

ROLE OF DALITS IN CONSERVATION OF WATER RESOURCES : SPECIAL FOCUS ON WATERSHEDS

Dr.Pulla Srinivas *

Part-time lecturer in Department of Public administration & HRM
Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana State, India.

It is appropriate to look into the Indian Caste system before going broadly in the subject to facilitate the reader for a better understanding of the topic. According to DrMazumdar, the caste system has taken its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India. In Rig Veda, the three classes, Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vysya are mentioned. In Chaturvarna, the "Sudra" was mentioned only once in Rig Veda. There are many theories describing the origin of caste system, such as Occupation Theory, Traditional Theory, Guild Theory, Religion Theory, Evolutionary Theory etc., Particularly, according to Occupational theory, the beginning of caste system can be originated in the character and quality of social work carried out by the various groups of people. The professions, which were regarded as better and respectable made the persons who performed them superior to those who were engaged in dirty professions. In the words of Nesfield, "Function and function alone is responsible for the origin of caste structure in India.

In South Asia Caste System, the Word "Dalit" formerly known as 'untouchable' or 'achuta' — is a person outside of the four Varnas, and considered below of all and polluting. Dalits include people as leather-workers, scavengers, tanners, flayers, cobblers, agricultural labourers, municipal cleaners, gymnasts, drum beaters, folk musicians and street handicraft persons. This was the situation in the pre and post-independence era. But, after the advent of many social reforms and paradigm change in attitudes of many people, the percentage of Dalits in Higher Education, Administrative Posts, Politics and Policy makes is appreciable. Like upper castes, Dalit is also divided into various sub-castes or jatis. Word Dalit has been defined differently by different people. Ordinarily, non-Dalit writers and intellectuals have invented its root in Sanskrit and considered its meaning as broken, crack, split, and as an adjective, they have given this word the purposes of burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed etc.

But for Dalits, the meaning of this word is qualitatively different. The word was popularised by the Dalit Panther Movement, when they adopted this term as an act of confident assertion, rejecting Mahatma Gandhi's nomenclature of Harijan, i.e., children of God. Dalit Panthers defined this word in their 1972 manifesto as: "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion." Noted Dalit Laureate Gangadhar Pantawane wrote: "Dalit is not a caste, Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. Both Dalit and non-Dalit Indians see the term relating only to the **Scheduled Castes** (the untouchables of the past) and the **Scheduled Tribes** (the Adivasis or the indigenous people of India).

Role of Dalits in Watersheds:

Watershed is a hydrological unit with a ridge/contour line surrounding the area such that the excess rainwater moves out as runoff to a single point. Thus watershed comprises some area, rain and water. Its administration needs a focus on sustainable use of land and rainwater. In the watershed area, there are upper reaches, middle lands and lower elements of the slope, the class of property being poorer at the lower aspects of the slope. Land use axiomatically changes from the top to the valley point. Further, there are various classes of people with different economic strata. Their aspirations vary. Generally, the functional areas are owned by medium to big farmers. The small and marginal farmers predominate in the upper reaches where the quality of the land is more mediocre. Not only their holdings are small, but even their plots also would be in smaller parcels.

Credit goes to the Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad who pioneered to take up the development of watershed programmes exclusively for Dalits. This programme was conceived as an equity-based model and as an alternative to area-based watershed approach, with the overall objective of Creation of a new Watershed Model targeted entirely for the poor. This brings in an entirely new dimension to the traditional watershed model, by consciously integrating new ideological positions on issues such as equity, gender, culture, food security, sustainable agriculture, etc. It employs the same principles of soil and water conservation as any other mainstream watershed, but by consciously choosing to work only on the lands of belonging to the Dalits. The project focuses all its resources on the upper reaches of catchments, where the properties of the Dalits are usually situated. Such lands are reclaimed and made cultivable and are used for raising food crops. (mostly mixed crops), to ensure food security for those vulnerable Dalit households. In these lands, high-cost external inputs like seeds and chemical pesticides and fertilisers are not used. Such an approach is designed to create a subsistence base for the Dalits through relocating control over agricultural processes and food production in the hands of the Dalit and other poor women. It aims to reduce their livelihood vulnerabilities. Those who are working with Dalits and women need to be bothered increasingly with these questions. Their primary interest lies in protecting the livelihood systems of the poor. In their concern to do good to the poor if they follow conventional watersheds, they may snatch away even the available livelihood systems from the poor.

A watershed, not so dramatic, not so expensive, but very incremental. A watershed that works exclusively on poor people's pariah plots. A watershed that increases the soil fertility and moisture levels gradually and incrementally. It is in the background

of these questions that the Deccan Development Society took up three micro-mini watersheds exclusively meant for Dalits and managed either partially or entirely by Dalit women.

The study area:

Zaheerabad area in Medak District of Telangana, where the Society works, lies at the centre of the semi-arid tract. Ravaged by years of drought and plummeting groundwater table, agricultural lands express a sorry face here. Year after year fallows expands as more and more people desert parcels of their agricultural lands, unable to cope with the rising costs of cultivation and depleting groundwater table. Unlike in the regions endowed with fertile soils, where farmlands are invariably owned by the rich, most people in Zaheerabad own agricultural lands, however small they may be. For the poor, these lands have either been gifted by the erstwhile feudal landlords for services done or by the democratic government as a part of its land reforms programme. But these lands are mostly of inferior quality. The landlords gifted those lands which were of less use for them. The government distributed degraded lands declared surplus under the land ceiling act.

Yedakulapally:

Yedakulapally is a village which has a majority of the Dalit population. Some traditional tasks which are performed by like Tammallollu, Begarollu etc. are also achieved by Madigas in this village. Probably because of this, Dalits own a significant amount of lands. But as is the history with other parts of this region, Dalit lands are far away from the village, i.e., some areas are located about three km away from the town.

Yedakulapally is an agriculturally rich terrain. It has a good irrigation tank continuously in use, a rare sight in these parts of Telangana. Soils are vibrant, black alluvial. These fertile lands produce paddy (at 20 bags an acre, achieving productive levels which are very high for these low-input farming systems), sugarcane, turmeric and recently ginger, all very rewarding cash crops.

But the majority of the lands belonging to Dalits are a far cry from this situation. Their properties are uplands. They are on the plateau of a hillock, and hence they have no irrigation possibility from the tank. Their lands are severely degraded and their production levels are shallow. Another factor which characterizes these lands is they are strewn with stones and pebbles all over. Sometimes this makes ploughing impossible because the bullocks start slipping on these lands and plough at times cannot cut through the land. Most of all, even if some crop is sown, when women weed the crops, their knuckles regularly hit the stones and they come back home with bleeding fingers. None will dare to go back and weed those lands again.

Though the slopes are not very steep, the fact that they are on a plateau which stretches uninterruptedly over vast vegetation fewer areas makes them vulnerable against winds and rains. Thus these lands lie severely degraded, massively underutilized and marginalized. After having to walk through several kilometres away from the village, when the Dalit landowners confront such a series of hostile factors, their courage to farm these lands shrinks. This has resulted in a growing alienation between them and their lands. The younger generation, in particular, seems to be moving farther and farther away from these lands. This has created a situation which is manipulated by the land sharks, the industrialists and the seed companies who are looking for cheap land. They tempt these owners with ready cash and buy large chunks of land at a very low price from them. Just when such a process was about to happen in Yedakulapalli, the women of the sangham asked us for help. This is a five-year-old sangham and one of the more energetic, cohesive and active of the new sanghams that DDS started working with.

The women of these sanghams were very worried that an offer made by an industrialist to their men, may tempt them to sell off their lands. Therefore they said that if a watershed activity can start on these lands, they will improve its texture and productivity, build a new stake for themselves and help them retain these lands, the only resource that poor are left with. This was the beginning of the project which was distributed into four parts:

Metlakunta watershed:

This is the third watershed area of about 106 acres, exclusively owned by about 80 Dalit families. An initial PRA was done to map the watershed, to locate the lay of the land and to identify the works to be done on it. People laid out their fields, slopes and gullies; identified the bunding spots on their lands. They also marked the actual places where checks and gully plugs need to be constructed.

Thus, provided opportunities, Dalits too proved to be the most efficient conservators of natural resources. The Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad has to be appreciated for its novel idea which is not unique but also first of its kind to develop and create such programmes exclusively for downtrodden, needy and poorest of the poor.

REFERENCES:

1. Non-Farming Systems & Watershed in Retrospect, J. Venkateshwarlu, National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management, Hyderabad.
2. www.informationexpress.com
3. PhD thesis "Impact of Watershed Programmes: A Sociological Perspective".
4. The source material of Deccan Development Society obtained through the website.