

The Dalit Panther's first leap

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Participant of the Dalit Panther movement in the 70s, Sunil Dighe reminisces here about its hopes and failure. The movement would have been 40 today.

Each nation has its share of movements but some movements are such that they compel society to give a thought to their calls and demands. They have long-term effects. The Dalit Panther was one such thrilling and stormy movement.

In 1972, a small news item appeared in 'Nava Kaal'. Leading Dalit writers were about to come together in a classroom to discuss the ineffective leadership in the Republican Party and find an alternative answer to it.

Litterateurs like Raja Dhale, J V Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Avinash Mahatekar, Latif Khatik as well as Baburao Bagul and Bhai Sangare were going to attend the discussion. The approved agenda of discussion was the then Republican Party's submissive stand on the question of Dalits and their leadership wagging its tail before the Congress Party.

Raja Dhale, a fine writer and poet, ran a newsletter using new methods. Its name was 'Vidroh' (rebellion). In 'Vidroh', his articles, poems, thought-provoking and shocking caricatures shot to fame. Namdev had slowly started gaining fame as a poet.

The atrocities committed against Dalits across the country and in Maharashtra at the time were the root of all these movements and the RPI, Congress, poets and others in Opposition were not ready to take any concrete measures to stand up against oppression. It is then the assembled members decided to form an organisation for self-defence and to take on the dominance of the Brahminical ideology. The movement was to be on the lines of the Black Panther movement that challenged the supremacy of the whites.

The Dalit Panther. What was surprising is that even earlier, to a certain extent, 'shudras' were described as Dalits. But this time, the word Dalit was used with a broader perspective. Everyone had taken notice of the organisation and this was the first leap of the Dalit Panther. The founders were grappling with humble lifestyles or abject poverty. Rebellion was in the voice. But they executed it in their actions.

The country had completed 25 years of independence and then, in 1972, Raja Dhale wrote a fiery piece in 'Sadhana', a weekly. In a country where the poor could not live, in Kalivenmani (Tamil Nadu) where 42 landless farmers were killed by landlords and in several villages in Maharashtra where women were paraded naked, Dhale's article gained popularity as an expression of anger against atrocities. The article questioned the sanctity of the tri-colour in a country that could not protect the dignity of Dalit women.

The article caused an earthquake, especially among the youth and progressive thinkers of the time. Namdev Dhasal lived then in a red light area in Mumbai, and like him Dalits were forced to live in ostracised settlements outside the city. His father was a butcher by profession and brought home a measly daily wage and the leftovers of mutton and kheema.

That is how Namdev's Golpitha was born. Most Dalit writers and poets lived in slums and settlements from Matunga labour camp to Mazgaon Khadda, Saat Rasta, BDD chawls etc. At such a time, those taking pride in the 25 years of Independence were shocked by Dhale's unhappy reactions to the tri-colour.

The question of real Independence was raised by the Dalit Panther first and there began the story of 'Vetaal Panchvishi'.

It was impossible for king Vikram to answer these questions, and similarly, even today it is impossible for the common man to find those answers. In the tornado-like formative years of the Panther, the first public protest was challenging. A rebellious protest was organised to condemn the police's attack on Raja Dhale after a fiery speech he delivered in Worli.

The winds of election were blowing. But this protest march was of a different kind. There were prohibition orders against assemblies and public meetings. But the radical protest was carried out in Bhoiwada in support of Dhale.

About 20,000 Dalits came together from bylanes of chawls and the narrow spaces between buildings like mice would spring out of burrows. With aggressive announcements and in violation of prohibition orders, the protest carried on. The mob was lathi-charged. But the scars of the lathi injuries were automatically left on the entire Dalit population. Later in Worli, some anti-social elements deliberately fuelled riots.

In its formative years, the Panther's first morcha was quite instigating. The morcha was held in the Bhoiwada-Parel area with a view to support a speech delivered by Worli's king Dhasal and to oppose the police's brutal attack on him. At the time, the elections were round the corner and this morcha came across as a very different kind. There was a ban on meetings and congregations at that time. Even under such conditions, just to oppose the police, nearly 20,000 men and women from the Dalit community came out from the middle of chawls and their two buildings.

The morcha started amid aggressive announcements despite the ban. There was lathi-charge. The lathis struck the very fabric of Dalit society. In the coming days, powers deliberately created riot-like situations in Worli. A fight was sparked between two sects in the chawls of Worli.

For the very first time, a Lok-Aayog (people's commission) was established and Admiral Nilopher Bhagwat drafted a report recording reasons and placing appropriate responsibility for the death of 11 Dalits in firing. The Dalit Panther gave new meaning to the word Dalit, and the movement spread to the lowest societal strata across all states. The Panther not only attracted youth, but also prompted them to think for their own. Due to proclamations made by the Panther in rallies, it became a habit to address root issues.

A book penned by Avinash Mahatekar on the Panther's lethal strike had gained popularity -- titled 'Arise hungry Dalits for striking corrupt economy'. The Panther called out to the hungry and deprived Dalits and taught them to live a life of dignity with a righteous stance. There was widespread dissatisfaction due to the all-round drought of 1967, the rising unemployment on the back of the failure of the five-year plan and the shocking report of the Lok Sabha appointed Ilaya Perumal committee on the torture inflicted on Dalits.

In 1972, there was severe drought across Maharashtra. To ensure the dissatisfaction did not erupt, the employment guarantee scheme was introduced as a medicine to keep the population calm. Dalit labour was used across the state to dig roads. Dalit youth thronged cities such as Mumbai, Nashik, Pune and other urban sprawls.

Most of them aligned themselves under the Panther's flag and created their shelters. They earned their right to live. This was a major impact of the Panther's movement. Just as growing public declarations, these small movements also gained strength.

Locked in a room at the Siddharth hostel for two days, the King, Namdeo and I had intense discussions and prepared the public declarations. It took some time for these demands to take effect, but a 100-point roster system was introduced by the state. First, the question was how to fill seats.

But the established higher classes, in the initial phase, used the roster to make sure that Dalits did not get their reserved seats. The situation changed a bit later. Today, reserved seats have become invisible due to privatisation everywhere, with the public sector being almost nonexistent. Bureaucracy also swallows the reserved seats on the roster.

There were many youth in the Dalit community who took advantage of the roster. But they never showed the initiative and courage to make proper use of reserved seats and study hard. The Dalit Panther movement affected not only Dalit men, but also Dalit women and people from other neighbouring communities to a great extent.

The movement only got three years to be conducted openly. But then, the Emergency was imposed. The Panther was the first to oppose the Emergency. Youth from all

communities came together to oppose it. Besides, a large faction of the Panther's leadership backed Jayprakash Narayan's movement.

There had already been controversy over who was a hardcore communist, after the Panther took part in a mill workers' protest. And this is where a rift started forming in the Panther leadership. Society was in need of leaders and organisations that would fearlessly solve its issues, but with time, even that started receding.

The leadership of the Dalit movement was formed on its own by people from poor areas and those staying in chawls and slums. Every branch came to be alternatively known as a 'camp'. Speeches at gatherings would always be made with the objective of encouraging participation by the society, regardless of whether ten people were in attendance or ten thousand. Respect would be paid to leaders like Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj and other social activists and revolutionaries at the beginning of these speeches.

The movement stood on its feet on its own, without submitting to anyone's leadership. This astonished everyone, including the leftist parties. People were as much affected by rebellious literature as they were by the global environment, the students' uprising in Paris, the Vietnam war and the cultural revolution in China. Women participated in the movement in large numbers.

The chief reason behind this was that that most atrocities were committed on Dalit women. Young Dalit men started standing up for their protection armed with sticks and bicycle chains.

They did not restrict themselves to giving public speeches against inhuman practices like human sacrifice and nude parading of women in villages, but went to villages and confronted the perpetrators. This style of giving it back showed a new path as compared to the existing tradition of staging morchas and calling for bandhs.

Later on, in election-oriented politics, the Panther's influence started shrinking. During the Lok Sabha elections, 20,000 voters from Worli staged a boycott in order to protest atrocities on Dalits, and the ruling government understood the political meaning of this.

Even if the Panther was not seen as an active organisation, the Dalits put up a fight during the riots in Marathwada region. The Panther movement, which had awakened and alerted all youth from the community and had opposed the Emergency, had shaken those in power at that time.

The riots were organised deliberately and houses and property of Dalits were destroyed. Due to these protests, people demanded homes, demanded the change of names of places and institutes. The protests were intense but not violent.

Surprisingly, the community today feels it still need an organisation such as the Dalit Panther. Even today, the Dalit youth look at the agenda published by Panther with a very scholastic view.

They advocate challenging the stronghold of the Brahmins and capitalists. Even today, a large number of people from the Dalit community say that though the reservation policy was introduced and framed by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Constitution, the actual implementation was started due to efforts of the Dalit Panther.

The leadership that has just emerged from an urban society does not continue for a longer period of time. However, the case of Dr Ambedkar was exceptional, who educated and awakened Dalit people belonging to urban and rural areas and taught them to struggle for their rights, What common people achieved and what they lost post Indian Independence is reflected s a little bit in the Panther movement.

The panther movement has taught the common people of the community to live their lives with self-respect, leaving behind their political helplessness. However, they received a huge setback during the movement from 1970 to 1980.

Still the leadership of that decade cannot be fully blamed for the failure at that time. There was an immediate need to combat these extreme and aggressive situations. Globally, this scenario is evident in every nation. The leadership should learn a lesson from the movement's failure. A powerful organisation and a meeting of flexible and ubiquitous thoughts is the need

of the hour.