

First Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING
THE MODERN DALIT
MOVEMENT

Delivered by
DR. JOHN C.B. WEBSTER
Waterford, Connecticut (U.S.A.)



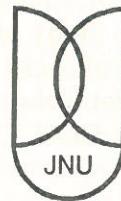
1999

Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067

First Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING
THE MODERN DALIT
MOVEMENT

Delivered by
DR. JOHN C.B. WEBSTER
Waterford, Connecticut (U.S.A.)



Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067

1999

Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

First Edition, 1999

Copies 300

© Dr. Ambedkar Chair, J.N.U., New Delhi.

Published by

Prof. Nandu Ram for Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi -110 067.

Laser Typeset by
Muskan Art & Graphics
Delhi

Printed at
Nice Printing Press, Delhi

PREFACE

It is historically evident that the state action, particularly in the form of reservation given to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes as provided in the Indian Constitution, is an outcome of at least a century-old movement(s) organised by Dalits (with narrow connotation of inclusive of the Scheduled Castes—the erstwhile Untouchables or the Depressed Classes) in different parts of the country. Although these movements varied in their nature and social composition, yet there were, by and large, commonalities of the issues that these had addressed to. Some of the commonalities were removal of social and religious disabilities imposed on them, their social degradation in the local caste-hierarchy, deprivation of their access to the public services and resources including land, their economic exploitation and so on. More specifically, since they were the perennial victims of untouchability, and physical and socio-psychological forms of atrocities, the Dalit movement(s) addressed primarily to these issues—including immediate issues of varied nature in different regions of the country.

It is also a fact that both the left and right wings historians of modern India, covering especially the periods from early colonial rule to India's political Independence, have almost siphoned the Dalit movement(s) in their writings. The initiatives had, however, been taken by a few British administrators who happened to be anthropologist or ethnographer by training, and a small number of not well-known historians from both India and abroad. This may be taken a sad commentary on the part of the Indian academia who have always ventured to explore and analyse the 'mainstream' social reality or events and have not paid even least attention to the miserable life

4 *Towards Understanding the Modern Dalit Movement*

situations of the marginalized sections of population of Indian society, and to their autonomous cultures, customs, etc. of whatsoever nature and form.

Without going into explaining the reasons for this, it is for certain that the Dalits in India, with their varying nomenclatures along the changing time and space, had protested or agitated, sometimes collectively but most of the time individually, against their socio-religious ignominies and for embracing equality since the early medieval period or even earlier to that. It is ironical that no written records about these are available in English language, except in vernacular languages and that too in scattered literary form or in the form of folk-songs and folk-tales—constituting mostly the mythic or oral tradition.

Accepting modern India as it has been viewed by the historians both from India and abroad, Dr. John C.B. Webster—a historian by training but a free-lance researcher and social activist by vocation—had delivered the Inaugural Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture organized on November 17, 1995, as a part of the main objectives of the Dr. Ambedkar Chair to disseminate the thought and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar and to study the socio-economic, political and cultural issues pertaining to the marginalized sections namely the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes or castes of Indian society. As it appears from the title of the text of his lecture, he has confined himself to the Dalit movement (used in plural number) of the modern time due to simple reason of availability of literature on it in English language. Thus, through the review of existing literature on the theme covering both the pre and post Independent periods, Dr. Webster has indicated towards two approaches—one, Dalit movement against exploitation including atrocities and for attaining equality, liberty and social justice inclusive of dignity and self-respect; and, two, to challenge social hegemony of the upper castes. Although the lecture could not be published earlier due to one reason or the other, yet I hope the students of social sciences in general and sociology and social anthropology in particular may find it an interesting reading and addition to their existing knowledge on this issue.

14 October, 1999
J.N.U., New Delhi.

Nandu Ram
Dr. Ambedkar Chair Professor of Sociology

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE MODERN DALIT MOVEMENT

John C.B. Webster

I would like to thank Professor Nandu Ram and his fellow sociologists for inviting me to give this lecture. I consider this both a great honour and a great opportunity. I myself am not a sociologist but an historian who has found sociology an indispensable asset in my own work. This afternoon, I intend to speak as an historian who is interested in benefiting from an inter-disciplinary discussion. The title which I have chosen, "Towards Understanding the Modern Dalit Movement", is perhaps an appropriate one with which to begin this Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series because it seeks to provide a general orientation to this important field of study. It begins with a survey of the monograph literature on the history of the modern Dalit movement and concludes by pointing to several important issues which any historian in the field must face in trying to understand it. In dealing with these unavoidable issues, the historian must take help from the sociologists and that, in an important sense, is what I am doing here at the moment.

The Dalit movement has not received the attention it deserves from the historians of modern India. In the general histories of modern India written a generation ago, Dalits were treated either as marginal people without a history of

6 Towards Understanding the Modern Dalit Movement

their own or as objects, rather than subjects, of the history of the nation as a whole. Thompson and Garrett did refer to the Dalit movement at several points but never described it.¹ Percival Spear, in a chapter on economic and cultural developments in his identical revisions both of the modern section of Vincent Smith's *Oxford History of India* and of P.E. Roberts' *History of British India under the Company and the Crown* pointed out that Gandhi was the leader of a movement for the uplift of the depressed classes, but acknowledged Ambedkar as a "Harijan leader" of "outstanding courage and ability."² Alone among these earlier British historians of modern India, L.S.S. O'Malley devoted one-fifth of his chapter on "The Hindu Social System" in *Modern India and the West* to the Dalit movement. However, he portrayed it not as a movement of Dalits but as a "movement for the uplift of the untouchables" initiated and sustained by others.³ The latest British history of modern India, that of Judith Brown,⁴ does monitor the condition of the Dalits at several points in their history, but makes no reference to any organized efforts by Dalits to improve their own lot.

The Dalit movement has not fared much better in the histories of modern India even by Indian historians, who generally relegate Dalits to chapters on social reform and then portray them less as activists than as passive victims, recipients and beneficiaries. The one paragraph, devoted to Dalits, in *An Advanced History of India*, described them as objects of philanthropic and social work conducted by others.⁵ In R.R. Sethi's chapters covering 1919-1947 in the *Cambridge History of India*, Dalits are referred to only in connection with the 1932 Communal Award and as objects of "uplift" work.⁶ In the final volume of the *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's History and Culture of the Indian People*, R.C. Majumdar did refer to Ambedkar and the Dalits as participants in the political bargaining of the 1930s and 1940s which ultimately led to independence.⁷ However, in his lengthier treatment of them, placed in a chapter on social reform, it is the social reformers, Gandhi, and the Congress who are portrayed as the prime movers, while Ambedkar is

cast in the role of perceptive critic.⁸ Bipan Chandra confines his treatment of the Dalits to a three page section on "the struggle against caste" in his textbook *Modern India*, but does give them a more activist role than did earlier historians.⁹ But this cannot be said in the case of his more recent *India's Struggle for Independence*, which describes only Gandhi's "Harijan Uplift Movement."¹⁰ Finally, Sumit Sarkar includes brief treatments of the Mahar movement in his sections on caste movements in *Modern India 1885-1947*, but he also refers to the 1930s only, and that too, at greater length, to Gandhi's Harijan campaign.¹¹

This brief survey would seem to suggest that there was no such thing as a modern Dalit movement, at least prior to Independence. To virtually all these historians, Dalits were not movers; and even if they were, they moved not on their own but in the wake of socially concerned members of the dominant castes. Such treatment of the Dalits has been elitist and at times patronizing. Beginning with the pioneering work of Eleanor Zelliott in 1969,¹² a growing number of recent historical monographs have offered a necessary corrective. These provide ample evidence of a Dalit movement prior to the enactment of the 1919 constitution, growing in size and political significance through the 1920s and 1930s. Dalits may not have had a single organization parallel to the Muslim League or the Hindu Mahasabha, but they did have grass-roots organizations; a recognized leadership, pre-eminent among whom was B.R. Ambedkar; and a common demand for political recognition, for representation of their own, as well as for dignity, equality and justice. These demands found expression in the 1950 constitution, of which B.R. Ambedkar was the chief drafter. A brief review of these monographs in the order of their publication will help to show how this movement is being understood. I confine myself to histories and do not get into either the far vaster biographical literature, especially on B.R. Ambedkar, or the many studies on the political ideology of either Gandhi or Ambedkar or both.

I

Eleanor Zelliot's doctoral dissertation on Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar movement has not yet been published, but has provided the basis for many frequently cited articles.¹³ It starts with 1890, "the year which saw the beginning of articulate protest among the Mahars,"¹⁴ and concludes with an assessment of the Mahars' condition following Ambedkar's death in 1956. Her history moves back and forth between internal developments within the Mahar caste and movement on the one hand and, on the other, Mahar's involvement with the changing political context of nationalist agitation and the process of increased democratization the British introduced in response. Ambedkar, as both the acknowledged leader of the Mahars and recognized spokesman of Dalits in general, provides a continuing meeting point of these two developments. Zelliot also makes considerable use of the analytical contrast between the traditional and the modern in writing this history. The early leaders of the Mahar movement, like Ambedkar himself, belonged to the non-traditional elite, they used modern methods of political agitation (petitions, newspapers, conferences, the Depressed Classes Institute, political parties); they also appealed to modern rather than to traditional values to press their case and further their cause. In this connection, 1935 was a major turning point when Ambedkar not only gave up temple entry and renounced Hinduism, but also concentrated on using newly won political power and his own political parties to promote his people's interests.

Whereas Zelliot confined her study to only one Dalit caste movement, *albeit* the one with the most outstanding record of accomplishment,¹⁵ J.R. Kamble was the first to attempt a more comprehensive history. His *Rise and Awakening of Depressed Classes in India* presents "the saga of [how] people suffering from social, economic and political discrimination for times immemorial---have achieved their emancipation" so that their story might become a part of modern Indian history.¹⁶ In this narrative account, the British rule provided the conditions

and the Hindu social reformers changed the attitudes (among caste Hindus) which made the Dalits' rise and awakening possible. Much of the history is devoted to the Dalit efforts to gain political representation in the legislature between the Montagu's declaration in 1917 and the Poona Pact in 1932. These chapters concentrate upon the negotiations over the constitutional reform at the national level. They are followed by chapters on the contributions of Ambedkar and Gandhi to Dalits' awakening, the now-Buddhist movement, and the record of the government of India in Dalit emancipation since Independence. Kamble writes as a nationalist who considers Dalit emancipation not only to have been the ongoing work of Dalits and of "all liberals and fair minded people" alike, but also to be a necessary prerequisite (along with the end of caste privilege) for political stability. At the same time, he is also an unabashed advocate of the Dalit cause who consider their emancipation incomplete and hence requiring vigilance, the use of privileges conferred, and the organization for its further realization.¹⁷

By the end of the 1970s, therefore, there was not a large and obvious body of research on the modern Dalit movement for someone writing a history of modern India to draw upon. It would be difficult to generalize from the rather exceptional Mahar case in Zelliott's study to the Dalits as a whole or to rely upon Kamble's more general work because its many large gaps and advocacy style may not inspire confidence. This situation would change in the mid-1980s.

II

The first monograph on the Dalit movement to appear in the 1980s was another case study somewhat similar to Zelliott's. At the centre of Mark Juergensmeyer's *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*¹⁸ was the Ad Dharm movement. This Juergensmeyer traces from its origins in the 1920s to its demise in 1946 and its revival in 1970. However, Juergensmeyer's major concern is not with the history of

one particular movement but with the role which religion has played in lower caste struggles for social change. He, therefore, devotes one section of his book to what he calls "competing visions"—the Ambedkarite (including Buddhist), the Valmiki, the Christian, the Marxist and the Radhasoami as well. Thus, while much of the study is centred in and around the city of Jullundur, the headquarters of the Ad Dharmis where most of his data was gathered, it does provide insight into broader regional developments as well.

Following Juergensmeyer came three studies aimed at providing a more comprehensive view of the Dalit movement as a whole. The first of these was S.K. Gupta's *The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence as a Political Power*.¹⁹ Its purpose was to "present a detailed and analytical account of the multifaceted struggle of the Scheduled Castes, the odyssey of their transformation from an apolitical, ostracized and indigent mass into a crucial factor in the Indian political structure."²⁰ He sees this transformation occurring between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the Government of India Act, 1935, the precursor for Dalits to the constitution of Independent India. This transformation passed through three stages: their initiation into politics by 1916, their establishing a political identity by 1927, and a marked change in their political status secured in the 1935 constitution. After providing a region by region survey of the socio-economic condition of the Dalits in 1916, Gupta concentrates the reader's attention primarily upon those key moments at which Dalits had an opportunity to express their views and play a role in the constitutional struggle between the central government and the Congress from 1916 to 1935. Where his account differs most significantly from that of Kamble, it is important in providing considerable data on the aims and actions of Dalit political organizations at each step in this process of political change. He also saw the social reformers playing a minimal role in initiating the Dalits into politics. Instead,

Political awakening among the depressed classes in the real sense of the term, and their introduction into the national

political arena were a part of the process of their increasing importance for the various religious communities and groups that were vying with one another for increasing their strength on the one hand, and tending to decrease that of opponents on the other, in the game of 'politics of numbers'.²¹

In *The Emergence of the Depressed Classes*, Atul Chandra Pradhan tells essentially the same story as Gupta told, but not in the same way. For one thing, his time frame is different. He considered developments prior to 1917 to be preparatory and treated them in a very summary fashion; however, he then extended his history beyond 1935 to 1947. For another, he organized his account less around the various British-initiated announcements, missions, commissions, conferences, constitutions and elections than around the three key parties to the Depressed Classes' emergence as a social reality and political force to be taken increasingly seriously. These parties were the British policy-makers; then not only Gandhi, and behind him (often far behind him in Pradhan's rendering) the Congress, but also the Hindu Mahasabha and other organs of Hindu religious opinion; and finally the Depressed Classes themselves, their leaders and organizations. The latter Pradhan divides into two categories: The separatists, such as B.R. Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan, and the nationalists, among whom the relatively late-comer Jagjivan Ram was the most consistent.²² Whereas the former sought recognition as a distinct minority with a separate identity and representation through separate electorates, the latter sought to become "an unsegregated and unquarantined part of Hindu society"²³, and to work with the Congress in attaining national objectives. Pradhan's own assessment of both the identity and representation issues is closer to the nationalists' than to the separatists' position. For him, the emergence of the Depressed Classes did pose a 'problem' in national politics, second only to that posed by the Muslims, which remains not easily resolved. The concluding paragraph of his chapter on 1939-1947 provides an essentially happy ending to his story, which the brief

concluding survey of the pluses and minuses of protective discrimination since Independence does not undermine.

With Ambedkar as the 'Father of the Indian Constitution' and Congress as the ruling party, which under Gandhi's leadership had committed itself to the uplift of the backward sections of society, the Constitution of the Indian Union accepted the legal, social, economic, educational and cultural development of the Scheduled Castes.²⁴

The aim of Trilok Nath's *Politics of the Depressed Classes*²⁵ was to "throw some light on the socio-political conditions which necessitated evolution of policies which made Depressed Classes' participation in politics a reality, however pale."²⁶ To achieve this aim he concentrated primarily upon the decade from 1927 to 1937, although his treatment of the history from the end of the nineteenth century grows increasingly detailed as he approaches 1927. Like Gupta, he saw the communal struggle for power following the Aga Khan deputation and the 1909 constitution providing the socio-political conditions which gave the Depressed Classes an opportunity for political participation. Also, like both Gupta and Pradhan, Trilok Nath not only concentrated upon politics at the All-India level because he considered that to have been crucial for Dalits, but he also provided considerable information from newspaper and private records on Dalits' political activities aimed at influencing policy at the Centre. His study, however, is briefer than theirs. In his treatment of the 1927-1937 period, his narrative on the constitutional struggle stops with the Poona Pact (1932) instead of with the Government of India Act (1935). He also devoted a chapter to temple entry and conversion subjects which Pradhan also covered but Gupta largely ignored. Also like Pradhan, Trilok Nath generally paid more attention to the difference between Dalit leaders and/or organizations than did Gupta. He devoted even a separate chapter comparing the contributions of Gandhi and Ambedkar, whereas the other two built this into their narratives.

With the publication of these three studies, there was no longer an excuse for omitting the Dalits from political histories

of modern India covering the period between the World War I and World War II. As yet, no histories of the Dalit movement since Independence had been published, although a very large number of micro-studies on reservations, social change, elites, and politics did exist. The best overview was that provided in 1982 by Barbara Joshi's *Democracy in Search of Equality: Untouchable Politics and Indian Social Change*.²⁷

III

The number of monographs on modern Dalit history written so far in the 1990s is small. Nevertheless, it has now become apparent that there are major differences of approach to this subject which have implications for any understanding of Dalit movement in the context of modern Indian history. My own *The Dalit Christian: A History*²⁸ makes use of earlier studies, but departs from them at three significant points. The first is that it considers Christian Dalits to be Dalits and, therefore, sets their history within the context of Dalit history. This point is not simply assumed but is argued in some details at various places in the book. The result is a more inclusive and rather more complex history. Secondly, I treat this history as the history of the modern Dalit movement. Of the earlier authors cited, only Zelliott and Juergensmeyer use the term 'movement'; Zelliott limits it to only one caste, while Juergensmeyer applies it to a variety of organized efforts which have anti-untouchability as a common theme. Like them, I consider the Dalits themselves to have been the major actors in their own history. Where I differ is in depicting a broader Dalit movement, of which the Mahar and the Ad Dharm movements were integral and inter-connected parts, that began in the late nineteenth century and has continued up to the present time. This movement (the Dalit Christian movement) has gone through three stages, the predominant features of which were mass conversion in the late nineteenth century and the participation in the politics of numbers from 1917 to Independence. Finally, I attempt a brief post-Independence history of the Dalit movement. I use the word "attempt" here

because I found it a rather baffling exercise with no clear models before me to build upon or to critique.

Next, two disappointments should be mentioned. One is P.E. Mohan's *Scheduled Castes: History of Elevation, Tamil Nadu, 1900-1950*²⁹ which is, in an important sense, really not a history at all. In the first five chapters it provides descriptions of those organizations, agencies and individuals who were involved in elevating the Scheduled Castes during that half century. The remaining four chapters then assess the results of their efforts in the areas of economics, education, politics and civil rights. What is missing are the connections and dynamic interaction between the various actors in the four arenas he describes. The other disappointment is the series of Subaltern Studies which, since Dalits certainly occupy a subaltern position in Indian society, could have had a significant impact upon our understanding of Dalit history. However, Dalits have been almost totally ignored, figuring occasionally as victims, even less frequently as minor perpetrators of violence, and once as a producer of a text.³⁰ Where they are mentioned, class categories predominate and caste is referred to only incidentally.

The most recent monograph on the Dalit movement is Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in Colonial India*.³¹ Omvedt treats the Dalit movement as part, in many ways the leading part, of a broader anti-caste movement which included non-Brahman movements as well.³² This anti-caste movement was, in turn, part of a yet broader revolutionary democratic movement which included "the national movement and communist and socialist-led working class and peasant movements" as well.³³ Omvedt argues that the Dalit movement in particular and anti-caste movements in general should be seen as anti-systemic rather than basically reformist in nature. In so doing, she challenges the reigning Marxist view which, by treating not only class as the most important factor determining exploitation but also the contradiction between the oppressed Indian nationality and British imperialism as the main contradiction to be overcome, has considered the Dalit

movement to be basically diversionary on both counts.³⁴ Historically, the Dalit movement has questioned both of those assumptions. On the one hand, it has seen caste in both of these assumptions. On the other hand, it has seen caste (in both its occupational and purity-pollution dimensions) as exploitative and, on the other, it has questioned the meaning and identity of the nation when such hierarchical divisions exist within it. Omvedt thus sets her study within a framework that is both Marxist and "Phule-Ambedkarite."³⁵ In it she concentrates on the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, Mysore, Hyderabad, and Andhra from 1920 to 1956, with a special eye to their relationships to the national movement and to other anti-caste and democratic revolutionary movements. In her analysis, which describes both "Hinduistic" and "autonomy" movements among Dalits, the years 1930-1932 constitute a particularly significant "defining moment" in Dalit relationships both to the Gandhian nationalists and to the Marxist. What makes her work so original is both the framework of analysis within which she sets it and her focus upon comparative regional history.

There are still no monographs on the Dalit movement in independent India. Jogdand's *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra*,³⁶ which does devote considerable space to what he calls the post-Ambedkar era, and V.T. Rajshekar Shetty's more journalistic *Dalit Movement in Karnataka*³⁷ are two regional studies. There are synoptic accounts such as my own which focuses upon protest, conflict and self-redefinition as well as Gail Omvedt's concluding chapter which sees a post-Ambedkar fragmentation and then, beginning in the 1970s, a subsequent upsurge in the Dalit movement.³⁸ There have also been overviews of the current Dalit situation in India³⁹ as well as theoretical analyses of Dalit movements covering the post-Independence period,⁴⁰ in addition to numerous micro-studies on various aspects of Dalit life. However, the period from 1947 to the present remains a major chapter of Dalit history which has yet to be written.

IV

If the ideal is a history of modern India that large diverse groups or categories of Indians can identify with, can locate themselves and their forebears in, and can claim as their own, then how should the history of the Dalit movement be understood within such a history? The often conflicting understanding of the nature and dynamics of the modern Dalit movement, described in this brief survey of monograph literature in English, point to at least five unavoidable issues which historians must address in answering that question.

The first of these is summed up in the question, "who is a Dalit?" Part of the confusion centres around the connotations of the word, 'Dalit' which was originally used as a Marathi and as a Hindi translation of the British term, 'Depressed Classes.' Thus there is a more narrow reference which, like the original, is confined to what are today often called the Scheduled Castes, as well as broader one which includes all those (e.g., women, tribals, the poor of all castes, religious minorities) who either are similarly situated or are considered natural allies. In scholarly approaches to Dalit history, those using a class analysis of Indian society subsume Dalits within such class or occupational categories as peasants, agricultural labour, factory workers, students, and the like. This, however, not only fails to take account of the basic contradiction and oppression which Dalits face but also hides these by using categories which divert attention away from them. On the other hand, those who use caste tend to adopt a communal or what Marc Galanter has called a sacral view of caste in their analyses. Thus, only those members of the castes, who are considered untouchable within the Hindu sacral order and remain Hindus by religion, are considered Dalits. If they convert to another religion, then they cease to be Dalits. This view is not only serious odds with all the empirical realities uncovered by studies of caste among Christians and Muslims, but also is based upon that highly compartmentalized view of Indian society as a whole which framed the debates over the constitution of India during the

1920s and 1930s. A more inclusive view, in which caste is seen not as an exclusively Hindu but as an Indian phenomenon, seems called for.

The second is a conceptual issue concerning the term "movement" with reference to the Dalits, as it has been either used to refer to different empirical realities or else it has not been used at all. Specifically, can one speak of a Dalit movement or only of Dalit movements? Ghanshyam Shah's and T.K. Oommen's recent analyses of social movements, both of which include chapters on Dalit movements, reveal how difficult it is to come up with tight definitions or sets of characteristics which do justice to the complexities of the many diverse social movements in modern Indian history.⁴¹ Certainly there has not been ideological or organizational unity, if those must be the determining criteria. Yet, to borrow Oommen's terminology, there were many similarly placed primordial Dalit collectivities with similar histories of oppression simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system, albeit in different regional-linguistic areas and inspired by varying visions of their own and society's future.⁴² Moreover, while these movements did not have a common organization, they did not operate in isolation; they were aware of each other and did have a cumulative impact upon each other over time. Since the purpose of the historian of modern India is not to dissect such phenomena into smaller and smaller isolated bits for the sake of analytical precision but to develop appropriate descriptive generalizations about significant continuities and changes over time, the label 'modern Dalit movement' for the many simultaneous and interconnected movements by Dalits as these movements began to surface in the late nineteenth century makes good sense.

Then, third, there has been disagreement over the background, origins and beginning of the movement (if that is what it was). There has also been a general consensus that made its appearance on the national political scene soon after the Montagu' declaration in August 1917. What happened prior to that is treated simply as background.

Those that treat it in some details, trace the sources of the movement to non-Dalit initiatives rather than to the Dalits themselves. I would argue instead that the modern Dalit movement was, from its very inception, a movement initiated by Dalits for Dalits. While there were Dalits who tried sanscritization and some who used occupational mobility to improve their lot, it was their mass conversions, especially but not exclusively to Christianity, which made their situation, identity and aspirations a matter of public concern. After the Aga Khan' deputation and the 1909 constitution, conversion came to have political overtones because it affected the communal balance of power. It was this situation which Ambedkar was able to turn to such good advantage during the 1920s and 1930s.

The fourth issue concerns the dynamics of this "movement" not only at the "centre" but also at the regional and local "periphery" during the thirty years between the Montagu' declaration in 1917 and independence in 1947. The Dalit struggle during this period under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, M.C. Rajah and others was focused primarily upon gaining recognition and power within the changing political order. On this scholars are in basic agreement. Studies of this stage of the modern Dalit movement have tended to concentrate primarily upon the constitutional struggle at the national rather than at the grassroots level, as well as upon the ideology and roles of Gandhi and Ambedkar in that struggle. Fundamental shifts in perspective on this stage of the movement are not likely to occur until more detailed studies of specific regional and/ or caste movements have been published. Until then, we still have relatively little information about the foundations upon which not only contemporary leaders made political claims but also post-independence Dalit movements were developed.

Finally, amidst all the plethora of micro-studies, how is the post-Independence history of the Dalit "movement" best understood? Those who have attempted some integration and synthesis of all these studies are not agreed on what they add up to. Two approaches seem to predominate. One is that

represented by Professor Nandu Ram in his recent book, *Beyond Ambedkar: Essays on Dalits in India*. Nandu Ram sees three types of contemporary Dalit movements:

Movements against socio-economic exploitation and numerous types of atrocities committed on the Dalits; movements for better access to the opportunities and for realization of goals of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice; and finally movements for gaining self-respect and dignified social identity (ies).⁴³

A second approach seeks an underlying unity beneath this diversity, as mentioned in Rajni Kothari's statement in an article published last year (1994).

The dalits' expectation and strategy seems to be designed to challenge the dominant castes by means of education, employment and special rights, in short, a struggle against the system that begins with challenging injustices within it, thinking of the struggle against imperialism and other such things as of second order importance. Or, as some of them would say, re-define the nature of imperialism in essentially social terms - both globally and locally.⁴⁴

V

During the past decade, an important start has been made in studying the history of what I have chosen to call the modern Dalit movement. Enough has been done now to recognize some major issues which all historians must face in seeking to give this movement its rightful place in modern Indian history. In this lecture, I have mentioned five and have tried to see how those issues are being framed. On some I have clearer views than on others. More issues will no doubt emerge as studies of this important subject continue, but these five seem unavoidable at present and do require the serious attention of historians, sociologists, political scientists and others who wish to understand both Dalit history and modern Indian history as well.

NOTES

1. Thompson, Edward and G.T. Garrett, *Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot. 1962), pp. 623, 631, 650. This is a reprint. The original edition was published in 1934 and was revised again following the Government of India Act of 1935.
2. Smith, Vincent A., *The Oxford History of India* (third edition edited by Percival Spear, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 835; P.E. Roberts, *History of British India under the Company and the Crown* (third edition completed by T.G.P. Spera) London: Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 652-653. Neither the Dalits nor Ambedkar find any place at all in Spear's more recent *A History of India: Volume Two* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).
3. O'Malley, L.S.S., "The Hindus Social System" in L.S.S. O'Malley, (ed.), *Modern India and the West: A Study of the Interaction of Their Civilizations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 374-381. This was originally published in 1941.
4. Brown, Judith M., *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, Second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
5. Majumdar, R.C., H.C. Raychaudhuri, and Kalikinkar Datta, *An Advanced History of India: Part III—Modern India* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1956), pp. 959-960.
6. Dodwell, H.H. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India: Volume VI—The Indian Empire 1858-1918*; with additional chapters on The Last Phase 1919-1947 by R.R. Sethi (Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1958), pp. 630-631, 685-686.
7. Majumdar, R.C., *The History and Culture of the Indian People: Struggle for Freedom* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), pp. 479, 494, 521, 639, 696, 731.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 1000-1012. See also pp. 523-525.
9. Chandra, Bipan, *Modern India: A Textbook of History for Secondary Schools* (New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1971), pp. 231-233.
10. Chandra, Bipan et. al., *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), pp. 291-295.
11. Sarkar, Sumit, *Modern India 1885-1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 56, 243, 328-330.

12. Her initial work was "Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement" (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969).
13. Many of these have been republished in *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).
14. Zelliott, Eleanor Mae, "Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement", Chapter 2 in her 1969 and 1992.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Kamble, J.R., *Rise and Awakening of Depressed Classes in India* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1979), p. xvii.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
18. Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
19. Gupta, S.K., *The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence as a Political Power* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985).
20. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
22. In this categorization the other major Depressed Class leader, M. C. Rajah, is a rather problematic figure because he seemed to switch back and forth between the two positions. I see his shifts as basically tactical in nature; what seems to have been constant was his loyalty to Hinduism within which he wanted his people an honorable place.
23. The phrase is Rajah's quoted in Atul Chandra Pradhan, *The Emergence of the Depressed Classes* (Bhubaneshwar: Bookland International, 1986), p. 244.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
25. Nath, Trilok, *Politics of the Depressed Classes* (Delhi: Deputy Publications, 1987).
26. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
27. Joshi, Barbara R., *Democracy in Search of Equality: Untouchable Politics and Indian Social Change* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1982).
28. Webster, John C.B., *The Dalit Christian: A History* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1992&1994). Future references will be to the Second edition. The American edition is *A History of Dalit Christians in India* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

22 *Towards Understanding the Modern Dalit Movement*

29. Mohan, P.E., *Scheduled Castes: History of Elevation, Tamil Nadu, 1900-1950* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1993).
30. This analysis is based on a survey of the first six volumes of the Sub-Altern Studies, all edited by Ranajit Guha and published by Oxford University Press in Delhi. The references cited above are to Gyan Pandey, "Rallying round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c. 1888-1917, Vol. II (1983), pp. 60-120; Arvind N. Das "Agrarian Change from Above and Below: Bihar 1947-78, in *ibid.*, pp. 180-227; David Arnold, "Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant, Action: Madras 18796-8," Vol. III (1984), pp. 62-115; and Gyanendra Pandey, "Encounters and Calamities: The History or a North Indian Qasba in the Nineteenth Century," *ibid.*, pp. 231-270.
31. Omvedt, Gail, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994).
32. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
36. Jogdand, Prahlad Gangaram, *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra*, (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1991).
37. Shetty, V.T. Rajshekar, *Dalit Movement in Karnataka* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978).
38. Hers is a distillation of a much longer chapter on 'The Anticaste Movement during the post-Independence Period' in her *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and The Socialist Tradition in India* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993).
39. E.g., Mendelsohn Oliver and Marika Vicziany, "The Untouchables Today," in Jim Masselos (ed.), *India: Creating a Modern Nation* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990), pp. 254-286. This was greatly expanded, with an historical introduction, in "The Untouchables," in Oliver Mendelsohn and Upendra Baxi (eds.), *The Rights of Subordinated Peoples* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 64-116. Most of it is devoted to poverty, discrimination and what is being done about them. The section on Dalit activism is entitled, "Failure of Untouchable Political Mobilization."
40. These may be found in Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements*

in India: A Review of the Literature (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990); T.K. Oommen, *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990); and Nandu Ram, *Beyond Ambedkar: Essays on Dalits in India* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1995).

41. Shah, Ghanshyam, *Social Movement in India: A Review of the Literature* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990); T.K. Oommen, *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990).
42. Oommen sees these movements crystallizing first against socio-cultural oppression (especially untouchability), then for political enfranchisement, and most recently against economic exploitation. Yet, he conceded not only that these could and did overlap but also that some movements combined all three elements. *Op. cit.*, pp. 256-257.
43. Ram, Nandu, *Beyond Ambedkar: Essays on Dalits in India* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1995), p. 31.
44. Kothari, Rajni, "Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 June 1994, p. 1592.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jonh C.B. Webster, after completing his studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York (USA), Lucknow University (India) and Pennsylvania University (USA), taught history at Baring Union Christian College, Batala and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (Punjab) as well as United Theological College, Bangalore (Karnataka) for nearly two decades. Then he opted for free-lance research. He has about a dozen books on his credit, mostly on the Dalits including *Dalit Christians*, *Religion as liberating factor*, *Church and women*, *History of Contemporary India*, etc. Besides, he also publishes *International Dalit Newsletter* which has worldwide circulation.