



THE DISPERSION OF CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF DALIT IDENTITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

In Indian society, the caste system has been prevalent since time immemorial. Historians opine that the invader Aryans were the predecessors of today's Brahmins. They had created Vedas, Shastras and Shrutis to formulate and control the social system. According to the various scriptures, Brahmins are the sacred creation on the earth. Therefore, they hold power over everything, whereas the Shudras or Dalits are the most negligible creation among human being. They are a group of individuals in India who have historically been considered untouchables, isolated from the rest of society by the caste system. The word Dalit comes from the Sanskrit word 'dal,' which means cracked, oppressed, underprivileged, broken, crushed, and destroyed. This paper is an attempt to pen down the dispersion of caste and untouchability in the context of Dalit identity in India.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Immemorial, Brahmins, Shastras, Shrutis, Negligible, Dalit, Dispersion, Untouchability, Identity

INTRODUCTION

The term Dalit refers to those who were once referred to as "untouchables." In different sections of the country, Dalits are referred to as Outcastes, Exterior-castes, Depressed Classes, Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables, Padadalit, Chandals, Avarna, and so on. Dalits were never comfortable with these created social identities and hence fought them. and the term Dalit is an outcome of these protests. "To assert their aboriginal lineage they adopted the appellations of Adi-Hindu, Adi- Dravida, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka, etc. in the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century" (Vivek Kumar 11). They are termed, as 'outcaste' as the architects of social system do not permit their inclusion in the fourfold graded caste structure of Indian society. They remain at the lowest rank of Indian society. The term 'Dalit' is defined in various ways by the scholars. According to Government of India Act 1935, Dalits are: Who occupy a low position in the Hindu social structure; their representation in government services is inadequate; they are inadequately



represented in the fields of trade, commerce and industry; they suffer from social and physical isolation from the rest of the community; and there is a general lack of educational development amongst the major section of this community.

Pathetic Notion of Dalits:

Literally, Dalit are the masses who have been oppressed and exploited socially, politically and culturally in the name of religion, God, Goddess, rebirth, paradise and other factors. Thus, Dalit represents a marginal section of society that is denied access to the worldly affairs. Indian constitution designates Dalits as 'Scheduled Castes'. Sohanpal Sumanakshar, a researcher, writes of Dalits as the ones "who have been deprived of human rights over the ages, who in the name of religion and *Manusmriti* have been forced by vested interests to accept false and barbaric values".

Dalits are forced into the derogatory and odd jobs because of their descent. They are forced to work as lowly labourers, landless farm workers and peasants, and pushed into various other livelihoods such as, beating drums, washing clothes, cutting hair, burning dead bodies etc. All these menial works are expected of them as a part of their caste based role in society. Caste is a determining factor of traditional position in Hindu society. Due to their traditional location in society, Dalits are deprived of the entrance to temples and other religious spaces or have to use "separate wells or are not allowed to sit inside a school, house but have to remain outside or which suffer similar social disabilities" (Michael 12). Horrible punishments are prescribed for Dalits who dare to read or listen religious books. Even in twenty first century it is very tough to find a Vedic teacher who will be very easily ready to search a bright student from lower caste families to teach sacred texts and will permit to join any place of worship in service of God.

There is no escape for Dalits from this fate in rural and semi-urban Hindu society where caste system rules the roots. On the basis of this status they were made to bear extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries that made them almost lose their humanness. Aravind Malagatti, a well-known Dalit writer and critic, opines:

The people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries, unable to live in the society of human beings have been living outside the village



depending on lower level of occupation, and unable to spell out their names, lived as 'untouchable', are regarded as Dalit.

Social Status of Dalit in the light Castism:

The word Dalit is synonymous for depressed classes. Apparently it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'Depressed classes', the term British used for what are now called the scheduled castes mainly. Today also it is used in the same sense in the context of Indian society. In Indian society, caste is forced upon as an identity determinant rather than religion or class. Social stigma and a variety of disabilities are based on caste, and to a significant degree, are the defining characteristics of a Dalit, even if a Dalit moves up in social class or changes religion. Their condition is very different from economically poor person. An economically poor person cannot entertain the privileges of financially able one but that individual is not deprived of cultural, social participation. The penniless upper caste people are not forced to live in excluded ghettos outside of village. Contrary to it, Dalits face the exclusion from the above mentioned three spheres. A Marathi Professor Gangadhar Pantawane gives one of the best definitions of the term:

Dalit is not just a caste, Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanness. He rejects existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited man in his country.

Their social status forced them to bear different sort of adversities. The hardships they faced were in different forms, which resulted in almost a complete loss of their humanness. Today the term "Dalit" is in use and its meaning can be deciphered in a much broader context. It includes all the backward castes, oppressed classes, such as Neo-Buddhists, tribes, landless agricultural and industrial workers, women and all those are exploited in society.

Brief History of Untouchability:

Limbale defines: Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits. The term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, Landless farm-tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included.



Division of society into various groups is a common feature in all human societies. Traditional pattern of stratification of Indian society has certain unique and pervasive features that are rooted in past. Indian society is divided into four fold Varna system that interlinks to the theory of caste system as it is rooted in Varna division. It has a long, complex and multi-layered history. Caste system contains thousands of castes with their own customs, traditions and rules but Varnas were four in number. The thousands of castes are positioned in one Varna out of four in an order which cannot be altered.

The term Varna is derived from Sanskrit language which means to cover up, count, classify, consider etc. The word "Varna" in Hindu Vedic texts denotes the skin colour that became a central feature of later caste system. This Varna system came into existence during Vedic era and classified society into different groups. It was based on `karma`. It was flexible as there was chance to change the occupation. Thus, one had opportunity to shift into another by changing occupation but later it became rigid and occupation became permanent with the development. Later on in *Dharam Sastras* the concept of purity and impurity or pollution emerged.

The notion of purity and pollution complicated the behaviour of caste group and their status. "The chief principle upon which the entire caste system depends is that of purity and pollution" (Stevenson 3). It is an age old issue which persists even today in similar form. The word caste originated from Spanish and Portuguese where word `casta` means race and lineage. But in European countries it was not used in the way as in India. Gail Omvedt, sociologist, writer and human rights activist, makes an argument based on the different perspective that of coalition of religion and state, that "Indian 'caste feudalism' was consolidated through an alliance of Brahmanism and state power. Colonial rule used this caste structure, transformed it and to a large extent strengthened it to its own benefit" (138).

Marriage in Caste Based Society:

A marriage within caste group was the characteristic of endogamous group. Marrying outside caste group was a taboo. Indian society is considered closed society due to the caste-based division. Caste defines the status of person he is born into. Edmund Burke defines caste as "the laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour, are all



united and consolidated in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called his caste” (302). Caste as an independent self-unit; decides the social status of an individual without any modification in religious sanctions. It is very easy to identify the caste of a particular individual with their name, surname, occupation, settlement, garments etc. In rural parts of India it rules the roots where it is very difficult to hide due to its hereditary nature. Generally in rural areas people strictly follow caste system than urban. Nowadays the intermingling of various castes could be seen in towns. On the other hand in rural areas there is discrimination on caste base and untouchability is practiced. It is because caste identity is mostly not revealed or modified to escape such insulting behaviour but in rural parts people know each other where there is no scope to escape using different titles. Sometimes violent conflicts occur due to caste tension in both countryside and urban parts of country.

Parents transfer the titles of the particular caste, they belong to their next generation. For more than twenty centuries initially varnas and later castes ruled the Hindu religion and society and it denied the right to live as a human being. Social structure in rural areas is relatively static and inflexible in nature. Thus, caste system still continues because of the undynamic nature of the society that makes available the favourable circumstances for its existence. The four major varnas or castes are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. It has long history and possesses central position in Indian civilisation. The first references are found in Holy Scriptures as *Rig Veda* one of *Vedas* that are considered the source of wisdom. The fourfold stratification is legitimised in ancient textbooks. The primeval myth is that of the Purushasukta hymn of *Rig Veda* in which the four orders of society emerge from four parts of the great sacrificed *Purusha*.

Dalits belonged to those castes of Hindu religion that were involved in polluting inherent occupations. Pursuing the unspecified jobs were not permitted. as the son of an agricultural worker would continue the same job, sweepers son would do sweeping and son of smith would carry on the job of prescribed to community. The caste based division of occupations was to satisfy the needs of society. Caste system is considered the division of different labour primarily of four main categories but Ambedkar viewed it not merely the division of labour but of labourers and medium of imposing the endogamy. He states



“Caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. As an economic organisation caste is therefore harmful institution, in as much as it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules” (*The Untouchables* 37). Caste system has given birth to many social evils from ancient times to modern age. Traditional division remains unamended from a long time. There is hardly any rationale in the justification for its continuation. Most of the time it is claimed that stratification of society into varna was established for social equilibrium, stability and harmony. But contrary to it Narendra Jadhav, a prominent contemporary Dalit voice considers divisive caste system “the most brilliantly administered scam in history.

CONCLUSION:

But it is a matter of great discontent that the Brahmin social reformers and the political leaders of India have not awakened any conscience for such inhuman practices. Hence, still today Dalits have been victimized and exploited as sweepers, toilet cleaner, laborers and so on for periods of time. Therefore, contemporary activities want to draw a new map similar to Babasaheb Ambedkar, a pioneer of social reformer, about India which will not be divided on the basis of caste, religion and economy. But his pen is unable to draw the new map. Still today the condition of marginalized subaltern community has not been up to the mark. Now the time has come to give their voices, identities and rights back and accept them as human being. Only then it will be possible to touch the ‘happy isle’ of Ulysses.

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