

INTERVIEW

'Need For Ideological Ambedkarism': Union Minister Ramdas Athawale On Dalit Panthers

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Voice of the Dalits: Ramdas Athavale addressing a rally in Shivaji Park, Mumbai Photo: Getty Images

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A Dalit Panthers cadre from Maharashtra, Ramdas Athawale, was closely associated with the formation of the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers and then became the president of the Republican Party of India (A). Today, he is the minister of social justice and empowerment in the Union government. He spoke to Suraj Yengde.

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Tell me about your memories of Dalit Panthers.

I did my schooling in the Sangli district. I came to Mumbai to study at the Siddharth College. There I stayed with my uncle who was in the police. When I joined the hostel, I met Raja Dhale, a Dalit rights activist and one of the founders of Dalit Panthers. I joined the Dalit Panthers later.

Ever since I was a child, I had a knack for fighting against injustice. If a Maratha boy taunted me, I would go after him. I had an attitude to not bother anyone, but if anyone committed an injustice then I would not tolerate it. When I was at Siddharth College, I got introduced to the stalwarts of the Dalit movement—Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, J V Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Umakant Randhir and Arun Kamble. Dhale trusted me so much that he would take me around wherever he went to deliver speeches. We were very close. Whenever leaders from Maharashtra and outside would call on him, he would also introduce me to them.

The differences between Dhale and Dhasal came to light in 1974. Dhale said that the “Dalit Panthers Manifesto” was written by Sunil Dighe, a Left activist. This manifesto was broad, but people said it had communist connotations. It is true that the manifesto was drafted under the influence of the communists, but the viewpoint of Ambedkar’s thought of a classless and casteless society was important. Ambedkar always wanted to expand his movement by bringing all the caste people together.

I do not agree that Dhasal was a communist. He came from the socialist movement, but he had good relations with the communists. If you read his poetry, it is about Dalits and resistance. Thus, within the Panthers, Dhale and Dhasal

had their own groups. But eventually, Dhale thought that the Panther was known because of him. The article in Sadhana (Black Independence Day 15 August 1972) made the Panthers famous. It sent a message that the youth was ready to fight against injustice.

Within two years, Dalit Panthers was known across the world, like the Black Panthers of the US. It became widely known that the Dalit Panthers were fighting against injustice. Many researchers from Germany, France, USA and the UK came to India to study the Dalit Panthers. The most vibrant era of the Panthers was between 1972 and 1974.

In 1974, after the Dhale-Dhasal split, many like me went with Dhale. But in 1977, Dhale dismissed the committee of the Dalit Panthers without holding any meetings. I was one of those who remained silent. Then I met many people like Dayanand Mhaske, Ramesh Yengde, Ashok Bacchav, Gangadhar Gade, S M Pradhan, Pritamkumar Shegaonkar, Suresh Sawant and we discussed about this sudden decision.

We convened a meeting in Aurangabad on April 10, 1977 and declared Arun Kamble as the leader, Gangadhar Gade as general secretary and I became the organiser of the Bharatiya Dalit Panther (BDP). The leaders of Panthers joined us and 99.9 per cent of them were young people.

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Even though it was known as BDP, the outside world identified it as the Athawale group. Though the BDP had a number of people from the literary world, we needed field actors too. Thus, I started working as a “fieldworker”. People began noticing; they established the chhavni (garrison); and, invited me. More than the previous version of Panthers, we were spreading fast. I would visit these places on a train on an unreserved seat.

We took a stand on various issues—Namantar movement, Gairaan (wasteland), unemployment and the Mandal commission. We were known for the rallies during the Namantar movement. One of the very kind activists who had the knack for making friends, S M Pradhan, hailed from Nanded. He brought a train load of people to Nanded for a morcha. He trusted in my leadership. We also got the support of Mai Saheb (Savita) Ambedkar in the later years. She accompanied us to various conferences. She never wiped off her red vermilion to connote that her husband was immortal (amar) and did not practice the Hindu religion.

BDP was active in 17 states. Yet, there were problems. The Republican Unity Conference was held on December 6, 1989. It was decided by the leaders of other Dalit organisations to dismantle their own organisations for the sake of unity. I was not in favour of BDP being dismantled. Jogendra Kawade said that since he is dismantling his “Dalit Mukti Sena”, we too should dismantle our group and join the Republican Party of India (RPI). The community feeling was tilted towards unity of the Republican leaders, so keeping that view in mind I sadly dismantled the BDP. Then we joined the Republican Unity.

There were conflicts on the position and direction of the unity—23 voted in favour of the Congress and 11 for the Janata Party. I advised Prakash Ambedkar and R S Gawai to join the Congress. I declared my support for the Congress. I wasn't interested in any ministerial portfolio. But everyone thought I should be a minister. I felt that if our United RPI had backed the Congress government, we could demand for 25-30 per cent share in the government formation.

You said you were not interested in a ministerial berth?

People from a range of backgrounds—journalists, friends, activists and leaders such as Namdeo Dhasal and Bhai Sangare (who were with us then)—insisted that if I became a minister, the environment for Dalit politics would become favourable. Gangadhar Gade was interested, but the weight of support was behind me, so I became a minister. People also felt differently happy. I would address rallies of 20,000-50,000. After Ambedkar, his RPI had a minister. That ministerial berth gave people energy. They would populate Mantralaya (secretariat) because they found that one of them had become a minister. I would solve people's problems. I would write letters; make calls. And whenever I would visit districts, I would order the officers to solve the issues.

We also made demands for OBC reservation during the Namantar movement, slum regularisation, pucca houses and took up issues like unemployment. That's why the people began to identify themselves with the Panthers. Some people would also be terrorised after hearing the name of the Panthers.

Why were people afraid?

That's because the Panthers would take action immediately. However, whenever I would address a meeting, I would convey to the people that my aim was to create harmony between people, to develop the villages and to advocate the philosophy of Ambedkar and Shivaji Maharaj. We are all one, even if our castes are different. Ambedkar's movement was not caste-bound, it was for everybody. His movement was for the unity of the working class, the labourers and the landless labourer.

Suppose you were not a minister, what would you do?

Becoming a minister is not like becoming a big person. I would have continued to be the president of the party and like Bal Thackeray, I would run the party. People accepted me as their leader. The mass movement is important. If I would have made anyone a minister, they would not disobey me.

What about Arun Kamble, the leader of BDP?

Arun Kamble acted independently. He met Vasantdada Patil, the then CM, and it was announced that the government would support the Dr Ambedkar Vishwa Vidyapeeth (Dr Ambedkar International University), but give up on the issue of Namantar. Following this, Arun Kamble left us and joined the Janata Party.

You are the most successful person among the Panthers. From a grassroots organiser, you became a central minister.

That is correct. Ambedkar's movement was to make us ruling class. He had said in one of his speeches that go and write on the walls of your houses that you want to become the rulers of this country. Barring the recent experience of the BJP, it is not really possible for any one party to come to power on its own. That's why without forging alliances we cannot come to power. I have not made alliances for myself. There are many who criticise me for this. I am not bothered with these criticisms. I am a true follower of Ambedkar. I am taking practical Ambedkarism ahead, which will take us towards power. Certainly, there is a strong need for ideological Ambedkarism. For these ideas to be implemented we need fieldworkers, and I am one of them.

"Whichever party I align with, they come to power. But parallel movements are important and they should organise and fight against injustice."

Whichever party I align with, they come to power. When they come to power, they give us share in the government. While this is important, it is also equally important to have parallel movements. These movements should organise and fight against injustice. Being in the government should not dissuade us from fighting for justice. I am happy to be in the government due to everyone's blessings.

The experiment of Shiv Shakti-Bhim Shakti was an outcome of meetings across Maharashtra with thinkers, writers, activists, journalists, who advised me that we ought to take strong positions in politics. Leading thinkers such as Gangadhar Pantawane, Bhau Vaman Ovhal and others advised me to go along with the BJP-Shiv Sena. Even though I have gone there, I am still a strong Ambedkarite, blue flag-bearing person. I have his constitution in my hand. My opinion is that India should stand according to the constitution.

What about the future of the Panthers?

We're thinking of restarting the Panthers.

What was it that attracted you towards Dhale?

Dhale was an Ambedkarite-Buddhist thinker. We were trained under his guidance. I also had a good relationship with Dhasal. He continued to be identified with his Dalit Panthers while I was identified with the BDP, which was well-known nationally. No doubt, Dhasal was a bigger leader than me. I honoured him. But as a mass worker and fieldworker, I travelled to small towns, areas, colonies and started chhavanis.

It is said that local dons were part of the Panthers?

They joined us not as dons, but as Panthers and were given responsibilities. The people were a terror on the streets. But once they joined us, I transformed them.

What was the attraction of such folks towards the Panthers?

They were naturally attracted because they were from the community and due to the Ambedkarite movement. Those who were part of gangs would come to me and seek protection to improve their lives. I would speak with the police and mainstream their lives.

(This appeared in the print as 'Need For Ideological Ambedkarism')

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