

UNDERSTANDING THE DALIT COMMUNITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Parameswar Mallik

Ph. D Scholar, P.G. Department of Sociology, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India

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ABSTRACT

Dalit communities in India refer to marginalized social groups that were categorized as untouchable in the Hindu caste system. These communities, occupy the lowest strata of the caste system. In rural areas, many Dalit communities are engaged in agriculture and casual work for the highest caste individuals. They often face discrimination, prejudice, and social barriers that limit their access to resources and opportunities. In modern India, the government has enacted laws and implemented policies to improve the lives of Dalit people. However, social stigma and discrimination still remain prevalent. This can sometimes dissuade the community from actively participating in government schemes or accessing available resources and services. Based on secondary sources of data, the broad objective of the paper is to study the status of Dalit communities in contemporary India. The subsequent section focused on issues and challenges faced by Dalit communities. The concluding section has focused on some policy recommendations for the betterment of the Dalit communities.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Discrimination, Social Inequality, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dalit community is one of the most marginalized and socially excluded groups in India. They are considered outcasts and untouchables and are often subjected to systematic discrimination and social exclusion. The origins of the Dalit community can be traced back to the caste system, which placed them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Dalits, also known as Scheduled Castes, make up approximately 16.6 % of India's population, as of the 2011 Census. They are distributed across the country, with the highest concentrations in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Dalit communities in India have been referred to by various names throughout history (Sreekumar,2023).Some titles for Dalit communities include Scheduled Caste (SC), Untouchables, Backward Classes,Harijana, Mahar, Jatav, Chamar,

Panchama, Vanniyar, Pariah and so on. These titles reflect the diverse regional and linguistic identities of Dalit communities across India. Each title carries its own set of connotations, symbolizing both the hardships faced by these communities and their resistance, resilience, and aspiration for social mobility and justice (Manakawad,2019).

The term 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit word Dalit, which translates to 'oppressed' or 'downtrodden'. Historically, the caste system in India rooted in the principle of Varnashrama Dharma, categorized people into several hierarchical strata. The original division was organized by color. The caste system divides Hindu society into four main castes, with the Brahmins (priests and scholars) at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), the Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and finally the Shudras (servants and labor) at the bottom. However, the primary reason behind this classification was separation based on rituals, habits, and occupations (Ramsharan,2012).

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding the Dalit communities in India requires locating them within the broader context of Indian Society. The history of Dalit communities in India dates back thousands of years. According to the sacred text the Laws of Manu, an ancient legal code, the caste system formed the backbone of Indian society. It categorized individuals into distinct hierarchies accompanied by strict rules governing social interaction and duties. The British colonial rule in India led to the introduction of a new administrative system that inadvertently reinforced the caste system. The British implemented policies and practices that, instead of eliminating social inequality and exclusion, further amplified the caste system and the marginalization of the Dalit community. Many British officials adopted the caste-based social system and even utilized it to their advantage in managing Indian society. The administration of British India did nothing to disturb the Dalit's socio-economic status. It was during the pre-independence time that social protests in the form of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Khilafat Movement began. Gandhi referred to the untouchables as *Harijans* or children of God drawing attention to their plight (Janagan & Patil, 2010). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, a group of progressive Indians initiated the social reform movement, which aimed to challenge the caste system and promote social justice. Social reformers like Jyoti Rao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule in Maharashtra, who were both from Shudra backgrounds, started social upliftment movements. They worked to educate and empower women and the lower castes, setting the stage for the broad social reform movement of the 20th century. Despite their efforts, the caste system's deep-rooted influence in Indian society rendered the movement's influence limited, and the social inequality and exclusion faced by the Dalit community persisted.

3. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The term Dalits was first popularized by B.R. Ambedkar, an influential leader from the untouchable community, who advocated for the annihilation of the caste system. Ambedkar's views on Dalit communities were marked by strong advocacy for social, economic, and political equality, as well as the abolition of the caste system. He viewed the caste system as the primary cause of social inequality and the oppression of Dalit communities in India. Mahatma Gandhi was also known as the 'Father of the Nation' in India. Gandhi believed that the caste system provided a social framework for understanding and ordering society, and he did not openly challenge it (Mandavkar, 2015). However, as he engaged more deeply with the issue of untouchability, Gandhi became an advocate for the rights of the Dalit communities. He played a significant role in raising awareness about the plight of the Dalit communities and worked toward ending untouchability by launching campaigns like the 'Harijan Upliftment' program to improve their living conditions, education, and employment opportunities. Gandhi believed that education was essential for the upliftment of the Dalit communities, as it would empower them to break free from the shackles of the caste system.

The theoretical context of the Dalit community in India, often considered an excluded or marginalized group is largely rooted in social exclusion theory and intersectionality theory.

3.1 Social Exclusion Theory

Social exclusion theory posits that certain groups in society are systematically disadvantaged and marginalized due to their social, economic, and political status. According to this theory, the caste system in India assigned the lowest social position to the Dalits, effectively relegating them to labor and marginalized roles with little to no social mobility. As a result, the Dalits have faced discrimination, social stigma, and economic exploitation for generations, leading to their chronic marginalization.

3.2 Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory developed by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, examines how overlapping social identities contribute to complex discrimination. In this context, the Dalit community, it is essential to consider the intersections of caste, class, gender, and other social variables that can either amplify or mitigate their marginalization. For example, a female may face more significant barriers to education, employment, and empowerment than a male due to the interplay of caste-based discrimination, class disparities, and gender inequalities. Intersectionality theory provides a comprehensive framework to study the multifaceted deprivations faced by the Dalit community, examining the interplay between various societal factors.

4. STATUS OF DALIT COMMUNITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Contemporary India has seen a significant transformation in the status of Dalit communities. The influence of globalization and modernization has brought about numerous positive changes for the marginalized section of Indian society. In this process has introduced new cultural values and social norms leading to a more inclusive and diverse society. This has contributed to the gradual dissolution of caste-based discrimination, reducing the social stigma associated with the Dalit communities. The Indian Constitution provides for affirmative action through reservations and protective laws aimed at benefiting Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, enforces penalties for the perpetrators of caste-based violence and discrimination (Judge,2012). The government launched various rural development initiatives, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Swarn Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY) aim to uplift the socio-economic conditions of the backward classes, including the Dalit Communities. India's booming job markets have offered new employment opportunities to all sectors of the population. As a result, many marginalized communities have secured well-paying jobs in the service sector, IT industry, and education sector (Banerjee, 2017).

To combat educational backwardness, the Indian government needs to focus on ensuring that all schools, especially those serving marginalized communities, have proper infrastructure, qualified teachers, and inclusive curricula. The literacy rate among Dalit communities has increased over the years due to various government initiatives and programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Right to Education (RTE) Act and Mid-Day Meal program have improved access to education which aims to provide free and compulsory education to all children aged 6-14 years. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate for Scheduled Castes (SC), which includes most Dalit communities, increased from 37.4% in 1991 to 66.1% in 2011. Many youths of marginalized sections are now pursuing higher education and gaining employment in diverse fields such as information technology, healthcare, and management. This has helped them secure better wages jobs moving away from traditional professions such as manual scavenging, street vending, and agricultural labor. Efforts are being made to provide equal opportunities for Dalits to access quality education and skilled development training. Scholarship programs and coaching centre have been established for the educational advancement of the community (Maurya,2018).

The advent of social media, information technology, and increased access to television and the internet has introduced the Dalit communities to a more diverse range of entertainment, news,

and discussions. This exposure has broadened their horizons and influenced their lifestyles and aspirations. The representation of Dalit communities in political institutions has risen substantially in recent years. According to the Election Commission of India, the percentage of elected Scheduled Caste representatives in Parliament has increased from 7.9 % in the 13th Lok Sabha(2004) to 15.9 % in the 17th Lok Sabha(2019).

5. ISSUES & CHALLENGES OF DALIT COMMUNITIES

Dalit communities in India have experienced social, economic, and political exclusion for centuries due to the caste system, which places them at a lower social stratum than the upper castes. This exclusion negatively impacts their quality of life, personal development, and access to opportunities (Salam, 2014). Some of the major issues and challenges faced by Dalit communities in India are;

5.1 Caste-Based Violence and Atrocities

Caste-based violence and atrocities against Dalit communities in India remain a pervasive and troubling issue. Though the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on caste, this violence continues to persist, with over 40,000 such incidents recorded from 2010 to 2019 alone. Caste-based atrocities have proven resilient in a country where caste divisions are deeply entrenched and intimately tied to social and cultural norms. These atrocities often take place in rural regions, where traditional caste-based hierarchies continue to exercise considerable influence. Despite being outlawed, the practice of untouchability is still prevalent in many parts of India. This often leads to violence, including incidents where Dalit individuals are subjected to physical assaults for attempting to access public water sources, schools, or other amenities reserved for upper castes (Mathur, 2021).

5.2 Socio-Cultural and Economic Disparities

Dalit communities in India experience significant socio-cultural and economic disparities that hinder their progress and growth. These disparities stem from a long history of marginalization, stigmatization, and excluded access to resources. Socio-culturally, these people face severe discrimination, humiliation, and untouchability. They are often not allowed to enter places of worship or use public amenities used by upper caste members. Many continue to live in separate, segregated settlements, limiting their access to opportunities for social interaction and personal growth. This social exclusion has also led to lower self-esteem, mental health issues, and a sense of powerlessness among the Dalit communities. Economically, Dalits are among the poorest and most disadvantaged sections of the Indian population. They experience higher unemployment rates, and limited access to education, health care, and other essential services. The lack of basic infrastructure, like clean drinking water and proper sanitation, further exacerbates their economic

vulnerability. In addition, many are engaged in traditional caste-based occupations, which are often demanding, hazardous, or economically unsustainable, offering little room for social mobility or financial stability (Singh&Agarwal, 2018).

5.3 Educational Backwardness

Educational backwardness among Dalit communities in India is a significant issue. Despite the government's efforts to promote education and uplift marginalized sections, the literacy rate of the Scheduled Castes which include the majority of the Dalit population is lower than the national average. The majority of the Dalit people live below the poverty line which makes affording education both private and government a change. Many families struggle to meet basic needs making investing in education difficult. Government schools, particularly in rural areas often lack basic facilities such as proper classrooms, teaching materials, and adequate water and sanitation services. This discourages families from sending their children to school, particularly in the case of girls (Benjamin,2008).

5.4 Inequality in Political Representation

Although the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, political representation for Dalit communities remains limited. This is partly due to the highly competitive nature of Indian politics, where larger caste groups like the so-called forward castes often dominate party systems. Many political parties in India, particularly regional parties, often rely on caste-based politics and form alliances or coalitions with other caste groups. Some political parties have been accused of using Dalit communities as a 'vote bank' meaning they seek to win the support of Dalit voters without offering any meaningful political or social exclusion. This can result in a lack of genuine representation for Dalit communities in political offices and policy-making processes (Kunhaman,2018).

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study it can be concluded that Dalits also known as Scheduled Castes have a long history of being marginalized and discriminated against in India. These communities faced multifaceted issues and challenges that require targeted intervention and long-term commitment from all stakeholders. Addressing the historical and ongoing discrimination, economic inequality, violence, political representation and access to essential resources will help the way for their socio-economic and political inclusion. To tackle these disparities, there is a need for comprehensive policies and programs that prioritize the upliftment of Dalit communities. This includes promoting inclusive education, skill development, and economic opportunities, addressing existing social stigma, and ensuring equal access to essential services and infrastructure. Furthermore, the Indian government should focus on increasing political

representation and participation of the Dalit communities, so their voices can be heard and their right upheld. India can foster a more equitable and inclusive nation that values the diverse contributions and rights of all its citizens.

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