

## CONCEPTUALIZING CASTE, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: CHALLENGES IN THE LIVES OF DALITS

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### *Abstract*

*Caste system is deep rooted in Indian society. It is a societal hierarchical arrangement in which some social groups of the Indian society are considered as superior and others are considered as inferior. Those who consider themselves superior discriminate with others. Not only this, there are certain norms which are set by the society like one cannot marry outside one's caste. In India, the caste system is rigidly followed by Hindus. The people of the lower rank are considered as Shudras or untouchables. Eating food from them or marrying with them is considered as something wrong and against the societal norms. Similarly, this caste system affects every sphere of individuals' lives. Even, casteism is there in formal and informal institutions. The present paper attempts to understand the problems and challenges which Dalits face in their lives. It tried to explore the kind of stigma attached with them. This is a conceptual paper based on the secondary sources which include research papers, different online sites, newspaper reports, books and articles. From this study, it is found that casteism and discrimination is everywhere, even in educational institutions. Due to this, many get psychologically depressed and they feel alienated from the rest of the world which ultimately hampers their progress.*

**Keywords:** *Caste, Discrimination, Stigma, Dalit, Institutions, Untouchables*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Dalits* are the group of individuals who constitute the last class of castes in the *Varnasrama Theory*. This is the old definition of the term *Dalit* as is proposed by different scholars. As per to the Indian Constitution, the *Dalits* are the persons coming under the category of SC's (Scheduled castes). Though, the term *Dalit* would mean not only by one category of caste but it means the person who is exploited, socially, economically and politically from all the domains of life, by the civilizations of the nation. Here, tradition would mean the Brahmanical Indian tradition dominant in the country from ancient times.

Caste-based oppression and discrimination has been continued till these days. This is one of the gravest human rights concerns in the modern world today which is adversely affecting near about 260 million people who are mostly residing in India. Minority groups are badly affected by this discrimination. Dalits are the main sufferers who have been down-trodden since ages. If one goes

back to historical ages, one finds that many movements have been started by people against caste-based discrimination. Dalits are regarded as the descendants of Pre-Aryan Indians who claimed themselves that they had an autonomous and egalitarian culture. Many different persons have made their efforts to improve the Dalits' conditions. Mahatma Gandhi had also tried to improve the status of Dalits and also tried to eliminate the stigma associated with Dalit people. He gave them a name 'Harijans'. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar regarded that caste system is the root cause of untouchability and Dalit is not a caste but it is a group who are in a state of oppression, social disability and who are helpless and poor.

Most of the Dalits do not have faith in in God, religion as proliferated by the Hindu sacred scripture and religious manuscripts. They consider that these traditions have made them slaves. A Dalit is the one who is having the realization of the griefs and struggles of those in the lowermost stratum of the society. The Dalits are usually called by different names like *Adi Dravida*, *Adikarnataka*, *Dasa*, *Atisudra*, *Dasyu*, *Tirukulattar*, *Panchama*, which constitute actually the Depressed Classes of Indian society. Dalit is one who believe in equality, who follows equality and who combats disparity. A Dalit is the follower of Humanism—the ultimate ideology of human beings. The real symbol of contemporary Dalit is '*Change and Revolution*'<sup>i</sup>

The caste system is one of the major threats to the basic rights of life of Indians. It is regarded as the world's largest social hierarchical arrangement and was developed by the Brahmins in order to rule and maintain their hegemony over others. The caste system is divided into four varnas which include Brahmins on the top, then Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, finally at the end Shudras. There is also a fifth category which is out of this varna and comprises of those who are known as Dalits and Untouchables. The work they do is not regarded as pure work and therefore their status in the society is not socially recognized. They are considered as a polluting element for the higher castes.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hans (2013)<sup>ii</sup> argued that Dalits have been exploited and oppressed as well as they are culturally subjugated, and also marginalized politically. The principles of *untouchability* and the notion of *purity and pollution* tells us that Dalits are not allowed to enter into temples, eat with their choice, wear and marry with their own choice. Involvement or their absence is always a matter of concern. Exclusion and Marginalization of Dalits in economic sphere, is sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, yet deplorable.

Bose (2021)<sup>iii</sup> stated that near about 240 million population in India is of Dalits which clearly indicates that 25 percent population belongs to the oppressed, downtrodden and socially exploited category and are oppressed by the higher castes. Since time immemorial, even in modern times, Dalits are not only disadvantaged from basic opportunities but also, they are facing exploitation by the higher caste people. Dalits are poor and socially excluded. Though, they do not have access to basic facilities like housing, clean water, clothing and two times meal. Apart from all these things, they do not have the access to proper educational facilities and therefore they are incapable to get adequate employment opportunities like rest of the people.

Guru (2000)<sup>iv</sup> in his study said that Dalits in India face many kinds of marginalization and the very common among them is political marginalization. This marginalization works at all stages of

the democratic process. Problems of Dalits are at all times made token of appearance in the election manifestos of chief political parties and in addition to this when somehow a Dalit arranged to enter into the political ladder, he/she is given an insignificant position. In many cases, the central cabinet and also in the state cabinet the social welfare ministry is given to a Dalit person or to a woman. The Dalit is not viewed as being capable enough to handle other ministries. This mis-recognition or side-lining of Dalit capabilities have existed from time of Ambedkar, therefore it is not a new phenomenon.

Pathak (2021) <sup>v</sup> argued that discrimination on the basis of caste is very old and complex issue in Indian society. Despite of various legal safeguards and special laws for the safety and protection of Dalits, still their human rights are violated on a massive scale. Various atrocities, extreme inhumane acts are done against Dalits. Dalits are considered as who are below the caste system. They are also known as *Untouchables* and *Outcaste*. The literal meaning of Dalit is *ground down* or *broken*. Mahatma Gandhi called them *Harijans* which means *children of God*. One cannot change his or her caste as per his/her own choice as it is something which is determined by birth and therefore it is hereditary in nature. The caste structure is the base which has formed the social and economic framework for the people of Indian society. Caste system has provided unequal rights to humans as those who are on the top of the ladder enjoy more rights coupled with very less duties whereas those who are at the bottom enjoy the less rights coupled with more duties.

## PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY DALITS

### ***Discrimination with Dalit women***

In India, Dalit women live in both in a society which is divided along caste lines and a highly patriarchal society. They face many challenges and discrimination from being women and Dalit. This makes them a main target of violence and systematically refutes them from freedom and choices. They are considered as easy targets for sexual abuse and other crimes, and they face many challenges to get justice. This pervasive juncture of gender and caste discrimination is the result of severely unfair social, economic, and political power equivalences. Apart from this, Dalit women are also very susceptible to caste-based slavery and involuntary prostitution, face serious problems in access to elementary services, and face prejudices against on multiple grounds in education.

### ***Untouchability***

Untouchability is another practice prevalent among Hindus due to which Dalits face humiliation, discrimination and they are stigmatized in the society. Even, in rural areas, most Dalits live in segregation, away from the houses of upper castes Hindus. They are denied from various access to facilities such as water. There are several places where they are not allowed to fetch water from public wells etc. this clearly depicts an example of untouchability.

### ***Discriminatory Customs***

As part of village customs, Dalits are supposed to give free services at the times of marriage, death or any other functions. During a *Marana festival* in a village of *Karnatka*, Dalits are forced by upper caste Hindus to kill buffalos and drink their blood, after that they have to mix up that blood with the cooked rice and run into the fields without sleepers. Dalits are always supposed to perform menial jobs even they are forced and threatened by upper castes to perform such tasks e.g., cleaning of drainage system, digging of graves and disposal of dead animals and so on.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Landlessness problem***

Our *Krishi Pradhan Desh* is also a *Jaati Pradhan Desh*. If we combine these two phenomena, a poisonous cocktail emerges, which is the reality of the country in the present time, a *Jaatiya-Krishi Pradhan Desh* is responsible for creating more poverty, increased atrocities, and low production. Dalits are not independent in India. Dalits are mostly displaced ones, exiled in their inherited land, travelling just as stateless subjects. The problem of landlessness takes away their various rights including, official, legal and constitutional validity as the Indian. According to the new data issued by the Census of India, 71 percent Dalits are dispossessed labourers who work on others land they do not own. In rural areas, 58.4 percent Dalit families do not have own land at all.<sup>vii</sup>

### ***Illiteracy***

Illiteracy is responsible for Dalits' backwardness. Due to deprivation and poor socio-economic conditions, Dalits are not able to attend school and remained educationally backward. As most of the Dalits are illiterate and they are unaware of the importance of the education, and the protection and safeguards that are given by the Constitution to guarantee social justice. Most young ones stop their education before the completion of their elementary education. After independence, schools have been opened for them but it has not been possible to enrol all Dalit Children in schools. Nowadays, the Dalits are getting awareness from various programmes such as *Saksharatha Andolana*, *Akshara dasoha*, *Vayaskara Shikshana Samithi*, Mid-day meals to the schools.

### ***Health and Nutrition***

Most of Dalit population suffer from malnourishment and protein and energy deficiency. Most of them live in unhygienic conditions due poor-socio-economic background. They are often sufferers of various health problems because they lack drinking water, proper housing and other basic amenities.

### ***Political Disabilities***

The people who are Dalits hardly participate in the political matters. During the British rule, Dalits were having no say in general governance, politics and administration of the country. They were not permitted to hold any public post, and were denied from political rights and representation. After the independence, due to the struggle of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, they were given the right to vote, through the Constitution, political opportunities and rights have been granted to Dalits, but politically they are excluded and yet to become a decisive force.<sup>viii</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, it can be analyzed from the above-mentioned problems that Dalits are in a vulnerable condition and still lagging behind from the rest of the society. Even, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we come across with the number of cases of Dalits' exploitation, violence against Dalit women and untouchability etc. every day. Though, Indian Constitution has given equal rights to all but despite of this inequality exists in our society and people still give importance to one's caste rather than one's achievements. Even after having constitutional provisions to protect the rights of Dalits, they are in a crippled condition. In different parts of the nation, the Dalits are poorly treated by the people of higher caste and therefore still exists a huge barricade among the castes which poses a serious danger to the healthier development of the society. However, one cannot deny the fact that changes have been come in recent times but a lot of things need to be changed

and only then we can imagine our India a caste free country.

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