



## DALITS IN INDIA: IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CASTE SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the trend of continuity and change in caste system in India. The paper highlights the centripetal and centrifugal forces, which have been playing a significant role to operate this traditional concept of social hierarchy. The paper's main focus of the points is meaning of the term Dalit and its historic past. It also includes the factors which have been playing a significant and vital role for its continuity and change in different contemporary societies in India.*

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## INTRODUCTION

At all times and in every society there are certain disadvantaged groups. They lag behind the mainstream of the society due to one reason or the other. In Indian context, '*dalits*' constitute one such group. The *dalits*, which is a social group peculiar to India, lagged behind the rest of the society in several respects since ages. They have been discriminated in several respects and were meted out, in several cases, even inhuman treatment, by the rest of the society particularly the socially advanced groups. They have been poor, deprived of basic human rights and treated as social inferiors in the society.

## THE CASTE SYSTEM AND THE DALITS

The caste system or *varna-vayavastha*, which has dominated Indian society for over 3000 years, was developed by Brahmins (Hindu priests) to maintain their superiority over less educated, less skilled and lower castes. Over the time, caste system was formalized into four distinct social groups called castes or *varnas*, which was organized in hierarchical manner. At the top of the social hierarchy were the *brahmins*, who were considered arbiters in the matters of learning, teaching and religion. Next in the line of hierarchy have been the *kshatriyas* who were warriors and administrators. The third and fourth in the social hierarchy have been the *vaisyas* who constituted the commercial class and the *sudras* who have been the farmers and peasants, respectively. The four castes are socially and religiously important because they are said to have divine origin.

Outside the *varna* system, there is a fifth group called *dalits*, who were prevented from doing any but the most menial jobs and were untouchable for the rest of the castes. They have been certain primitives, criminals, defeated and degraded people. *Dalits* were referred to as *panchamas* or people of fifth order. The *dalits* were also called as *pulkasas* and *chandalas* engaged in polluting work such as sweeping and were believed to be the illegitimate children of *sudra* fathers and *brahmin* mothers. The *chandalas* were the most despised of the Hindu society. They were not allowed to live within the walls of the town. The *pulkasas* like *chandalas* were also despised people. They were excluded from the category of castes. In the *Dharam Shastra* the occupation of a *chandalas* is to carry the dead bodies of men and animals and to



execute criminals. While crises of temporary untouchability occurred in the lifecycle of all castes, the Scheduled Castes were born as untouchables, they lived in untouchability and died as untouchable. The *dalits* in present context in India are referred to as the Scheduled Castes.

Initially, the Rigvedic *varna* system in the first instance was labour division, i.e., this social classification was on the basis of the work performed by an individual. *Brahmins* or priests were just like Bureaucrats of today. They were the virtually powerful. The *kshatriyas* or warriors were the military personnel and the rulers. The *vaishyas* were merchants and cultivators, while the *sudras* were menials and labours. But this classification soon became rigid and degenerated and gradually the caste of a person was determined on the basis of lineage.

The doctrine of inequality is core at the heart of the caste system. Dalits are outcastes or people who fell outside the four fold caste system. As a system of social, economic and religions governance, the rigid caste system based on lineage of an individual was not founded on the principle of equality, liberty or fraternity, but on the principle of inequality in every sphere of life. The social, religious, cultural and economic rights of the person belonging to a particular caste are predetermined on the basis of his or her birth and are thus hereditary; they are not subject to change after the birth of a person.

### **MEANING OF THE TERM DALIT**

According to Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary (1975), the meaning of *dalit* is ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally. *Dalit* is not a caste in India. Dalit is a man exploited by rituals and upper castes. It means burst, split, broken, downtrodden, scattered, crushed and destroyed. In popular parlance *dalit* refers to ex-untouchable population of India. In legal terminology in India, a *dalit* is a person who belongs to the castes identified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The term *dalits* has under gone many changes and each time it appears with new nomenclature. The Hindu doctrine of creation exemplified in *chaturanana* scheme of social stratification does not clearly account for the origin of the untouchables. As discussed above, those who were below or outside the four *varnas* were called as *panchams*. In the later Vedic period they were referred as *chandalas* and



*pulkasas*. According to *Baudayana Dharm Sutra*, a *chandala* is an offspring of *sudra* father and *brahmin* mother. These *chandalas* do not denote one single homogeneous class, but offsprings of five different varieties. The term *antyaaja*, *aniyavasin*, *asuras*, *dasas* or *dasyas* and *raksasa* was used over the period of time.

The term was initially coined by Narsi Mehta, a Bhakti era poet to refer to the children of *devadasis* (female temple dancers). Symbolically speaking, they were children of God in that the *devadasis* were dedicated to the service of God and sexual union between the agents and servants of God was mystified and even invested with an aura of divinity. Perhaps the last saint poet in this stream was Narsi Mehta a Gujarati, who coined the term Harijan. The term Harijan literally means 'children of God.' By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the term 'depressed classes' was introduced by the British administration to refer to the untouchables and tribes.

The Government of India Act, 1935 introduced the term Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to replace the earlier composite term depressed classes used for these categories. Mahatma Gandhi invoked the term "Harijan" in a different sense a word intended to express his compassion and meant to be ennobling. But it was totally rejected by conscious untouchables and wondered why they had been signed out as 'children of God?' In this terminology *dalits* perceived another attempt to subtle segregation from the rest of society. But Ambedkar, the most outstanding leader of the Scheduled Castes in modern times, rejected it outright and insisted that these people be referred to as 'untouchables' so as to avoid the obfuscation of reality.

The last and the current label used by Scheduled Castes to define themselves is *dalit*, the oppressed. The basic characteristic features of the *dalits* in India are: A recent coinage, it came into vogue in the 1970s in Maharashtra with the formation of a political party that called itself the Dalit Panthers. Although the Dalit identity crystallized first in Maharashtra, it spread quickly, gaining wide currency, and it is now used all over India. They are stigmatized people and poverty is their constant companion; segregated by the society marginalized by the polity, oppressed by the power mongers. Act of brutality and terror continue to be part of the atrocities perpetuated on *dalits*.



Thus, it can be said that *dalit* is not the name of any traditional caste; rather it is a social group which has been deprived of the rights which other sections of society enjoyed. People belonging to this group worked as manual scavengers, clearing away dead animals and doing other such works. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual who performed them and this pollution is considered to be contagious. As a result, *dalits* were commonly banned and segregated from the rest of the society.

### **HISTORICAL POSITION**

During the Vedic times, when the caste system was not defined on the basis of birth rather on the basis of the occupation pursued by an individual, the position of the *dalits* was not pathetic. However, their position started deteriorating when the caste of a person was determined on the basis of lineage. The *Dharam Shastras* and the Epics mention the *nishada*, *chandala*, *pulkasas* as degraded ones. The outcaste people were mainly bounded labourers and could do only menial jobs. They were denied access to temples, wells and schools. Manu's work is full of inhuman codification of caste rules. He supported the supremacy of *brahmins* and other dominating communities and fully condemned the Non-Arya *sudras* and *chandalas*. Hence the position of *chandalas* was very critical at that time. *chandalas* could not live in the villages, they could perform the menial and unskilled labour particularly the ritually unclean works. So they were out of the Hindu caste system cut off from the rest of the society. Chinese pilgrim Fahien, a contemporary of Chandra Gupta-II, visited and lived in India between 405 A.D. and 411 A.D. He stated that *chandalas* lived apart from others, in separate quarter. The other Chinese traveler Yuan Chaug, who visited India in 629 A.D., reiterated that "these people were forced to live outside the city." In Buddha and Mahavira, period the condition of the *dalits* was not worse. Both Buddha and Mahavira admitted untouchables in their administration and social order, during their life time they condemned caste system.

By the time of medieval period, the practice of untouchability had set in. In the beginning of the eleventh century Al-Brunie visited India and left some valuable accounts of the life of the people during that period. He said that *sudras* followed



by a section of people, *antyaja* or *achhut* were engaged in eight varieties of crafts and trades. Those were sailor, fisherman, juggler, basket maker, weaver, shoemakers and hunter of birds and wild animals.

During thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Hindu religion was promoted at high-level. During this period, the condition of *dalits* was not very good. During Medieval period, the Arab invasions started, one after another and plundered the country followed by massacres and destruction of religious sites. During *Sultanate* period and *Mughal* regime, the *sudaras* and untouchables suffered very badly. With the emergence of Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, Nanak etc., it almost became a movement of social awakening and unity among lower castes. *Bhakti* movement condemned the social odds and oppressive features of Hindu society and also attacked Muslim orthodoxy. It opposed caste system and practice of untouchability. At that time society was consisted of poor and rich, the master and the slave. The *dalits* were known as *achhut* in this period. Ramanand, a Hindu reformer, Rai Das, a *chammar* of Banarasa, preached equality and opposed untouchability. The *Bhakti* movement rejected the authority of Vedas, *brahmin* priesthood and ritual practices, but failed to recover the lost identity. It was continued in various forms till the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century during British rule the condition of *dalits* was not as worse as it was in ancient time and during *Bhakti* period. The emergence of British power made a lot of difference for downtrodden people. They brought a sense of liberty for the marginalized communities. The British strongly opposed the rituals as *sati partha* and untouchability. During this British period, the *dalits* were known as untouchables and they were officially called the Scheduled Castes. After independence the position of *dalits* has improved considerably due to constitutional provisions and the efforts undertaken by the government, spread of education and awareness. Although the concept of untouchability was made illegal after India gained independence in 1947, the persecution and alienation of the *dalits* has not been stopped altogether. They are still facing economic problems, socio-cultural and political discrimination in the name of caste in many parts of India. The education is the basic factor for upliftment of any section of society. But the quality of education especially of government school in rural areas is very poor.



In rural areas there is inadequate infrastructure, lack of accountability of teachers and inadequate working conditions of teachers and this has adversely affected the quality of education thereat.

Even now the position of *dalits* especially of the women and children of this category is vulnerable. *Dalit* women and children are primarily engaged in civic sanitation work followed by leather fraying in tanning and footwear manufacturing whereas many *dalits* are agricultural labourers. Most of the *dalits* are living very critical life particularly in states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan etc. Dalits claim that their economic, social cultural rights as well as their civil and political rights have been violated by the government and its entities for centuries. They argue that the government should recognize and enforce economic, social cultural rights of *dalits*.

## CONCLUSION

Hence, the condition and position of *dalits* was very critical in ancient and in medieval periods. But when the Western ruler held the power in India, the position of *dalits* was improved in modern times. Their condition and position has improved of dalits and is still improving due to constitutional provisions and the legislative and executive has also played an prominent role in this side. So the position of *dalits* is not so critical as it was earlier. In this globalization era, the interaction between the men has increased. Hence the people are more vigilant about his rights and duties and about his future. New things, new ideas, new innovations and new technology has changed the mind of upper caste and high level society's people.

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