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Implications of Caste System in Indian Democracy: An Analytical Study from the Human Rights Perspective

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Abstract

Caste system is still considered as an integral part of the Indian society. The system continues to create division in the society which also leads to the exclusion of certain groups. These groups often feel detached from the mainstream society, deprived form the benefits arising out of the neo-liberal policies followed by the successive governments since nineties. The concept of 'untouchability' which is a product of historical development of Indian society is still being practiced overtly and covertly in different parts of India. This in turn creates a barrier to enjoyment of civil, political, cultural and economic rights for millions of people who just because of their caste identity remain excluded from meaningful participation in the democracy. Low caste people who are termed as *Dalits* still face an uphill task to ensure 'sociability'. This paper deals with the issues which confront the Dalits in India and how the human rights which are fundamental to live like a human being is violated is studied from an analytical perspective.

Key Words- Caste, Dalits, social exclusion, inclusive society, discrimination, human rights, untouchability

Introduction- Caste is considered as a distinct feature of Indian society since time immemorial. It is often argued that unless one understands the dynamics of caste system, he may not able to capture the nuances of enjoyment of rights by different groups in Indian society. The caste system not only highlights the structure of social stratification in India but also can be studied as an institution which creates the fixed notion of hierarchal position based on birth as well as an ideology which acts as the legitimate reinforcement of social inequality which exists in India society. As a member of civil society, an individual is supposed to enjoy certain rights which are necessary for social security, fair remuneration, adequate standard of living, freedom from engagement in filthy menial jobs which destroys the notion of human dignity etc. The framers of Indian Constitution considered every aspect to secure the fundamental human rights for the all sections of society and formulated our Constitution in such a way that would usher a new era based on the notion of equality, freedom and social justice. But unfortunately even after seventy years of independence, we fail to eradicate the caste system which still acts as a barrier to create an "Ideal Society". India is often presented to the outsiders as the largest democracy in

the world but hardly there is introspection on the issues of liberty, equality and fraternity enjoyed by the citizens in real life. Contrary to the idea of an ideal society, we observe that Dalits who are commonly known as untouchables in the Indian society still struggling hard to earn an attitude of respect and reverence from the upper caste people. In the absence of fraternity, the society is remained as divided and does not initiate actions needed to build an inclusive society.

Dalits in Indian society-Dalits comprise one- fifth of total Indian populations. According to national Census (2011), it was witnessed that decadal growth of the dalit population was 20.8% (Nayar & Bedi, 2016:13) The distribution is also not uniform and this can be presented by drawing a table-

Sl. No	Name of the Indian State	Dalit population (in millions) out of total 20.14crore Dalits in India
1.	Uttar Pradesh	35.14
2.	West Bengal	18.45
3.	Bihar	13.04
4.	Andhra Pradesh	12.33
5.	Tamil Nadu	11.85
6.	Maharashtra	9.88
7.	Rajasthan	9.69
8.	Madhya Pradesh	9.15
9.	Karnataka	8.56
10.	Punjab	7.02

Source: Socio- Economic Caste Census, 2011 & National Census, 2011

It is evident from the above that dalits have significant presence in the most populous states of our country. But the socio-economic conditions are hardly satisfactory because of the tokenism followed by the successive governments which are dominated by the politicians, policy makers and the bureaucrats especially from the upper caste sections. Nayar and Bedi (2016:13) mentions that only 20.57% of the dalit children are enrolled in schools and 50.1% drop out rate in higher classes in

school in 2014. Their situation is particularly deplorable in the rural India as it still shows the traits which Dr. Ambedkar identified many years ago as the "dens of ignorance and oppression". The effort to maintain the supremacy of the upper castes is going on unabated even after the capitalism got legitimized. Class has significantly replaced the system of caste in Urban India. But even then if we look at the particular phenomenon dispassionately, we would understand that it is the upper caste people who have garnered the benefits arising out of class system in contemporary Indian society. It is the new weapon to unleash the elitism where the dalits who are known to be as untouchables will be permanently excluded because of the historical disadvantages.

Caste as a Barrier to development-

In the contemporary period, Development of nation is generally perceived to be the panacea for all maladies that exist in the society. Development brings in true sense the regime of human rights where economic, social, cultural and civil rights can be enjoyed by the all citizens of the nations. Since 1947, we have installed democracy which is participatory in nature, the constitutional provisions have also ensured the political equality but failed to eradicate the concern expressed by the father of Indian Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar who stated "On January 26, 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and, in social and economic life, we will have inequality " (Mehra, 2014: 2). It was Dr. Ambedkar who raised the slogans of liberation and emancipation of the dalit community in true sense. He in fact launched a vehement attack on the chaturvarnya system under the Hindu religion as he felt it responsible for the complete disability of the lower classes of hindu society (Ram,2015:4-8). The country which is predominantly a Hindu nation is always remains partial towards the Upper caste people especially Brahmins since time immemorial fail to eradicate the extravagant claims of supremacy by the Brahmins. Even great social philosophers like Yajnavalkya in his Yajnavalkyasmriti accorded Sudra (lower castes) a proper legal personality. But in reality, hardly any changes have taken place to consider them as equal (Bhattacharya, 2013:16-31). Religion plays an despicable role in according social status according to the vocations of different castes and thereby created a barrier for a vast section of society who consists nearly one – fifth of the total population to enjoy freedom in true sense in the society. The situation of the chandalas was even worse that the Sudras as they were forced to live outskirt of the city and the state. It is highlighted in the writings of another great social philosopher Kautilya (Sastri,2013:32-46). It is undeniable fact the after independence a lot have been done to set aside untouchability from the Indian society but many social evils arising out of the caste based discrimination still continues. It is pertinent to mention the Article-17 of the Indian Constitution which forbids the practice of " untouchability" in any form. While understanding the actual meaning of the term, we need to remember that it should not

be understood in the literal or grammatical sense but to interpret as a practice as it had developed historically. This was the opinion of the Mysore High Court (Pandey,2013:151). This notion of untaouchability is still predominant in the Indian society. Caste is a powerful card to control the millions in India. It is more often played by the politicians to capture power. Inter caste marriage and inter –dinning are still taboos in many parts of the nation. Therefore, Caste system never allows a lower caste person in India to enjoy life as a human being. Untouchables are forced to engage activities such as manual scavenging in this much flaunted digital era. Mehra (2014:2) cited 2011 census which showed that there are 7,94,390 dry latrines where the marginalized dalits including women are engaged as manual scavengers . This is gross violations of human rights which lays down that human beings must not be involved in such activities which put human dignity at stake. The Dalit youth in India do not want to fall behind in taking advantages of the development that is changing the face of the country. But the rigid system of caste mechanism does not allow them to explore the new horizon. It is true that bullock carts are fast disappearing even from the rural areas but the persecution and barriers based on caste system hardly show any sign of regression. The strategy of the dalit community often focuses on the migration to cities as it is seen only available to them .In turn many parts of rural India witness massive shortage of manual labourers. The success of the rural schemes launched by the government for development largely depends on the participation of all sections of Indian society. Caste system which propagates the concepts of purity and impurity amongst people remain as a stumbling block to a vibrant democracy where all the sections have a stake.

Caste system and Social Exclusion of weaker sections-

In the idea of exploring the concept of social exclusion in the context of Caste system is of recent origin. It is often argued that we need to overcome the temptation of attaching the concept of exclusion with everything under the sun. Yet , it is necessary to mention that social exclusion in Indian society exists due to paternity and caste system. Caste is still being used to create inequality in society. Social stratification , social inequality, hierarchy and hegemony are the main characteristics of social exclusion emanating from the caste system in India (Rawat, 2013:354-371). The notion of lower and upper castes in the society ultimately jeopardizes the mobility of the labour as well as capital which are badly needed to address the problem of social exclusion. If we continue to believe in the concept of purity and impurity, the traditional socio-economic patterns are not going to change . If this trend is not reversed by adopting strategies, the optimal utilization of the resources for the progress of the nation would remain a myth and country would witness the battle of dalit people against hunger, for the protection of dignity, and defend themselves from the cruelties. India has seen the introduction of number of social legislations and resistance

movements for bringing social justice to this excluded section but justice, equality and dignity remains a distant dream for the dalit population in India. The situation of mahadalits i.e untouchables of untouchables are even worse as they were not allowed to walk in the main village streets (Ramakrishna et al, 2015: 20-30). What could be more degrading than this? It is often argued that reservation policy followed in the government sector is the ultimate solution to help the dalit population to achieve the upward social mobility. But with the passage of time, we can see the shrinkage of the public sector and opportunities in the government departments . So there is a clamour for the reservation for the dalits in the private sector. The private sector is in the grip of upper caste population and they are not inclined to create a space for their dalit brethren in fear of loosing hegemony. We are still searching for an amicable solution to bring an end to this notion of social exclusion. The father of nation Mr. M.k.Gandhi also thought about the plights of untouchables whom he called Harijans. He opined " Not much lip propaganda is necessary now. Work is propaganda. You should work fearlessly unmindful of social ostracism for bettering the condition of the 'untouchables'."(young India, September 10,1925). When Mr. Gandhi stressed on the need to change of heart and self less services for the upliftment of the depressed, Dr. Ambedkar laid emphasis on the constitutional methods in bringing social injustices to an end (Mehta, 2016: 16-25).

Road to Justice- Myth or reality?

A progressive society always looks to bring about positive changes for creating a conducive environment where basic human rights can be enjoyed without any barrier. Indian society is also not an exception when it tries to bring desired changes through various means. Of late we can see the attempts by the mainstream national parties to end untouchability and bring back dalits into Hindu society. The initiatives are apparently good and progressive but in depth studies will prove that it is political compulsion rather than honest will of accommodating the untouchables in the mainstream. The rule of law is yet to cement its place in the Indian society. Khap panchayat is the glaring example of failure of constitutional machinery and proves the power of caste system in a caste based society. The caste free society under these circumstances can be safely presumed to be a distant dream for a dalit person in India. We are living in an era of tokenism and propaganda. Dalits become important when the election knocks at the doors of political parties. On one hand there is celebration of the ideology of Dr.Ambedkar and other side the continuation of practice of untouchability is allowed to be practiced. Many spoke about the economic empowerment as the panacea of bringing dalit community from the fringe. But the political will is missing as the budgetary allocation (2016-2017) shows that the amount was Rs-38,833 crore which was far less than the Rs-82,000 crore that should have give according to government's own guidelines (Gahilote & Devi, 2016: 10-18).

Another thing that can jeopardize the dreams of dalits is the government's reluctance to invest in the education and health sector. The dalits in India largely depends on the state funding on both issues. But in the age of liberalization and privatization, dalits find themselves in a disadvantageous position as they are not financially sound enough to get access to quality private schools and health care facilities. The society is further pushed towards elitism by inaction of the Governments and therefore creating an environment where the number of excluded will register phenomenal rise in future .The suicide of the Ph.D scholar Rohit Vemula, a PhD scholar in the University of Hyderabad campus only highlights the deep rooted division even in the highest temple of higher education. The death has stirred the conscience of the nation but hardly there is any constructive steps have been taken to remove the trust deficit from the hearts of the Scheduled castes , scheduled tribes and other marginalized groups. As long as we tend to divide society on the basis of " we" and "They" on the basis of caste, there is hardly any hope of a inclusive society in near future.

Conclusion-The Quest for establishing a " Just" society depends largely on the eradication of social evils in a particular society. Few scholars are in favour of tolerance and patience to address the issues arising out of caste system. There are others who believe in the words of Dr. Ambedkar who propagated the " Annihilation of Caste". Many contemporary entrepreneurs believe in the concept of Dalit capitalism which can turn the caste system into relic (Anand, 2016,32-34). It is interesting to note that this ancient civilization still searching for a possible way out to end this discrimination and differential treatments to a section of Indian society. In the era of globalization where the nations needs to stand up as a whole is crippled by the caste system. If we look at the preamble of the Indian constitution the long cherished dreams of the framers to turn the nation in truly democratic republic cannot be fulfilled unless the citizens of the nation adhere to certain democratic conducts which includes the duty to treat everyone equally. If we fail to upheld the dignity of a section of the society, then it may not be treated as a civil one. We should not forget that the universal brotherhood cannot be achieved if the society is based on the notion of higher and lower position ascribed to different persons. We need to remember that the concept of social exclusion may not be always present before us as "active". There is also possibility of passive exclusion which often remains undetected because we have a tendency to accept and interpret the social reality which serves our vested interests. The result of which may lead to explosion of the public anger which would be more difficult to pacify and may be loaded with the possibility of destroying the social fabric of the entire society. The proactive initiatives are missing on part of the upper caste population in India as they are afraid of sharing power. They have a false notion of limited power. Contrary to the prevailing notion, there is a counter argument of expansion of the power in a particular society. This emphasizes on the creation of

new opportunities where the people according to their potentials can achieve their goals. This can be only achieved by challenging the barriers to entry in the mainstream. Frontal attack on the corruption can be also explored by various means to transfer the power to marginalized who have waited long in a democratic set up. Their silence and patience should not be taken as their weakness as the signs of coming together to protect their interests are visible at the ground level. Those who are at the corridors of power need to think that Caste system and the evils emanating from it, has weakened the social cohesiveness amongst people. It leads to impoverishment of a section of our own society. It is high time that proactive measures should be taken to eradicate this social evil. The idea of ensuring social justice cannot be a reality in the presence of discrimination or violence. A truly democratic nation has a obligation to guarantee the human rights regime. We need to remember that the alternative is sort of anarchy where the freedom of thought is not allowed, people cannot enjoy the feeling of living in an inclusive society. The result could be bitter struggle for survival. Human values would take a back seat and there would be constant conflict which will destroy the " we feeling" in the society. The report s of beating up of dalits and ransacking of their homes are also not uncommon even in the twenty first century in India (Roy, 2016:38-39). This bears the evidence of a fractured society largely because of the caste equations that we preserve or tend to protect at the ground level. The need of the hour is to change the psychological outlook of the Society. It is the prism through which we look at the society is to be blamed for this continued social evil. It is the high time that we should remove the prism by adopting a holistic approach which should include socio-economic emancipation, major changes in the social institutions and above all the implementation of the Constitutional provisions.

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