



EXAMINATION OF DALIT SOCIAL STATUS IN ODISHA

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Abstract

Indian is a largest democratic state in the world. There are multi castes, classes, traditions, culture, languages, habits, feast and festivals around the country. Though, we stand together in the name of India being an Indian still then division are there among us on the basis of caste. Indian Society is a caste ridden society since Vedic Civilization. Now we are living in the 21st century at the age of science and technology is running towards rapid development. Still then we are living and practicing caste system in our daily life and in this caste hierarchy Shudra are lowest in the social ladder where Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are higher position. The Shudra of different communities are known as Dalits in the 19th century when Jyotirao Phule, the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary used it to describe the Shudra as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste ridden society. The Shudra known as “asprushya”, impure, polluted, “antyaja”, panchama, “hinajati”, “chandala”, “mlechha” etc. and are referred to as depressed classes, backward classes, exterior castes, harijans and outcastes. Though Indian Constitution provides equality and equal treatment among the Indians still then discriminations are there among themselves. Shudras are lower caste and oppressed, depressed as a Shudra, as a poor and as a poor Shudra in the society. In this paper an effort has been made to determine the social status of Dalits in Odisha by examining various social aspects.

Key Words: Dalit, Untouchables, Hindu, Shudra, Discrimination.

Introduction

Indian Caste system is characterized by social stratification and social hierarchy. Each caste is endogamous and has a hereditary occupational specialization. The Caste enjoys a definite status and position in the stratification and hierarchic system. So far as the ritual status is concerned, the Brahman occupies the highest position in the caste hierarchy and the so called untouchables are in the lowest run traditionally. The Varna order with the twice-born categories such as the Brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and the Sudra, as once-born recognized untouchables as avarna/asavarna in the traditional sense. The erstwhile untouchables are regarded as “asprushya”, impure, polluted, “antyaja”, panchama, “hinajati”, “chandala”, “mlechha” etc. and are referred to as depressed classes, backward classes, exterior castes, harijans and outcastes etc. known as Dalit.

Main Context

The last two hundred years have seen the emergence of a new identity among the 200 million people who have been considered “outcaste” or “untouchables”. Today they call themselves “Dalit”. The term “Dalit” has been derived from the Sanskrit root “Dall” which means to crack, open and split.¹ The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called outcastes, untouchables, pariars, panchamas, atisudra, avarnas, antyajaa and namasudra. The present usage of the term “Dalit” goes back to the 19th century when Jyotirao Phule, the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary used it to describe the outcastes and untouchable as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society.² The Dalits numbered about sixty million out of three hundred million Hindus. That is to say very nearly twenty percent of Hindustan is untouchables.³ M.K.Gandhi coined the word “Harijan”, translated roughly as “Children of God”, to identify the former untouchables. The terms Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) are the official terms used in Indian Government document to identify former “untouchables” and tribes.

An important feature of the population of Odisha is its component of the weaker sections comprising the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes. The consisting of 62 tribes account for 22.15 per cent and the later comprising 93 castes make up for 16.12 per cent of the total population. The scheduled tribes are concentrated in order of density in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Keonjhar and Phulbani. The scheduled castes are widely distributed in all the districts of the state but are found in greater number in Phulbani district followed by the districts of Balasore and Cuttack. Among the states of India, Odisha has the largest percentage of scheduled tribes next only to four others, namely Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura. The scheduled tribe and scheduled caste population in Odisha constituting 38.25 percent of the state population is much higher than the country’s average of 23.5 percent. Major per cent peoples in Odisha are ST/SC composed social life with their own identity. Though, it is a SC/ST based society still then it is not free from Hindu caste ridden society. About 87 percent of Odisha’s population lives in villages. The districts of Phulbani, Mayurbhanj and Kalahandi are mostly rural having a rural population of about 94 per cent in average.



Dalits situation in villages are much degraded one. In every aspects of Dalits life they are depressed and suppressed. Violence against women is high in Odisha. The *National Crime Records Bureau* reported 6,249 cases of violence against women, including 799 rape cases, 547 abduction cases, 334 dowry deaths and 1671 cases of cruelty by husband and relatives among other in Odisha during 2005. Women were killed on the charges of being witches. Most of these crimes were done against Dalit women. The Dalits, who constituted 16.53 % of the state's total population, are neglected a lot. About 52.30% of the Dalits live below the poverty line. The National Crime Records Bureau reported 1439 cases of crimes against the Dalits in Odisha. Their houses burnt and they are denying access to public places and services such as community tube-well and temples. Dalit women are often subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. On 19th Sept.2005, a group of Dalit women belonging to the barber community were reportedly dragged out of their houses and paraded naked on streets by upper-caste khandayat community in Bhubanapati village in Puri district. The women had been punished as their husbands refused to wash the feet of a bridegroom and other members of the barati during an upper-caste marriage held in July 2005. In Kendrapara district Dalit women applying for the job of cooks in schools under the mid-day meal scheme were allegedly turned away by the school authorities for the fear that upper caste students might not take the food cooked by Dalits. Since early times Varnasramadharma has been the most deep rooted and outstanding feature of the Odishan Hindu society. In fact, this has been the corner stone in the magnificent edifice of the Hindu social structure since time immemorial.⁵ The earliest mention of the four-fold classification is made the purusasukta of Rig Veda, where the four Varnas are said to emanate from the sacrifice of the primeval Being.⁶ They are named Brahmana, Rajanya(Later known as Kshatriyas), Vaishyas and Shudra. The status of Shudra was extremely low and they did not even enjoy the freedom of movement. They were forbidden to recite the Vedas.⁷ The "Dalit" indicates the broken or untouchables or outcastes people of the lowest of four ladder society in India but particularly it signifies to the SC peoples of all communities. In Odisha, there are 93 community comes under SC groups to whom the term "Dalit" has been applicable on the basis of their social status. Major Dalit communities in Odisha are Pano, Dewar, Dhoba, Ganda, Kandara and Bauri. The Dalits number is 60,82, 063 from all communities of SCs in Odisha comprises 30,73,278 male and 30,08,785 female according census report of India 2001.⁸ In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, as any involving leatherwork, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste. Occupation of the Dalits have been categorised similar to that of respondents; that is low, medium and high and in addition, two more categories-very low and lowest have been created.⁹ Dalits of Odisha are divided into two groups like touchable and non-touchable. The non-touchable of these two categories include jobs which have mentioned above. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual, and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. Discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas in private sphere; in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. Dalits are the lowest members of Hindu caste system in Odisha. They undertake occupations that the rest of Odishan society found filthy and embarrassing and also receive ill-treatment from the members of the higher castes, particularly from Brahmins. In rural areas of Odishan society it is seen that the Brahmins would have to bathe if a Dalit shadow fell on them, would not eat food prepared by Dalits and would not drink from the same wells as Dalits. The news was published in the "The Times of India" on April 18th 2011 as follows-kendrapara:An Idol of Hanuman was washed by some upper caste people in Kendrapara's kanipada village after it was touched by some Dalits. During the Hanuman Jayanti celebration on Thursday, 14th April, 2011, Dalits came to worship the deity. Some of them touched the idol while offering Puja. A victim named Prasant Mallick aged about 26, a Dalit of village Kanipada protested and said that the upper caste people abused and threatened not to touch the deity again. In kanipada upper caste persons don't allow the Dalit people to enter the Hanuman temple, said Ashok mallick, a Dalit leader and the president of the district Dalit Manch. Four years back, some Dalits were not allowed to enter the Jagannath temple in Kereragada in Kendrapara district by the temple authority for which Dalits filed a case against the temple authority before the High Court.¹⁰ Even in educational institutions discriminations are happening till the date. News is published in "The Times of India" on 25th April, 2011 that the Dalit children at a school in Jagatsinghpur district do not know where they went wrong with their studies because teachers refused to check their notebook. "Ame achut(we are considered untouchable), the teachers refuse to touch our books and our home work is never corrected," said Bijaya Mallick, a student of class IV at the school at Keutapala in Balikuda Block. "If we even touch our teachers by mistake, they scold us for polluting them," he added.¹¹

Generally the Dalits live together in a separate ward which is usually located at the outskirts of the main hamlet or village where upper caste men live. The stigma of untouchability which is attached to them deprives them of using water from the same source used by higher caste groups in the villages. The influential and established higher caste group never allows the Dalits to take water from the existing tube-well and wells in the villages. Thus they face lot of problems in getting drinking water. They are scared to use wells and tube-wells as sometimes it brings about confrontations with other persons of upper castes. They use water from the tanks and Nala (Small River) which adversely affects their health. Sometimes they take bath in the water lagged in the paddy land. Somehow they manage during the rainy season but in summer when the Pond and Nalas dry off, they face difficulties.¹²



In rural Odisha Dalits have been murdered for proposing to marry somebody further up the social ladder, barred from temples, forced into bonded labour and made to carry human waste from the homes of high-caste Hindus. In the cities, where it is easier to hinge one's name and slip into the crowd, Dalits say economic exclusion is now the biggest issue. Dalits maintain their life by wage-earning, excepting a few households, who depend on cultivation and agricultural labour. Major portion of their annual income comes from agricultural labour. Almost all households derive income by adopting agricultural labour as main or subsidiary occupation. Thus it is appropriate to consider agricultural labour as their main occupation. Besides wage-earning and cultivation, they also earn through other activities, like drum –beating, small business in nearby weekly markets, rickshaw pulling and engaging themselves in trading animals like cow, buffalo, bullock etc. Some of them also collect raw hides and supply them to tanners through middlemen.¹³ The majority from the Shudra castes as marginal or small farmers or artisans labouring in the Jajmani-balutedari(client-patron) system is variously exploited and is poor. A minority of them as big farmers and middle farmers were well off. Some of them were vested with the traditional powers of village administrators. These people of the farmer castes came to do the role of exploiter in the village setting. All the castes under this generic Shudra caste group were not well off economically and socially equal. Many of them the artisan and service castes were as poor as Dalits and lay at various rungs in the caste hierarchy. However, they could be bracketed together socially in caste terms and economically as farmers as most of them had land. The caste divisions between them were really imperceptible in hierarchical terms. In relation to Dalits however they were placed socially and economically clearly apart as the caste Hindus.

Trafficking was rampant in Odisha. A study conducted by the Bhubaneswar based *Institute of Socio-Economic Development* in collaboration with *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW)* revealed that the holy place of Puri remained the main destination of victims of trafficking with 43.83 per cent, followed by capital city Bhubaneswar with 30%. The study covered 13 out of the state's 30 districts and identified 559 cases of trafficking from 275 villages in 83 blocks under 21 districts found major per cent of Dalits. Historically, all the Dalit castes are not economically equal. Only adult male members are the earning members whereas adult female perform the domestic work of the family.¹⁴ Most of them had a specific caste calling and so had a reason to perceive a stake in the system. But there was a caste engaged to do low skilled miscellaneous village jobs, by virtue of which it came to be relatively more populous and remained economically, most vulnerable. There is enough evidence that the Dalit castes also initially made common cause with this anti-caste movement. But, with the advent of parliamentary electoral politics the ruling class could easily engineer their detachment from the Dalit mainstream movement. Later, the contradiction between the middle caste hegemony and the Dalit struggle accentuated this division and put a cup on the prospects of Dalit unity.

This debacle embodied a larger debate relating to class vs. Caste and the concomitant question of how to wage class struggle and also how to annihilate castes. In so far as the working class in Odisha collectively come from the Dalit and Shudra castes, it is important that they come together to become a class. In the same manner, the question of annihilation of castes is intimately linked to the coming together of the Dalits and lower-rung Shudra castes against the upper caste hegemony in every sphere of power.

It has largely disappeared in urban areas and in the public sphere. Some Dalits have successfully integrated into urban Odishan society where caste origins are less obvious and less important in public life. In rural Odisha, however, caste origins are more readily apparent and Dalits often remain excluded from local religious life, though some qualitative evidence suggests that its severity is fast diminishing. Although, article 17 of the Indian Constitution banned untouchability in 1950, Dalits still suffer widespread discrimination and mistreatment. While the Indian Constitution has made special provisions for the social and economic uplift of the Dalits, comprising the so-called scheduled castes and tribes in order to enable them to achieve upward social mobility, these concessions are limited to only those Dalits who remain Hindus. There is a demand among the Dalits who have converted to other religions that the statutory benefits should be extended to them as well, to overcome and bring closure to historical injustice.¹⁵

Local law enforcement personnel often refuse to document, investigate and respond adequately to Dalits' complaints. Upper caste members often threaten and assault Dalits who dare protest against their mistreatment. The traditional practices of segregation between upper castes and Dalits are continuing in Odisha. The Dalits of Odisha financially very poor even after establishment of the industries both large and small units during the second and third five-year plans. In spite of the rapid growth of industrialization in the state, Odisha remain at the bottom of economic progress in the country.¹⁶

India's Constitution abolished "untouchability", meaning that the dominant castes could no longer legally force Dalits to perform any "polluting" occupation. Yet sweeping, scavenging and leatherwork are still the monopoly of the scheduled castes, whose members are threatened with physical abuse and social boycotts for refusing to perform demeaning tasks.



Migration and the anonymity urban environment have in some cases resulted in upward occupational mobility among Dalits, but the majority continues to perform their traditional functions. A lack of training and education as well as discrimination in seeking other forms of employment has kept these traditions and their hereditary nature alive. In the 19th century Odishan society where agriculture presented the main facet of economic output, the peasant suffered from unforeseen fluctuation of weather leading to crop failure, starvation and high mortality¹⁷ among the Dalits. Dalits in Odisha, as elsewhere, have been and still continue to be downtrodden and oppressed because of their repression by the caste system. Predominantly rural and illiterate, they have become one of the most exploited peripheral groups in the society. Over the years, they have been living in sub-human conditions and suffer economic exploitation, cultural subjugation and political powerlessness. A report prepared by the Harijan Sevak Sangha in 1978, which is still relevant, highlights the existential conditions of Dalits in Odisha. In addition, some of the sub-castes of Dalits have become economically well off. Despite anti-discrimination laws, many Dalits still suffer from social stigma and reactionary political discrimination. Indian law and Constitution does not discriminate against Dalits.¹⁸ In keeping with the secular, democratic principles that founded the nation.¹⁹

Conclusion

Caste discrimination cannot end without concrete social, educational and economic changes. The irony is that Dalits, comprising 16% of India's population suffer from a dominance of the upper castes that control not only social, economic and political power in the country but even knowledge and opinion. Even the personal experience of being discriminated against does not become an issue unless permitted by the experts and the state. To disbelieve them is a necessary precondition for Dalit assertion. The Dalits have been in dark in exercising their political rights viz. the denial of rights to contest the village local body election. Government must take steps to improve financial and educational level of Dalits and as well as higher castes people should accept Shudra at par with them by removing age old caste system.

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