

SOME ASPECTS OF DALIT ISSUES UNDER SUBALTERN STUDIES

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Abstract

Sabaltern studies increasingly getting momentum in academic circle - It is a part of social history - starting from Herodotus - Annaels School of France - Antonio Gramsci - Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar - Settlement and Occupational problems of Dalits - Food and hygiene - Forced Labour - Poor remuneration - Inaccessible to Hospitals and Schools - Victim of caste discrimination - Impact.

Keywords: *Dalit - subaltern - Annaels School - Prison Note books - Sudra - Manusmriti - Varna - Outcaste.*

Intorduction

It is proposed to focus some light on the Dalit Peoples issues, which were for long time neglected even under the domain of social history, otherwise called as the history of the Subaltern people. In order to understand the gradual developments in the domain of social history, a brief account is given on the significant developments and changes that took place world over, and then of India and Tamil Nadu as well. References to social history are not sufficiently available to be taken from writings of earliest philosophers, chroniclers and historians. At the same time it is difficult to reject the contributions of some of the earliest historians including Herodotus of the earliest period. Since then, there were scholars and philosophers in the west had pointed out themes relating to social history. The hitherto popular dynastic and political history was replaced by social history after II world war. The attention of historians diverted towards the domain of social history particularly of the ordinary people at the grass root level. This is mainly due to the contributions made by the Marxian interpretations which led to the emergence of a new area of study called subaltern studies. The role played by the proletariat and the peasantry in their political and economic struggles were documented under the Marxian social history. After hundred years of the French revolution, Lucien Febvre (1878 - 1956) and Marc Bloch (1886 - 1944) the two leading French social scientist changed the nature of social history under the auspices of *Annaels School of France*.¹ The annalists touched upon a variety of subjects normally ignored by traditional historians, to focus on the life of the ordinary people.

Western Thought particularly in the U.S. had drastically changed the writings of conventional history. It deals with the life of ordinary people rather than ruling elite section of the society. The subject matter of the study was directed towards the people whose activities and achievements were unrecorded. Thus the seeds were sown in by the historians of Europe and the west in particular on the social history of the insignificant masses. British administrators like H. Tremenheare, Francis Buchanan and F.A. Walhouse have written about the Dalits and their problems but their writings were sporadic in nature. Subaltern study as a discipline emerged during the last phase of the 19th century. The term 'Subaltern' according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, means 'of inferior rank'. Ranajit Guha, along with his fellow historians contributed to a new school of thought called Subaltern studies, as a subject of historical and sociological inquiry from the last quarter of the 19th century. This school of thought was first advocated by Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Politician and social scientist in his *Prison Notebooks*. It is the general attribute of Subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of Class, Caste, age, gender and office or in any other way, 'The Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling

groups, even when they rebel and rise up'. According to Ranajit Guha, Subaltern consciousness manifests itself in the revolt or outburst of more spontaneous nature of inferior people, which is derived from the conditions of exploitation?

The term "Dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit word root "dal", which means burst, split, broken or tom asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, and destroyed. Although the term has ancient roots, its contemporary usage goes back only to a few decades. The seeds of this understanding of Dalit lie in the writings of two great Indian personalities; the 19th century reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and the 20th century intellectual and revolutionary B.R. Ambedkar. Mahatma Phule used the terminology *shudra- adishudra* for Dalits. In order to enslave the *shudras* and *adishudras*, Mahatma Phule said, the Brahmin or Priestly Caste conspired to divide them into these two classes. Thus the Dalit people are those who, on the basis of caste distinctions, have been considered as "outcaste", because the architects of the system did not see fit to include them in the graded fourfold caste structure of Indian society. On the basis of this status, they have been made to bear extreme forms of disadvantage and oppression for centuries, a continuous assault on their humanity which virtually reduced them to a state of being "no-people"

The traditional Hindu caste system remains a strong factor against the development of the Dalits. Ever since the *Vedic* and *Manusmriti* Period the rights of the Dalits were taken away and rendered them without any basic human rights including right to education, land and property, natural resources, dignity and freedom. The earliest suppression of the Dalits found in the Smriti literatures in which it accorded a non-entity position to these lower strata of the community. Even today, it remains as such and change seems to be a mirage.

Considered and attested as original inhabitants of India by the sociologist the condition of the Dalits was not far from slavery. Their movements were restricted and controlled by the non-Dalits even after 67 years of independence. The brutal killing of the Dalits across all regions of the country and the persistence of inhuman forms of employment were some of the caste related issues that came up time and again. Other serious issue was the acts of physical violence such rape, honour killings, discrimination in public and private domains in different parts of the country.

The leaders of freedom movement influenced millions of youngsters and common people throughout India. Their speeches and actions were emulated by all people. The names of leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subash Chandra Bose, and Balagangadhar Thilak, Jhansi Rani, Kasturi Bai were named to their sons and daughters irrespective of their caste and community. But it is disturbing to note that Ambedkar's name was not named by the people other than Dalits. His name has become a symbol of Dalit and untouchability throughout India.

To quote on the same line, Upendra sBakshi, the Vice-chancellor of Delhi University said that "Dr. Ambedkar is a multifaceted genius. We should learn his individual talents sincerely. He is an architect of the constitution. He was sidelined by the rulers of the country. Number of books and articles published on Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. But the intellectuals of the country kept silent on Ambedkar." Delivered a lecture at Chennai on 5th March 1991". In this context it is relevant to quote V.T. Raj shekar, the author of *Dalit: The Black untouchables of India* "Even professional historians have stayed away from Dalit Problems and have little or no interest in recording the life and achievements of the Dalits. There is an all-round conspiracy of silence when it comes to the question of untouchables,"

The Dalit settlements were located normally on the outskirts of the villages. Their hutments were very close to each other without leaving any space. All the required

facilities such as schools, hospitals, water sources, post-offices, co-operative stores and such other things are available only in the locality of the non-Dalits. Even the accesses to burial grounds were only at the mercy of these people. In most of the villages a permanent space for burying their dead was not available to the Dalits. Still one-third of the villages keep separate glasses and plates for Dalits, and refuses them entry into the shops. It is found that 64% of the people were not allowed in public places of worship and 48% villagers were not permitted to use the village water facilities for fear of their contamination. Whenever there is a dispute over a trivial issue, there was a lot of disagreement and dispute surfaced in the villages. Even the separation of wall of East Germany and West Germany was pulled down to pave the way for a united Germany. A small village in Tamilnadu called Uthapuram in the Madurai district where the non-Dalits constructed a wall separating the Dalit settlements in order to prevent the Dalit people's activities and entry in to their area.

In the case of cities, the poor Dalit were constructed their hutments on the side of roads and uninhabitable places. Their dwellings were very close to each other and there is hardly any space available to entertain their children. Their settlements were unhygienic and risking their life in their day-to-day activities. It remained of the slums of England during the period of Industrialization. Whenever the government required space, the first casualty was the Dalits in the slums. They frequently forced to shift to the outskirts of the cities leaving their nearest work place. Thus their settlements were made temporary under the guise of the beautification of the cities. As daily wage earning people, they were unable to lead a decent life. The environment in and around them is hostile to their well-being. They were not able to save for their future and spent on their children's health and education. The level of their earning was only on the subsistence level and it was difficult to meet any of their exigencies. As a result, the Dalit people life expectancy in the cities was lower than their counterpart in the villages.

From the available sources it is clear that throughout the historical period the Dalits of the country virtually reduced to the state of agricultural labourers in the villages. Forced by acute starvation and poverty, they allowed themselves to be agricultural labourers as they were not entitled for holding lands. 60% of the agricultural operations of the country devolve almost around this Dalit people/The onus of ploughing the soil, sowing the seeds, transplanting them to the fields, irrigating waters, and harvesting them, fell on the Dalits of the villages. But the benefit of their hard work mostly enjoyed by the land owners and the wages they received were just sufficient to meet their square meal. Thus they were kept at the subsistence level and were hardly able to make any savings. If they demand more to meet their minimum requirement often the land owners mostly belong to the non-Dalit section retarded against them and render the Dalits jobless. On the top of it, these agricultural labourers were undergo physical torture, setting their houses fire, their hard earned properties destroyed and sometimes loss of life. Kilavenmani in Tanjavur district, where the Dalit agricultural labourers were burnt alive was the worst incident in the post-independent India. In order to, escape from these kinds of exploitation, tyranny, and dehumanization, the Dalit wanted to migrate to cities, where their condition is also not encouraging.

The Dalits were one of the ancient indigenous peoples of the land. The history of their enslavement started from the Vedic period. The denial of opportunities to enter into educational institutions ever since the Vedic age is main reason for the present position of the Dalits. But due to the changing scenario especially after the advent of the British, the Dalits had little scope for English education. To-day nearly 42% of Dalits in India was considered literate compared to the national literacy rate of 65%. However, the children of Dalit families have suffered from social discrimination. It is reported that 38% of the village schools practiced separate arrangements for dining, 22% separate seating arrangements

in the classroom. In rural schools, the young minds were corrupted by the principles of segregation and discrimination, reproducing the hierarchies of caste and untouchability." Even after such a hard condition at the school level, a minimum percentage of Dalit students moves to higher education. Under the present condition, the Dalit youth are frustrated due to their lack of opportunities even if they are educated. In higher education and specialized education, their entry is restricted under the guise of 'no-reservation' category. Under the Central services, the percentage of Dalits share were 13% including a bulk of last grade and menial servants and under the State services 12% share was reported. However both in the Central and State services only 7% of the officers in group 'A' category is being employed."

It is shocking to note that, wherever appointment is done by nomination by the heads of the State and Central authorities, the Dalit were not been considered. Of the 120 secretaries in the Central Secretariat, no one is appointed from the Dalit community and of the 22 universities under the State government no one from the Dalit community is appointed as Vice-Chancellors for the past 10 years, even though hundreds of qualified candidates were available from these category. Whenever the question of appointments by nomination comes, the rulers of the country conveniently forget the Dalits, the reason being it was beyond the scope of reservation. In the recent survey by the researchers of a university in England and Delhi University brought to light the fact that the reservation followed in the Indian Railways, one of biggest public sector undertaking, was in no way brought down the efficiency in administration. When the American government choosing Indians to the top position without prejudice, the Dalits in their own country were discriminated for quite long time is an irony. In the words of Barack Obama the President of United States of America "As long as India is a secular, India will see its development". The same statement can be applied to the Dalits inclusion in matters of governing their own country.

Now-a-days Religion plays an important role through which the social activities of the people involve. The history of religion goes back to the period of Stone Age. However, it took concrete shape during the Vedic period. The division of society into fourfold was created in the name of god and religion. But, fortunately or unfortunately the Dalits of the country fell beyond the pale of caste system called fifth *Varna* or untouchables. All the rights extended to other non-Dalits were denied including the right to worship. In course of time when Buddhism and Jainism were established in the 6th century, the Dalit had joined in the new religion. However, as centuries rolled on, due to historical reasons, the Dalits of the country identified themselves in one religion or other, but majority of them were following Hinduism as their religion. The Sachar committee report of 2006 revealed that scheduled caste and tribes of India constituted nearly 32% of the Hindu population."

Hardline and orthodox Hindus do not consider the Dalits as part of their society. In the Indian villages, the freedom of Dalits had been effectively controlled and checked. The so called village deities and temples were considered as the exclusive property of the non-Dalits. The Dalits entry into the temple for worship is restricted by the dominant non-Dalit people of the villages. After a prolonged struggle, Dr. Ambedkar caused a sensation 1927 when he dramatized his campaign against Brahmanism by publicly burning a copy of the Manusmriti, that is, the so called Institutes of Manu and finally he decided and embraced himself to Buddhism in 1956.¹⁰ Following his leadership the enlightened and educated Dalits either protested against the existing practice of Hinduism or converted themselves to a new religion. Nearly 25 years after this incident, 220 Hindu Dalit families of the village of Meenakshipuram in Tamilnadu embraced Islam to protest against the ongoing exploitation of Dalits by caste Hindus.

It is clear from the foregone pages that the Dalits were infact the original inhabitants

people of India and that their present status was the consequence of the imposition of the Hindu social order based on the caste system. So it became important for them to reject not just the Hindu way of life but the Hindu religion as a whole. In this connection the statement made by Dr. Ambedkar in 1950's still relevant.i' To quote "Caste has killed public spirit, Caste has destroyed the sense public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu public life is caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity but begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy but not for men of other caste..

The capacity to appreciate merits in a man apart from his caste does not exist in a Hindu"

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