

The History of Dalit Culture and Their Deplorable Situation in India

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Abstract

The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means “broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed.” “Dalit” (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India’s caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs Those previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes, and Harijans are today increasingly adopting the term “Dalit” as a name for themselves. “Dalit” refers to one’s caste rather than class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have born the stigma of “untouchability” because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations.

Keywords: Dalits, Untouchability, Depressed Classes.

Introduction

Dalits are ‘outcastes’ falling outside the traditional four-fold caste system consisting of the hereditary Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra classes; they are considered impure and polluting and are therefore physically and socially excluded and isolated from the rest of society. Dalits represent a community of 170 million in India, constituting 17% of the population. One out of every six Indians is Dalit, yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens of India. Caste-based social organization extends beyond India, finding corollaries in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, as well as other countries outside of South Asia (see below). More than 260 million people worldwide suffer from this “hidden apartheid” of segregation, exclusion, and discrimination. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections. Dalits have chosen the “Dalit” label for themselves for at least three important reasons. First, the label indicates that the condition of the Dalits has not been of their own making or choosing; it is something which has been inflicted upon them by others. Thus, secondly, there is an element of militancy built into the label; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied them. “Dalit” also indicates that all these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis, etc.) share a common condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

India's caste system assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu beliefs. Traditionally, there are four principal castes (divided into many sub-categories) and one category of people who fall outside the caste system—the Dalits. As members of the lowest rank of Indian society, Dalits face discrimination at almost every level: from access to education and medical facilities to restrictions on where they can live and what jobs they can have. The discrimination against the Dalits is especially significant because of the number of people affected; there are approximately 167 million Dalits in India, constituting over 16 percent of the total population.

Within the Dalit community, there are many divisions into sub-castes. Dalits are divided into leather workers, street sweepers, cobblers, agricultural workers, and manual "scavengers". The latter group, considered the lowest of the low and officially estimated at one million, traditionally are responsible for digging village graves, disposing of dead animals, and cleaning human excreta. Approximately three-quarters of the Dalit workforce are in the agricultural sector of the economy. A majority of the country's forty million people who are bonded laborers are Dalits. These jobs rarely provide enough income for Dalits to feed their families or to send their children to school. As a result, many Dalits are impoverished, uneducated, and illiterate.

The origins of the caste system

The word Dalit—literally translating to “oppressed” or “broken”—is generally used to refer to people who were once known as “untouchables”, those belonging to castes outside the fourfold Hindu Varna system. The caste system finds its origin in functional groupings, called *varnas*, which have their origins in the Aryan society of ancient northern India. In their creation myth, four varnas are said to have emanated from the Primeval Being. The Creator’s mouth became the Brahman priests, his two arms formed the Rajanya warriors and kings, his two thighs formed the Vaishya landowners and merchants, and from his feet were born the Shudra artisans and

servants. Later, there developed a so-called “fifth” varna: the Untouchables.

This caste system became fixed and hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism and its beliefs of pollution and rebirth. The Laws of Manu (*Manusmitri*), which date roughly to the 3rd century A.D.—and parts of which form the Sanskrit syllabus of graduation studies in Gujarat even today—preach the sanctity of the varnas and uphold the principles of gradation and rank. They refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance and total impunity of Brahmins. Those from the “lowest” castes are told that their place in the caste hierarchy is due to their sins in a past life. Vivid punishments of torture and death are assigned for crimes such as gaining literacy or insulting a member of a dominant caste. Among the writings of Hindu religious texts, the *Manusmitri* is undoubtedly the most authoritative one, legitimizing social exclusion and introducing absolute inequality as the guiding principle of social relations.

Today, Dalits make up 16.2% of the total Indian population, but their control over resources of the country is marginal—less than 5%. Close to half of the Dalit population lives under the Poverty Line, and even more (62%) are illiterate. Among the Dalits, most of those engaged in agricultural work are landless or nearly landless agricultural laborers. The average household income for Dalits was of Rs. 17,465 in 1998, just 68% of the national average. Less than 10% of Dalit households can afford safe drinking water, electricity and toilets, which is indicative of their deplorable social condition. Moreover, Dalits are daily victims of the worst crimes and atrocities, far outnumbering other sections of society in that respect as well. The vast majority of these crimes remain unreported due to omnipresent fear, and those that are reported are often ignored by police or end up languishing in the backlogged court system. Between 1992 and 2000, a total of 334,459 cases were registered nation wide with the police as cognisable crimes against SCs.

Caste and untouchability based social exclusion in contemporary India :Even today the Indian society is following the same varna system were the society is categorized in to four namely the Brahmans, kshtriya, vaishya, and the shudra and the practice of the varna system is still in existence which has a practice of discriminating the shudras. . Today in contemporary Indian society the shudras are known as the Dalits which is a Marathi word means as “broken men” and presently there are 180 million Dalits categorized and classified as scheduled castes in the Indian constitution. How ever more than 180 million Dalits are subjected to social, economical, political and cultural exclusion deeply imbedded in social practices. Dalits are social and physically separate they most live in outside areas of the village in rural areas and in specified areas in cities. They are denied basic human rights not allowed to own property rights and to use public and common property such as the wells, tanks and temples. After India’s independence when India declared itself as a democratic nation having adopting a written constitution in which the practice of social exclusion in the form of untouchability is been eradicated and made it as a punishable offence under article 17 and 18 of the Indian constitution and have made several developmental provision for the Dalits. In spite of this the practice of social exclusion and discrimination has been practiced in one or the other form the practice still exists in a newer forms and strategies.

Dalit Culture as a history: The culture of the Dalit-advansi has got long history in it. If we quote the definition of history it is known as ‘an account of an event, a systematic account of the origin and progress of the world, the knowledge of past events’. *Birtias* are a category of people, who are culturally known as the elder brother of Dalit community like *Domb/Gana*. *They* are the living and mobile history of this community. They have got enough knowledge about the past events of Dalit community and the pattern of worship of their family deity. They usually narrate these events in the social gathering like marriage, death etc. The idea of narration is to transfer the knowledge about ancestor and their origin from generation to generation.

In the similar way *Parghanias* are also a category of people who are culturally known as the elder brother of *Gond* (Tribe) .They also narrate the ancestral history and deity of tribe in social gathering of *Gond* community. *Ghogias* are a relatively nearer caste of Gauda as per caste hierarchy, who also has got similar identity and action in their society. They are otherwise known as the elder brother of *Gauda* (OBC) community having vast knowledge about the past events of *gauda* or *yadav*. Though these knowledge and information available with these people satisfy the definition of history to some extent, still their knowledge does not find space in the history because, their knowledge has not been written or printed anywhere. Is it a fact that the Sudras were denied of education in the Vedic period as a result the *Birtia*, *Ghogih* and *Parghanias* were not able to document their events and choose a simple option of transferring this knowledge in social gathering through narration? However, there is historical evidence in the culture of Dalit which are yet to be determined and recognized by the historian. In this connection it can be quoted that most of the Indian Ancient history is based on Vedas and *Purans*. ‘William Jones, the leading Indologist of the late eighteenth century, suspected that some texts, even if including the myths and legends of the Hindus, probably contained the core of a history’. So, why not the information that is available with the *Birtias*, *Parghanias* and the *Ghogias*, who are the cultural story teller of the *Dom/Gana* (Dalit), *Gond* (Tribe) and *Gauda* (OBCs) community respectively.

Crimes against Dalits

According to official Indian crime

1. Atrocities against Dalits every day.
2. Dalits murdered every week.
3. Dalits homes burnt every week.
4. Dalits kidnapped or abducted every week.
5. Dalits women raped every day.
6. Dalits beaten every hour
7. A crime committed against a Dalits every 18 minutes

Natural Resources as symbols of Dalit folk songs Dalit culture is rich with tremendous musical instrument and various kind of musical rhythm. The myth of origin of music tells that the different kind of rhythm of the music has been derived from the sound of cloud, singing of birds, the melodious sound of rivers & stream and the sounds of forest trees. This music is used in the day to day activity of this community. Therefore each and every festivals, marriage or death, there are unique & specific rhythm which they have created and acquired from the nature. It is most significant that Dalit culture has been deep-rooted by their music which they have invented since age-old. *William A. Haviard* has mentioned that '*It is rare that a culture has been reported to be without any kind of music*'. This shows the primitiveness of this society and the richness of their culture and tradition. There are different kind of songs that are being sung in different festivals & marriage irrespective of all man, woman, girls and boy etc. They use to dance and enjoy. The instant composer of the songs is called *Geet Kudia or Gahank*, who play vital role in singing the songs. Mostly these songs are based on love and day to day normal happening. One can observe the same in following folk song in English translated version

Dalit & Tribals (Adivasis) are from same origin There is age old tradition story regarding the separation of Dalit and adivashi. The story speaks as follows "In the valley of Mahanadi river there lived a king called *Gagarba Saasan Lakhan Bhandi Nag Banshi Chaturbhuj Raja Dungi Chuhan*. He had eleven sons and one among them was '*Kolbhaj*'. *Kolbhaj* king had four sons called *Gang, Gaagrang, Jadu and Kadam*. Presently these four brothers are known as Tribe, Caste, OBC and Tribe respectively. In the process of multiplication of family members, subsequently there was property distribution among the brothers. The caste people got the deity as their share and others got landed property. Since then they have been separated from each other but as their ancestor being one and same, the culture and tradition are similar in nature. The deity whatever being worshiped in the *Pidar* of Dalit family is mostly worshiped in the family of tribe and OBCs. It is needless to say that SC/ST/OBC was earlier known as Sudras. Being a share holder of deity the Dalit become *Bajania* or drum beater. Musicians are integral part of worship deity because Dalit deities are very much fond of music. It is a common understanding of all that *Bajaniacs* understand the language of the deity, who can directly interact with the deity as per the tradition. In a similar way tribes or OBCs who acts as a village priest in many places, distributes paddy in *Nuakhai*, a great festivals, as a symbol of shareholder of the land. Even, if we look to the contemporary situation, there were numbers of tribal kings all over who are the landlord or land owner. This proves the reality of myth, the division of property may be in the prehistoric period. The cultural similarity of all these caste, tribe and OBC speaks about their ancestral origin from one point. The origin of Dalit-*adivasi* from same ancestor has been observed by many. 'It can only be shown in a few instances that the existing impure devotional castes were directly derived from the indigenous tribe'. Before Aryan invasion it is presumed that there was no division in the name of caste among aboriginals. Their main religion and belief was to worship nature. In the process of Sanskritization though they become separated socially from each other their original culture and tradition is remaining without change. Since the aboriginals are son of soil, their culture and tradition is very rich. The living style, the livelihood earning through weaving, entertainment through various songs and dance, their festivals and rituals are unique and more scientific except some few which are based on blind faith. This separation is well established in the name of caste and tribes since 1911, when the enumeration of census process started to provide some facility to this community by British Government. Their social and individual life can't be separated from natural resources since they are interlinked and inter dependant with environment. Some of the instances of their tradition and culture in relation to the environment and natural resources can be reflected as below to have minimum understanding of Dalit culture.

Conclusion. Today, Dalits make up **16.2% of the total Indian population**, but their control over resources of the country is marginal—less than 5%. Close to half of the Dalit population lives under the Poverty Line, and even more (62%) are illiterate. Among the Dalits, most of those engaged in agricultural work are landless or nearly landless agricultural laborers. The average household income for Dalits was of Rs. 17,465 in 1998, just 68% of the national average. Less than 10% of Dalit households can afford safe drinking water, electricity and toilets, which is indicative of their deplorable social condition. Moreover, Dalits are daily victims of the worst

crimes and atrocities, far outnumbering other sections of society in that respect as well. The vast majority of these crimes remain unreported due to omnipresent fear, and those that are reported are often ignored by police or end up languishing in the backlogged court system. More than 60 years after gaining Independence, **India is still very much afflicted by the cancer of the caste system.** Dalits remain the most vulnerable, marginalized and brutalized community in the country. Many Dalits and the lower caste people are well in some fields. But they are oppressed and deviated from the eligible sect of the society. Giving the freedom and uplifting them to the mainstream is a dangerous the rest for some targeted set of the society. But these poor people have no voice to reveal their innocence, rights and oppressions.

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