with the increasing fragmentation of India's polity, which has also affected Dalits. In the past, most Dalit reserved constituencies in parliament used to predominantly elect candidates from a single party (the Congress Party). Whereas the congress used to bag more than 50 out of the 79 SC reserved constituencies (the party even won 64 seats in 1962), now BJP which has a maximum number of SC reserved members has only 24. And the remaining 55 seats have been split among 23 parties.¹⁹

On the one hand, Dalits' disenchantment with the Congress and their desertion from it have resulted in the party's loss of power²⁰ and on the other major parties are not sufficiently motivated to take up the issues affecting the community as they are not sure of the community's electoral support. However, it may not be farfetched to argue that, by the late 1990s, the Dalit problem became a national problem. The issues that agitate the community, such as discrimination, atrocities, reservations, etc., were no longer the problems of Dalits alone. They started affecting even national politics.

As the preceding analysis shows, the experience in 1990s was far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, the new millennium started for Dalits with new opportunities and new partnerships — a little crack here and a ray of light there. Perhaps they do not amount to much in terms of tangible improvement in the condition of the community but at least they are enough for the community to explore new spaces in the changed environment.

To put it chronologically, the first such an opportunity came in 1999 when *The Pioneer*, an English daily, offered Chandra Bhan Prasad a weekly column, the

¹⁹ Elizabeth Nach, *India's Dalits and Reservations: The Oldest Affirmative Action program*, A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Political Science for Honors, Duke University, (Durham, NC: April, 2002), pp 142-3. (The text can also be found at <http://www.ambedkar.org/News/reservationinindia.pdf>.)

²⁰ "The decline in the influence of the Congress especially in UP", says Ian Duncan, "and the subsequent reverses for the party nationally, can in large part be attributed to (he loss of much of its Dalit support base to the BSP in the 1990s," see his paper, "Dalits and Politics in Rural North India: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (London), Vol. 27 (1), October 1999, p. 36

"Dalit Diary"²¹. It was the first occasion in history that a mainstream newspaper gave a column to a Dalit to write about Dalit issues. The column instantly became a forum for discussing Dalit issues and also to profile Dalit 'achievers' thus creating a visible community among the mainstream media. The same newspaper was instrumental the following January in furthering the agenda, this time by giving one issue of its then popular glossy series called 'Millennium' supplements. To mark the dawn of the millennium, *The Pioneer* was issuing monthly supplements on various topics and one was offered to Dalit writers and commentators to produce the 'Dalit Millennium'. Edited by Rajasekhar Vundru, a Dalit IAS officer and a poet, the 12-page broad-sheet received critical acclaim²².

The 'Dalit Millennium' was instrumental in bringing together the individuals who produced it and the Government of Madhya Pradesh which made 'Dalit agenda' a central theme of its development strategy. That partnership culminated in the Bhopal Conference in January 2002. Moreover the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001 also played a vital role in bringing Dalits back into the national discourse.

II: The CONFERENCE

The Bhopal Conference drew inspiration from the struggles of Blacks in South Africa and the United States. The success of Blacks in these two countries has been spectacular. Compared to the Blacks in the US, for example, Dalits live in what can be called the pre-Civil Liberties Movement times in the US.

The Bhopal Conference of Dalit intellectuals and activists, held on January 12-13, 2002, is unique in several respects. First of its kind in that never before did such a huge all India Dalit conference (with more than 250 participants from all over the country) take place to take stock of the situation. The exercise was more policy-oriented than academic.

The experience is similar to the 'Dalit Millennium'. The conference was organized by the Madhya Pradesh government in that it provided infrastructural and financial support but the Dalit activists determined the agenda, sessions, speakers, etc. Perhaps one may legitimately doubt the genuineness of such an arrangement because there had never been a precedent and the whole exercise falls in the grey area of politics. Yet it became possible as there was a convergence of views and interests. Aditya Nigam, a sympathetic but sceptical observer who attended the conference, wrote:

It was clear to those attending the conference that though Digvijay Singh and his government were hosting the event, it was almost entirely conducted by a committed group of dalit intellectuals and activists. Probably, there was a mutual dependence of both sides on each other but clearly, the agenda and the discussions reflected an almost complete

²¹ See for the background to the column, Chandra Bhan Prasad, *Dalit Diary* Vol -I (New Delhi: Dalit Multimedia Network, 2003)

²² Strange it may seem but *The Pioneer's* offer included full freedom to the editor to select articles and other material, and even the artwork which happened to be that of a well-known Dalit artist Savi Sawarkar. See, "Dalit Millennium", *The Pioneer* (New Delhi), January 30, 2000.

autonomy of the intellectual content of the conference.²³

From the government's point of view, it wanted a fillip to the measures it was already implementing for the welfare of Dalits and Tribals. In any case, the Digvijay Singh's government is known for organising conferences and setting up of expert committees to propagate its policies and get feedback.²⁴ Singh said at the Conference: "I have been a politician for 30 years. But this conference is not politics to garner votes. It is politics for development of a section of the society without whose progress the nation cannot progress."²⁵ The Bhopal Conference thus presented two unique opportunities to the government. First, it aimed at publicizing several welfare schemes being implemented and also getting feedback from activists. Second, the conference was a vehicle for political consolidation among the target group as the government feared that it was losing electoral support among the community. For example, in 1991, the ruling Congress party won 13 out of the 15 SC/ST reserved parliamentary seats, conceding only two seats to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). By the 1999 elections the situation got reversed, with the BJP winning 12 seats and the Congress only 3. However, success or failure in 'reserved' constituencies may not be a barometer in determining the community support because a majority of Dalits live outside the reserved constituencies. Nevertheless the election results do indicate the trends.

For the activists, it was not only a 'unique' opportunity, it was the only opportunity! There is always a general lack of interest in the matters Dalit among intelligentsia and even the government. There is no debate in legislature. They could hardly hope to meet a district collector to submit a memorandum. No matter the political risks involved, therefore, an invitation from a Chief Minister to organise a conference would have been irresistible. Also in the post-liberalisation period it was the first occasion for the Dalit scholars and activists in large numbers to deliberate on the community's condition. But a conference without an agenda would have been futile but the activists *did* have an agenda. They sought to mainstreaming the subject, especially in the context of liberalisation and the place of the community in the new economy. On the other hand, they understood the willingness of the state government to open up hitherto excluded sectors to Dalits. The state government was favourably disposed to implement the US model of 'Diversity' in its economic activities such as giving preference to Dalit entrepreneurs. And what was needed is a conference to crystallise the agenda.

Though many grass-root workers took part in the conference, it was dominated by second/ third generation English-speaking Dalits. In fact, with a few exceptions, the working language of the conference was English. Mid-career Dalit academics and researchers along with sympathetic non-Dalit scholars and journalists were invited because the main aim of the conference was to explore new spaces for the

²³ Aditya Nigam, "In Search of a Bourgeoisie: Dalit Politics Enters a New Phase," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), Vol. XXXVII (13), March 30, 2002, fn.3, p. 1193.

²⁴ Its proactive measures include conferences on Communalism, Buddhism, Information Technology, Water-harvesting, etc and also the Madhya Pradesh government happens to be the first state government to bring out the state Human Development Report, which also involved conferencing!

²⁵ "Dalit meet is not ploy to get votes", *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), January 13, 2002. See also, "Dalits must get their full rights: Digvijay", *The Hindu* (New Delhi), January 6, 2002.

community in the fast changing economy. Given its representative character, the < (inference became a part of the Dalit discourse everywhere.

III: THE DOCUMENT

The Bhopal Document: Setting a New Agenda for Dalits for the 21st Century was released prior to the conference so that participants would address the concerns expressed in it. The Document extensively discussed the affirmative action policies that yielded tangible improvement in the economic conditions of Blacks in the US and South Africa.

The Document is divided into two sections. The first section, "The Dalit Agenda", has been drafted by Chandra Bhan Prasad. It is as much a critique of the public policy as the community's introspection, trying to figure out where Dalit activism went wrong. Setting the tone and tenor of the Document, Chief Minister Digvijay Singh writes in his foreword:

But barring Zamindari abolition, nationalisation of banks and insurance, and to an extent, land ceiling legislation, the State observed a stance of neutrality in the economic life of the country, although it was empowered to intervene. It is precisely for this reason that money pumped into agricultural development did not result in capital formation in the same proportion, and it also led to increased rate of economic inequalities amongst various social groups. The end result is: the Private Sector, including the Agricultural Sector, remained socially indifferent, and in fact turned hostile to the goals set for the nation by the founding fathers mandated in the Constitution. Needless to elaborate, the SCs and STs became the losers.²⁶

Prasad talks about the origins and practice of Untouchability; exclusion of Tribals from the mainstream. "In fact," writes Prasad on Tribals, "the lack of clarity in our approach towards the tribals emanates from our distance — both physical and mental — and also from our failure to foster a sound basis for a healthy and balanced repression-free reciprocity in the minds of the tribals themselves".²⁷

He raises a series of questions with regard to the nature of Dalit movements to prove the point that Dalits have been barking the wrong tree. On politics he poses the question: "Did Ambedkar win rights after capturing political power?" Though he is not against 'capturing political power', what Prasad means is that the community should not wait until political power falls into its hands and instead articulate its concerns and demands immediately.²⁸ While profiling Dalits'

²⁶ *The Bhopal Document: Charting a New Course for Dalits for the 21st Century* (Bhopal: The Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2002), p. 4. [Hereafter, *The Document*.] (The PDF version can be download from: <http://www.mpinfo.org/english/bpl/bhopal-net.pdf>)

²⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁸ Similarly, Prasad raises the following questions: *Did Ambedkar earn rights after totally annihilating Varna-Caste Order?, Did Ambedkar win the rights after embracing Buddhism, or, he won rights first, and then embraced Buddhism?, Why has the post-Ambedkar generation not produced a single book which has an all India acceptance even amongst Dalits, comparable with Ambedkars "State and Minorities" or "Who were Shudras" ??* Answering in the negative to these questions, in a way, Prasad was urging the fellow Dalits to follow Ambedkar, Ibid. pp. 37-40.

economic situation, he concludes, "... out of every 100 SC/STs in India, only about 51 of them can claim to be eating at least two meals a day, who can afford to send their children to schools, who enjoy a bit of independence and who can exercise their franchise as per their conscience."²⁹

Proposing his hypotheses in the chapter, "The Future", Prasad highlights the limited impact of reservations and argues that, if the quota is completely filled of the total 1.94 crore jobs in public sector (central and state governments, local bodies and the public sector undertakings), Dalits and Tribals get no more than 45 lakh jobs. Assuming each one of those 45 lakh employees supports a family of five, the total beneficiaries will not be more than 2.25 crore. "What about the rest of 18 crores?"³⁰ He points out the same limitation of job reservations in private sector, if at all they are granted. For private sector in India employs less people (86.98 lakh) than the government. Therefore, "... reservations cannot uplift the community from its existing economic conditions."³¹

Before advocating the Dalit agenda, he reviews emancipatory policies in die US and South Africa, where a conscious effort is made to help the disadvantaged and excluded sections to join the mainstream, Oblivious to the reverses that affirmative action suffered in the US during the last two decades, Prasad quite enthusiastically lists out 'Diversity' practices not only by the government but by Forrune-500 gaints such as Exxon-Mobil, Wal-Mart, GM and Ford, and universities and media organizations. Perhaps what he intends to highlights is the voluntary commitment of companies and community leaders to make their workforce more diverse reflecting societal diversity. For example, he cites the Microsoft's Diversity statement to drive home the point:

In the United States whitemen are often presumed to be competent until proven otherwise, while women and people of color are presumed to be incompetent until proven otherwise. In other words, there is no presumption of competence for women and people of color (and other groups), and this is clearly a double standard.³²

Just replace whitemen with upper-caste men and people of color with women, Dalits and Tribals, what will you have is a statement of fact on India! Prasad concludes his agenda with an appeal to adopt the US model of Diversity in India but he is careful in maintaining that Diversity ought not to be mistaken as 'quota' system. Already the message has reached educated Dalits, some of whom have formed the Delhi Dalit Diversity Group'. It organized a Dalit Diversity March on July 18, 2003 and submitted a memorandum to FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry), in which the author too took part.³³

²⁹ 29 Ibid., p. 52.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 57

³¹ Ibid., p. 58.

³² Ibid., p. 82.

IV: THE DECLARATION

Opportunities, not quotas, is the message of the Bhopal Conference. The 21-point Bhopal Declaration adopted by the conference unanimously lists out the areas that need immediate attention³³. In addition to more 'traditional' demands of Dalits for equality and social justice - such as meaningful land reforms, curbing atrocities, etc., — the Declaration calls for adopting the American model of Diversity and Equal Opportunity. Implicit in the Declaration is the urge for a new Social Contract to realise the Dalit dream of representative democracy without which “...no amount of activism on our part and proactive measures from the State can liberate the community from the scourges of untouchability and exploitation.”³⁴

The Preamble to the Declaration starts by invoking Ambedkar's theorisation of Social Democracy, which may be treated as the mission statement of the Conference: "A democratic form of Government presupposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy."³⁵ The Preamble was used somewhat tactfully perhaps to make the fundamentals clear and also to counter any future criticism. For example, the conference expressed its belief in the Constitution of India, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN Charter, etc., with emphasis on “struggle through democratic and constitutional means”. Nor did it gloss over the shortcomings of the community and regretted the failure of “post-Ambedkar Dalit intelligentsia” and also the breaking down of social consensus over the Dalit question reluctantly agreed upon at the time of Independence. As if to draw legitimacy for the exercise, the Preamble mentions the promises of the “founding fathers of the Republic” to work for the welfare of Dalits. The use of the expression ‘founding fathers’ is an indication of the influence of the US model, for in India the expression is rarely, if at all, is used.

Having put the context in perspective, the Declaration goes on to issuing a charter of 21 demands. Though the exercise started to advocate ‘Diversity’ only, the inclusion of twenty-one demands was necessitated to arrive at consensus.

Most of the demands fall in 'traditional' category, the kind of issues always agitates the community: enough cultivable land, share in common property resources, living wages, restoration of alienated tribal lands, quality education, extension of affirmative action to judiciary and armed forces, bonded labour system, manual scavenging, etc. By calling these 'traditional' here, it is not intended to belittle their importance. For, these issues affect a majority of the community. The Bhopal Conference was intended to press for these demands and also find a place for the community in the liberalised economy. The philosophy of Diversity finds mention in as many as four demands (6, 13, 15 and 19). There is a call to "Democratise Capital" to help the community to enter market economy. The State's role is invoked to provide investment opportunities and capacity-building for starting private enterprises. Workplace Diversity in both public and private institutions, and supplier and dealership Diversity are called for. The

³³See, *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), July 19, 2003.

³⁴*The Bhopal Declaration: Charting a New Course for Dalits for the 21st Century* (Bhopal: January 2002), p. 2. (The Declaration can be downloaded from: http://www.mpinfo.org/english/bpl/bpl_document.htm) See Appendix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.I.

'Workplace Diversity is used in place of reservations because, one, reservations lacks non-Dalit approval and, two, it is seen to be too rigid with its stress on 'quotas'. Whereas Workplace Diversity calls for inclusion and the need to increase the number of people from groups hitherto underrepresented. Pratap Bhanu Mehta commented thus:

The declaration does not recommend that reservation be made applicable to the private sector as whole, but to those companies that receive any form of Government assistance, in the form of tax incentives, subsidies etc. Most of the report lays great stress on the American model for creating diversity within the private sector. This model, rather than insisting on quotas, lays greater stress on anti-discrimination legislation and diversity programmes. In principle this has two advantages. It is not incompatible with the requirements of quality and merit, and the report is salutary in its acknowledgement that the quest for greater representation ought not to dispense with these considerations entirely. Second, It is more realistic in the assumptions that quotas, once instituted, become almost permanent and can seldom be cut back.³⁶

It can be asserted that the Bhopal exercise succeeded in forwarding the Dualit agenda and in finding new ground. It has taken affirmative action beyond government jobs and convincingly argued that the community be given its rightful share in the economic activities of the government. The government is bound by constitutional mandate of ensuring the interests of SC/STs (now also of the OBCs) and no constitutional changes are needed to provide affirmative action policies in public contracts, construction, supplies, etc. As for its more ambitious goal of Dalits' entry into private sector, so far a debate has been created. The day may not be too near when the Indian private sector enthusiastically embraces some form of Diversity or affirmative action but it can no longer ignore the issue.

Yet another feature that makes the Bhopal Conference a unique event is that the experiment got translated into policy without any delay. The state government was willing to expand affirmative action policies into areas other than employment opportunities. In the concluding session of the conference, the Chief Minister declared that his government would implement supplier diversity in government purchases from the ensuing fiscal year. The government issued necessary orders setting aside 30 percent of supplies in the SC and ST welfare department for the SC and ST dealers. Later it decided to implement supplier diversity in all departments.

One more accomplishment is that the government appointed a 'Task Force', comprising of nearly 30 Dalit and Tribal intellectuals, to recommend policies to implement the Declaration. There were four serving or former vice-chancellors of universities, a dozen senior academicians and some Dalit bureaucrats. Convened within two months after the Bhopal Conference, the Task Force was divided into six subcommittees to work on specific issues, viz., land, reservations, diversity, education, human rights and tribal welfare. These sub-committees were assisted by senior bureaucrats and they submitted their reports by October. Again the full Task Force met and considered these reports and finalized its recommendations.

³⁶ Pratap bhanu Mehta, "New agenda for Dalits – I", *The Hindu* (New Delhi) February 14, 2002.

The final report³⁷ was submitted to the government towards the end of 2002 and the government announced on January 12, 2003, the first anniversary of the Bhopal Conference, its acceptance of the report.

V: CRITIQUE

If the organisers' aim of starting a national debate on the Dalit question is taken as given, the Bhopal Conference has been a phenomenal success. It caught media attention from the day one. Several newspapers covered the event and commented editorially, and electronic media too covered the conference and carried debates thereafter on the Dalit question. There have been commentaries on the Conference and, nowadays, any comment on Dalits routinely takes note of the Bhopal Conference. *The Times of India*, while criticising editorially the way affirmative action is used as a ploy by political parties, said, "Perhaps the time has come to shift the emphasis of affirmative action from quota to market participation. Significantly the idea of democratisation of capital was mooted by Dalit leaders and intellectuals at a conclave in Bhopal a while ago. Promotion of supplier diversity may well be the alternative to jobs that are simply not there".³⁸ The issue even seeped into Indian language media as well. Mainstream Hindi and Telugu newspapers, among others, still carry articles on the subject. And publications of Dalits made it a major theme.

The criticisms against the Bhopal Conference and its agenda come mainly from three sources. The first is from political parties opposed to the Congress party. The BJP and BSP, treat the whole exercise as a Congress' ploy to 'mislead' Dalit voters. Of the two, BJP has been more careful in articulating its position. It says that the Bhopal agenda is empty and it has also tried to rake up a controversy by charging that the Bhopal Document exhorts Dalits to desert Hinduism and convert to other religions. Among all the criticisms against the conference, this one has proved to be bankrupt in that the Document *does not* advocate conversions and, in fact, it dismisses religious conversions as a trivial issue or at best a personal matter. On the other hand, BSP has taken exception to the exercise as the Conference *ipso facto* challenges its claims of representing Dalits everywhere. One of the party's followers has this to say:

In the backdrop of the so-called "Bhopal Declaration", about two years ago, what exactly has been achieved in Madhya Pradesh is not clearly mentioned even by the supporters of the Declaration. Is it some thing that has really to be examined. In any case, when we have got a role model, which is tried, tested and found useful for empowering the Dalit masses, in the form of Mayawati's

³⁷ See *The Task Force Report on Bhopal Declaration* (Bhopal: Government of Madhya Pradesh, January 2003).

³⁸ "Reserved Signs: Politicians can only offer job quotas but no actual jobs," *The Times of India* (New Delhi), June 2, 2003.

achievements in Uttar Pradesh, do we really need to think about the “Bhopal Declaration” as a “Model”?³⁹

The second set of criticisms come from those ideologically opposed to liberalisation and market economy and, for them, it is naïve to ask for “the ‘crumbs’ offered by the diversity model of the capitalist West, specially its corporate sector, currently in the ‘globalisation’ mode”.⁴⁰ Aditya Nigam seriously challenges the positive treatment given to the American model in the Document. He specifically questions the assertion (in the Document) that “inhuman practice of slavery and systematic elimination of Native Americans’ is now a matter of the past.” He goes on to highlight the ‘blatant discrimination’ against the African-Americans in the US today and says: “If the drafters of the document would care to look at some of the dramatic race-related events of the last decade in the US, they would not be so euphoric about the ‘American model.’”⁴¹

The third and last stream of criticism, which is widespread, comes from naysayers. They are either subjectively opposed to any emancipatory move for the benefit of Dalits and other marginalised sections or they genuinely believe that affirmative action! welfare policies do not work. One sub-sect of this group keeps changing the topic.

When confronted with affirmative action or job quotas, they declare that these policies will not help the target community and, in fact, they are counter-productive. They also bring in related but less relevant issues such as the ‘creamy layer’ gobbling up all benefits at the cost of more deserving sections. Instead of reservations, they feel education ‘better education’ — can solve the problem. They are mostly silent on how best the better education can be accomplished.

Irrespective of the criticism, in fact, the seal of approval for the Conference came from none other than the then President of India, K.R.Narayanan, himself a Dalit. He said in his address to the nation on the eve of India’s Republic Day, on January 25, 2002:

Recently a conference was held in Bhopal of Dalit and tribal intellectuals and activists. They issued a Declaration called the Bhopal Declaration charting out a new course for Dalits and the tribal people for the 21st century. After calling for the implementation of the policies enshrined in our Constitution for their development, the Declaration emphasizes the importance, in this present era of privatization, of providing for representation for these deprived classes, not only in Government and public institutions but in private corporations and enterprises which benefit from Government funds and facilities. Indeed in the present economic system and of the future, it is necessary for the private sector to adopt social policies that are progressive and more egalitarian for these

³⁹ See the comment by Dr. K. Jamanadas, “Ms. Gail Omvedt’s ill Advice To Dalit Bahujans” on June 16, 2003 at: <http://www.ambedkar.org/jamanadas/illAdvice.htm>

⁴⁰ Javed Anand, “Dalit Drishti: Dateline Bhopal”, *Communalism combat* (Mumbai), No. 75-76, January-February 2002, p. 3 I.

⁴¹ Aditya Nigam, *op cit*, p. 1193.

deprived classes to be uplifted from their state of deprivation and inequality and given the rights of citizens and civilized human beings.⁴²

Mostly due to the Bhopal Conference, even political parties have started discussing the future of Dalits. In a major development the Congress Party has become the first national party to seek a 'dialogue' with private sector to increase the representation of Dalits in the private sector through workforce diversity.⁴³ "We want to take the issue out horn the agitational mode and build a consensus on it [reservations in private sector]", said Jairam Ramesh who is a member of the Congress Party's economic affairs department. He recently wrote to the apex chambers of commerce and industry to explain the party's stand on the subject.⁴⁴ As expected, the party's decision has led to a mixed response. Some sections expressed "serious reservations"⁴⁵ and others, though equally unsympathetic, at least took the trouble of pondering the Dalit question. A noted commentator questioned: "What should we do about a situation where hardly any SCs, STs or OBCs figure in corporate hierarchies?"⁴⁶ This is precisely what the activists sought to highlight.

However, the issue is not necessarily a share in 'corporate hierarchies' but Dalits' participation in the nation's economic life. The community needs to be helped to enter the private sector as entrepreneurs, as dealers and suppliers. A few jobs in private sector will be as ineffective as those in the government. A section of the society, cut off from the mainstream for centuries, cannot on its own break out of the shackles. There are impediments both internal (mindset) and external (discrimination) that inhibit Dalits from realising their full potential. These impediments not only keep them under perpetual poverty and denial but render them a burden on the society. Mendelsohn and Vicziany aptly describe the situation:

Some of the best evidence that the new civic culture is pragmatic and superficial rather than transformational can be discerned in the almost complete absence of Dalits from areas of private employment other than the menial or manual. Given a choice, it would seem that employers will ordinarily opt for a caste Hindu over a Scheduled Caste person. It might be argued that the caste Hindu is likely to have a stronger record of academic achievement and greater social presence as a result of the usual disparity in family background. But highly doubtful that

⁴²For the text, visit: http://pib.nic.in/archieve/Ireleng/1yr2002/rjan2002/250_12002/r2501_20026.html

⁴³ Rajesh Ramachandran, "Private sector for Dalit cause: Party", *The Times of India* (New Delhi), July 10, 2003.

⁴⁴ "Cong takes up quota issue with pvt sector," *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), September 3, 2003.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the editorial with this caption in *Hindustan Times*, July II, 2003 in which the paper called the Congress' decision "a retrogressive step" and an indulgence in "gimmicks."

⁴⁶ Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar, "Diversity doesn't mean reservations", *The Economic Times* (New Delhi), July 23, 2003.

this is a sufficient explanation. There are now considerable numbers of Dalits who can compete equally with high-caste people for at least middle-level positions. As yet, private employment in the white-collar sector is only a relatively minor source of overall employment in India. But India is to prosper it will become perhaps the most important sector. *Unless attitudes change, or unless reservation is extended to the private sector, the lack of a Dalit presence there will reinforce their lowly social position.*⁴⁷

Striving for attitudinal change, in addition to other strategies, is the course that the Bhopal Conference has set for Dalits. Formal, legalistic solution of extending reservations to private sector may appear to be attractive and easy. But the difficult path of is no less important, for ignoring societal complaisance and prejudice may accentuate existing cleavages. And the next phase of Dalit emancipation has to go beyond job 'quotas'.

⁴⁷ [Emphasis added] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, op cit, pp.267

APPENDIX

The Bhopal Declaration

Adopted Unanimously By **the Bhopal Conference: Charting A New Course For Dalits For The 21st Century** held at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India, 12-13 January 2002

We— intellectuals and activists assembled at the Bhopal Conference, 12-13 January 2002, to deliberate the Issues concerning the welfare of and justice to the 250 million Dalits (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), and

Declaring our belief in Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideal of Social Democracy and his prophecy that, "A democratic form of Government presupposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy",

Endorsing the ideals of civil society enshrined in the Constitution of India, particularly its Preamble that declares the Indian State's commitment to Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity,

Recognising that the tenets established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various other charters of the United Nations which our nation has acceded to also emphasise the same principles,

Recognising also the tribals' legitimate and historical rights over forest and forest-produce,

Acknowledging the role of tribal communities, particularly tribal women, to the protection and conservation of the country's rich biodiversity and natural resources as well as its culture and civilisation

Acknowledging also the need to ensure that SCs and STs are given due representation in all bodies of decision making,

Recalling the struggles that Babasaheb had waged for the emancipation of his people and the historic rights he had won for them,

Mindful of the fact that even after 54 years of Independence, the Dalit community is denied of its basic human rights and is also at the receiving end of the most brutal and oppressive forms of discrimination and exclusion,

Reaffirming that concerted action by society as a whole – especially coordination among the political leadership, officials and grassroots activists - is necessary for the over-all development of the most oppressed of India,

Bearing in mind the responsibility to take forward our struggle at this critical juncture in spite of the fact that most political formations are reluctant to pursue any policy favourable to the Dalits,

Recognising that the social consensus over the Dalit cause – reluctantly agreed upon at the time of Independence - has by and large broken down,

Convinced that informed and democratic discourse at all levels is essential to re-negotiate a new consensus over redeeming the pledges of the founding fathers of the Republic to do justice to Dalits,

Convinced also that the national psyche and public discourse in the country accepts uncritically the rigid hierarchy and discrimination caused by caste 'and

thereby denies that caste is a major source of prejudice and brutal violence,

Emphasizing that Babasaheb's stress on struggle through democratic and constitutional means is relevant today,

Regretting that the post-Ambedkar Dalit intelligentsia has failed both in carrying forward his emancipatory movement as well as making a dent in the country's intellectual life,

Recognizing the need for Dalits to make common cause with other liberation and human rights movements in and outside the country,

Conscious of the hurdles that caste-Hindu society - and its tentacles in government, media, voluntary sector, etc., - is likely to hurl at any serious movement that challenges the entrenched system of discrimination and exclusion,

Noting that women - especially Dalit women - represent the most oppressed sections of our society, and that they face multiple forms of discrimination, including caste-based, religious and patriarchal ideology and practices,

Welcoming the winds of change the world over that are conducive to Inclusion, Equal Opportunity, Diversity, Democratisation and Civil Society, and against discrimination, stereotype, stigma, exclusion and caste society,

Hoping that this country will no longer remain an exception to the global norm of Progress, Equality, Justice, Peace and Social Harmony, and

We hereby **solemnly proclaim** that while we rededicate ourselves to work in unison to achieve basic rights of Dalits, we are convinced that unless the following issues are resolved no amount of activism on our part and pro-active measures from the State can liberate the community from the scourges of untouchability and exploitation.

We therefore demand..

21 POINT ACTION AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

1. Ensure that each Dalit family will own enough cultivable land for socio-economic well-being. The government should pursue all possible measures including the distribution of surplus land, government revenue lands and temple lands within a specific timeframe. If the need be, the government should purchase cultivate land and distribute it among Dalits.
2. Enact legislation and enforce it stringently to enable Dalits have an equitable share in the appropriation and use of the rural and urban common property resources. The law must be amended to ensure that lengthy litigation with the ulterior motive of denying Dalits of legal redressal, is not resorted to.
3. Enact legislation and enforce the right of Dalit agricultural labourers to living wages, to gender parity in wages, to job security, to better working conditions and welfare measures, and ensure punitive measures against offenders.
4. Appoint Statutory Committees at the national and state level to identify within specified time-frame all the Depressed Class lands occupied by non-Dalits, to assess the quantum of compensation to be paid by non-Dalits for their illegal utilization of lands, to identify the original owners and their nearest kith and kin for restoring these lands back to them, to expedite legal proceedings in

courts specially appointed for this purpose against the illegal occupants and to ensure punitive measures against them.

5. Ensure the restoration of the alienated lands to the tribals, restore their rights over forest and forest-produce, provide them with compensation and rehabilitation measures, extend resources and capacity building measures for gainful utilization of their lands and forests and make those Dalits displaced due to construction of dams/ developmental projects as shareholders of such enterprises.
6. Democratise capital so as to ensure proportionate share for SCs and STs. Make budgetary allocation for SCs and STs to enable them enter the market economy with adequate investment resources, and develop their capacities and skills for such market enterprises.
7. Enforce with stringent measures the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and abolish forthwith child labour to ensure freedom with dignity for all the Dalits, and accordingly make suitable amendments in the appropriate legislations.
8. Amend Art. 21 of the Constitution of India: Fundamental Rights so as to include the following rights for all citizens, but with special emphasis for SCs and STs, and on the basis of two criteria, namely low economic income and without religious discrimination: the rights to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of women and men equally, including food, safe drinking water, clothing, housing, public health and medical care, social security and social services; the right to living wage and the right to own 5 acres of cultivable land or to gainful employment.
9. Implement compulsory, free and high quality education for all Dalits immediately, make allocation of funds proportionate to the number and level of the illiterates, ensure compensation to those families which forfeit their income from child-labour, increase the number and amount of scholarships, and provide better infrastructural facilities in SC and ST schools and offer market-oriented vocational and technical education.
10. Make the reservation quota applicable in all the public and private educational institutions from primary to technical and professional levels. Every SC/ST child with low income-base must be given quality free-education at State's expense. And every English medium school must implement Diversity in Admissions.
11. Recognize SC and ST women as a distinct category among women, and accordingly make segregated data on Dalit women available in census reports, action taken reports and progress reports, evolve national and state level perspective plan for mainstreaming SC and ST women in developmental programmes, market enterprises, financial allocation, reservation facilities in education, employment and health facilities, and mandate the National and State Commissions for SC and ST and for Women to study and report specifically the status of SC and ST women in their annual reports.
12. Implement effectively in letter and spirit the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & Rules 1995, especially with regard to atrocities against Dalit women, and accordingly prosecute the dominant caste leaders

and their minions who stoke the fire of caste clashes and the police officials acting in connivance with them. In cases of atrocities against SC/STs, a system of collective punishment has to be evolved as oppressors enjoy community support and protection and escape the law.

13. Ensure diversity or SC/STs' due representation in all public institutions of India, whether universities or academic or autonomous or registered bodies. Those institutions, which do not abide by the principle of Affirmative Action, must lose recognition and state funding. All private industry/ corporate houses must accept and implement Diversity in workforce immediately.
14. Ensure that in all state and national budgets allocations are made as per the proportion of SC and ST population and penal action taken against unutilisation or diversion of funds meant for these sections.
15. Every government and private organization must implement Supplier Diversity from socially disadvantaged businesses and Dealership Diversity in all goods and services.
16. The State must assume sole responsibility in protecting the SCs and STs. The State must identify those atrocity prone areas and deploy forces. In addition, provide arms licences to the SCs & STs as stipulated in the Atrocities Act for self-defence purposes, make the setting up of Dalit self-defence groups from village onwards mandatory, and specially train Dalit women to handle weapons in self-defence against the perpetrators of crimes and atrocities.
17. Eliminate the humiliating practice of manual scavenging on an urgent footing through effective rehabilitation, alternative and sustainable employment measures and developmental programmes, and prosecute violators of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, especially the gross violators Railways, Defence and Urban Local bodies.
18. Make it statutory for Parliament and State Assemblies to debate on the Annual Reports of the National and State level Commissions for SC/ST and Safai Karamcharis within the following year, and ensure that these annual reports and the action-taken reports of the government are made public.
19. Make reservation mandatory in the private and corporate sector in the same proportion as in the public sector and government institutions and develop the capacities and skills of Dalits to help them cope up with the demands of these different sectors.
20. Implement policy of reservation to SCs and STs at all levels of judiciary and defence forces. And make transparent appointment processes in Judiciary by doing away with the nomination system.
21. Bring out a Truth Paper in two years on the status of reservation during the past 25 years and place it before Parliament and State Assemblies for debate, and on a war footing fill immediately all the backlog posts meant for Dalits and that, too, only with Dalit candidates.