



CASTE MOBILISATION IN MODERN INDIA: THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Government of India, in order to uplift the socio-economic status of Dalits has framed various schemes and policies. A purported non-discriminatory attitude towards Dalits is also reflected in the Constitution. However, ground realities show a different picture. This paper highlights the discrimination people face based on their caste-based identities in their everyday life. It also shows the community's efforts to reposition themselves not only socially and economically, but politically too. This way, the paper brings forth the identity-related contradictions in Indian society—in theory and practice.

Keyword: Dalits, Discrimination, Policy, Caste identity and contradictions

Introduction:

Casteism has been a persistent idea in India's social reality. It continues to shape a person's socio-economic status. Casteism is deeply rooted in the structure of Indian society that not only influences everyday life of people, but it also bears upon state-sponsored claims of the marginalized and the poor. Caste discrimination is predictable; patterns of discrimination occur internally which get reflected in the welfare programmes initiated by the government. Marginalization of the Dalits is based on structural injustice that denies human rights and development, infrastructure, education, health facilities or other welfare schemes. Moreover, most of these efforts frequently fail to reach the Dalit which further pushes them towards marginalization.

Caste, the structural problem of Indian society often becomes an obstruction for Dalits in economic and social transaction in the daily life as they hereditarily occupy lower position in the caste hierarchy and constantly remain subjected to untouchability that prevents them from carrying out transaction with the dominant upper caste. People belonging to the upper caste often overthrow, evade, take over and exploit the legal structure of the state and nullify those that help in anti-discriminatory course of actions. Moreover, they also play a crucial role in excluding Dalits from many of the welfare schemes and programmes. The perpetual domination of the Upper Caste in the social and economic sphere is one primary reason for prejudices and discrimination of Dalits. It is a big obstacle for them while accessing any welfare service. They are excluded from government policies, which are designed with special reference to the marginalized groups. The intensity of such exclusionary practices, extend due to the lack in partnership and involvement towards the implementation of such programmes and policies to the perceptible and imperceptible benefits of the scheme (Pankaj, 2019).

Welfare Policies of the State, and Exclusion of Dalits:

The Government of India has initiated several schemes to alleviate poverty; generate employment and welfare programs for the Dalits. There are many affirmative policies undertaken to encourage the inclusion of marginalised groups to promote representation and social inclusion of the marginalized in the developing countries. Although well-intentioned, these programmes are however not always proved to be fruitful in conditions where prevailing power relations (domination of the upper caste over the marginalized) resist initiatives that challenge their structural position in society. The dominant power relations based on caste endorse cultural practices and ideological prejudices that enforce and legitimize the exclusion of the alleged 'lower-caste' groups and hence, despite several affirmative actions initiated by the government, the 'lower-caste' groups perpetually remain socially and economically deprived (Kurian & Singh, 2017).

There is plethora of literature regarding social exclusion of Dalits that result in their exclusion in relation to the participation in implementation of welfare programmes as well as the benefits of these programmes. In rural India, Gram Panchayats play a crucial role in identifying beneficiaries, but unfortunately, it often fails to do this in an impartial way as they constantly



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face the pressure from the authoritative elite groups and community leaders. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) and Indira AwasYojana (IAY) are two important programmes of the Government of India, which are directly associated with employment and poverty eradication. The aim of MGNREGA scheme is to provide adult members of every household willing to do unskilled manual work against wage employment for 100 days. This scheme remains one of the grandest welfare programmes for the rights of the marginalised under the Indian government.

Indira AwasYojana that was launched in 1985 and later on restructured as Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana in 2015 aims at providing free dwelling units to the poor families of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, bonded labourers and others belong to the below poverty line in the rural areas. Ajeet Kumar Pankaj in his study examines the day-to-day experience of discrimination and exclusion based on caste faced by marginalized Dalits in two villages of Uttar Pradesh regarding welfare schemes like MGNREGA and IAY. His research based on the narratives of people showed that caste-identity turns out to be a hurdle for the marginalized in the way of accessing benefits of these government sponsored welfare programmes. Caste-based discrimination and deprivation are observed in all the stages of execution and implementation of these programmes. In the process of identification and selection of beneficiaries for IAY, it was reported that kith and kin of the Village Development Officer and Pradhan (Village Head) were given preference and hence, a large number of beneficiaries who were not eligible according to the criteria of the scheme could be seen accessing the IAY. Other important factors that influenced accessibility to these welfare schemes were physical location of houses and socio-economic condition of people. Therefore, even after implementing a number of housing and welfare schemes like IAY in the state of Uttar Pradesh, it was observed that most of the Dalits are still living in mud houses. It indicates poor implementation of such welfare programmes as well as exclusion of Dalits from the legal framework. The few households that are benefitted from IAY did have to bribe the Pradhan or Village Development Officer amounting to Rs. 5,000–10,000. Poor families from the Dalit community, who could not afford to pay the bribe, were kept away from accessing the benefits of IAY.

Even in case of MGNREGA, Dalits are provided only a few days of employment with delayed payment of wages, which proves those 100 days of employment, as promised by the scheme was not being implemented in reality (Pankaj, 2019). In a study of similar nature by Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh it showed that Dalits were not able to fully enjoy the benefit of schemes like MGNREGA. Although they were entitled to hundred days of wage employment under the scheme of MGNREGA, the survey conducted by Kurian and Singh showed that poor Dalit families could receive average 13 days and 12 days of employment within a two-year period, in Barai Kalyanpur and Nagla Bhakti villages of Uttar Pradesh respectively. Moreover, only 0.5% of the people from Dalit community in both the villages could be benefitted by such housing schemes, say IAY. And only 20% from the community could access pension that were available to disabled, elderly and the widows (Kurian and Singh, 2017).

In the year 2003, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) had undertaken a survey in around 531 villages of five Indian states, namely- Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu that exposed the patterns of caste discrimination and exclusion that unleashed adverse effects on the Mid-day Meal Scheme (MMS) and Public Distribution System (PDS) initiated by the Government of India. The report suggested that one crucial factor that determines Dalit children's access to MMS is the localities where mid-day meal is served in terms of caste geography of the village. Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan had quite poor percentages: 19% and 12% respectively, of villages where mid-day meal is served in a non-threatening environment for Dalits (i.e., a Dalit colony, and not a dominant caste locality). Therefore, an immense majority of Dalit children had no other way except entering an area of tension, threat and utmost vulnerability in order to have access to mid-day meal. The study documented a pattern of incidents that highlights how the dominant castes often tend to curtail the movement of Dalits in the localities dominated by the Upper Castes whenever they feel that they need to reaffirm their hegemony and it includes even the movement of Dalit children. Consequently, in case of mid-day meal served in localities dominated by Upper Castes, Dalit children's access to it usually depends on the fluctuating nature of relations and transactions based on caste in the village or region.

Showing the exclusion of Dalit children from accessing benefits of the scheme, six villages in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh reported that Dalit children were prevented from accessing mid-day meal by dominant castes on the ground of



being ‘untouchable’. Segregated seating was another common issue – such practices required the Dalit children to sit separately from children of the dominant caste while having meal, and it is furthermore terrifying to know that completely separate meals are served to Dalits and that from the dominant caste.

Besides these, opposition to Dalit cook is another serious and specific act of discrimination and exclusion of people in the name of caste, which was discovered in the particular study. These patterns have been found in five different levels- first, when MMS are put into operation by local administrators, members of dominant caste community interfere in the hiring process of cooks to ensure that dominant caste cooks are hired instead of Dalit cooks. Second, in a school where a cook from the dalit community has been hired, children from the higher caste are sent with lunch box packages prepared at home or they are required to come back home for the lunch and any how disallowed to have food which is prepared by a Dalit. Third, the parents or members of the dominant caste community put pressure on the local administration, to remove the Dalit cook, on the ground of false accusations, so that a cook from the dominant caste is employed there. Fourth, when all these three steps become ineffective, the upper caste parents start campaigns to withdraw the MMS entirely from the village-school. Lastly, in some extreme cases upper caste parents pull out their children from those schools and enrol them into a school where there is a dominant caste cook to show their disapproval to the employment of a Dalit cook (Thorat & Lee, 2005).

Moreover, the Central Government’s targeted Public Distribution System (PDS) that aims at providing essential food to the poor people at regulated and subsidised price which functions in the above mentioned five states (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu) was also surveyed in that study done by IIDS. The study showed that the physical location of the PDS shops is one of the important factors that determine whether a Dalit household can avail itself the benefits of the PDS. In an average scale, Dalit colonies have 17% PDS shops, while upper caste dominant localities have 70% PDS shops and 13% of villages have PDS shops which are located elsewhere. In terms of ownership in a five-state average, 81% PDS shops are owned by dominant caste and Dalits own only 17.6 percent. Regarding Dalit communities’ access to PDS, discrimination is seen in quantity, price and favouritism based on one’s caste by the PDS dealer. On an average scale in those five states, 40 percent of respondents reported that discrimination in is quantity i.e., a Dalit receives lesser quantity than the dominant caste for the same price; 48 per cent reported that caste-based favouritism determined how much the PDS dealers provide service to the dominant castes on every day of the week, while they serve the Dalit community only on discretionarily created one or two ‘Dalit Days’ in a week, often with reduced hours (Thorat and Lee, 2005).

Engagement with Government Agencies:

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) - a statutory body in India criticised the law enforcement mechanism that it is the prime violator of Dalits’s human rights. According to the Commission, killings and torture of Dalit in Police custody, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and prowling of property of the Dalit by the police themselves are “condoned, or at best ignored”. Dalits, whenever come in contact with the police, are abused, and thrown false allegations on their disposition. They further receive dangers besides their family relatives and friends (HRW Report, 2007).

A Tamil Nadu-based NGO, initiated a project called ‘National Preventing Torture’, which pointed out that Dalits are more prone to sufferings at the hands of police and they are subjected to torture while in police custody (HRW Report, 2007). According to the theory of collective punishment, Dalit communities are usually subjected to aggressive search and convulsion operations by the police look for of one individual and they are also professed by the police as inherently criminal. State agencies also act hand in hand with dominant caste private actors in inflicting human rights violations against Dalits.

In 1997 Human Rights Watch conducted an investigation in the state of Bihar; it was establish that government officials would act as representative of the Ranvir Sena, which is an upper caste and personal organisation. The officials would overlook the killings of Dalits by them. Dalits in particular are undefended to arrest under repressing security laws. The “Prevention of Terrorism Act (2002) (POTA)”, had been widely used specially in the states like Jharkhand and Andhra



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Pradesh against Dalits, who were targeted because of their caste identity despite not being involved in any kind of criminal activity. Dalit women have to face rape and sexual assaults by the police. Custodial rape and sexual assault of Dalit women is a horrifying yet common issue which is used as an instrument by the police to punish the whole Dalit community, especially to punish the male relatives of those women who are escaping from police (Human Rights Watch Report, 1999). During raids by the police, Dalit women are often sexually abused to exert pressure on the male members of the family, so that they surrender and withdraw their complaints and provide false evidence or even to silence them if they are protesting against illtreatment by police (HRW Report, 2007).

The Dalits have also been discriminated in terms of the provisions of disaster relief. In separate reports prepared by the Human Rights Watch and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, it was observed that Dalits were discriminated in aid distribution in the aftermath of India's two largest natural disasters in recent years – the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 and the Gujarat earthquake of January 2001. After the earthquake in Gujarat, government distributed identical amount of food supplies and compensation to everyone irrespective of caste and community, but the Dalit communities were discriminated by the agencies while providing assistance. The upper caste population could get access to quality shelters and other amenities while the Dalits and Muslim population were denied running water and electricity and access to adequate shelter (HRW Report, 2007). Likewise, the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights reported that following the Tsunami in December, 2004, Dalits not have sufficient and appropriate guidance on getting admittance to relief camps, accessing a pale share of relief assist and were even mistreatment and illtreated when they stipulated equal treatment (HRW Report, 2007).

The Dalits have to deal with discrimination even in the court of law and other organs that administer justice. They are denied equal treatment due to the poor quality of prosecutions, under the 'Prevention of Atrocities Act (1889)' and 'Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955)'. Dalit women in particular often face encroachment upon their rights and denied equal treatment by organs dispensing justice. Patterns of systemic impunity enjoyed by the accused in cases of attack on Dalit women have been demonstrated and recorded by different women rights organization, the Press, Human Rights Watch and even National Commission for Women. It is a very rare scenario for the Dalit women to get redressed for violence, especially sexual violence inflicted upon them (HRW Report, 2007).

Political Rights and Participation of Dalits:

Dalit's rights to participate in the political process has been denied as they are often restricted from entering polling booths and the "Untouchability in Rural India" survey estimated that the number of such cases can go up to 12.3 per cent. The age-old practices of booth capturing where ballot boxes are seized by the hired goons also make their voice remain unheard.

Dalits are also barred from contesting in the elections. There are several cases of violence and intimidation faced by the Dalit if they try to contest in the elections against Upper caste candidates. In October 2005, it was reported that a Dalit woman named Prabhathi Devi in Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh was burned alive. The reasons were that she contested a village panchayat (council) election, against an opponent who belonged to the upper-caste. Even after, she was being warned by local politician not to contest (Times of India, October, 2005). As per the survey on the Dalits, which is entitled by 'Untouchability in Rural India' was found that they are also denied access to panchayat offices. Around 14.4 percent out of the 499 villages were investigated that spectator the outcome of denying their right of entry and the right to be listen to, even at the lowest level of government office. Even for any Dalit who could get a position in Public Office, it is not easy to discharge their duties to public properly (Davies, 2007). The 'Asian Human Rights Commission'(November, 2006) reported that Prem Narayan, who was head of Vajidpur village(Dalit village) in Uttar Pradesh, had to face threats, discrimination, intimidation and even physical violence while discharging his duties as a village head (HRW Report, 2007). In October 2020, it was reported that a female Dalit Representative of a village Panchayat in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu was forced by the Vice-President who belonged to Vanniyar (a dominant caste of the locality) to sit on the floor, instead of a chair, as she had to preside over the meetings of the local body (Times of India, 2020). The dominant caste use intimidation, violence and other tactics to prevent Dalits from enjoying their rightful and meaningful participation in the



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Panchayats and other local bodies. The incidents of Dalit Panchayat President's forceful resignation due to upper caste hostility, constant harassment faced by the Dalit Panchayat Presidents and their families are common in most of the parts of India.

Conclusion:

In recent years, organized political assertion by Dalits has showed that they are becoming politically aware. They have started to actively seek redistribution and recognition of remedies to their deprived status in relation to the mainstream society. Their assertion of their identities stands in protest and pro-mobilisation against the identity-based discriminations practised in the society. The increased number of SC voter turn-out shows that the Dalits have started using the democratic and representative political system as an important institution and mechanism to assert their socio-political and legal rights. Caste-based mobilization has led to the constitution of different political parties in the line of caste. Some examples are Bhartiya Lok Dal (BLD) and Bhartiya Kisan Dal (BKD), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), mainly. These political parties represent the backward. The other backward classes and Dalits have supported them in order to function as collective forum for such social groups in Indian politics.

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