



THE IDENTITY OF DALITS IN THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract

The identity of the Dalit community has evolved and transcended a lot over the past few centuries. The search for a pure past within which the Dalits had to be placed was the primary struggle for scholars such as Jyotiba Phule, Gopal Baba Valangkar and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The former had placed the Dalits within the constraints of the Hindu Religion. Dr. Ambedkar on the contrary gave them an entirely new discourse by placing them outside the Hindu religion, he was of the opinion that the roots of the Dalit community was in the Buddhists who were subjugated, conquered and dominated by the Aryan Brahmins who invaded their lands.

However, with the introduction of Globalization in the Indian society, one can observe that the dimensions of caste changed dynamically. The opening up of opportunities for the lower caste communities in the employment sector and the introduction of affirmative action policy by the government had uplifted the status of the Dalits in very rudimentary aspects. But, with the onset of Globalization, the Indian caste system found new grounds abroad. Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom started witnessing several instances of caste discrimination among its employees in work places. This particular research paper analyses the place of caste in the era of Globalization.

One begs to ask, if the politics behind caste is still relevant? And if so, how can we theorize the elements of caste politics and the discrimination against the Dalit community in the modern age? Throughout the course of this research paper, an enquiry in understanding the caste system will be made as well. Is the globalized society ascribing to the synthetic theory of caste or are we starting to think of caste as a social reality? This entails a dialectical perspective.

Keywords: Globalization, Synthetic Theory, Dialectical Theory, Caste Politics and Discrimination.

Introduction And Historical Background

Analysing the history and forming a narrative on the Dalits is an elaborate discourse in itself. The same has been attempted by several Indian political thinkers in the past, however in order to fully understand the manner in which the Dalit Identity has transcended over the centuries we are required to reiterate the ideas as instigated by prominent scholars such as Jyothirao Phule, Gopal Vithalnak Valangkar and B.R Ambedhkar.

In order to trace the complex evolutionary history of the Dalit Identity we must first deconstruct the meaning of the term 'Dalit'. The term 'Dalit' in its most basic meaning signifies a 'broken people', 'ground down' or 'broken into many pieces'. Dr. Ambedhkar first used this term in his newspaper 'Bahishkrit Bharat' in the year 1928. The term only entered into the realm of popularity in the 1970s following the infamous Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra (Rao, 2009).

One of the preliminary struggles faced by early Dalit activists in order to represent the Dalit cause was to find a common history which in ways could unite the dispersed lower caste community of India against the Brahmanical hegemony. The categorization of the lower caste communities into a common



identity was in itself a strategy which helped in countering the superstitions of the Hindu religion and opposing ideological indoctrination through the process of rational thought. Jyothibha Phule managed to accomplish the same by placing the lower caste communities within the Shudra-Atishudra category. Jyothibha Phule united the lower caste communities of India at the time in a very brilliant move. Phule managed to represent Orientalist and nationalist fascination with that of the various theories of the conquest of the Aryans (Rao, 2009).

Phule unified the lower castes by antagonizing Brahmanism and thus deriving a positive force from the bravery of the indigenous communities that had stood against the hegemony of the Aryan Brahmins in the past. Phule had brought in the narrative of the Mahars and the Mangs of Maharashtra. Phule recognized the Maha-ari resistance as the strongest movement against the Aryan Brahmins and their hegemony of the past. They had been severely punished for their resistance against Brahmanical domination, the Maha-ari were defenestrated and banished from society. This had pushed them in to extreme poverty, which had in turn forced them to feed on dead carcasses in order to survive. Hence, Phule had essentially conceptualized the Dalit Identity and their subsequent history as a militant struggle against Brahmanical domination which had ended in the defeat and consequent degradation of the Dalits.

Gopal Baba Valangkar also shared similar views as Jyothiba Phule; Valangkar adopted the narrative of a foundational antagonism that existed between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Scholars such as Shivaram Kamble and Valangkar substantiated their argument by citing the example of Dravidian kings such as Ravana and Bali who were once virtuous rulers but were defeated through the use of trickery and were later portrayed as 'Asuras' or Demons in Puranic literature (Rao, 2009).

Gopal Baba Valangkar elaborated the defeat of the Maha-ari by the Aryan Brahmin invaders and was convinced that this narrative of defeat was the primary reason as to the humiliation and the degradation as the cause for the oppression of the lower caste communities. Valangkar even went to the extent of arguing that the Mahadurga famine of 1396 had pushed the Mahar Kshatriyas who at the time had been banished into eating meat in order to survive. This led to severe exclusion of the Mahar Kshatriyas within the religious realm under the Brahmanical state which had an overwhelming presence. However, this particular proposition as instigated by early Dalit activists was contradicted by Dr. B.R Ambedhkar.

Ambedhkar made it his mission to accommodate the Dalits outside the Hindu history, Ambedhkar managed to find a pure past for the Dalits within the constraints of the forgotten Buddhist religion. Ambedhkar was of the opinion that the Aryan Brahmins who had invaded were primarily meat eaters, and had adopted vegetarianism in order to contest the Buddhist religion which was predominant at the time. The Aryan Brahmins according Ambedhkar's perspective also adopted a peaceful being which was once the hallmark of Buddhism. Brahmanism prevailed over Buddhism, and the takeover was supplemented by degrading the existing Buddhists who were meat eaters as being unclean in the Vedic literature. This resulted in the inevitable annihilation of Buddhism and dominance of the Brahmins in the Indian subcontinent (Kumar, 2001).

However, one must note that arriving at such a foundational identity dictates the evolution of the Dalit struggle. How has the Dalit community embraced globalization? Has it result in any sort of empowerment of the community? How can we compare and contrast the same against Ambedhkar's views on 'Capitalism'? All such questions will be dealt with in the course of this paper. The question as to the form of perspective within which we analyze the caste system will also be dealt with. Are we prescribing to a synthetic theory of the Indian caste system, wherein we ignore the hardships faced by



the lower caste communities within the realm of social reality? Or are we accepting a dialectical theory with the help of globalization wherein we understand the social reality of the caste system?

Literature Review

The perspective of Anupama Rao on the identity of the Dalit community from the points of view of several early Dalit activists such as Gopal Baba Valangkar, Jyotirao Phule and B.R Ambedhkar in her Chapter entitled 'Who are the Dalits? The Emergence of a New Political Subject' from the book entitled 'Claiming Power from below' edited by Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus, published in the year 2009. A clearer understanding of the history of the Dalit community in an evolutionary manner was perceived from the works of Anupama Rao.

Gail Omvedt's perspective on capitalism and globalization among the Dalits helped our paper in diving into refined notions of how the Dalits reacted towards the anti-LPG stance. The solution towards the issues of economic inequalities created by globalization through affirmative action policies and how the same affects the Dalit identity was absorbed from his article published in the Economic and Political Weekly in the year 2005 entitled 'Capitalism and Globalization, Dalits and Adivasis'.

From Vivek Kumar's article published in the Indian Anthropologist in the year 2001 entitled 'Globalization and Empowerment of the Dalits in India' an understanding into the constructs of the true meaning of globalization and that of the Dalits were derived. Vivek Kumar's idea on empowerment and the cultural impact that globalization has had on the Dalit community in India opened the metaphorical doors of this research paper to the socio-political inequality faced by the community even after the onset of globalization.

Several news articles helped in the formulation of a statistical idea as to the composition of the Dalit community in the employment sector. This helped in the conclusion of the paper and also accounted for a broader understanding of the impact that LPG has had on the Dalit community.

Research Questions

1. Has capitalism brought about any sort of progress in the status of the Dalit community? And how has this narrative changed from the period of Ambedhkar to the contemporary era?
2. Is globalization the catalyst that furthered inequality in the socio-economic realm against the Dalit community? And how has the same accounted for the issue of caste crossing into the international arena?

Research Objectives

1. To understand the various views that pertains to globalization from the Dalit perspective.
2. In order to understand the magnitude of the social and economic rift created by globalization in the Indian society with respect to caste discrimination.
3. To understand the dynamics of caste discrimination in countries like the United States and to fully grasp the ways in which caste has become a global issue.

Scope of Study: The scope of this research paper is to properly understand the Dalit history, their identity, their relationship with the globalization and how globalization has impacted the Dalit community in the present world order. The question as to whether caste discrimination has seeped itself into countries abroad is also an enquiry made in the course of this paper. An analysis on whether affirmative action policies are implemented in the private sector was dealt with as well.



Methodology

For the purpose of this research paper, various secondary sources were taken. Secondary sources such as articles, books, newspapers and journals were referred which was written by scholars who have articulated their thoughts about the Dalits, and the emerging effects of globalization on the Dalit community was considered in detail.

The Varied Views on Globalization And Capitalism From The Dalit Perspective

In order to make sense of the various facets that revolves around capitalism and globalization from the Dalit perspective we must first understand the dimensions within which capitalism works. One must juxtapose it with the views of prominent Dalit activists such as Ambedhkar and contrast the same with the present Dalit narrative that revolves around the concept of globalization. If one analyzes the Proletariats struggle against Bourgeois in the pretext of capitalism, it in many ways parallels the Dalit struggle against Brahmanism. In the words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels “The history of all existing societies is the history of class struggles”. This can be attributed as the struggle of the Proletariats against the Bourgeois. Similarly if one analyzes Dalit history it has always been a constant and endearing struggle against Brahmanism. This obvious comparison is one of the primary reasons as to why Ambedhkar equates Brahmanism and Capitalism as the two foundational enemies of the Dalit community (Teltumbde, 2011, pp. 10-11).

This was the existing perspective on Capitalism by the Dalit community, the Bourgeois and their dominance had always been compared to the Brahmins and their subsequent dominance and hence causing resentment against the prospect of globalization due to its inherent nature of strengthening the already dominant sections of the population.

Dr. B.R Ambedhkar and his followers had concluded that the influx of capitalism will further undermine the status and the position of the Dalits. This is why Ambedhkar leans towards a socialist ideology for the Dalits. He believed that in many ways socialism can provide the Dalits with a platform that instils equality. Ambedhkar called for the establishment of village societies for the Dalit community, wherein they can be away from the ones that subjugated and undermined them (Teltumbde, 2011).

Keeping this particular view in mind, it can come across as a pleasant surprise when you find contemporary Dalit activists who have been elevated in the hierarchical class system. These are a small proportion of the population, who have managed to twist the arguments of Ambedhkar in order to fit their agendas.

It is commonly claimed that the Dalit community prospered a bit by the means of migration from their villages to urban localities during the onset of globalization in India. However, those who instigate such an argument fail to understand that the Dalit community have always been migrating; especially those Dalits who have little at stake in the villages have constantly been exploring possibilities for better employment. There is little evidence that can substantiate the argument that globalization in itself uplifted the status of the Dalit community.

Then why is there such noise on the supposed positive impact of globalization on the Dalit community? In order to fully understand as to whether or not Dalits are actively involved in the progress as instigated by Capitalism one must compare and contrast the involvement of the Dalit community as against the Non-Dalit population.

When one analyzes in such a way we understand that it is due to the presence of a handful of Dalit capitalists which might be some hundred odd individuals in a hefty bulk of One Hundred and Seventy



million other people who are involved in business establishments which account for the logical fallacy that globalization has elated the status of the Dalits. The apparent cumulative value of the same can be compared to a droplet in the vast ocean of the corporate world.

On the basis of this it can be argued that the 19% of Dalit individuals who reside in Urban areas who themselves are the proponents of this false narrative that the Dalits have “arrived” at the penultimate platform of social and economic equality. These urban upwardly mobile Dalit individuals resent and detest the stereotypical elucidation of the Dalit community and aspire to be treated as a group that is in the upper strata (Teltumbde, 2011).

As a result of the same they are part of several international conferences and had even planned on organizing a so called ‘March for Dalit Capitalism’ in the year 2005, in which they wished to clothe five thousand Dalit individuals in three-piece leather suits with an umbrella in their hands in Delhi in order to demonstrate their progress. The failure to move this agenda forward shows how this tiny section of Urban Dalits who have moved forward in life cannot dictate terms to the 81% who still suffer from the inaccessibility to basic needs and facilities and who sink deep down in the fringes of poverty and social injustice.

The ‘Catalysts’ That Further The Social Inequality On The Basis Of Caste Discrimination In India And Abroad

Surely the title of this chapter might seem as being anti Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization, however we’d wish to contest and bring out the argument that it is not globalization in itself that needs to be held accountable for the upsurge of economic and socio-political inequality but the way in which globalization has been absorbed in to our society. In order to justify the statements given above a reference will be made to Gail Omvedt.

The last thing anyone would want is to isolate the Dalit community away from the world system. The requirement of the hour is to make provisions for the Dalit community in the field of globalization. How can one do so? Gail Omvedt in his perspective calls for an efficient affirmative action policy within the private sector (Omvedt, 2005).

The primary issue in treating globalization as the sole perpetrator responsible is that it falls apart rather too soon once we delve deep into statistics. As Omvedt has concluded there are several missing links, open contradictions and various unproved statements that tend to demolish this particular line of thought. The common line of reference is that the market is spreading everywhere and that the same is increasing the number if lay men and women that are being excluded as well as the argument that poverty is increasing. However this stream of thought is contradictory in its nature, if the market in itself is spreading that could only mean that the purchasing power of the individual is on the rise hence explaining the spread of the market. However, if poverty is on the rise then the same could not account for the increase in the purchasing power of the individual. Gail’s argument lies in the fact that people require to be employed in order to buy anything that comes into the market (Omvedt, 2005). This argument can be refuted with a simple line of thought, the availability of jobs does not necessarily account for progress in any given society. Job security is what needs to be given emphasis.

The bourgeois capitalists who are dominated by individuals from the upper-caste do not even take the time to address the issue of affirmative action in the private sector let alone job security of a Dalit individual. On the flip side of that coin when we analyze the multinational capitalists from countries such as the United States we observe that they have come to live with affirmative action policies. The



upper-caste capitalists have resolved themselves to articulate the idea of 'Merit' in order to keep the Dalits away from accessing reservations in the private sector. Although Liberalization, Globalization and Privatization has not directly accounted for the increase in inequality with respect to the situation of Dalit individuals in the country, it must be accepted that it has acted as catalysts that have furthered the element of inequality which was once only in the socio-political realm but now was directed towards the economic realm as well (Omvedt, 2005).

The numerous pleas for extending the existing Discriminatory Law Review in order to accommodate legislations against cases of caste discrimination in the United Kingdom, (Waughray, 2009), the reports of several instances of discrimination against individuals from the lower caste communities in companies such as CISCO in the United States, instances of caste violence and discrimination in South Asian countries tends to prove as to how the issue of discrimination on the basis of Caste has taken a global dimension. The failure of CISCO to prevent the discrimination against an engineer from the Dalit community in San Jose from two Indian co-workers in particular requires needs to be illuminated. The lawsuit that was filed against CISCO by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing faced heavy backlash from Indian workers in the year 2020. This shows the extent as to how discrimination against Dalit individuals is in many ways normalized even in countries other than our own. The denial of there being caste discrimination in the United States by many Non-Residential Indians does not account for instances as elucidated above (Sarkar, 2020).

It is in fact an irony to see how most of these upper-caste employees in many of the Tech companies in the United States stand in support of the Black Lives Matter movement but continue to suppress their Indian co-workers due to their lower caste backgrounds. The problem arises due to the fact that caste is not being treated as a global issue; it is high time that it is done so. Considering the magnitude of our population and its impact factor on the total population of the world, and with globalization it is not just people that cross countries but conservative and parochial ideologies find their ways to seep in to other state nations.

So the question arises as to what exactly has globalization provided for the Dalit community? It has provided them with exposure to more employment opportunities, this cannot be denied, but can this be called as progress? We conclude that it is a big 'No'. Who are the Dalits in the era of the supposed progressive societal culture? The Dalit community is still one of the most oppressed groups in terms of their socio-political and economic status. On the basis of the data as collected from the NSS-PLF conducted in the years 2018 and 2019 the number of informal workers who had no jobs and social security was the highest in the Scheduled Caste group accounting for almost 84% of the total number of individuals in the informal sector. The total number of SC wage workers in the non-farming sector who had either no contracts or contracts only for a year was 89% which was the highest in the group and was followed by the Scheduled Tribes at around 87%. The average income of an informal worker from the Scheduled Caste category was a meagre Rs. 269, with the national average being Rs. 315 and the average earnings of the higher castes being Rs. 357 (Thorat, 2022).

The average per-capita consumption expenditure on a monthly basis was the lowest for the SCs with just Rs. 1717 while that of the higher castes was Rs. 2720. An examination of the NSS data of the years 2017 and 2018 showed that discrimination on the basis of caste accounted for about 70% of difference in the levels of employment among the Scheduled Castes and the higher castes in specific jobs (Thorat, 2022). There is a stark economic difference that persists between the lower caste communities and the higher castes on top of the already existing social rift. The facets of globalization has impacted the lives of the Dalits, but the debate as to whether or not it has done the same in a positive manner is a question



that may remain unanswered. The mistreatment of the Dalit community, although eradicated from the national level still flourishes at the local level. We may try to run away from the harsh reality that regardless of the strenuous efforts of Dalit activists such as Ambedhkar the status and identity of the Dalits remains the same. An oppressed community, who are deprived of social and economic equality, a community who still strives to thrive in the climate of rightist capitalist forces that for the most part intentionally or perhaps unintentionally work against them.

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