

## FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DALITS AND IDENTITY CRISIS

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### **Abstract**

There are many evil practises in Hindu society one of such evil is caste which divide and split the society into occupational cubicles. These occupations were predetermined based on the caste hierarchy; in this caste ladder former untouchables were arranged at lower step of the ladder. All the menial and despicable jobs have done by them; it applies to members of those menial castes today known as Dalits. Dalit is a caste rather than class label, which have borne the stigma of untouchability because of the extreme poverty impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. Historically disadvantaged Dalits were suppressed and oppressed physically and economically in the Indian society. Inequalities based on the caste divisions are fundamentally inhumanity and the caste system as an oppressive ideological system represents the scheme of power, domination, privilege and hierarchy. In the India society from primeval to present and in future the discrimination takes place against Dalits various forms like the two-tumbler system to bar on wearing slippers. The caste discrimination, untouchability, caste hierarchal relations of dominance, spine-chilling atrocities and subordinations circumstances has exasperated and cause for the rise of Dalit consciousness. These objective conditions have transformed into the sites of struggles when the Dalits are affronted with the real operation of liberal principles of equality, freedom, fraternity and social justice. In the Indian society caste conflict were widespread that lies at the structural dimensions of the form of untouchability and economic inequality. Caste-based discriminations can be retraced and deconstructed at all spheres of society to combat it. Earlier untouchability was practised after the emergency of constitution former is changed its form and appeared as discrimination against Dalits. In this connection the present paper made an attempt to focus the light on the untouchability and discrimination against Dalits at educational institutions, judiciary, power, media, industry, administration and civil society.

**Key words:** Caste ladder, Hierarchy Untouchability, Pollution, Spine-chilling atrocities, Economic inequality, Caste-based discriminations.

## Introduction

As in past centuries most Indians would identify themselves as Hindus. They are likely to be familiar with the distinct concept of communal affiliation. This affiliation gradually changed into the caste, which is the hallmark of the Indian society. Here the caste status is inscribed and unchanging for the individual forever because castes are endogamous; they are ranked within a local system. The status of castes varies from state to state in India but the lowermost level of Dalits status never alters from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Dwaraka in Gujarat to Kumki in Arunachal Pradesh. Dalits remained forever as untouchables since underlying the caste are values associated with ideas of purity and pollution. Besides that caste divided the society into occupational cubicles which is determined by Hindu Dharma sastras. The varna scheme in Dharma sastras insisted the low caste Dalits have to do menial works in the society in addition that they were socially boycotted and oppressed physically and economically in the Indian society therefore the practise of untouchability and discrimination made the lives of Dalit outrageous. To get a measure of untouchability in our country, one needs only to look at the two tumbler- system. It is a practice whereby Dalits are not allowed to use the same glass as elite castes to drink water from, not only that bar on wearing slippers. It was happened once in all over the country and in some of the remote areas practices the same still now. Castesim in India deprived the civil rights of Dalits.

## Primordial conditions of Dalits

So called former untouchables occupy an ambivalent place below and outside the Varna scheme.<sup>1</sup> Only the small number of this extensive caste derives their income from denial and menial occupations.<sup>2</sup> Some had other means of livelihood like the carrying and cremation of corpses. They also served as executioners of criminals. According to the law books they should be dressed in the garments of the corpses he cremated further he should eat his meal from broken vessels and should wear only iron ornaments.<sup>3</sup> But the great majority make their living as agricultural labourers. They have a separate hamlet or quarter on the outskirts of the village.<sup>4</sup> They were forced to strike a wooden clapper on entering a town or village to warn the higher caste people of their polluting approach<sup>5</sup> or even if their shadow falls on a good caste, he is supposed to be polluted.<sup>6</sup> These outcastes were labelled with different nomenclatures and presently called them as Dalits.

## Nomenclature

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit which means 'ground', 'suppressed', 'crushed' or "broken pieces".<sup>7</sup> The marginalised group of people popularly known as untouchables, in due course, others have called them as Chandala, Paulkasa<sup>8</sup>, Antyavasayin, Shvapakas<sup>9</sup>, Antyaja, Avarna, Pukkakas, Mlechhas, Bhillas, Parasikas<sup>10</sup> and Meda<sup>11</sup> These words were mostly used in Ancient and Medieval periods, but in the colonial times Harijan<sup>12</sup>, 'Exterior Castes'<sup>13</sup>, 'Outcastes', 'Pariahs'<sup>14</sup> 'Depressed Classes'<sup>15</sup>, Scheduled castes<sup>16</sup> were popularised. Whatever the nomenclatures used for untouchables, such names became derogatory and that names could not be helped to develop their dignity in the society. In Ancient and Medieval periods the above said names were used for them by the Hindu religious scriptures, the British officials were also denoted them as depressed classes and scheduled castes. These British colonial names are continuing for untouchables after India's Independence. So the oppressed people frustrated for their grievances in the society and to retain their self-respect and identity branded themselves as Dalit<sup>17</sup>. It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile untouchable's castes by the twice born Hindus. Dalit is a word to give enormous strength and enforced the unity among the mass of depressed and oppressed. Dalit is a caste rather than class label, it applies to members of those menial castes, which means the former untouchables.

## Segregation of Dalits

Dalits have borne the stigma of untouchability and discrimination because of the extreme poverty, impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. These occupations were predetermined based on the caste hierarchy. In the Indian society caste conflict were widespread that lies at the structural dimensions of the form of exclusion, discrimination and economic inequality. Inequalities based on the caste divisions are fundamentally inhumanity and the caste system as an oppressive ideological system represents the scheme of power, domination, privilege and hierarchy. Even nobody break or spoil such caste system oppressive ideology since it is deeply rooted into the minds of Indian folks, because castesim had pervaded the socio-cultural and endogamy fabric of the Indian society. As the tendency of the caste hierarchal relations of dominance, subordinations and oppressive ideology have provided sufficient conditions for the rise of Dalit consciousness and these objective conditions have transformed into the sites of struggles when the Dalits are affronted with the real operation of liberal principles of equality, freedom, fraternity and social justice.

## Need international support

Every day Dalits are experiencing untouchability, segregation from the society, spine chilling atrocities and caste- based discrimination in India. They are fighting for equality, freedom, fraternity and social justice. Still as it is a nightmare to the Dalits after 68 years of Independence. Hence they think that domestic pressures, struggle and remedies do not work, internationalisation is viable option to seek improvement of the status of Dalits. To address this situation Shridar V. Ketkar in his book 'The History of the Caste in India' mentioned and opined that "as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem"<sup>18</sup> and as it was focused internationally like apartheid. Devanura Mahadeva, Kannada wirter, Dalit activist and author of *Kusumabale* won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1990. He attributed about apartheid in his article "the condition of the apartheid and the untouchable is quite similar in many ways, yet not same. Apartheid is first phase of untouchability and he said that untouchability is the great-grand father of apartheid".<sup>19</sup> Apartheid is a problem of Negroes; which means the racial discrimination practised by whites against blacks. The black people fought against this practise which draws the attention of world and treated it as inhuman practice against humanity. Therefore international organisations like U.N.O condemned and criticised the practise of Apartheid in such a way Dalits also try untouchability and discrimination against Dalits familiar to the international society.

If anyone tries to speak against caste system on the international pulpit their tone and tenor made mute by using their all powers. In April 1991 Devanura Mahadeva was invited by Australia's Monash University to participate in a project called "Literary Commons: Writing Australia, India in the Asian Century with Dalit, Indigenous and Multilingual Tongues". Unfortunately he could not attend because the text of speech he prepared for the event was not supported caste system in India. The caste system did not give chance to open the voice either in India or in international arena.<sup>20</sup> This is the most recent example India's attitude to uphold caste system. Special rapporteur Rita Izsak-Ndiaye of Hungary at UN revealed that in the March 2016, India's reaction on discussing the caste issue at any UN forum raised the dissent by the Permanent Mission of India to the UN in Geneva. She further reported that, characterised the caste- based discrimination as that based on "descent", labour stratification, untouchability practices and forced endogamy were "global phenomena" that impacted more than 250 million people worldwide largely in India.<sup>21</sup>

## Untouchability and Discrimination

Earlier caste Hindus practiced untouchability now that is changed into form of discrimination. These two are both sides of coin. In ancient time up to the Ambedkar Dalits are kept far away from the village or town because their presence might pollute the caste Hindus and practised untouchability against Dalits. The untouchables could not avail their rights in the society. The Indian Constitution or the law of the land prohibited untouchability so that it appeared in another form as discrimination which is the strongest barrier against the Dalits. It prevents them from rising out of it. It has made the life of the Untouchables one of the constant fear of one thing or another, of unemployment, assault, persecution, etc. It is a life of insecurity.<sup>22</sup> The bias against Dalits today is often subtle, sophisticated, packaged in ornamental and metaphorical language. By and large there is no difference between untouchability and discrimination against Dalits. A mega pan-India survey in 2014 conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland, United States of America has been revealed the shocking facts; Dalits and Adivasis continue to face mind-boggling social discrimination and spine-chilling atrocities across the country even after sixty eight years of Independence. One in the four Indians admits to practising caste untouchability in some form in their homes. It also reported that 30 per cent of rural and 20 percent of urban households practised untouchability.<sup>23</sup> Although untouchability officially decreed unlawful continues all over India. Mariswamy a Dalit professor from Mysore anguished that “I understood that we are victims of the caste system and that untouchability is a deep wound of insult and humiliation”.<sup>24</sup>

## Discrimination at higher educational institutions

Anupama Rao faculty of History at Columbia University recorded an occurrence from 1856. The Bombay government denied admission to a convert Christian Mahar into a public school on the ground that caste Hindus did not wish to “associate” with a Mahar student. After continued protest lasting a few decades, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dalit students were allowed to attend public schools, but were directed to sit separately in a verandha outside the classroom. They were barred from accessing the common water supply.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this struggle laid foundation for Dalits entering into educational institutions like schools, colleges and universities. In modern time the contours of discrimination change, but the hierarchical mindset stays as solid as ever. Thus Dalits understood exclusion occurs along multiple axes: through boycott, through stigmatisation and through segregation from education and society.<sup>26</sup> The hegemonial philosophy

could not tolerate the presence of Dalit students in higher level. Students from Dalit and Adivasi groups have exclaimed that, they are experiencing the exclusion in the most elite educational institutes of the country also. Many of them come to higher education institutions at great personal cost to themselves and their families, not just in terms of the finances involved but also social opposition.<sup>27</sup> The caste Hindus give support in education and employment then only they enter into the main fold but this attitude lacking completely.

Yeranna Bogulla a Ph.D. scholar in Bio-chemistry at University of Hyderabad explains the upper caste student's mindset and scoffs that "the minute we (Dalits) enter the campus, we are branded and silently segregated."<sup>28</sup> D. Uday Bhanu, a Ph.D. scholar in Telugu responded that getting a seat in the SC category is itself a social boycott. She told with despair voice all my life, I have lived in a ghetto on the village outskirts, our marriages, our birth and death ceremonies are in isolated parts. And when we come here (varsities) expecting a better life, it is all the same.<sup>29</sup> Another scholar at the varsity Sanaki Munna said that whenever a 'quota' student goes for administrative work, he or she is kept waiting or simply ignored. He also indicates to the intrinsic discrimination in the system of publishing lists of students with star marks- a single star for S.C (\*) students, two stars for STs (\*\*\*) and a # mark for OBCs. We (quota students) hear comments from other students such as 'Ah, here comes the star' when we enter a classroom'.<sup>30</sup> Santosh, Mathematics PhD scholar at Loyola College in Chennai describes his encounters with casteism on campus is as 'nano discrimination.' He added that no one knows my name in the campus but everybody knows my caste including canteen *wala*.<sup>31</sup> Rohit Chakravarthi Vemula departed Ph.D. scholar in University of Hyderabad rightly pointed out about caste discrimination in educational institutions. He quoted in his suicide note "The value of a man ... reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility To a vote, To a number, To a thing, Never... as a mind".<sup>32</sup> Dalit Ph.D. scholar Maddari Venkatesh has more to append on the subject. He points out how research supervisors are not allotted to SC/ST research scholars on time. "This delays the doctoral work, which in turn leads to frustration".<sup>33</sup> The privileged caste faculty is not very cordial towards Dalit boys and girls who come from rural background, instead of that insulting. How generally professors at the university scold the student from marginalised community that they were not fit for education and would be better off being an agricultural labourer like their parents. Like as liberal campuses become the hunting grounds for majoritarian forces where the Dalit and Adivasi students are either discriminated or mentally massacred. In the campus hostels many elite- caste students even refuse to share rooms with Dalits. This social exclusion and discrimination creates mental agony to Dalit students and they undergo dishonour their self confidence and self respect.

However economic stability and social support proven academic merit or intellectual stature unfortunately they do not have both to the majority Dalit students. Even many Dalits students who want to go ahead leave behind or discriminate by the colleges and universities. So far no Government endeavoured to take concrete steps against exclusion and discrimination at educational institutions.

### **Exclusion and discrimination at public administration**

The lack of representation of Dalits across fields like judiciary, power, media, industry and civil society clearly indicates that the exclusionary system in institutions will continue in public administration also. Public administration is most deeply drenched by the spirit of discrimination against the Dalits and Adivasis. It has affected Law Courts, Government Departments, Co-operative Banks and particularly the Police. Discrimination against Dalits in the matter of securing land, get loans from banks and jobs exist in the most extensive form.<sup>34</sup> Their representation is almost zilch in some of the departments. The principle in general is maintained that the Dalits shall not be placed in administrative authority over the Hindus which are most intolerable condition to them, as result is that unless some entire branch of service is turned over the Dalits. There are very few posts Dalits are allowed to fill. To put it correctly and concretely, the only field of service in which there is no discrimination against the Dalits is scavenging. In this field there is no need for discrimination because the whole of it is made over to the Dalits and there is no competition from the Hindus.<sup>35</sup> The Hinduism believed that ‘cleanliness is Godliness’. This cleanliness work being done by the sweepers so that the Hindus must acknowledge the service of sweeper and offer them some measure of compassion for their work. Vijay Prashad author of “Untouchable Freedom” extolled that scavengers ‘should be called artists, who when they look at dirt cannot rest without cleaning it’ and Hindus must learn to applaud them, not revile them.<sup>36</sup>

### **Discrimination in Media**

Needless to say press is known as fourth estate or fourth pillar of the societies which respond and display the currents issues in regional as well as the world. But at present the role of media, its aim and goals are completely diverting and became commercial. D. Uday Bhanu, a Ph.D. scholar in Telugu at University of Hyderabad asks ‘show me one media person who is actually interested in the lives of Dalit students.’<sup>37</sup> Citing the example, Rohith Chakravarthi Vemula along with four other Ph.D. scholars and Ambedkars Students’ Association members was suspended from University of Hyderabad. The foursome faced a social boycott, forbidden from entering the hostels,

the mess, the administrative building and interacting freely with faculty starting from January 3, 2016. They stayed outside in a tent; Rohit was feeling the pain of indifference to their plight. He said with his friends “We had been sleeping in the open for 14 days like dogs out here but not a single faculty member came to see us and nobody cares at least no one was taking us seriously”.<sup>38</sup> No channel and news papers ever have covered the story of five Dalit students in University of Hyderabad being suspended. If media did so he had not died. But posthumously Rohit and his poetry was praised by many regional and national channels, (print and electronic media) magazines. It means that all most all print and electronic media in the hands of elite class. No one questions the administrative authority about five suspended Dalit students. Because lack of representation in this field. There is no cop who can investigate, no magistrate who pronounce justice, no media to demand punishment for perpetrators. Dalits must realise a huge gap between theory and practice. The Political parties are chanting Dalit mantra through lips for vote bank politics but in actual practice suppressing with their iron hegemonic legs to Dalit voice.

### **Dalits- Hyphenated Identity**

Uneducated Dalits, who live on the margins of society, are often at the worst end of caste injustice and faced identity crisis.<sup>39</sup> Neither the society nor the Hindu religion allows them into the main fold. It is a systematic attempt to degrade the dignity and status of meritorious Dalits. A elite caste larder would be described as a great Indian leader. No one would describe him as the leader of Brahmin, if a leader who happens to be Dalits is to be referred or described as the leader of the Dalits. . A Hindu doctor would be described as a great Indian doctor. No one would describe him as a Iyengar or some other caste. If a doctor happens to be Dalit, he would be pronounced as Dalit doctor. A singer from Hindu would be described as a great Indian singer. If the same talent happens to be with Dalit he would be announced as a Dalit singer. . A Hindu poet would be described as a great Indian poet. In case Dalit would be a poet, described as a Dalit poet. This type of discrimination has its origin in the Hindu view that the Dalits are an inferior people and however qualified.<sup>40</sup> They can never be great or even equal to the great men among the elite class. The caste Hindu people felt that the Dalit great men are only great among Dalits not for nation. In this way Ambedkar was popularised as Dalit leader. He is not only the leader but also the God of Dalits. So next time you hear his name, don't just relate him Dalits. He is much more than that renowned internationally. Ambedkar further disagreed that caste Hindus created ‘a slave mentality among the Untouchables’ and it killed ‘the spirit of independence from among the Untouchables’.<sup>41</sup>



## Conclusion

The caste system injured very deeply and psychologically hurt the Dalits. Chinua Achebe a researcher from Africa told that “in Africa, we have people who are called ‘God Children’. It is regarded a sin if their blood is shed on earth. But here (in India) shedding the blood of Harijans is seen as a good deed”. The repression, cruelty, violence and the brutally killings which may have taken place, in ancient India to throw out an entire community of people (Dalits) from the Varna/Caste system and force them into accepting untouchability were repeated in the form of discrimination in the fields of employment, electronic and print media, politics, cinema, and most enlightened educational institutions. Caste-based discriminations can be retraced and deconstructed to combat it. One of the key strategies of the elite caste, discrimination communities is to argue that discrimination is natural, that it is part of nature and that you have to accept it. This part of their ideological weapon and it is not true. Discrimination does not come from the cosmos. Everyone engage in this ethical and intellectual strategy to uproot what is building and creating the culture and mentality of discrimination. Indian Government had done so well in supporting Dalits. We see in detail from Gandhi to present leaders of Government did not argue for emancipation from dalithood, but for reform within dalithood. Because the whole government suffers from a mindset of the upper castes that are victims of their own guilt and will therefore try to hide their faults.

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9. *Ibid.*, p.47. The Manusmriti was composed between second century B.C and second century A.D decrees that and Antyavasin should be employed in a cemetery(Doniger and Smith-X.39) and also said that the Chandalas and Shvapakas should live outside the village(Doniger and Smith-X.51.)
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11. Michael, S.M., *Op. Cit.*, p. 46, 47. Narada mentions Shvapakas, Meda and Chandala. He calls them *mala* or the refuse of human society. He rules that they should always be punished with corporal punishment. A fine from them is unacceptable because their wealth is also impure. The king should, therefore, never impose a fine on them (Tagara, 1980: XV.13.).
12. This term coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted and popularised by Mahatma Gandhi.
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14. Commonly, but undoubtedly derived from the Tamil word *para* or *parai*, the drum, see Deliege, 1997.
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