

## What's in a Name: The Dalit Paradox

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**Abstract:** Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar and his works on the anti-caste movement can be considered as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) while considering other leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, and even Mahatma Jyotibha Phule. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's stance on the notion to "educate, agitate and organise" reflects the educationist, and reformist perspective put forward so as induce a developmental multiplier effect on the marginalised sections of the Indian populace. However, since India's independence and after the death of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar, the wording of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar is often misnomered to suit the needs of various political agendas and propaganda put forward by political leaders time again. The process of social engineering once envisioned lies dismantled hitherto due to political apathy. The word Dalit which is mostly used by literati across the world and even in India was less used by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar himself, so as the less stigmatise the already socially marginalised populace. The writings and speeches regarding the depressed and backward sections along with the idea of the reservation is most often misquoted. This results mostly in the polarisation of the masses and the distorting of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's views regarding the social fabric of Indian Society as perceived by him. In this research article, we would delve into the original writings of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar and try to look into the historical perspective of the word Dalit and its contemporary usage at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Dalit, Depressed, Backwards, Marginalised

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### I. Introduction

The term "Dalit" came into existence due to the efforts of Mahatma Jyotibha Phoolley who is considered to be the very first Dalit reformer (Gulati, 2018). The term "Dalit" in the 1930s was synonymously used as a Hindi/Marathi version of the depressed classes (Omvedt, 2012). In due course, the term was chosen by some members of the caste communities within a socio-political and or cultural context of social justice, empowerment, and future emancipation. The term "Dalit" bore a deep historical conjecture which emerged in the socio-political contours of Maharashtra embodied with the rise of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar as a national hero in the pre-independence India and as founding father of modern India for his role as the Chief architect of Indian Constitution.

If we look into the history of pre-independence India, there the rift between Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was apparent due to their viewpoints on matters regarding the so-called untouchables (Tripathi, 2018). The untouchables were framed as depressed classes by the then-British Raj. In 1932, during the Poona Pact, Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhi, and others were examining a time frame for integrating political reservation for the Depressed Classes (Sarkar, 2022). After the expiration of this time limit, Dalits would be offered a referendum to decide whether or not they were content with the provisions that were already in place for their political reservations. This was discussed by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhi, and others. The idea of completely stopping operations was never brought up during the conversations, and in the end, it was decided against holding the referendum (Ibid). In a similar vein, during the debates that took place in the Constituent Assembly, a proposal for a ten-year period for caste-based reservations was actually arrived at as a compromise in order to bridge conflicting views (Ibid). In point of fact, it was Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar who first proposed utilising constitutional amendments in order to keep extending these provisions. He did so because he was

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unhappy with the ten-year clause (Ibid). The idea to protect the rights of reservation was clubbed in the fundamental rights inserted in Part III of our Indian Constitution. This was done so as to prevent any future stigmatisation of the centuries of hegemonic practices enforced against the lower castes based on jati and varna. The limits of caste-based reservations pertained only to political caste-based reservations as seen in the 104<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment put forward by the Government of India in 2020 — and not to education and public service. These were targeted venues for inoculating social engineering from a bottom-up approach envisioned by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar.

The notions instigated by the term “Dalit” still persist in the mindsets with regard to re-ensuring the burning of a socio-political coup of weaponising the same term antithetically to the masses for re-stigmatisation. With the advent of pseud-tribalism, some communities are trying to reintroduce untouchability to enjoy a piece of the pie (i.e., social reservations). In reality, the term “Dalit” only carries the centuries of oppression carried out by hegemonic Brahmanical practices of the so-called upper-class elites on the so-called untouchables. The term “Dalit” in the truest anthropological sense is nothing but a derogatory term in usage as seen in the context of demeaning the Scheduled Tribes as periodic attractions for visitors as exotic cultures.

## II. Methodology

This research article was framed after studying a wide variety of secondary sources, such as the writings and speeches of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar as well as the writings of scholars on Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar after he passed away. All of these were subjected to in-depth analysis so that an all-encompassing perspective of his visions and ideas regarding the application of the term “Dalit” and its prevalence in modern times could be constructed. Apart from these, various government reports, online newspaper articles, books, journals and data points were looked into, by us for creating relevance of the matter at hand in contemporary times. In addition to this, a content analysis of the secondary data was carried out in order to interpret and categorise all of the realistic conclusions that could be drawn from it in order to compose a more engaging narrative for academia related to social sciences and humanities both in the Indian context and abroad.

## III. Results

### **Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's Usage of the Term “Dalit”**

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar referred to the marginalised community in a number of different ways, including as “Untouchables”, “Depressed Classes”, “Backward Classes” and “Boycotted community”. Even though he didn't use the word “Dalit” very often himself, he and his other associates undoubtedly did. The published speeches, writings, and pamphlets from the 1930s and 1940s provide some shreds of evidence on the usage of the word in the Marathi language (Paik, 2022). The shreds of evidence can be traced back to when the word was first used.

In this vein, the significance of the ‘Dalit Congress Meeting’ is mentioned in the Marathi translation of the report of the All-India Depressed Classes Congress, which took place in Nagpur in August of 1930. The report was written in Marathi (Ibid). The fact that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar himself only rarely used the term reflects his own belief that the depressed classes should not be identified by names that degrade their social being and show them to be lower in comparison to other socio-political classes. This makes the question all the more pertinent because it reflects Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's own beliefs. Noteworthy in this context is the fact that, in contrast to the “Dalit Panthers” and the other advocates of the term “Dalit” in 1972 (Tripathi, 2018), Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar hardly ever used the term himself. There is a remote possibility that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches contain a solitary mention of the word in Marathi, but none of his original writings in English makes any reference to it. The Poona Pact had the only reference to the term “Dalit” in context of the referring to the oppressed classes (Thorat, 2009).

Such a form of deliberate defenestration of the word “Dalit” in Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's writings sheds light on his thoughts regarding the word as well as the politics surrounding it. In contrast to the majority of modern proponents of the word, he never employed the term “Dalit” as a denoted socio-political category for the marginalised masses. In point of fact, they have ensured that the word continues to function as a political category across all languages. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was aware of his positive progression from the cultural category of “Bahishkrut” (socially excommunicated) to “Prabuddha” (enlightened), as well as from the socio-political category of “Depressed Classes” to “Republican”. All of these were in response to the discrimination that he faced in his early days of budding into whom we know today. The titles of the journals, magazines, articles and so on written by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar reflect his thoughts and visions.

However, in the contemporary context, one small group, which considers itself to be steadfast in its adherence to Ambedkarite principles and practises, vehemently opposes the use of the word “Dalit” as a derogatory signifier of their social identity. In contrast, those who advocate for politics known as “Dalits” believe that their use of the word is also linked to the ideology and politics of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar and other forerunners of socio-political emancipation. The latter group relies on a few scant historical facts that

appear to justify the use of the word “Dalit”, but these facts are not widely known for the misinformation which is widely spread by most of the mainstream media to ensure polarisation of masses. This quest frequently investigates the meanings of the words that Jotiba and Savitribai Phule used in 1869 to refer to Mahars (Paik, 2022). The term Schedule Caste bears neutrality which lacks in the term “Dalit” due to the social construct attached to it. The change in the usage of terms might not be that significant, but the derogation can be reduced through re-inculcating novel values in minds via mental reformation.

### What's in a Name: To Be Or Not to Be

The official terminology of the word “Dalit” was and is Scheduled Caste which dates back to the official records of Round Table Conferences and the Representative Act of 1935 which materialised due to the concentrated efforts of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar. Independence was sought by most of the national leaders, but Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar not just wanted independence for India, but he additionally sought an egalitarian Indian society wherein social justice would be available for all and at all times which is why the fundamental rights were brought in to secure positive discrimination. The term “Dalit” is never once mentioned in the Indian Constitution, while the Indian Constitution was framed by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar. There were other persons associated with the project to materialise the Indian Constitution, but it was Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar who was the constitutional and legal expert hand-selected by Mahatma Gandhi to complete the task. In most of the writings and speeches of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar, there is a mention of depressed, oppressed and backwards classes which were the point of foci in the anti-caste struggle in India.

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar in his seminal work “Annihilation of Caste” observed that,

*“It is common to experience that certain names become associated with certain notions and sentiments, which determine a person's attitude towards men and things. The names, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, are names which are associated with a definite and fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu. That notion is that of a hierarchy based on birth. So long as these names continue, Hindus will continue to think of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra as hierarchical divisions of high and low, based on birth, and act accordingly. The Hindu must be made to unlearn all this. To continue the old name is to make the reform futile. To allow this Chaturvarnya, based on worth to be designated by such stinking labels of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, indicative of social divisions based on birth, is a snare. There is no doubt; in my opinion, that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress”* (Ambedkar, 2014).

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar in his 1936 speech titled “What Path to Salvation” stated that,

*“The names that depict your caste are considered so filthy that even their utterance is enough to create a vomiting sensation in the heart of Hindus. Thus, by calling yourself a Chokhamela instead of a Mahar, you try to deceive people. But, you know, people are not deceived. Whether you call yourself a Chokhamela or a Harijan, people understand what you are. By your actions, you have proved, the necessity of a change in name. Then I would like to ask you, if you feel the need of change in your name, what objection should there be for the change of religion? Changing a religion is like changing a name. Change of a religion followed by the change of name will be more beneficial to you”* (see Round Table India, 2012).

Furthermore, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar in his work titled “Away from Hindus” jots down the note that,

*“The social attitude of the Hindu towards the Untouchable is determined by the very name ‘Untouchable’. There is a fixed attitude towards ‘Untouchables’ which is determined by the stink which is embedded in the name ‘Untouchable’. People have no mind to go into the individual merits of each Untouchable no matter how meritorious he is. All untouchables realize this. There is a general attempt to call themselves by some name other than the ‘Untouchables’. The Chamars call themselves Ravidas or Jatavas. The Doms call themselves Shilpakars. The Pariahs call themselves Adi-Dravidas, the Madigas call themselves Arundhatyas, the Mahars call themselves Chokhamela or Somavamshi and the Bhangis call themselves Balmikis. All of them if away from their localities would call themselves Christians. The Untouchables know that if they call themselves Untouchables they will at once draw the Hindu out and expose themselves to his wrath and his prejudice. That is why they give themselves other names which may be likened to the process of undergoing protective discolouration. It is not seldom that this discolouration completely fails to serve its purpose. For to be a Hindu is for Hindus not an ultimate social category. The ultimate social category is caste, nay sub-caste if there is a sub-caste. When the Hindus meet ‘May I know who are you’ is a question sure to be asked. To this question ‘I am a Hindu’ will not be a satisfactory answer. It will certainly not be accepted as a final answer. The inquiry is bound to be further pursued. The answer ‘Hindu’ is bound to be followed by another; ‘What caste?’. The answer to that is bound to be followed by a question: “What sub-caste?” It is only when the questioner reaches the ultimate social category which is either caste or sub-caste that he will stop his questioning. The Untouchable who adopts the new name is a protective discolouration finds that the new name does not help and that in the course of relentless questionings he is, so to say, run down to earth and made to disclose that he is an Untouchable. The concealment makes him the victim of greater anger than his original voluntary disclosure would have done. From this discussion two things are clear. One is that the low status of the Untouchables is bound upon with a stinking name. Unless the name is changed there is no possibility of a*

rise in their social status. The other is that a change of name within Hinduism will not do. The Hindu will not fail to penetrate through such a name and make the Untouchable and confer himself as an Untouchable. The name matters and matters a great deal. For, the name can make a revolution in the status of the Untouchables. But the name must be the name of a community outside Hinduism and beyond its power of spoliation and degradation" (see Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches Volume. 3).

Apart from this, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar even agrees, in his statement on electoral representation in the Round Table Conference, to exchange the category of "depressed classes" that he used, noting that it was inappropriate and unsuitable, for names that are more respectable. This is in light of the fact that Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged that the term was inappropriate and unsuitable. Herein, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar points towards the fact that,

*"the term 'depressed classes' has led to a great deal of confusion in the census because it includes others who are not strictly untouchables. Secondly, it gives the impression that the depressed classes are a low and helpless community when as a matter of fact in every Province numbers of them are both well-to-do and well-educated, and the whole community is acquiring consciousness of its needs, is charged with ambition for securing a respectable status in Indian society and is making Stupendous efforts to achieve it. On all these grounds the term 'depressed classes' is inappropriate and unsuitable. Mr. Mullan, the Census Superintendent of Assam, has brought into use a new term called 'exterior castes' to cover the untouchables. This designation has many advantages. It defines exactly the position of the untouchables who are within the Hindu religion but outside the Hindu society and distinguishes it from Hindus who are economically and educationally depressed but who are both within the pale of Hindu religion and Hindu society. The term has two other advantages. It avoids all the confusion that is now caused by the use of the vague term depressed classes and at the same time is not offensive. Our Committee did not feel competent to make recommendations on this behalf. But as a representative of the depressed classes I have no hesitation in saying that until better nomenclature is found the untouchable classes should hereafter be described by the more expressive term 'Exterior Castes' or 'Excluded Castes' and not as depressed classes"* (see Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches Volume. 2).

Even though these are only a few excerpts from Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches. There are numerous stanzas that are filled with this kind of qualitative reasoning against the usage of names and terms that are degrading and show people as lower beings. In both his writings and his actions, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar placed a significant emphasis on the concept of naming. Aside from a couple of isolated instances of translation, he maintained throughout his writings in both English and Marathi that the political category of "untouchables" or "depressed classes" came first, followed by "Schedule Castes."

In the end, as was just mentioned up above, he decided to call his political party the Republican Party of India, while simultaneously establishing a new social and cultural category for his community called the Neo-Navayana sect of Buddhism. Therefore, putting into practice what he had stated in the preceding statements as his opinion. However, according to Paik (2022), "there is no denying that the word 'Dalit' is inseparable from its social-political function and that it effectively facilitated political action for Dalits". But Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar disagreed, and the term "Dalit" was never his category for referring to particular groups of people. In point of fact, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar progressively moved forward with a positive outlook to restructure his image as a self-made traditional reformer when the times were vehemently against such forward thinking. Thus, in this vein, we can observe that the concept of "Dalit" socio-politics was circumvented by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar in his writings step by step, and eventually he completely disregarded it to seek a greater good for the community as a whole. The idea of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar being a Dalit icon is nothing but parochializing his social identity as the true national leader that he is.

### **Reservation: Is it still the Need of the Hour?**

Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar developed a number of strategies to combat social oppression and injustice against specific classes, and one of those strategies was a social reservation for the marginalised populace of Indian Society. The practice of giving preferential treatment to traditionally disadvantaged groups of people is more commonly known as affirmative action. Nevertheless, reservations are only one of many strategies for advancing social progress. There are many other approaches, some of which include the provision of scholarships, funds, coaching, and other forms of social assistance. Vote-bank politics play a significant role in determining the manner in which India's reservation system is administered and carried out. In this vein, according to a recent report titled Crime in India that was published by the NCRB for crime-related statistics of 2021, crimes committed against Scheduled Castes (SCs) have increased by 1.2% in 2021. Uttar Pradesh reported the highest number of cases of atrocities committed against SCs accounting for 25.82%, followed by Rajasthan with 14.7% and Madhya Pradesh with 14.1% during the year 2021. (Rohmetra, 2021). In a similar vein, there is also a rise in crime statistics against STs across India (Ibid).

However, data regarding OBCs are mostly left out of mainstream media reports. The 1.34 billion population size as propagated by the Census of India is the basic difficulty which needs to be crossed (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India 2011). In this context, the government of the day is

facing technical challenges for re-introducing proper caste census to weed out the unnecessary populace which is feeding off the mechanism of the positive discrimination provisioned by the state for the poorest of the poor. Thus, we can observe that the benefits of the reservation were successively enjoyed only by a few communities (or classes), excluding the truly deserving ones. Even 75 years after independence while celebrating Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, the demand for reservations has only increased due to various fiscal nudges faced by the poorest of the poor. Now, with the introduction of economic criteria for reservation, in addition to the caste criteria which already existed, things have become a bit more equal in terms of the social discrimination for the socially-educationally backwards along with the principle of socio-economically backwards. In this context, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar in his seminal work “Annihilation of Caste”(2014) opined that, “Turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform; you cannot have economic reform unless you kill this monster”. The current government of the day is trying to inoculate a vision of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* by closely following the principles put forward by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar through implementing the mantra of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* to throttle our nation towards becoming *Vishwaguru*. Thus, becoming *Vishwaguru* can be only followed up through diverse economical steps to enrich our industries which will in turn inoculate neo-social engineering (Paul, 2022) to socially uplift and empower them to bear the weights of our nation’s growing challenges in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Untouchability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Article 17 of our Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on untouchability. However, there is a sudden development of neo-untouchability (Paul & Chatterjee, 2022) which is caused due to the changes in the fabric of our Indian Society in the modern context. In 2020, a research article was published by Thorat and Omkar (2020) titled “The Continuing Practice of Untouchability in India”. In this research article, the authors made the observation that untouchability is still a daily reality for India's marginalised, as evidenced by the fact that 20% of India's urban population and 30% of India's rural population admit to engaging in such practice. Due to the fact that providing information for the study was entirely voluntary, a significant amount of hesitation was observed in responses coming from people living in urban areas. As a result, the numbers could be significantly higher. In India, approximately half of the population openly accepted acts of caste-based criminality (Ibid). The neo-untouchability can be experienced through the certain degree of disenfranchisement faced by the such a marginalised populace, especially during the tumultuous times of the coronavirus pandemic (Paul & Chatterjee, 2022).

In a contemporary context, we can observe that, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's hopes have not yet been realised, and in the meantime, our country is facing the gravest concerns due to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020-21. However, the prior data that was collected for the House listing and Housing Census in 2011 shed light on the ongoing injustice that was perpetrated against Dalits through the humiliating practice of manual scavenging. These workers use their brooms and tins to collect human excrement and then transport it to an appropriate disposal location (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021). This work division continues on the basis of the traditional Hindu social order, which assigns the Dalits low-status jobs that are dirty and unpleasant. The current government of the day have inoculated the process of employing Safai Karmacharis to look into such issues under the umbrella body of the National Commission for Safai Karmacharis (NCSK). Modern-day technologies are also utilised in synergy, so as to uplift the social stigma associated with such jobs. According to Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar (1991), “in India, a man is not a scavenger because of his work. He was born a scavenger, so the question of whether or not he actually engages in scavenging is irrelevant to his status as a scavenger”. These notions have severely impacted and reformed through Swachh Bharat Abhiyan across India. The social stigma associated with the practice of untouchability has somewhat blurred out through such mission-mode projects carried out by the current government of the day.

### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to note that, an estimated eight lakh individuals are still traditionally engaged in the manual removal of night soil, which is a depressing fact that was revealed in the data on households from the 2011 Census of India (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India 2011). This is a significant embarrassment for the State governments, which are still in the mode of denial. However, the current government of India is seen as having advanced Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's efforts to eradicate such caste biases. The bias and derogation associated with “Dalit” can be significantly reduced by limiting its usage to the term Scheduled Castes in general. The “Dalit” politics and the literature associated with it have come a long way, but such a social process has failed to assuage the masses to enter into the mainstream populaces due to the prevalent social stigma associated with it. Even late Kanshi Ram altered the term Dalit to Bahujan to initiate social reform (Narayan, 2012). In this vein, we think that naming oneself as an Ambedkarite has a better pragmatic aspect linked to it. The central maxims of social justice and future emancipation envisioned by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar are yet to be fulfilled. The government of the day is trying its level best

to inoculate the much-needed mental reformation, but the years of governmental apathy and bureaucratic red-tapism are yet to be removed from the steel frame of India.

There are numerous non-governmental agencies which are working hand in hand to ensure the social empowerment of marginalised populaces. But so much work is yet to be done. The work of ensuring social justice is never-ending until and unless the last mile coverage is completed. In this context, we would like to observe that, rather than simply presenting flowers to his statue on the anniversaries of his birth and death, it would be a more befitting way to pay tribute to the great leader (Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar) to carry on with his mission of uplifting the people who belong to the depressed and backward classes on assisting them in breaking free from the oppressive cycle of caste and cultural barriers in contemporary times. And, instead of using the term “Dalit”, Ambedkarite is quite an eloquent term because most of the principles that are being followed were proposed by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar himself.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The views expressed in this research article are entirely based on the authors' opinions after deeply reading and reflecting on the visions and ideas put forward by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar.

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