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Origin and Development of Dalit Community

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Abstract:

Hindu religious and cultural values have sanctioned the principle and practice of untouchability, a system, perhaps unknown in any other part of the world. The so-called untouchables' touch, shadow and sometimes even their voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals to use certain metals for ornaments; were obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of footwear. They were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy, in sanitary and miserable shanties or cottages in the outskirts of villages and towns. Though these untouchables worshipped the gods of the Hindus and observed the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them and the service of Brahmin priests was denied to them. Barbers and washer men refused to render them service. They did not have access to public road, schools and wells. The untouchables were treated by the caste Hindus as sub-humans, less than men and often treated them worse than beasts. Their miseries did not end at this. They had to follow the hereditary occupations, which were considered inferior, menial and polluting. Such occupations not only added to their degraded status, but also their miserable poverty. Thus these people were deprived of social economic, religious and civic rights.

Key words: Scheduled caste, Untouchability, Untouchables

1. Introduction

The details of the origin of untouchability and the racial, ethnic composition of the Dalits are shrouded in mystery. They have been the weakest constituents of the Indian social structure except the Adivasis. They are designated with a variety of nomenclature such as dalits, untouchables, Harijanas, depressed classes, servile classes, weaker sections, panchamas, atisudras, a varnas, anthyajas and scheduled castes.

The caste system in India has legitimized the dehumanization of a large section of society known differently as Chandala, Pariah, Harijana etc. in various parts of the country. Despite minor similarities among these heterogenous communities, the fundamental uniting feature is their segregation as 'untouchables' and religious legitimacy accorded to their servile status. They are now recognized under a genetic term 'Dalit' an embodiment of a new consciousness along with an inherent desire to rebel against the exploitative structure as a whole. It should be made clear at the outset that the term 'scheduled caste' is primarily an administrative category with an all India applicability. At the local level, there exist numerous castes, each with a strong sense of its own identity and separateness from others. Consequently, its endeavour to establish a new social system, which would restore dignity and human rights to Dalits necessitated the growth of consciousness by constructing a collective identity. This leads them for conversion to other religions.

Pradhan A.C. (1986 : 01) opined that the term 'depressed classes' refers to those castes which belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy and whose touch or proximity is considered polluting to the caste Hindus".

Reddy G.N. (1981:307) said that the word 'Dalit's denotes poverty and their oppressed conditions. The 'servile classes' phrase was used to denote the servile nature of their working relations with the higher castes and the degraded nature of work with which they were involved like scavenging and sweeping etc. Sivaprakasam (2002: 02) writes, "the term 'Harijana' to Anthyajaja used by the Saint Narasimha Mehta. Later it became a catch-word-cum-brain child of M.K. Gandhi who popularized the concept.

The origin of Dalit community is a complicated theme. The origin of untouchability can be traced from the Vedic period i.e., The coming of Aryans to India during 2500 B.C. to 2000 B.C. and from the writings of Rigveda, which has written during 1200 B.C. to 1000 B.C. Prasad (2002:03) opined that in the early Vedic time, it is said that, all men were equal and there was no trace of untouchability as we see it today. According to Rigveda, in those days, perfect brotherhood was prevalent. In course of time, when the Aryans, having grown in overwhelming numbers, scattered and colonized throughout the whole of Aryavarta, they divided themselves into four divisions according to their different qualities (guna) and actions (karmas) in order to organize their society and set it upon sound basis. This four-fold division has been a predominant feature of Hindu social fabric. Historically, untouchability was the social fruit of the Aryan Conquest of India.

Desai A.R. (1981:263) said that in the process of social interaction, a portion of the indigenous conquered population was incorporated into the Aryan fold. The most backward and despised section of this incorporated population, it appears, constituted the hereditary caste of untouchables. But many read a kind of caste structure with four varnas in the Rigveda, in its Purusha Sukta.

Sivaprakasam (Ibid: 03) opined that though doubts exist about the status of the Purusha Sukta as an integral part of the Rigveda, it is certain that the functional division of society was known at the time of the Rigveda. The existence of the fourfold divisions of society in Iran, viz., Athravanas, Rathaestars, Vastria Fshonyants and Hink, corresponding to the four varnas in India, must have been known to the early Aryan colonizers, and functional division of society on similar lines could have been practiced. So untouchability as we now understand it seems to be not existent during the vedic period. The reference about four varnas which we find in purusha sukta of Rigveda does not necessarily suggest the Brahminical supremacy over the other three varnas. It rather suggests that all the four groups are equally important for the preservation of the total human race.

The distinction concerning four varnas is from the standpoint of certain qualitative standards and it need not be interpreted in terms of birth. This point has been very much supported in the Upanishadic period when one finds not only non-Brahmins like Kshatriya, even vaishyas and sudras were duly accepted as Brahmins in the social plane on account of their qualitative mark and excellence.

In the later Vedic period, this caste system was not absolutely rigid, rather, it was a mid-way between the laxity of the Rigvedic Age and the strong rigidity of the age of the Sutras. The term varna was now used in the sense of caste not in the sense of colour in this age. In the Sutra period, the caste system was rigid various restrictions were imposed. So the later vedic literature such as other three Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads and Vedangas or Upavedas, Smritis, Sutras and the epics give a glimpse of the concept of untouchability. The origin of caste system can be traced to their professions, which they practiced and preferred hereditary. In this regard, Hutton (1981:66-67) writes that untouchability had begun to creep in the probability seems to be that in vedic times the Varnas were classes rather than castes and that post vedic scholars, looking for authority for the caste system in the earliest Vedas, have interpreted the nature of the varna in terms of the caste system as they knew.

In Puranic period, due to certain economic forces the people belonging to higher castes indulged in lower occupations and naturally they were declared as out castes and once they lost their position it was not possible for them to regain it.

Moffatt (1979:33) writes that the Dharmasutra writers declare the Chandalas to be progenies of the most hated of the reverse order of mixed unions, that of a Brahmin female with a Sudra male. Koutilya agrees with the Dharmasatra writers and he has no objection if they treat them as Sudras. He regards the Chandalas so low that he advises all other mixed castes to avoid being with the Chandalas. According to Manu, they were to be the hangmen who were to be prohibited entry into villages and towns during day time, were to be stamped with some marks and were to serve as the undertakers for unclaimed corpses. According to him the Chandalas were technically 'apathras'. The earliest evidence of caste and untouchability is textual, and dates back to more than two thousand years. Varna is first mentioned in a late vedic text and by the time of the law book of Manu, Varna and Jati co-exist as isomorphically ranked social order.

Nargolkar (1969:189) said that untouchability is largely an outgrowth of the system of caste and caste in its turn is the illegitimate child of the concept of Varna. But, in the absence of any historical evidence, it is difficult to say with any precision or finality as to when the three or four varnas or occupational divisions of society into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra come to be multiplied into numerous castes. The origin of untouchability also is lost an antiquity.

So in the later Vedic period, specifically in the period of smritis and sutras we find little restrictions in interactions. There is the possibility that in this phase of development of Human civilization, the healthy spirit of equality, gave place in course of time to the tradition bound caste system and then again to the institution of untouchability which divided the Hindus, wrapped their thinking and eroded the structure of the community. The Hindu scriptured interpolated the concept of Varna and legitimized the concept of Chaturvarna and gave it a divine origin who did not recognize this system, mostly indigenous people who had their own gods, religion and social system as well as those who opposed or violated this system were outcasted and were put aside the Pale of Hinduism, they were forced to live outside the towns and villages and were treated as untouchables.

In post vedic times society was clearly divided into four varnas. Each varna was assigned well defined functions, although it was emphasized that varna was based on birth and the two higher varnas were given special privileges. The first three varnas were 'Dwizas' or the twice-born were entitled to wearing sacred thread and studying Vedas and the Sudras did not possess any such rights. The Sudras were treated as slaves and has the only right to serve the three other higher Varnas. This varna divided society with the concept of special privilege gave rise to tensions.

The Kshatriyas, who acted as rulers, however, reacted strongly against the ritualistic domination of the Brahmins, and seems to have led a kind of protest movement against the importance attached to birth in the varna system. The Kshatriya reaction against the domination of the priestly class called Brahmins, who claimed various privileges was one of the causes of the origin of new religious sects of Hinduism such as Jainism and Buddhism. Among these religions Buddhism made an important impact on society by keeping its doors open to women and sudras. During this time conversion to Buddhism freed the sudras from marks of inferiority. But neither Jainism nor Buddhism could make any substantial change in the position of sudras. Although sudras could be admitted to the new religious orders, their general position continued to be low.

These gradually, as the Hindu Varna system grew fashionable, strong strict measures were adopted to enforce it. Social intercourse and intermarriage were prohibited. Society became strictly endogamous and was divided into water-tight compartments. Those who violated the law of endogamy were ex-communicated and were forced to live outside the community. In consequence they had no option other than the low and degrading occupations.

Ghurrey (1979 : 312-313) writes that, the reference to Chandalas are specific and almost invariably show them as a despised group, to see members of which is to see evil, to quert which one must atleast wash one's eyes. Chandalas are described as occupying sites outside regular villages and towns whether in the West near Taxila or in the center near Ujjain. They could be detected by their special dialeet. Sweeping was their hereditary occupation.

By the close of the pre-Mauryan period rigidity had crept into the caste system and inter-marriages were disfavoured but these were confined to higher classes alone, the Chandalas were looked down upon. They were deemed to miserable plight and lived outside the city. The untouchables have been living outside the cities and towns for centuries. They were not allowed to enter the cities or to have contact of any kind with the mobility and the upper caste people.

Sivaprakasam (2002:08) said that, Faihen, who came to India in the 5th century A.D. during the Gupta period, mentions about the untouchables, who lived outside the cities and Vishnupurana mentions an incident in which Hindu Kings were condemned to be born as dogs, crows, pigs, etc. for the sin of looking or conversing with an untouchables. Again, Faihen refers to this special class of people called Chandalas, who lived outside the city gates and had to strike a bamboostick on the floor, while traveling on the road side so that people might take precaution and were not touched by them. Their shadow was not to fall on the people. The Chandalas reared pigs and birds and ate all kinds of foods.

The Chinese pilgrim Huein Tsang who came to India gave an account of the condition of untouchables. By 5th century A.D. the untouchables grew to only in numbers but by glaring disabilities. Whenever they entered the town the upper caste people kept themselves at a distance from them because the road was supposed to be polluted by them. The Chinese pilgrim takes notice of untouchables such as scavengers, executioners etc. They lived outside the villages and took garlic and onion. The untouchables announced their entry into the town by shouting loudly so that people might keep away from them. Thus the untouchables were neglected and looked down upon. In this regard Kuppuswamy (1979 : 204-205) says, "It can now be inferred that the Chandalas followed some degrading occupations, and that they lived outside the villages. But it is very difficult to imaging that persons born out of forbidden sex contacts were numerous enough to form a separate caste group, since they are to be found practically in all villages of India. It is possible that because they were followed occupations which were despised, they were characterized by the Dharmashastras as equivalent to the despicable progeny of forbidden sex relations", Thus as observed in the Hindu Shastras in the eyes of laws these Anthyajas had no status.

Coming to medieval India Alberuni grouped together Dom and Chandala, as two of the groups not reckoned among any caste or guild. They were occupied with dirty works, like the cleansing of villages and other services and distinguished only by their occupations. So, the Hindu had developed a very complex social structure by the beginning of the 11th century. Inter-marriage and inter-dining were strictly prohibited. The untouchables lived outside the towns and villages. They suffered from many social and economic disabilities, which made their lives miserable. The ruling elite and the orthodox Brahmins shut themselves into the ivory towers of caste system and were cut-off from the main stream of the society. In Central Hindustan, there was untouchability and Chandalas were required to make their presence known by striking a piece of wood while entering the market place or the quarters inhabited by upper class people. No wonder, more than half on the Hindu populace stood fourth as mere spectators when the Rajaput rulers had to fight a life and death struggle against the Turkish invaders. They did not consider themselves to be responsible for the defense of their own hearths and homes. During the Turkish rule, Hindus made the caste rules more rigorous.

So during the Muslim rule, amongst the Hindus caste system was so rigid that both intermarriage and inter-dining were taboos. Because of much rigidity the untouchables became a prey to the process of conversion started by the Muslims. Many of these untouchables and low caste people embraced Islam and joined the invaders partly to avoid prosecution, partly in search of freedom.

Then the Mughals, like other Muslims, had come to India not only to conquer the country but also to convert its people to Islam. Islam is a militant faith and its followers are zealous missionaries who look upon it to be their main duty to propagate the message of Mohammed. They despised the Hindus as inferior people. They were filled with conqueror's innate pride and were determined to retain their separated identity. So, Muslims refused to be absorbed in Indian society. Hence, Hinduism tried to defend itself by making the caste system more rigorous and the conditions of the untouchables became more miserable. The worst effect of the cramping Mughal rule was that the Hindus could not speak or write the truth. They could not deal with the Muslims in equal terms and developed low cunning, hypocrisy and even deceit to get on the in the world. It is believed that caste system was much more rigorous than the previous period and Mughals exploited this weakness by which some of the lower caste Hindus, notably in Bengal and in certain other parts were converted into slam and some high castes in Punjab and Kashmir had in the same manner, been compelled to abandon their ancestral religion.

Thus untouchability was expressed in the maintenance of physical distance between scheduled castes and high castes and in extreme restrictions of commensally relationships between untouchables and all others. Upper caste groups also enforced a code of conduct, which symbolized this super-ordinate position vis-à-vis the untouchables and deferential behaviour in manner, dress and language was expected of scheduled castes.

After the Mughals, during the rule of Marathas and Peshwas, it is also recorded that the Mahars and Mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona city after 3 p.m. and before 9 a.m. It was because before 9 and after 3 their bodies cast too long a shadow which falling on a number of higher castes-especially Brahmins defiled them. Thus untouchability was institutionalized.

Reddy (Ibid : 313-314) said that Brahmins at the top the most pure of human beings purifies himself in order to approach god. The untouchable at the bottom the least pure of human beings makes personal purity possible by removing the strongest sources of organic impurity such as removing of garbage, dead animals etc. Thus the completion of the cycle by two unequally ranked units is equally

necessary. In other words, the execution of impure tasks by some is necessary for the maintenance of purity for others. Thus the two elements are together making a whole. Thus there is cultural agreement between the higher castes and the untouchables.

Similarly Ghosh (1979:27) observed that pollution and maintenance of social distance are specific forms of segregation and inequality bred within the Indian caste system. Hinduism sanctifies it through its theory of Karma and Dharma and the cycle of rebirth, those who are indispensable for the maintenance of caste hierarchy are excluded from it. The classification of certain sections of people as Pariahs, obviously is not accidental. The overt bases of exclusion were menial occupations, constant contact with pollutant like leather, excreta, earth, etc., yet without the performance of such tasks by some, the other could not maintain their purity. Thus some form of coercion had to be exercised over these village servants and details upon whom fell the exclusive responsibility of their performance.

However, the generally accepted notion is that the untouchables were the aboriginal inhabitants who were conquered and enslaved by the Aryan invaders. Apart from they being known to perform all degrading services, they were alleged to have following characteristics – Drunkenness, shamelessness, brutality, truthlessness, uncleanliness disgusting food practices and an absolute lack of personal honour. To be an untouchable is to be beyond reach of the Hindu culture and society, to be almost cultureless. Among the savarnas the sudras are required to perform hard work like farming, cattle rearing and artisan work etc., but they are not expected to do degrading work like scavenging and sweeping public roads etc. So the untouchables are described as “persons of a discreet set of low castes, excluded for reasons of their extreme collectively, impurity from particular relations with higher beings both human and divine”.

The idea of untouchability and unapproachability observes Ghurye (Ibid : 180) arose out of the ideas of ceremonial purity, first applied to the aboriginal Sudras in connection with the sacrificial ritual and expanded and extended to other groups because of the theoretical impurity of certain occupations.

Pradhan (Ibid 103) said that the Varna system, in course of time, broke into hundreds of castes and sub-castes as a result of the operation of a variety of factors, such as racial admixture, geographical expansion of the population, inter-regional isolation of the various parts of the country and growth of crafts which tended to be hereditary. The result was the emergence of the caste system, as found today the Hindu society. While the untouchables stood outside the pale of the Varna system, they formed an essential part of the caste system.

2. Conclusion

So the concept of untouchability or Dalit is peculiarly an Indian idea. There are several theories to support the doctrine of touch. Those who believe in the sanctity theory, specify the idea, the more the sanctity the more the nearer to God. It is lost by touching objects of less or no sanctity and restored by a both or utmost by a paltry unmeaning ceremony of expiation. A common man who does not search for the reason of a practice, which is sanctified by religion, believes it to be a sin to violate the custom and hence practices it firmly. The practice of untouchability thus was not the result of a deliberate conspiracy to suppress the untouchables. It was just the holding on wrong beliefs about religious purity. During modern period lot of changes occurred among untouchables. British gave due care for the all-round development of untouchables. At the time they were renamed as ‘Scheduled Castes’. The term ‘Scheduled Caste’ was first coined by the ‘Simon Commission’ in 1928, and later in the ‘Government of India Act 1935’. This Act listed out a few of the castes as the most inferior ones, which required some special attention. This list of castes was designed as ‘Scheduled Castes’. When India became Independent, this term was adopted by the new constitution for the purpose of providing them with special facilities and constitutional guarantees.

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