

Future of Untouchables in India: A Case Study of Dalit

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of status to all citizens, irrespective of their caste, race, religion, descent, place of birth and residence. The majority of Dalits are poor, socially backward, and deprived of basic needs. Though some Dalits have occupied important positions in politics and government jobs, majority of them have faced discrimination lack access to education, health and honourable livelihood. Hardline and orthodox Hindus do not consider them as part of their society. The Dalits generally perform menial and degrade jobs. Social backwardness, lack of access to food, education and health care keep them in bondage of the upper castes. In hundreds of districts and several states, the Dalits live today in a constant state of fear due to threats to their life. For Dalits throughout South Asia, caste remains a determinative factor for the attainment of social, political, civil and economic rights. Politically active Dalits use the electoral process and political linkages to improve their lot. However, they have to go a long way before they will be able to enjoy the rights given in the constitution.

KEY WORDS: Dalits, Caste, Hindus, Untouchables, constitution.

Introduction

The traditional Hindu social philosophy is based on strict caste system that is rigid and hierarchical. The Dalits fall outside the four-fold caste system that gives them the lowest and outcaste status.

The hierarchy is based on the principle of purity and pollution determined by birth and large number of Hindus belonging upper castes actively discriminate the lower castes. Dalits were segregated and denied access to many community facilities like schools, temples, wells, water tanks, etc. Dalit communities in those days were comparatively isolated.

Caste discrimination seems to be still prevalent and the concept of untouchability and in the many institutions refuses to take mid-day-meals on the

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plea that the cook belongs to the untouchable caste. Untouchability is practically in the decrease and the caste consciousness has been weakened considerably. The higher Hindu castes, social distance measured units from the higher caste people and the educational domain the Dalit issue poses different problems. The phenomenon of untouchability continues to operate violence insult and humiliation.

According to the historical analysis of the origin of the concept of Dalit and there are lots of anthropo-sociological expositions on these problematic issues. These have got integrated linkage with multifarious domains of life situation and caste system in India is not the old age and depth-oriented socio-cultural phenomenon.

The socio-economic background of the Indian caste based rural society has been taken up by the social scientists to explore the pattern of working in Indian society through time and space. Dalit concept for development though related to the same community has similar problems.

Practical help of the media has been utilized to create the public opinion against the question of untouchability in any form. These traditional ritualistic performances organized and governed by the untouchable caste very naturally cut across the Brahmin-oriented purity-pollution centred social structure. On the basis of the concept of purity and pollution the Dalits are the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy. They have been segregated owing to their utter untouchability.

The Indian Constitution, 1950, abolished untouchability and introduced the concept of equal citizenship. However, the practice of untouchability – “the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes remains very much a part of rural India. The untouchables may not cross the line dividing their part of village from that occupied by higher caste. They can not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste” (SAMA, 2004: 62). Most Dalits continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education.

“Hindu fundamentalism has cast a shadow over the ideals of religious secularism promised in the constitution. Mahatma Gandhi wrote that he did not expect India to develop one religion, which was wholly Hindu, wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant” (SAMA, 2004: 62).

Discriminations that exist in India have serious ramifications in the field of education. This discrimination is indeed deeply rooted.

“On the contrary, intolerance whether culture or religious is increasingly becoming the hallmark of the largest working democracy in the world.”
(SAMA, 2004, 62).

With the exception of a small number of people who have benefited from “India’s policy of quotas in education and government jobs, the Dalit are relegated to the most menial of tasks as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers. Dalit children make up a majority of those sold into bondage to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors. Without their own land, Dalits are unable to produce crops for their own consumption or for sale in the market. This combined with the limited employment opportunities available in their small village forces them to leave their village in search of work else work” (Ranabira & Ghanshyam, 2001).

“The Dalits form the lowest caste in Hindu caste hierarchy and are cruelly referred to as the untouchables. Dalits perform menial tasks, traditional Hindu society consider them unclean. Higher castes are thus required to avoid close contact with Dalits, leading to a generations old segregation of society. According to the New York based Human Rights Watch, more than 100,000 atrocities, including murder and rape, are committed each year against Dalits, who in the view of Hindu traditionalist should not be allowed even to sit on the same bus seats as a higher – caste Indians” (SAMA , 2006: 109).

India is committed to legislating ideas of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as well as legislating against human rights violations.

“Labour legislation in India can apply only to what is called the organized sector which means firms employing more than ten people. Of a national workforce of over 400m, only about 9m are in the private organized sector. For this reason, Chandrabhan Prasad, a Dalit writer, supports quotas but argues that more important is help for Dalit business in the unorganized sector, where distributorships, grants of alcohol licences, construction contracts and so on are involved”(Economist , 2004).

Dalit

Literally the term “Dalit” in Sanskrit means ‘oppressed wide circulation after upheaval of caste-based politics and political parties in India. It is very recent development. Probably, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of “Depressed Classes”, the term the British used for what are now officially called the scheduled castes.

“The word Dalit comes from the Marathi language, and means ground, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. According to Victor Premasagar, The

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term expressed their weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of upper castes in the Indian society” (Premasagar, 2002: 108)

Mohandas K. Gandhi coined the word Harijan, translated roughly as “children of God” to identify the former untouchables. The terms, “Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes” (SCIST) are the official terms used in Indian government documents to identify former “untouchables” and tribes.

“Adi Dravida”, “Adi Karnataka” and “Adi Andhra” are words used in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, to identify people of former “untouchable” caste in official documents. These words particularly the prefix of “Adi” denote the aboriginal inhabitants of land” (Lesile, 2004: 46)

As enshrined in the constitution, India is committed to the welfare and development of its people in general and of vulnerable sections Dalits in particular. Preamble, directive principles of state policy, fundamental rights and specific sections, namely Article 38, 39 and 46 in the constitution of India stand testimony to the commitment of the state to its people. Welfare is not a matter of charity. While the caste system has been abolished under the Indian Constitution, there is still discrimination and prejudice against Dalit in South Asia. Dalits have not been encouraged for proactive provisions to better the conditions through improved education, health and employment

(<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/02/12/india-hidden-apartheid-discrimination-against-dalits>).

Social Status of Dalits

In the context of traditional Hindu society, “Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leatherwork, butchering, or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and waste. Dalits work as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines, and sewers. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual, and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. For example, they could not enter a temple nor a school, and were required to stay outside the village. Elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other castes

(<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/02/13/india15303.htm>). “Discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. It has largely disappeared in urban areas and in the public sphere. Some Dalits have successfully integrated into urban Indian society, where caste origins are less obvious and less important in public life. In rural India, however, caste origins are more readily

apparent and Dalits often remain excluded from local religious life, though some qualitative evidence suggests that its severity is fast diminishing” (<http://indianchristians.in/news/content/view/311/48/>).

In India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, Dalits have revolutionized politics and have elected a popular Dalit chief minister named Mayawati.

Dalits and similar groups are also found in Nepal and Bangladesh. In addition, the Burakumin of Japan, Al-Akhdam of Yemen, Baekjeong of Korea and Midgan of Somalia are similar in status to Dalits.

Dalits and Religion

The Sachar Committee report of 2006 revealed that “scheduled castes and tribes of India are not limited to the religion of Hinduism. The 61st Round Survey of the NSSO found that almost nine-tenths of the Buddhists, one-third of the Sikhs, and one-third of the Christians in India belonged to the notified scheduled castes or tribes of the Constitution” (Sachar Committee report, 2006).

Religion	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe
Buddhism	89.50%	7.40%
Christianity	9.00%	32.80%
Sikhism	30.70%	0.90%
Hinduism	22.20%	9.10%
Zoroastrianism	-	15.90%
Jainism	-	2.60%
Islam	0.80%	0.50%

“India aspires and seeks a major power status in international politics. It is claiming this status on the basis of being the world’s largest democracy, having a secular disposition, armed with nuclear power and a booming economy. Notwithstanding these claims, the Indian society is daunted by the challenge the Dalits pose who forms the great mass of its deprived and downtrodden class which it is unable to assimilate into its diversity. Their inhuman treatment by the high caste Hindus threatens the Indian federation and stands in the way of rising to the major power status it aspires in the world” (Murali, M, 2009).

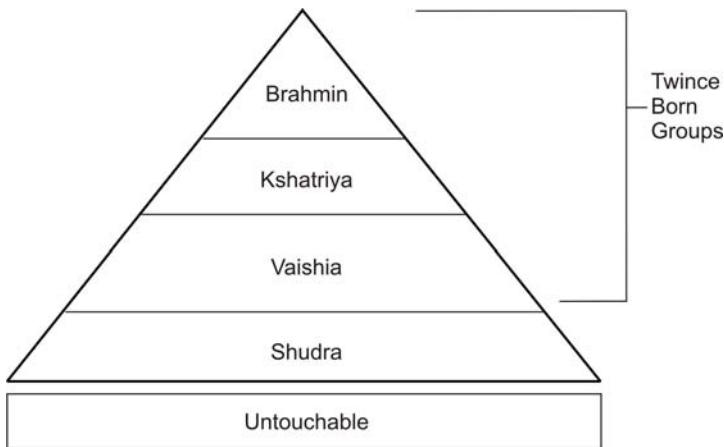
“Despite India’s manifold growth, the Dalits still lag behind, largely due to economic disparity, which is a consequence of the deep rooted caste system. Dalits constitute more than 160 million of the population of India (according to the Census of 2001) yet they face discrimination ranging from the trivial domestic chore of fetching water from the community well, to the major question of

economic survival by getting employment. The emerging of a strong middle class, with a considerable section of Dalits in it, but those who do not have access to education and other benefits form the bulk of the real Dalit section of society. The Dalits issue has its roots in the stratified nature of the Indian society ridden by the caste system whose origins are blurred and ambiguous” (Indian Population Census, 2001).

The Caste System

The Caste system originates from Varna. According to the ancient Hindu book Rig Veda, “Varna refers to the Hindu belief that humans have been created from different parts of the body of the divinity ‘Purusha’ Brahmin (the teacher, scholar or priest) is made from the head, Kshatriya (the warrior class) from the arms, Vaishias (the farmers and traders) from the thighs and Shudras from the feet. The part from which a Varna was supposedly created determines a person’s social status with regard to issues such as who they could marry and which profession they could pursue”(http://adnieI.tripod.com/origin.htm).

Figure



The Caste System

“There is another belief, of “Karma”, according to which every being passes through a process of re-incarnation. The next life is either a reward or punishment depending on the deeds in the earlier life. Consequently, Dalits are supposed to be suffering from the punishment for their deeds in previous lives.” (Malley, 1975: 10)

There are various theories about the identity of Dalits. According to the Indo-Aryan theory the main proponents of which are William Jones 1790, Friedrich Schlegel 1808 (who proposed the term Indo-Germanic) and Friedrich Max Muller 1840. They argue that the Aryans out of fear of revolt from the aboriginal Dravidian legitimized their superiority in the form of the Hindu religion which relegated their status to the lowest rung of the Hindu society under the caste system who ultimately came to be known as Harijans (children of God), a term Gandhi used that was bitterly opposed by “Dr Ambedkar who was himself a Dalit. He warned Dalits to “beware” of Gandhi who had opposed the ‘right of separate electorates’ to the untouchables before partition of India” (Bhimrao, 1946: 250).

A View of Dalits in Society

Untouchability as the fate of a Dalit, is more explicit in rural areas of India. Though it was abolished in the Constitution (Article 17) yet still persists in various forms. For instance, Dalits are prohibited to use village wells, to enter temples and are supposed to use a ‘marked’ cup in the local tea-shops. There is strong discouragement of inter-caste marriages in society. Even today, when the son of a Dalit millionaire wishes to marry outside his caste, demonstrations are held in the city to deter that “unholy” act of mixing the pure blooded with the impure.

They are untouchable because their religious duty is supposed to be manual scavenging. This profession is widely looked down upon in society. Poignantly, a large number of “Dalits” are associated with this profession. Lack of proper sanitation system in public toilets makes the Dalits even more detestable. “In 2002-03, the union ministry for social justice and empowerment admitted the existence of 6.76 lakh people who clean human excreta from lavatories for a living and the presence of 92 lakh dry latrines, spread across 21 states and union territories” (The Observer, 2007).

“The untouchable status of a Dalit becomes scornfully explicit when they have to fetch water from exclusive wells in rural areas. For instance, in the village of Palliyad the water source of Dalit scavengers is 30 minutes or more away from their homes” (Balakrishnan, 2007).

Another problem with Dalits is that owing to their ‘untouchable’ status, they hardly find any productive work. Consequently they are compelled to borrow debts in times of need. Their debt is by the large, ‘ancestral’ in nature. According to a report by Human Rights Watch published in 1999, “Dalits, usually work to pay off debts that were incurred generations ago, 15 million of whom are children working in fields or factories in slave-like conditions”. As Emily Wax puts it in her article “A broken people in booming India”, “By virtue of birth, some castes inherit wealth; the Dalits inherit debts” (Emily Wax, 2007).

There has been some improvement in their situation lately owing to the implementation of reservation system. Some Dalits have acquired a reasonable position in society.

The Reservation System and Backward Classes

In constitutional language the Dalits are denoted as Scheduled Castes and Adivasis (the people living in tribes in rural India/aboriginal or indigenous people) as Scheduled Tribes. Dr. Ambedkar, one of the chief architects of the Indian Constitution, being a Dalit himself, recognizing and experiencing the 'natural calamity' of fate befallen on Dalits, has included various provisions in the basic document regarding rights of Dalits. In the "Indian Constitution, Article 46 deals with the promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections of society. Article 335 gives the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes right to services and posts. Article 243T, 330 and 332 deals with the reservation of seats for SC/ST in municipalities, House of Peoples and Legislative Assembly respectively" (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Under "the 1950 constitution, 15 per cent of educational and civil service seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes and 7.5 per cent for Scheduled Tribes. In 1979 a Commission (Mandal Commission) was set up by the Janta Party, to further improve the status of backward classes on the whole. The basic task of this Commission was to identify OBCs and to recommend reservations for the backward classes. It recommended 27 per cent of quota in public sector and in higher educational institutions over and above the existing 22.5 per cent reservation for SC and ST" (Amit Bhattacharya, 2006).

OBCs or (Other Backward Classes) still stand as a controversial term, which officially include economically and educationally "backward" people in lower castes. On the contrary, poverty stricken Muslims, Sikhs and Christians and higher castes who happen to be economically 'lower' also seek to be considered as OBC in order to enjoy the reservation rights primarily in education.

"In 1990, Prime Minister V.P. Singh tried to implement the recommendations of Mandal Commission. His critics called it a "dicey move to win votes." Still the allocation of 27 per cent quota for OBC/SC/ST in elite educational institutions 'lingers on', in the Supreme Court despite the fact that the Reservation Act, December 2006, provided for its enactment in 2007-08"

The reservation and quota system has met much criticism. The opponents of Reservation system argue that it has embodied discrimination by law. Subsequently, a "voucher system" was introduced, in which needy students were

supposed to be given vouchers by which they would be able to payoff their educational bills, but this is not accepted yet.

Critics of Reservation system believe that this system despite being an “affirmative move” is not workable where introduction of opportunity to the ‘lowest’ among oppressed, is concerned. For instance, “few years back, the Government of Tamil Nadu decided to reserve 15 per cent of the seats in professional courses for students in rural areas. This progressive move, led more students from villages to medical colleges in 1998. However, the actual beneficiaries were not the less-privileged rural students whom the government wanted to favour. Those who walked away with the golden opportunities were the more-privileged students from upmarket schools that just happened to be in rural areas” (S. P. Udaya Kumar, 2003).

“Critics of Reservation system are to some extent justified because Reservation system has no place where meritocracy comes, the rule adopted by progressive nations. But considering the ground realities of India where general public has a peculiar mindset, due to primitive caste system, an “affirmative discrimination” is needed to give untouchables access to a good life” (The Tribune, 2004).

There is another section of society, which is largely ignored and is unable to benefit from the “positive discrimination”, the Dalit women. Women among Dalits are considered as the ‘lowest in the low’ and need to be empowered in the same capacity.

Women – Dalit Among Dalits

Women being the weaker gender though physically, are maltreated even by those, who themselves demand dignity and respect from others. Ruth Manorama, a social activist and the head of a newly constituted ‘Federation for Dalit Women’, has rightly called women Dalit among Dalits” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Manorama).

“Referring to their plight she said, Dalit women are at the bottom in our community. Within the women’s movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously ... Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together. Women’s labor is already undervalued; when she is a Dalit, it is nil ...” (P. D. Mathew, 1996: 10).

Dalit women are discriminated on the basis of not only caste but gender also. The crimes against Dalit women are exceedingly high. According to a report of

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Human Rights Watch (1999) “Dalit women make up the majority of landless laborers and scavengers, a significant percentage of the women is forced into prostitution in rural areas or sold into urban brothels ... In Laxmanpur-Bathe, Bihar, women were raped and mutilated before being massacred by members of the Ranvir Sena in 1997. In Bihar and Tamil Nadu, women have been beaten, arrested, and sometimes tortured during violent search and raid operations on Dalit villages in recent years” (Human Right Watch Report, 1999).

Dalit women have limited access to justice, for them justice is not only “delayed” but “rejected” altogether. According to Human Rights Watch report, “out of the total (rape) cases in which trials were completed, 41.5 percent ended in conviction during 1990, 34.2 percent in 1991 and 33.8 percent in 1992 and 30.3 percent in 1993. Thus the acquittal percentage is showing an upward trend over the years. The rate of disposal of cases in courts was 23.9 percent in 1992 and 16.8 percent in 1993. On an average, 80 percent of the cases remained pending for trial” (National Crime Records Bureau, 1996).

Today in contemporary Indian politics with the accession of power to Mayawati, newly elected Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh, a Dalit herself, a better plight for Dalit women can be expected in the days to come. Though Dalits have acquired political power, yet the atrocities related to them on basis of their servile status, are still reported.

De-Facto Segregation of Dalits

Despite the abolition of untouchability, allocation of 23 percent quota for SC/ST, they are discriminated against everywhere. In 2006-07 various cases of atrocities against Dalits were reported. Here is an account of some such cases ranging from March 2007 to date.

Some Rajputs put some Dalit houses on fire in Salwan (Karnal). Chandrika, of Dallipur; a 24-year old Dalit mother recalled that she along with her 20 month old daughter and two years old son was thrown out of a local health centre owing to her caste and her children died uncared for (Emily Wax, 2007). In Ramnagar, (Lakhisarai district) high caste men raped sex Dalit women because they voted for some other member, defying the recommendation of high caste Hindus. In flood hit Madhubari district, a Dalit man Shiv Kumar was blinded by pouring acid into his eyes by the husband of a village head for demanding his bit of the flood relief provided by the government. In Gulbarga, (Shahapur district), a social boycott was imposed on Dalits which resulted in cancellation of all lease agreements, of Dalit farmers as a punishment of the “sin” of taking water from the community well which was meant for the usage of upper caste Hindus. In Patna, (Bihar) two boys were beaten up by upper caste Hindus, as they were playing near a temple (The Tribune, 2007).

In 2006 a review “survey of Indian media during a six-month period in 2006 illustrates the plight of Dalits:

- Dalit leader abused for sitting on a chair
- Dalit worker beaten on suspicion of theft
- Dalit lynched while gathering grain
- Dalit beaten for entering temple
- UP Dalit girl resists rape, loses arm as a result
- Dalit tries to fetch water beaten to death” (Survey of Indian Media, 2006).
In tsunami relief camp (2004) and earthquake relief camps (October 8, 2005), discrimination was witnessed regardless of crucial circumstances, when upper caste victims refused to get facilitated with the lower caste victims.

In Paliyad village of Gujarat, a study has indicated that 40 percent of manual scavengers are frequently or always denied access to the market places. “A manual scavenger from Paliyad village, (Ahmedabad district), has described his plight in these words: “the water mixes with the faces that we carry in baskets on our heads, it drips onto our clothes, our faces. When I return home, I find it difficult to eat food ... But in the summer there is often no water to wash your hands before eating. It is difficult to say which [season] is worse” (Frontline, 2006).

The reason for mentioning these few horrifying events is to give an idea of the nature of the lives the Dalits lead. The advancement of “positive discrimination” by constitutional measures and showering of favours on Scheduled Castes has benefited some, but the ‘lowest’ still remain the ‘wretched of the earth’. Serious efforts are needed to weaken this de-facto segregation of Dalits. Still millions of Dalits are not willfully included in the societal set up. Consequently, the trend of conversion on a massive level is gaining momentum.

Conversion and The Restrictions

On May 27, 2007 in Mumbai, on the occasion of 50th anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, more than 1 lakh Dalits and tribals converted to Buddhism. It seems that Buddhism has appeared as the last report for Dalits to save themselves from the atrocities attached to their lower caste status. On the occasion, a landless labourer who came from a distant village for conversion asserted that conversion is his only hope to live a life of dignity in India. He painfully voiced that “I am 45 and I don’t want my children to suffer my fate.

There have been conversions in the past as well. Some 50,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism on November 4, 2001 at the Diksha ceremony organized by All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations and the Lord Buddha Club. This was followed by another conversion ceremony (January 2002 Kerala district) in which 25,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism. Earlier, some Dalits had converted

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to Christianity and Islam as well. In early 80's a number of Dalits converted to Islam, this conversion resulted in a 'Hindutva' move, of banning the act of conversion. But the Mumbai ceremony appeared as the biggest event of conversion after the first conversion ceremony in 1956, in which about 5 lack Dalits converted to Buddhism.

Conversion which appears as a remedy for Dalit problem is in fact, not effectual enough to heal the deep wounds of disrespect for Dalits. Their conversion in any religious fold does not help in changing the status of a Dalit. In Sikhim the temples for Dalits are separate, when they are Christians they are discriminated in churches, when Muslims they are not allowed to inter-marry with affluent Muslims. Thus discrimination like their skin is always there, wherever they go. Buddhism on the contrary, is more trusted by Dalits as it is considered closer to Hinduism and does not believe in any caste system from which Dalits want an escape.

This propelled trend towards conversion has been countered by certain restrictions. In Northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the government of Congress party has passed an anti-conversion bill without considering the need for it. S Vijay Kumar, secretary of 'state home department' admitted that the government has no official data regarding the forcible conversion to justify the bill.

In Tamil Nadu, AIADMK government had also introduced an anti-conversion bill in October 2002. It was primarily produced to woo BJP, the ruling party of National Democratic Alliance (DNS) but DNA lost the elections. Eventually, the then Jayalalitha's government repealed the law calling it 'anti people legislation'. In Orisa, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh anti-conversion laws are in force from 40 years and not even a single person is found guilty of forced conversion. Critics of 'anti-conversion law' believe that it is enforced and repealed only in order to cater to the vested interests of political parties making it a tool of politics. It does not protect people from forced conversion nor is punishment enacted on the perpetrators. In addition to law, some groups have taken the case of conversion in their own hands. In 2001 Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal turned their guns against Christian missionaries in the state of Gujarat who were accused of forcibly converting Dalits and other low caste tribals. Schools, hospitals and churches were attacked and priests and nuns were assaulted. The incident which received much publicity in the press was burning alive of an Australian priest based in Orissa and his son in their car by a Bajrang Dal activist.

The ceremonies that were holding on the celebration of 50th year of B.R. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism have facilitated Dalits for conversion. Thousands among Dalits, endeavour to convert, openly and willfully, on such occasions. The massive conversion of Dalits on 27th May 2007, show the uselessness of anti-conversion bills. Moreover, this conversion on such a massive level, in the age of globalization, has revealed the frustration of suppressed classes which constitute half of India's population (because arithmetically, taking backward castes as a whole, SC, ST and Other Backward Classes (OBC) into

consideration; that approximately form about 52 percent). In view of some scholars this conversion, (27th May 2007) is not taken as a good omen regarding the consolidation of Indian federation and unveils the reality that something extremely wrong is happening to Dalits. This trend depicts that Dalits want respect not mere favours and it has its roots in the conversion of B.R. Ambedkar.

A Dalit is a human: Awakening

When we talk about India as an independent state, the prevalent Dalit phenomenon, which was very much there before partition as well, received wide recognition and constitutional accommodation by the efforts of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Various laudable efforts had been before partition as well – the Bhakti movement (14th-15th Century) initiated by Kabir, a saint and Mirabai, to help the oppressed. Then Jotiro Phule started a movement (1827-90) in the shape of Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth seeking society) in Maharashtra which focused on emancipation of Dalits from caste system. E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (1879-1973) in Madras state founded the “self respect movement” and rejected the idea of caste. Today the two descendent parties of this movement, Dravida Munetra Kazaghham (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazaghham (AIADMK) have a lot of influence in Tamil Nadu politics but in reality they “have veered away from rationalism and atheism of Naicker and lapsed into various forms of Hindu obscurantism.” During British period as well, the government did not neglect Dalits and first special schools were opened for untouchables which were encouraged not only by missionaries but British administration also. Dalits attended schools for the first time in 1840.

Ambedkar struggled to achieve fundamental rights for Dalits. Though Ambedkar was critical of Mohammad Ali Jinnah yet like him he struggled for ‘right of separate electorate’ for Dalits. Jinnah talked about permanent seats for Muslims in the executive and the legislature. Ambedkar demanded the same for Dalits in the Indian Constitution but unlike him he did not demand a separate state for Dalits when he failed to achieve his demands but continued to struggle for their rights within the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar struggled hard to win a respectable status for his people but when his efforts failed he left the pail of Hindu society to become a Buddhist to show another way to the ‘wretched of the earth’ to find a life of dignity. On his conversion he said:

“I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love) and Samanta (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life” (http://www.ambedkar.org/babasaheb/commandements_of_Baba_Saheb.htm).

The Harijan movement was started by Gandhi which lost its vigour with the passage of time. Ambedkar was critical of Gandhi, despite his Harijan (children of

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God) cliché. He was skeptical of Gandhian philosophy, to reveal his suspicion he said, “Examine the Gandhian attitude to strikes, the Gandhian reverence for caste and Gandhian doctrine of Trusteeship of the rich ... Gandhism is the philosophy of the well-to-do and leisured class.”

Nonetheless, Gandhi had a following of those Dalits who were not with Ambedkar, the grandeur of ‘Mahatma’ kept them spellbound. Ambedkar was unable to fight that charisma for the first four decades of independence. But later on, Ambedkar’s effort bore fruits and today a number of Dalits have reached to the top positions in Indian society. K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit was elected president whose term ended on July 24, 2002. Mayawati the newly elected Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh is a Dalit, Ruth Manorama a Dalit activist has international recognition. T. Rajshekar, a Dalit writer, is a senior journalist at Indian Express. He has authored more than fifty books dealing with castes, Muslims, Christians, and Brahmanism etc.

There are a number of Dalits who have escaped the clutches of caste, but in the rural society, Dalits are living below the poverty line and they still face discrimination. Such is the level of discrimination that in Bihar (village Musahar), Dalits do not get any job and unavailability of money and food compels them to live by eating rodents. However various NGO’s provide financial help to Dalits and their efforts have become successful in making Dalit-problem an international concern.

Socio-Economic Share of Dalits in India

There is a 15 percent quota for Dalits in the public sector but in private sector, Dalits are not offered any quota despite vast opportunities. Dalits can explore the private sector more effectively in sectors like leather industry in which they can progress on account of their traditional expertise in shoe making and manual scavengers can take part in the business of sanitation products and so on. Therefore a well-known scholar Christopher has recommended that policy of positive discrimination must target the corporate sector.

Another view regarding the participation of Dalits in private sector is presented by Bhopal declaration (January 13, 2002). This declaration has firstly, highlighted the issue by indicating that there is not even a single Dalit billionaire, businessmen or industrialist. And secondly recommended an “equal opportunity for all” principle in Indian industry so that “Dalits may escape the historical burden of economy’s polluted tasks.”

There two different views address the same issue, one talks of positive discrimination in corporate sector while the other talks of meritocracy. By keeping in consideration the present position of Dalits, specially the lowest among them, positive discrimination in both private and public sector is needed in order to bring them into the mainstream of society. It needs time to change the mindset of Hindus

in which caste system is still an imperative part of their life. However, gradually this positive discrimination could be reduced in order to move towards meritocracy.

Consequently, some positive moves have been taken in this regard, though in a subtle manner, without the legislative binding. Subsequent to the Bhopal declaration the government of Madhya Pradesh gave financial support to a Dalit businessman and intends to continue this policy. Another, positive step has been taken by Bharti Enterprises recently in employing engineers from the SC/ST on preferential basis in cooperation with the Social Justice Ministry.

Politicians too have taken steps from time to time to address the problem. For instance, in 1980's Rajiv Gandhi's government initiated a landmark recruitment campaign of allocating 50,000 vacancies to SC/ST. But it is not certain whether that target was achieved or not.

In view of some critics only "few" can benefit from the quota system to form a "creamy layer" while others lag behind. The issue of 'creamy layer' that is raised frequently in Indian media is somewhat justified as this creamy layer emerged as a result of the existing quota system. It is also a fact that same 'quota system' had benefited Dalits in the previous decades. Dalit leader Mayawati (an ordinary school teacher) was elected on a Dalit seat, Kanshi Ram (the late founder and ideologue of BSP) was a beneficiary of the reservation system as a civil servant before turning to politics and K. R. Narayanan (former Dalit Indian president) was a member of Indian Foreign Service before joining Congress. They all belonged to the suppressed class before gaining their respective positions through the reservation system. They would never have been recruited anywhere because of their "polluted" being. The acceptance of Dalits in Indian society is a product of the reservation that has made possible the idea of lower castes working with higher castes in the segregated structure of the Indian society. Therefore, the legislation regarding the reservation of Dalits in private sectors is perpetually being demanded by the influential class of Dalit community. Mayawati has demanded at least 30 percent reservation in jobs both in public and private sectors, 10 percent each for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the socially and educationally backward classes and the poor and the unemployment among the upper castes.

Another important Dalit figure, Narendra Jadhav, who is the Principal Adviser and Chief Economist at the Reserve Bank of India, has rightly said that "the need for it is coming from the inability of the system as a whole to be fair. It is to guard against that. What reservation means is that if you are a Dalit and I am a biased man and therefore I will not give you the job, it is to prevent the kind of injustice which is there because of the psychological problems in non-Dalits towards Dalits; that is the genesis."

Reservation in the private sector will generate jobs for the deprived classes. And gradually, people like K. R. Narayana, Mayawati, Bangaru Laxman (BJP party President) will appear in private sector also as Dalit entrepreneurs.

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Agriculture, being the main occupation of 680 million of the rural population, where 65 percent of the Labour force is from Dalit community; is in doldrums. In the wake of globalization and stepping in of various multinational corporations on the Indian soil, and export-based agricultural development, the farmer class whose bread and butter was this occupation, is in trouble as the employment of agriculture workers has fallen from 160 days (1991) to 70 days (2001) per annum, the reason why a large number of peasants have committed suicide (970 in 2001).

Another aspect of this situation is the struggle launched by the Naxalite group for the rights of the peasants who are mainly Dalits. This Naxalite led peasant struggle has now surfaced in several areas of North India. Naxalites groups are actively engaged.

The Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) 1989

“**The Prevention of Atrocities Act** (POA) is a tacit acknowledgement by the Indian government that caste relations are defined by violence, both incidental and systemic. In 1989, the Government of India passed the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA), which clarified specific crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the Dalits) as atrocities, and created strategies and punishments to counter these acts. The purpose of the Act was to curb and punish violence against Dalits. Firstly, it clarified what the **atrocities** were: both particular incidents of harm and humiliation, such as the forced consumption of noxious substances, and systemic violence still faced by many Dalits, especially in rural areas. Such systemic violence includes forced labor, denial of access to water and other public amenities, and sexual abuse of Dalit women. Secondly, the Act created Special Courts to try cases registered under the POA. Thirdly, the Act called on states with high levels of caste violence (said to be atrocity-prone) to appoint qualified officers to monitor and maintain law and order. The POA gave legal redress to Dalits, but only two states have created separate Special Courts in accordance with the law. In practice the Act has suffered from a near-complete failure in implementation. Policemen have displayed a consistent unwillingness to register offenses under the act. This reluctance stems partially from ignorance and also from peer protection. According to a 1999 study, nearly a quarter of those government officials charged with enforcing the Act are unaware of its existence” (<http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF83.asp>).

Dalits and Contemporary Indian Politics

While “the Indian Constitution has duly made special provisions for the social and economic uplift of the Dalits, comprising the so-called scheduled castes and tribes in order to enable them to achieve upward social mobility, these concessions are

limited to only those Dalits who remain Hindu. There is a demand among the Dalits who have converted to other religions that the statutory benefits should be extended to them as well, to overcome and bring closure to historical injustices” (The Wall Street Journal, 2008).

Another major politically charged issue with the rise of **Hindutva's** (Hindu nationalism) role in Indian politics is that of religious conversion. This political movement alleges that conversions of Dalits are due not to any social or theological motivation but to allurements like education and jobs. Critics argue that the inverse is true due to laws banning conversion, and the limiting of social relief for these backward sections of Indian society being revoked for those who convert. **Bangaru Laxman**, a Dalit politician, was a prominent member of the **Hindutva** movement.

“Another political issue is over the affirmative-action measures taken by the government towards the upliftment of Dalits through quotas in government jobs and university admissions. About 8% of the seats in the National and State Parliaments are reserved for Scheduled Caste and Tribe candidates, a measure sought by **B. R. Ambedkar** and other Dalit activists in order to ensure that Dalits would obtain a proportionate political voice” (The Wall Street Journal, 2008).

“Anti-Dalit prejudices exist in fringe groups, such as the extremist **far-right** militia **Ranvir Sena**, largely run by upper-caste landlords in areas of the Indian state of **Bihar**. They oppose equal treatment of Dalits and have resorted to violent means to suppress the Dalits. The Ranvir Sena is considered a **terrorist** organization” (Ranabira & Ghanshyam, 2001).

In 1997, **K. R. Narayanan** became “the first Dalit to have been **President**. In 2008, **Mayawati**, a Dalit from the **Bahujan Samaj Party**, was elected as the Chief Minister of India's biggest state **Uttar Pradesh**. Her victory was the outcome of her efforts to expand her political base beyond Dalits, embracing in particular the **Brahmins** of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati, together with her political mentor **Kanshi Ram**, saw that the interests of the average Dalit (most of whom are landless agricultural laborers) were more in conflict with the middle castes such as the **Yadav** caste, who owned most of the agricultural land in Uttar Pradesh, than with the predominantly city-dwelling upper castes. Her success in welding the Dalits and the upper castes has led to her being projected as a potential future **Prime Minister of India**” (The Wall Street Journal, 2008).

“Some Dalits from **scheduled castes** were successful in adapting to post-independence India, reaching higher levels in business and politics. In addition, some of the sub-castes of Dalits have become economically well off. Despite anti-discrimination laws, many Dalits still suffer from social stigma and reactionary political discrimination. Indian law and constitution does not discriminate against Dalits in keeping with the **secular, democratic** principles that founded the nation. Discrimination against Dalits typically manifests itself in the private sector with respect to employment/jobs and social mobility, and via divisive political partnership against Dalit communal interests in the public sector. Ethnic tensions

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between Dalit folks and non-Dalits have manifested themselves on account of resentment against rising Dalits and prejudices against Dalits that are reinforced by constant views. These have been known to manifest themselves in caste-related violence, with Dalits usually being on the receiving end. Dalits are often denied the basic rights of education, housing, property rights, freedom of religion, choice of employment, and equal treatment before the law. In **2006**, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed concern for what he saw as parallels between untouchability and **apartheid**. However, this analogy has been rejected by some academics and **anthropologists** on account of **affirmative action** policies enacted by government to (in part) address the situation of the Dalit folk” (Ranabira & Ghanshyam, 2001).

Dalit Literature

“Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of **Indian literature**. One of the first Dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an **11th-century** cobbler-saint who lived in the reign of **Western Chalukyas** and who is also regarded by some scholars as the father of **Vachana** poetry. Another poet who finds mention is Dohara Kakkiah, a Dalit by birth, six of whose confessional poems survive” (Thummapudi Bharathi, 2008).

Modern Dalit Literature

In the modern era, “Dalit literature received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like **Mahatma Phule** and Ambedkar in **Maharashtra**, who brought forth the issues of Dalits through their works and writings; this started a new trend in Dalit writing and inspired many Dalits to come forth with writings in Marathi, Hindi, **Tamil** and **Punjabi**” (N.M. Aston, 2001).

“By the 1960s, Dalit literature saw a fresh crop of new writers like **Baburao Bagul**, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarao Kharat, though its formal form came into being with the **Little magazine movement**. **Dalit Voice**, a political magazine which started publishing in 1981, was another force in the rise of Dalit literature in India. In **Sri Lanka**, Dalit writers like **Dominic Jeeva** gained mainstream popularity in the late 1960” (Thummapudi Bharathi, 2008).

Caste-Based Violence

Human Rights Watch continued to receive reports of “Dalits falling victim to caste-based violence, most often at the hands of upper castes who perpetrated these crimes with almost complete impunity. Dalits in the southern state of Tamil Nadu were tortured by a village leader: two were branded with a hot iron rod and forced to feed human faces to each other. The incident occurred after the three

victims publicly announced that the village president had yet to return money she owed one of them. One of the victims was subsequently strangled and beaten by the president's husband and son. While the police eventually charged the perpetrators with crimes under the Indian Penal Code and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989), Dalits complained that as a result of the incident local upper-caste community members refused to give them work" (Report of the United Nations High Commissioner, 2011).

"In September, the Center for Dalit Human Rights in Rajasthan, a northern state, organized a two-day march, protesting community policies in the village of Chakwara that barred Dalits from using public ponds or entering village shops. An upper-caste mob descended on the march, pelting stones and attacking both the demonstrators and the police, injuring fifty people. The policies were put in place in December 2001 when the village's upper-caste community imposed a fine on two Dalits who had used public bathing facilities. Despite lodging a complaint with state authorities, Dalits continued to be excluded and to face threats of violence. On October 16 in Jhajjar district, Haryana, Five Dalit youths were launched by a mob, reportedly led by members of the VJP in the presence of local police officials, following false rumors that the Dalits had killed a cow – an animal regarded as sacred in the Hindu religion. Nearly a month later five people were arrested, prompting a backlash by villagers who pelted police with stones and blocked off roads for nearly a week. The VHP reportedly also forced shops, businesses, and schools to close in protest of the arrests. The local leader of the VHP, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, said he had no regrets over the incident and that the life of a cow was worth more than that of five Dalits" (Human Right's Watch, World Report, 2003).

"Dalit women and girls were often subject to sexual harassment and violence. For example, on April 15 four upper-caste men abducted a fourteen-year-old Dalit girl from her home just outside Jaipur, Rajasthan, and gang-raped her over a period of three years. After her return to the village, the upper-caste community of the village threatened to remove her family from the village if they reported this incident to the police. On November 3 a Dalit women in Kishanganj, Bihar was paraded half-naked by a group of people who wanted to teach a lesson to her family for not relinquishing their claim to a piece of land" (Human Right's Watch, World Report, 2003).

"The controversial prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Bill was passed in the state of Tamil Nadu. The new law attracted widespread criticism because it was feared it would make it more difficult for poor people, persecuted minorities, and others ostracized under the caste system to convert from Hinduism to another religion. Ordered by the AIADMK-ruling government of Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram, the bill found support with the federal government, led by the BJP" (Human Right's Watch, World Report, 2003).

"In January, the state government of Madhya Pradesh adopted the landmark Bhopal Declaration following a two-day conference titled "Charting a New Course

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for Dalits for the 21st Century”, which was organized with the support of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights. The declaration’s twenty-one point agenda included the enforcement of living wages for agricultural laborers, the restoration of alienated land for tribals, strict enforcement of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1976), honest implementation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) and Rules (1985), and the elimination of the caste-based practice of manual scavenging” (Human Right’s Watch, World Report, 2003).

India’s swift urbanization is a mixed blessing for Dalits. Many lower-caste people have been moving to cities. “Our youth are leaving our village rather than depending on the dominate-caste people”, observers Narasimhah, a villager in the tumkur district of Tamil Nadu. “They have become bold and independent.” But activities point out that urban Dalits are still oppressed. Only Dalits clean sewers, break stones or sweep roads. “Who is building India’s cities?” Asks Ruth Manorama, head of the National Federation of Dalit Women. “Who is cleaning toilets, building its roads? Dalits”. Politics could change that, over the past decade, “Dalit political parties have emerged across the country. The 1998 election showed a consolidation of Dalits with other minorities into an effective voting block in many Indian states. A Dalit woman, Mayawati, was even elected Chief Minister of Utar Pradesh. India got its first Dalit archbishop this spring, and its first Dalit Supreme Court judge last month. In Tumkur’s local council elections this spring, Dalits ran for the first time. A Dalit named Ramesh K., like 3000 other Dalits across the district, won. His wizened mother, Lakshumamuma, sees historic change. When I was young, people would call me by the name of my caste, She says: Now they call me by my name, That’s a start” (Human Right’s Watch, World Report, 2003).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Dalit have traditionally been victims of inequality. They face social discrimination. Their relatively lower social status is determined by the role which is either ‘invisible’ or non productive in economic terms. Their socio-economic attribute clearly shows that they are lagging behind in economic development, education and political participation. They are usually outside the decision-making process due to their peripheral position and social situation. Owing to all their features they may be considered as disempowered segment of the society.

Hence, the question of empowerment is very crucial to them. Empowerment relates not only to the nature and character of the society, but also to privileges and opportunities to be provided to them by the government and non-government organizations. The major obstacles to Dalit empowerment are economic, political and social. The Dalit mindset which is constituted under authoritarian partriarchal

social system is also a great obstacle to their empowerment. The most urgent need is to include Dalit voice in policy formation and intervention.

Recommendations

To empower the Dalit of India, the society as well as the government must continue to make efforts to increase opportunities for them in all walks of life, especially government and semi-government sectors. The following steps may be adopted:

- a) The government and non-government agencies should formulate policies for improving the health condition as well as the economic, educational and social status of the Dalit.
- b) The Dalits should also examine the ways to improve their lot. They should also make efforts on their own to ensure that they get opportunities of social improvement.
- c) Removal of obstacles that deprive the Dalits of the benefits of economic, education, health and social development.
- d) Initiatives to be taken to encourage the Dalits to organize themselves to remove disparities that directly and indirectly affect them.
- e) Encourage the Dalit to develop as effective partnerships with the government and other societal groups.
- f) Measures to be taken to wipe out the barriers to participation of Dalit in the labour force and to provide them the credit and other monetary assistance for income generating activities.

The government of India has adopted several measures to improve the conditions of the Dalits. Some Dalits have made to higher levels of the society and government. However, a very large number of them continue to face discrimination and hardships. Greater attention should be given to the Dalits based in the rural areas where untouchability, discrimination and poverty continue to threaten their future.

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