

Working Class Neighborhoods in Bombay and the Rise of Assertive Dalit Politics in the 1930s

In Western India, Bombay has been the epicenter of Dalit politics for long period of time. Although Dalits from other urban and rural areas from the western region had contributed in the upsurge against untouchability and caste, the role played by the Bombay Dalits was immensely significant in the colonial Dalit movement. This paper will explore the nature of Dalit activism in the working class neighborhoods and its concomitant impact on the Dalit politics in the decade of the 1930s. The role played by the Bombay Dalits during this decade was significant because they had been in the forefront in influencing the Dalit discourse on caste and class. Besides, they also helped to install an electorally successful political outfit, the Independent Labor Party (ILP). The ILP was founded by Ambedkar in 1936 and immediately it went on to become one of the significant political parties during the 1937 elections in Western India. The majority of the seats the ILP occupied in the Bombay legislature came from the Konkan region (which also includes Bombay city). This paper argues that the political success of the ILP in the Bombay city and the Konkan region was significantly contributed by the politically conscious Dalit working class neighborhoods. In the 1930s, the role of the Dalits in the working class neighborhood became increasingly decisive due to their relatively better social mobility than the rural Dalits. The Dalits from the working class neighborhoods of Bombay played an important role in the activism of the Dalit industrial working classes as well as in the agitations against the Khoti system in the Konkan region. This paper will primarily rely on rare pamphlets and the journalistic writings of *Janata*, the mouthpiece of Ambedkarite movement. This paper will also explore as to how the political consciousness of Dalits was shaped and nurtured in the working class neighborhoods during the 1930s. *Janata* not only played an important role as a catalyst by articulating the grievances of Dalits but also it helped to mobilize these Dalits by providing an articulation for their quest to organize and agitate. This paper points out that the larger political developments in India, such as the constitutional deliberations at the Round Table Conference at the background, had greatly affected the mass activism of Dalits in the working class neighborhoods of Bombay city. But most significantly, it was also during this period of activism that Dalit articulations on “class” attained fine clarity vis-à-vis caste and untouchability. The paper would focus on how the working class neighborhood activism reflected these articulations in their everyday politics.