Socio- cultural status of Dalits in India

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Abstract

The present paper is about the socio cultural status of the Dalits in India. Originally untouchables were termed as *Harijans* and *Dalits*. But with the time the term Dalit expanded its fold and started covering many non- dalit castes as well. Natural environment and traditional values of dalits are being hammered in the name of progress and development. Any system, which allows greed to grow and selfishness to spread is a rigorous threat to human existence. This growing tendency, on the other hand, had badly influenced dalits' life and culture. Eventually, a new culture of westernization and modernization has emerged within the last few decades breaking the community life and cultural identity of masses. The word "change" or "progress" in Literature and culture reminds us the writers, who make accomplish the change to common people. If a person became a writer means, he stands beyond illiteracy and ignorance. When he starts his journey of writing, almost he is subjected to culturalization. For this culturalized person their natural environment and traditional values may seem senseless. This kind of evolution is a great threat to the original culture. Globalisation, privatization, industrialization and education brought two kinds of changes in dalit life culture and literature. One is, in this process, they may lost their original culture. Another one is, it is creating a big gap between the educated and un-educated dalits. In the context of traditional Hindu society , dalit status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure such as any involving leather work butchering, or removal of rubbish animal carcasses and waste. Dalits worked as manual labourers cleaning streets latrines and sewers. 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. It's not just limited to a certain section of the society. Often, top officials who are dalits are offended and humiliated with caste slurs. Sometimes, Ambedkar is abused too through destruction of objects related to him. There is hatred against dalits and that is often promoted through words and visuals. This issue is unabated.

Key- words- Dalit, culture, status, Community, tradition.

Literature is one aspect of culture. The importance of literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs and the purpose of literature is clear only when the reader understands and accepts the culture on which the literature is based. Culture, being a main source of literature, influences many writers and thinkers. There is close relationship between culture and literature. Human life is incomplete and impracticable without cultural , which is the essence of human decorum. In the past people lived together in community. They had true feeling of love, caring, sharing and Co-operation towards their fellow beings. Their life was also influenced by natural factors like blowing wind, flowing water, songs of birds, voice of animals and other natural phenomena. Thus, they developed the use of a mixture of various sounds to signify different things. In a course of time, this could have led to the evolution of language and

music. During this period consciously or unconsciously, a Life style and culture evolved in ways that were unique to each little community. Step by step, with the passage of time, cast and the skills became the profession and monopoly of certain communities. For example the Brahmins as teachers, kshyatrias as warriors, Vaishyas as traders and Shudras as servants. There was of course another set of people who were not even preferred within the Varna structure and they were the Avarnas. Under The hegemony of Brahmins and other upper caste Hindus, the Avarnas and Shudras were grateful to them in every aspect.

The human history began with the endless struggle between the two opposing forces: that is between the exploiters and the exploited, the rulers and the ruled, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed and between the colonizers and the colonized. Moreover the powerful group attempts to control and exploit the less powerful group by using all its resources in order to preserve its own interests. The state power and the organised religion forced on them social, cultural and mental restrictions through superstitions, myths and physical punishments. Because of the less significant, ugly and unhealthy nature of their work, their physical contact was strictly avoided. Even their shadow was considered as an evil and polluting force by the higher castes. The exclusion of the untouchables from the centre of the social life of the village to its periphery deprived them of their dignity and self respect. Their peripheral and 'Othered' existence was surrounded by helplessness, unattractiveness, nastiness, ignorance and poverty. The high castes assigned nasty, menial and fruitless tasks such as scavenging carrying and disposing of the dead bodies. They were also required to act as Hangmen. Any deviation from these prescribed duties entailed dreadful physical punishments for them. In return for their services the untouchables were favored with the stale food and the leftovers. The most horrible, brutal and cruel example of social injustice was the practice of forcing them to tie an earthen pot around their neck and a broom at the back in order to save the village roads from getting defiled and polluted through their infectious sputum and footprints. To cap it all, even the potable water was not easily accessible to them as they had to depend upon the kindness of the higher castes to favour them with the drinking water.

The years of depression, poverty, unawareness, slavish mind- set and economic dependence gradually eliminated a desire for any kind of freedom from the collective consciousness of untouchables. It was due to the repressive socio-cultural state apparatus, their self esteem for identity was replaced by self hatred. Their consciousness was colonized by the socio- political and socio- cultural discourse which conditioned their minds as passive receivers and slaves of the system. As a result of this conditioning they began to look at themselves as the high caste people would do, and in the course of time they Lost sense of their "Self" and will to fight .In general one can say that being a Brahmin means that you are more privileged. This can mean having a good education and accordingly , a more powerful position in the society. Being born as a Dalit you will be less off and because of less education you will have a less good job. In daily life, it has a lot of consequences of being a Dalit .The historiographers find it complicated to locate genesis of the concept of caste and untouchability in chronological and spatial terms in the historical antiquity of India's' past as there is not much of accurate and archival record of social cultural correspondence. The archaeological and sociological sources are barely sufficient to address the problem.

Though political and economic influence was accountable for a prestigious social and religious standing of community member, yet the system had an inherent lacunae that did not allow a well to-do untouchable to aspire for a high ritual position and nor could a poor Brahmin was forced to occupy a lower ritual position in the hierarchy. In the Indian socio- cultural structure castes are invariant and timeless categories in the sense that castes are determinants of one's position in the hierarchy. Even today, a person's birth into a particular caste-fold prevents him from marrying over to the caste of his choice or from marrying a spouse from another caste. These cast stereotypes were accorded religious sanction through Hinduism. The Hinduism emphasizes that one's actions in the present life determine his or her status and happiness in the next life. This kind of postulation strengthened the existing stereotypes and spared little scope for polarization. As a result of this, Hinduism tended to become a monolithic ideology of life. Its belief in rebirth and next life made it abstract and other worldly. This provided higher castes with an excuse to perpetuate social discrimination to further their own interests at the cost of the untouchables.

After half a century of independence even the educated among the Dalits are not free to get a house for rent of their choice to live in. Most Hindus will avoid having a Dalit to prepare their food, because they fear becoming polluted. The government has made reservations for Dalits so that they can enter into jobs in public sector, parliamentary state assemblies and universities. This reservation, however, makes them even more vulnerable in the society. We have come a long way, but nothing much has changed. Now we have two classes in the country. One, who wants to continue with the oppressive social order by social dominance because it suits their social status. The other class is the Dalits and the tribals who want to break this social order to bring in constitutional equality in reality. There is a third class – the one of passive urban watchers who are not just bothered about any social change , but who occasionally squeak and scream against Ambedkar and reservations.

This fight for equality is going to define the 21st century India for us, whatever might be the social and economical proficiency we achieve. Being a Dalit today is an existential question.

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