

THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND THE DALITS QUESTION IN INDIA

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(Abstract)

The Dalits are the downtrodden or oppressed people. Those are previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes, and Harijans. These days they increasingly adopting the term 'Dalit' as a name for themselves. They are the lowest members of the Hindu Caste/Social system in India. The caste system is a Hindu hierarchical class structure with its roots in India dating back thousands of years. To understand the Dalits questions in India, understanding of the Hindu social system is very important. The Hindu social system itself promotes social exclusion. The development of the concept of 'social exclusion' can be traced back soon after the American and French revolution. The ideology of freedom, justice, equality and fraternity became the dominant ideology after the revolution and that lead to develop the concept of 'social exclusion'. But it became the proper shape in the later part of 20th century only.

Thus, the paper tries to give a fair idea about the concept of 'social exclusion' and its reference to the conditions of the Dalits in India. It will also try to analyse the Hindu Caste system and its relevance to the Dalits questions in India. A brief discussion on the Dalits movement and their present condition in India will also be focused in the paper.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, Hindu Caste system, Caste Discrimination, Dalits Question and Dalits Movement etc.

INTRODUCTION:

The Dalits are the broken, downtrodden or oppressed people. Those are previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes, and Harijans. These days they increasingly adopting the term 'Dalit' as a name for themselves. They are the lowest members of the Hindu Caste/Social system in India. The Caste system is a Hindu hierarchical class structure with its roots in India dating back thousands of years.

The term 'Social exclusion' was first born in Western Europe, predominantly in France in the 1970s to tackle the increasingly crises of Industrial capitalism in the context of a welfare state. Social exclusion is a process by which certain people or group of people are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age and migrant status. Discrimination occurs in public institutions, such as the legal system, education and health services, as well as social institutions like the household.

The Hindu Caste/Social system itself excluded some of its members to access some basic social rights like access to power, status, wealth and income and thus giving fuels to the Social exclusion in India. The deep rooted caste system not only debar the some of its members to access the right to be the full member of the society; but it also nullifies even the Human rights of the some castes. There are a number of groups of the people, who are being deprived to get their full membership in the Indian Social system. We can take the example of the Dalits, Tribal, Minorities, Women and Children etc. These groups are discriminated in name of

caste, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, language etc. This continued for ages in the society and continued in the post independent Indian society as well.

Thus, the paper tries to give a fair idea about the meaning and term of 'social exclusion' and its reference to the conditions of the Dalits in India. It will also try to analyse the Hindu Caste /Social system and its relevance to the Dalits questions in India. A brief discussion on the Dalits movement and their present condition in India will also be focused in the paper.

THE DALITS IN INDIA:

The Dalits are a particular caste group found in South Asia, largely in India and Nepal, where the manifestation of their social exclusion is very similar. Despite certain measures, the issues surrounding the Dalits are still embedded deep in the social structure and the psychology of both institutions and individuals [Eimar Barr, Susan Durston Rob, Jenkins, Eriko Onoda and Anjali Pradhan (2007)]. Hindu Caste system in India assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu beliefs. Traditionally, there are four principal castes i.e. Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and one category of the people who fall outside the caste system—the Dalits. As members of the lowest rank of Indian society, the Dalits face discrimination at almost every level. The discrimination against the Dalits is especially significant because of the number of the people affected. According to the Census of India 2001, there are approximately 167 million of the Dalit populations in India, constituting over 16.2% percent of the total population in India. In that Census of India, the state of Punjab had the highest proportion of about 29% of the Dalit population in the state and the state of Mizoram had the lowest at nearly zero (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION:

The concept of social exclusion essentially refers to the processes through which groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live [Thorat, 2007]. The development of the concept 'Social exclusion' can be traced back soon after the American and French revolution. The ideology of freedom, justice, equality and fraternity became the dominant ideology after the revolution and that lead to develop the concept of 'social exclusion'. But it became the proper shape in the later part of 20th century only [Abdul Kalam Azad (2013)]. In fact the term was first coined by Rene Lenior of France in the 1970s. He published his famous book "*Les Exclus*" which means 'excluded'. Lenoir in his book identified the marginalized groups like poor, handicapped, suicidal people, elderly people, abused children and drug addicted etc. are included as the socially excluded groups in the society. Then, the concept 'Social exclusion' had received popularity in France. According to H. Silver "Social exclusion describes a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status or where they live". A D Haan in his article "Social Exclusion: Towards a holistic Understanding of Deprivation" point out another key dimension of the social exclusion perspective, as we understand that it is relational, deriving from social relations, invariably founded on differences in status or power [A D Haan (1998)]. According to Beall and Clert "Social exclusion relates to the alienation or disenfranchisement of certain people within a society. It is often connected to a person's social class, educational status and living standards and how these might affect their access to various opportunities. It also applies to some degree to the disabled, to minority men and women of all races, and to the elderly. Anyone who deviates in any perceived way from the norm of a population can become subject to common forms of social exclusion. Social exclusion is about the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society...or to realise their full potential." [Beall and Clert (2000)]. Thus from the above definitions given by different scholars regarding the concept of the Social exclusion it can be concluded that Social exclusion is the denial of equal opportunities imposed by certain groups

of society on others, leading to the incapability of an individual to share their basic political, economic and social rights which were performing in the society.

THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN INDIAN SOCIETY:

In Europe, the concept of social exclusion has generally been concerned with social problems in the labour market thrown up by economic restructuring. But this concept of social exclusion discourse in India is different from Europe. In India, this concept is mainly concerned with the backdrop system of Caste/Social system that prevails since about three millennia ago. This caste system practice has dominated the Indian sub-continent from long epoch and it is also the most comprehensive and intolerable of all exclusionary systems. Caste-exclusions are precisely followed in Indian traditional society. Membership and status are determined by birth; there is a hierarchy of social preference among the castes; there are restrictions on social and cultural intercourse between castes; castes are segregated and stratified with regard to civil and religious rights; occupations are caste determined with relatively little choice allowed; restrictions on marriage outside one's sub-caste etc. all which were help in maintaining the system.

Historically, the caste system has regulated the social and economic life of the people in India. The organisational scheme of the caste system is based on the division of people into social groups (or castes) in which the civil, cultural and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary. The assignment of civil, cultural and economic rights is therefore unequal and hierarchical. The most important feature of the caste system, however, is that it provides for a regulatory mechanism to enforce social and economic organisation through the instruments of social ostracism (or social and economic penalties), and reinforces it further with justification and support from philosophical elements in the Hindu religion [S. Thorat (2008)].

The deep rooted caste system not only debar the some of its members to access the right to be the full member of the society; but it also nullifies even the Human rights of the some castes. There are a number of groups of the people, who are being deprived to get their full membership in the Indian Social system. We can take the example of the Dalits, Tribal, Minorities, Women and Children etc. These groups are discriminated in name of caste, race, ethnicity, religion, gender and language etc. This system continued for the ages in the society and continued in the post independent Indian society as well. Under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar certain measures were taken while adopting the constitution of independent India to mitigate the menace of caste system and thus social exclusion. Until the Constitution came into force in 1950, exclusion was enforced primarily by the traditional caste-based social order. This practice was legally abolished in the 1950s, but it is still continued in India.

THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND THE DALITS IN INDIA:

Hindu Caste/Social system in India assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu beliefs. Traditionally, there are four principal castes i.e. Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and one category of the people who fall outside the Caste system—the Dalits (untouchables). As members of the lowest rank of Hindu society, the Dalits face discrimination at almost every level. They are being dominated by the upper caste Hindu in India for long epochs. To understand the Dalit questions in India, understanding of the Hindu Social system is very important. The Hindu Social system itself promotes social exclusion. According to G. S. Ghurye “the indigenous non Aryan races were subdued by the Aryan conquerors and conquered races became the Shudras, they were debarred from sharing the religious and social activities of the Indo Aryan” [G.S. Ghurye (2008)]. The socio-economic, political and religious rights became pre-determined by the Caste system. The distribution of those rights was so unequal and there was inflexible provision in the caste system to make the

members to follow the division without opposing it. The occupation was too pre-determined and the members were not allowed to change their occupation. Predominantly the Brahmins were enjoying the best and the Dalits were forced to accept the worst. Hence, the concept of liberty, freedom or democracy was almost missing in the Hindu society. Even the concept of universal declaration of Human right also contradicts with the Hindu society.

Thus, the Caste based Social exclusion in India witnessed and described as 'living mode of exclusion'. In other words, exclusion entails to taking part in social, economic and political life of a community. Therefore, the Dalits located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy have much less economic and social rights than the castes at the top of the order.

THE DALIT MOVEMENT IN INDIA:

The Dalit Movement can be called as a collective agitation of the Dalits against the exploitation both in the form of class, caste, creed, cultural and social exploitation in the Indian society. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in the Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of the Dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected the Dalits to poverty and humiliation. The Dalit movement is a struggle that tries to counter attack the socio – cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is a movement of the masses that craves for justice through the speeches, literary works, dramas, songs, cultural organisations and all the other possible measures. So it can be called as a movement which has been led by the Dalits to seek equality with all other castes of the Hindu society.

In the pre-Independence period, the anti-caste movement comprised strong non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu as well as Dalit movements in Maharashtra, Punjab, western UP, Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, coastal Andhra and Hyderabad. Independent India saw two decades of silence through the Nehru era, before the issue of caste once again burst onto the national consciousness with the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972 and the emergence of the Dalits as a major electoral force through the 1980s and 90s[Gaurav Rajkhowa(2008)].

The start of the Dalit movement can be placed around the 1920s with the emergence of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. B. R. Ambedkar, who was almost the sole national voice of the Dalits in the first 30 years of the movement, provided it with its ideological framework which demarcates the general set of instructions for the Dalit resistance even today.

THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE DALITS IN INDIA:

Although, Article 17 of the Indian Constitution banned untouchability in 1955, the Dalits still suffer widespread discrimination and mistreatment, particularly in villages and rural communities. In many areas, the Dalits may not drink from the same wells as upper caste members do, and may not enter temples where high caste Hindus worship. Despite the system of quotas for government employment, the Dalits rarely rise above traditional the Dalit occupations. The existence of quotas often fuels upper caste disregard for the Dalits. In the private sector, even educated the Dalits struggle to succeed. Although Indian laws are now supposed to protect the Dalits from degradation, the reality of Dalits' lives has hardly changed. In many communities, upper caste members still expect the Dalits to perform their traditional occupations on demand and without pay. The Dalit children are subjected to human rights abuses as well. These children are common victims of bonded labour practices, even though bonded labour is outlawed in India. When the Dalit families become indebted to moneylenders to pay for emergency health services, the Dalit children are often forced to work off these debts. Due to the purposefully low wages these children are paid, they can rarely ever earn enough money to pay back their debts and break free from their labour obligations. Additionally, the Dalit girls are often selected for the practice of *Devadasi*, or marriage to temple deities. As part of *Devadasi*, these girls must serve in the temple and perform sexual services for temple workers. The Dalits also are the targets of hate crimes and violence.

Even after the enactment of SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, the scenario has not changed so much. The some upper caste people after getting higher education too they do not change their behaviour towards the Dalits. The untouchables who converted to other religion like Islam and Christianity to escape from the vicious cycle of caste discrimination are still treated badly in their new religion as well. The Case based discrimination is still continuing in full swing. Human rights organizations and newspapers tell countless stories of the Dalits who have been beaten, unlawfully detained, tortured, raped, killed, and had their homes burned in caste violence, while state officials failed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

CONCLUSION:

It may be came to conclude that though India has made measurable progress in terms of the protections afforded to the Dalits since independence, the Dalits still suffer from horrible social discrimination and exploitation at the hands of upper caste members and law enforcement officials. Such exploitation is inexcusable under both India's domestic laws and its obligations under International law. Although the Indian Government denies the problem of exploitation of the Dalits and points to extensive legal protections evidencing compliance with International standards, the numerous reports of violence and discrimination indicate that the Dalits remain India's "broken people." Until the violence against the Dalits end, the International community ought to continue to publicize the conditions of India's disenfranchised population and encourage India to live up to the standards established in its domestic laws and International obligations. Thus, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said, only legislature can't solve the deep-rooted social problems alone. We all need to work for a casteless society.

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