

EMANCIPATION OF DALITS: A DISTANT DREAM

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INTRODUCTION

The word emancipation means 'a process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions.' This paper tries to explore how Dalits can get freedom from the kind of treatment they get from upper castes and can be emancipated. The caste system originated in the classic Hindu scripture 'Vedas'. The hymns of Rigveda justified the hierarchical system of social orders saying that all these four orders/castes represent Brahma, the creator. It is believed that from the 'mouth' of Brahma the Brahmins were born, so they became a priestly class; from his arms were born Kshatriyas, so they became warriors; from his "thighs" were born Vaisayas, and they performed ordinary work, like business or agriculture and from his "feet" the Shudras were born and so they performed the dirty work of scavenging, disposing of dead animals or unknown human bodies. Since these people were allotted the dirty jobs, they were considered untouchables by the other castes.

The term untouchable is not appropriate now, as the practice of Untouchability has been legally proscribed. which is why people have started calling them ex-untouchable. Untouchables are called by different names. Religious books of the Hindus called them Shudras, Gandhi called them Harijan (children of God) and Ambedkar called them "depressed classes". However, since 1970 the term "Dalit" has been widely used. Dalit is a Marathi word, first used by Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule (a 19th century social reformer). In official documents they are designated as Scheduled Castes (SCs)

Dalits are subject to discrimination, subjugation, deprivation, and violence. They are not included in the mainstream Hindu society. They are still disadvantaged socially & educationally. The root of this discrimination was not religion, language, sex, or colour which are the common ground for discriminatory treatment in most part of the world. Rather it was "Caste" or birth, which is unique. The art of reading and writing was controlled by the upper castes. Shudras were not allowed to read and write. Shudras found to be listening to the Vedas were to be punished by pouring molten lead into their ears or by other ways, for example in *Mahabharata* Eklavya was compelled to cut his thumb. Thus, Dalits were not allowed to engage themselves in reading and learning.

WHY DALITS WERE DENIED OF EDUCATION?

The possible answer to the question can be, this was a strategy designed by Upper castes to oppress and rule Dalits. This is a known fact that education is one of the important means of reducing ignorance, inequality and helps to raise one's social status. Knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes acquired through education help an individual to lead desired quality of life. It allows them to communicate, argue and to have control over their lives. Dr Ambedkar, a visionary Dalit leader and architect of the Indian constitution, once said:

Deprive a man of knowledge and you will make him inevitably the slave... deprivation of

knowledge is denial of the power to use liberty for great ends. An ignorant man may be free... but cannot employ his freedom to give him assurance of happiness. (Ambedkar-1987, 39). Therefore, education and knowledge must be available to all.

Caste based discrimination is one of the biggest human rights problems. Although the caste system is abolished by law, it still has implications on the lives of Dalits. It limits the possibilities of Dalits to be economically independent and to make a living by earning an income for being self-employed. Although Dalits are being protected by law, but caste-based discrimination seems never ending. Dalits are at the bottom of society when it comes to education, income, formal employment, health, and political participation. The physical exclusion of Dalits from people of other castes on the base of pollution and Untouchability causes segregation from the rest of the society. The kind of structural discrimination, alienation and abuse that Dalit children face in school are so traumatising that they are often forced to drop out of school. Neglect, repeated blaming and labelling of Dalit students as weak performers, lead to irregular attendance, less concentration in studies and school activities. Educational deprivation of Dalits results in poor economic and social standing in the society. One way to bring egalitarian system is to end caste discrimination. Our constitution has provided a positive framework. Besides abolishing the practice of Untouchability, it has also introduced the positive discrimination measures to achieve integration of Dalits into the mainstream society. If laws for prohibiting Untouchability and prevention of atrocities act implemented properly the practice of discrimination will gradually disappear.

LITERATURE SURVEY

The UN has adopted 100 human rights instruments during the past six decades. Most of these international human right documents not only provide a detailed catalogue of human rights to which everyone is entitled to enjoy but also categorically proclaim that the principles of

“equality” and “non-discrimination” constitute the dominant themes of the modern international human rights law. The constitutional and statutory laws in India also establish a comprehensive list of human rights. Many laws have been adopted to remove discriminatory practices towards ex-untouchables. Despite all this Dalits are still subjected to social and economic exclusion and discrimination. Their attempts to assert their rights are often met with strong resistance from higher castes, resulting in inhuman torture, rapes, massacres, and other atrocities.

S.Anand(1999) advocates learning of English by Dalits :

'unlike Sanskrit' there are no scriptural injunctions against the learning of English; English is theoretically as accessible to Dalits and women as it is to 'dwijas'. However, the Brahminical classes have monopolised the use of English (as also other symbols of western modernity) and have justified the denial of the same to the Dalits, sometimes even reading their 'faulty' use of language as acts of resistance/ rejection of colonial modernity.

Dr Ambedkar, an ardent critic of caste system demolished the myth of divine origin of caste hierarchy. He inspired and initiated the creative minds of India to enforce the socio-cultural upsurge for the total emancipation of the Dalits. His clarion call of “Educate, Agitate and Organise”, lead Dalits to the right direction. He gave importance to modern education for the betterment of the Dalits. Ambedkar writes:

Hindu society seems to me to stand in the need of a moral regeneration, which it is dangerous to postpone. And the question is who can determine and control this moral regeneration? Obviously only those who have undergone an intellectual regeneration and those who are honest enough to have the courage of their conviction born of intellectual emancipation. (1973)

He correctly understood the importance of education and English language as a vital and powerful instrument to free the Dalits from century old miseries, sufferings, insults, stigma inflicted on them by caste system. His commandments will raise the educational standards so that they may know their own condition and have aspirations to raise themselves to the level of the high caste Hindus and be in a position to use political power to that end.

Many studies have been conducted on Dalits and Education. The studies have found that Dalit children are facing discriminatory treatments in their schools. Teachers force them to sit at the back or near the door of the classroom, they segregate Dalit children from non-Dalits during lunch time, forbid non-Dalit children from sitting next to Dalit children or touching their plates, limit Dalit children to participate in class, subject them to verbal abuse and grading them unjustifiably low marks. Like Dalit students. At some places even Dalit teachers are segregated from non-Dalit teachers in accessing food and water during lunchtime.

DECONSTRUCTED IMAGE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN DALIT/ EXPERIENTIAL LITERATURE

The institution of education and religious institutions treat Dalits badly and inhumanly so that they can instil the fear of caste in their minds. The motif of such institutions is to make Dalits believe that whatever treatment they are getting is their destiny and this is how caste system operates, which no one can change. Socialists have constructed an ideal picture of schools and teachers. Teacher is hailed sometimes above God. But, in Dalit literature teacher is a suppressor. Dalits suffer discrimination in the schools and in the quality of education. To understand the kind of sufferings and discrimination they face few examples have been cited from the auto/biographies written by Dalit writers.

Many a times teachers at the school are from upper castes and they have low expectation for the Dalit children and rarely seek to provide them

with a positive learning environment. Various 'discriminatory practices', "corporal punishments, denial of access to school water supplies, segregation in class rooms and forcing Dalit children to clean in and around school premises" (IDSN and Navsarjan briefing note, 2010), have been used by upper caste teachers against Dalit children in schools. In 2006 the special Rapporteur on the right to education observed that, "teachers have been known to declare that Dalit pupils cannot learn unless they are beaten" (HRW, 2007).

In *Joothan* written by Om Prakash Valmiki, author is teased and tormented by Taga boys:

The children of tyagis would tease me by calling 'chuhre ka'. Sometimes they beat me without any reason. This was an absurd tormented life that made me introverted and irritable. If I got thirsty in school, then I had to stand near the hand pump, the boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. All sorts of stratagems were tried so that I would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which I was born. (3)

Once a teacher forced Valmiki to sweep the school premises as he belonged to sweeper caste. The teacher said, "all right...see that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom and sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is after all your family business" (5). Valmiki's father who considered education to be the panacea for all their ills, particularly for overcoming the sin of being born in a low caste, forced his son to improve his caste by getting education. However, his caste continued to haunt him throughout his professional life. By documenting his painful life experiences, he exposes a social order that is cruel and inhuman. 'Joothan' is a manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. It confronts its readers with questions about their own humanity and encourages them to join the universal project of human liberation.

Laxman Mane also writes about his school experiences in his novel *Upara*. His experience at school was bitter. Mane recalls how his first day in the school was like a nightmare for him while for others it was like a public exhibition. To see a kaikadi boy attending school was quite an unbelievable sight. So, the students from the upper caste started teasing him the ways hen do when a strange chick intrudes upon their privacy. Obviously, the upper caste students were afraid of having any physical contact with him. With no books, no slate, no pencil and no proper clothes, Mane would sit at a distance and listen to his teachers and classmates. (182)

Dalit children face discriminatory attitudes from fellow students and the community. In particular from higher caste members who perceive education for Dalits as a waste and a threat. This is linked to a perception among some higher caste people that educated Dalits pose a threat to village hierarchies and power relations and that Dalits are generally incapable of being educated.

There are many schemes by Indian Government for the upliftment of Dalits, like reservation for SC/ ST in all areas of education. Special scholarships and other incentives are provided for Dalit candidates. With the help of such facilities few Dalits have managed to reach higher levels in society. But they are unable to change their position in the society. Prof. Rajkumar in his book *Dalit Narratives* talks about a low caste who becomes a Vice Chancellor of a University. He writes:

Shyamlal's autobiography, on the other hand, records the life-events of a self-made man who becomes a Vice Chancellor due to his hard work and perseverance. But, as the title of autobiography suggests his position in the academic circle remains unchanged despite the top position he occupies in the university. For the upper castes Shyam Lal remains a bhangi whether he becomes a professor or vice chancellor. This treatment of Shyam Lal is not an isolated event. Every single Dalit autobiography has faced similar treatment, the difference between them being only in degrees. (207).

Many Dalits adopted Christianity to escape casteism, but Christianity could not change the significant fact of their life. Christian Dalits have dual identity, Christian as well as Dalit. *Karakku* written by Tamil Dalit writer Bama is an autobiographical account of a Dalit Christian woman. Bama's family embraces Christianity to escape casteism, but even after conversion they remain low castes. As a teacher in the convent school she was humiliated by upper caste parents. She was called "Paraya teacher", a derogatory remark that made her realize that even her education cannot change her caste. According to Bama in most of the Convents, caste is visible and there is discrimination at all the levels. She tells that in schools upper caste teachers misbehave with lower caste students. They always criticise lower castes if anything wrong happens in school, they will immediately and without any reason take the name of the low caste children. They would say, "It must be one of the cheri-children who did it" (6). Bama narrates one incident when she and her friends were playing at the school in the evening. At that moment somebody stole a coconut, but the guilt was thrown on Bama. Although she was not guilty, but the headmaster treated her badly. He scolded her in the name of caste and said, "you are the people of low caste like the manner you have... we cannot allow you inside the school. Stand outside". after this she got suspended from the school. She felt ashamed and insulted but could not do anything to prove her innocence.

CONCLUSION

Dalits are facing various kinds of discrimination, though any forms of discrimination is outlawed both by national and international laws of human rights. We must strive for the liberation of Dalits from the clutches of oppression. Effective measures should be taken by the Government to decrease the dropout rates. More emphasis should be given to increase enrolment rates among Dalit children in both at public and government schools. The "affirmative action program" for Dalits has slightly changed their lives and status, but they are still socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged. The

constitution provides a framework and there are laws which prohibit untouchability, such as Untouchability Offences Act, 1995(amended and renamed as Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976) and the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. If these laws are implemented properly the practice of discrimination may gradually come to an end. Many studies regarding upliftment of Dalits have suggested numerous suggestions such as “acknowledgement of the caste discrimination” (rather than just assuming that it was an age old practice and now it has disappeared), “random monitoring” to ensure that there will be no violation of Dalit rights. There should be a public campaign to raise awareness. 'Tolerance education' and 'education for non-violence' is also suggested. Teachers should be sensitized on caste discrimination during training programmes. Sensitizing people is of utmost importance because we know despite of government policies and programmes Dalits are facing problems. They are not getting social dignity. Because of upper caste prejudices and intolerance, Dalits do not get respect even if they achieve high position in their professions. Upper castes think Dalits are not worth it or they do not have the capabilities. According to renowned Dalit writer Laxman Gaiwad of Maharashtra, 'the attitude of the people towards Dalits have changed considerably in recent times but a lot still remains to be done'.

Dalit friendly pedagogy must be evolved and academic support to Dalit students must be provided. The government should take necessary steps to ensure equal access to free quality education at the primary and secondary levels for Dalit children. The government should also enable and improve education and professional training for Dalit students so that they can be moved to the profession of their choice. Education should be enlisted as one of the three basic human needs. It is equally important for the progress of a nation and for the enrichment of society in general. A country's literate population is its asset. In the globalized world of today, Dalits can prove to be assets to the nation if provided with the right kind of education

and employability skills. Therefore, the emancipation of Dalits depends on the quality education and proper implementation of laws prohibiting discrimination against Dalits. Quality education becomes an important tool for the upliftment of Dalits from a state of dereliction to a state of prosperity and to ensure the dignity of human life. Such steps for the betterment of Dalits will lead to social harmony in the nation, which will further lead to achieving the dream of an egalitarian society

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