

## Dalits in India: Who Are They?

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### Abstract

Dalits in India are the people belonging to the lowest strata of social hierarchy. Their place in Indian social setup is permanently determined and perpetually forced on them simply by the accidental process of their birth. Once a person is born in any particular caste, he is not entitled to move out of his caste. So caste is a closed structure in which nobody outside the caste can enter or nobody can move out.

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a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary : equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals : bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the

community more felt by the sanction of detrain penalties and, above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group.

This description of 'caste' seems to include many essential aspects related to the term 'caste.' To begin with, it speaks about the 'close' structure of the caste system and its 'hereditary' nature. It adds that the members of a caste 'do not marry outside the caste,' follow common 'occupation,' 'traditions,' 'festivals,' and have a 'chief' who looks after its administration. So the caste in Indian society itself is an institution that has certain rules of its own which are followed by all the members of that caste. In India, these castes are divided in two groups – touchables and untouchables. Dalit is a term that includes the untouchable castes who suffered unbearable pains because of the specific 'place' they were forced to occupy in Indian caste-based social structure.

'Dalit' is originally a Sanskrit term that came to be used in other Indian languages including Marathi which means 'divided,' 'suppressed,' 'crushed,' 'broken to pieces.' It includes hundreds of lower untouchable

castes who were outside the four-*Varna* system of Indian social structure. The term came to be prominently used to refer to the members of these untouchable castes with the rise of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in Indian socio-political scenario.

The other influential name in Indian socio-political affairs was Mahatma Gandhi who referred these untouchables as '*Harijan*' meaning 'God's children.' Gandhi's calling Dalits as '*Harijan*' has deep cultural connotations as untouchables were not allowed to enter into the temples of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Mahatma Gandhi seemed to have realized the falsity of Hindu caste system which was the perpetrator of all the miseries in the lives of untouchables. Eleanor Zelliott has quoted Mahatma Gandhi in her book *Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership*, where Gandhi calls untouchability as "excrescence on Hinduism, a poison, a snake, a cancer, a hydra-headed monster, a great blot, a device of Satan, a hideous untruth..." Dalits are the communities found to be present in many South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. In Indian context they are the original inhabitants of the country. Dalits are referred with different names in different parts of India. E.g. In Karnataka, Dalits are called 'Adi Karnataka', In Tamil Nadu, they are 'Adi Dravida,' in Punjab, they are 'Ad Dharmi' and in Andhra Pradesh, they are "Adi Andhra." Here the term 'Adi' means 'original.'

However, the Constitution of India recently prohibited the use of the term 'Dalit' to refer to the former untouchable communities as it is unconstitutional. The Constitution has used the word 'Scheduled Castes' which is the 'official name given in India to the lowest caste, considered

'untouchable' in orthodox Hindu scriptures and practices, officially regarded as socially disadvantaged.' Though Dalits were kept outside the Hindu four-*Varna* system and were not allowed to enter Hindu temples, more than 90% of them belong to Hindu religion while the rest of them are the followers of Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity.

There is widespread disagreement among the scholars about the meaning and scope of the term 'Dalit', however, most of them agree with the fact that Dalits are the people who are suppressed, exploited, victimized, brutally assaulted and even murdered for simply because of their being 'Dalits.' At this stage, a close analysis of various definitions of the term 'Dalit' will be helpful to understand the real meaning of the term.

"Dalit" refers to one's caste rather than class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have born the stigma of "untouchability" because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations... They are considered impure and polluting and are therefore physically and socially excluded and isolated from the rest of society... Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens of India.

This definition seems to be self-sufficient as it covers all the broader aspects of the term 'Dalit'. It says that Dalits are the people who are socially excluded and isolated as untouchables because of their involvement in impure and polluting works. The elements of discrimination and

violence are also pointed out in this definition.

The scholars like Baburao Bagul and Dr. M.N. Wankhede emphasize on the element of inclusiveness of the term 'Dalit' in their definitions. For example, Dr. M.N. Wankhede includes the Bauddhas and the other backward classes and labourers in the scope of the term 'Dalit.' Similarly for Baburao Bagul 'Dalit' is a class that includes all Blacks, Whites and Reds of America and Afro-Asian countries along with the untouchables, tribals and other exploited people of India. In reality, these seem to be very broad definitions as they include all the down-trodden, depressed, socially and economically backward communities like the Bauddhas, Blacks, Reds and even Whites under the category of 'Dalit' which is opposed by some of the Indian scholars and activists of Dalit movement.

The inclusion of 'Bauddhas' in the category of 'Dalits' is acceptable to almost all the scholars as 'Bauddhas' are the followers of Buddhism, a religion and dharma that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to the Buddha'. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar along with his thousands of followers got converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956. According to Dr. Sharankumar Limbale 'all people cannot be treated as equal on economic ground as social reality in India is quite different. In Indian social structure, it would be incorrect to call all the oppressed communities, from Brahmins to Bauddhas, as Dalits.'

Sharankumar Limbale's opinion seems to be logical as he says that in Indian context, only the economic considerations are not enough to label someone as 'Dalit' because

Dalit is a specific sensibility which is comprehended only by the untouchable castes as they had first hand experiences of the functioning of the inhuman system of untouchability. Therefore, grouping all down-trodden communities under the umbrella term 'Dalit' will be unjustifiable from socio-cultural points of view.

Most of the scholars agree with the view that Indian society is a composition of the four classes called '*Chaturvarna*' that include '*Brahmin*', '*Kshatriya*', '*Vaishya*', and '*Shudra*'. This classification of Hindu social structure was based on the type of work each of these *Varnas* were traditionally assigned. For example the *Brahmins*, the upper-most stratum of *Chaturvarna* system were assigned the work of teaching and studying the Vedas, and performing religious rites and rituals. The second in hierarchy were the *Kshatriyas* who were involved in protecting the society and looking after the administration. The *Vaishyas* were the community of traders who looked after the business transactions and the cultivating of the land. At the lowest level of this hierarchy were the *Shudras* whose job was to serve and work for the benefit of other three classes.

The significant aspect of this *Chaturvarna* system was that each Varna had the opportunity to shift from one to the other depending upon the nature of their work. So it provided an open structure to all the members to move from one class to the other. However, with the passage of time, this open system became closed thereby depriving the members of one class to enter into the other class with the assistance of their individual capabilities. In later years, this class structure evolved into the caste structure with its rigid rules of upward and

downward movements. It resulted in the predetermined occupation of a person depending upon his birth into a particular caste. It means individual performance had nothing to do with one's place in such a society.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar rejected the existence of *Chaturvarna* system in Hindu society. He argued that initially, there were only three *Varnas* in Indian social setup. They were *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. He argued that the *Shudras* 'did not form a separate *Varna* as they ranked as a part of the *Kshatriya Varna* in the Indo-Aryan society. But troubled by their tyrannies and oppressions, the *Brahmins* developed a sense of hatred towards the *Shudras* and refused to perform the *Upanayana* of the *Shudras*. This became the fourth *Varna* of the *Chaturvarna* social structure. According to Hindu tradition 'only *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* have the right to wear the sacred thread whereas the *Shudras* are not allowed to wear this thread. So those having the right of wearing the thread were *Dvijas* (meaning twice-born) and those who have no right to wear it are the *non-Dvijas*.' As the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* belonged to the *Chaturvarna* system they are the *Savarnas* whereas the Untouchables or *Ati-Shudras* being outside the *Chaturvarna* system are called *Avarnas*.

The origin of untouchability has its roots in ancient Indian social structure. In this connection, Dr. Ambedkar says:

there was a time when the village in India consisted of a Settled Community and Broken Men and that though both lived apart, the former inside the village and the latter outside it, there was no bar to social

intercourse between the members of the Settled Community and the Broken Men. When the cow became sacred and beef-eating became taboo, society became divided into two - the Settled Community became a touchable community and Broken Men became an untouchable community... Untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D.

Thus the practice of untouchability existed in India for almost 2000 years. Due to this system, the untouchables were literally forced to lead their lives worse than the animals. These people were treated as if they were not human beings at all. They were forced to engage in polluting works, were not allowed to touch the *Savarnas* and their houses, they were not allowed in the streets in morning and evening hours as their shadows were considered to be polluting, they were forced to tie an earthen pot round their necks to hold their spittle and carry a thorny branch to brush out their footsteps. The Brahmin was the all-powerful member of this system, so he enjoyed all the privileges. The untouchables were made to lie on face when a Brahmin passes by them. The untouchables were forced to wear a black thread so that they can be easily recognized. Such kinds of atrocities against the members of untouchable communities had made their lives worse than the hell.

The untouchables were strictly confined to practice their hereditary works many of which involved hard physical labour and earned a very low income. This was a deliberate arrangement made by the upper castes so that the untouchables will remain dependent on the mercy of caste Hindus. The responsibilities of the untouchables were doing all kinds of polluting and menial

works like removing the dead animals, cleaning latrines, sewers, and gutters, looking after the burning grounds, etc. As they were engaged in such filthy works, they were not allowed into public places like the temples, gardens, schools and streets. This segregation forced the untouchables to stick to their low-earning hereditary works. Naturally, they had no any other alternative but to be reliant on their oppressors. Referring to this fact in the lives of Dalits, Navi Pillay observes:

They (Lower castes) often find themselves battling high levels of indebtedness or even debt and labor bondage, which is practically a contemporary form of slavery. The barriers they face in seeking justice or redress are formidable. Child labor is rampant in descent-based communities and children of “lower castes” suffer high levels of illiteracy. For women, caste is a multiplier that compounds their experience of poverty and discrimination.

However, the lives of Dalits to some extents have changed due to the Herculean efforts of the many visionary social reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad, Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde, and Chh. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur who made Dalits aware of the painful conditions of their lives. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a well-known figure in Dalit movement in India and a scholar of international repute, convinced Dalits that the caste-system was the real devil in their

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lives and it was an urgent need of the hour to break the caste-system. It was only possible if they denied their ancestral works and moved away from the villages and educate themselves. They followed the teachings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar by crossing the boundaries of villages and became independent of the *Savarnas*. Once outside the traditional structure of the village, Dalits began to freely express their disapproval and dissent against their oppression by various means that included violent as well as non-violent means of protest. The establishment of The Republican Party of India by Dr. Ambedkar helped Dalits to gain political mileage. The Peoples’ Education Society opened new avenues of education for them. All these efforts have been fruitful in changing the lives of Dalits in India.

However, with the political independence of the country, the conditions of Dalits have changed to some extent. The Constitution of India has referred to them as the Scheduled Castes and the practice of untouchability is legally banned. They are provided reservations in certain government jobs and schools. It has brought some positive changes in the lives of Dalits. But still untouchability is practiced in rural parts of the country in some form or the other. There are the incidents of atrocities against Dalits. Dalit women are still the easy prey to the sexual hunger of the *Savarnas*. Dalits are commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life.

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