

THE DALIT QUESTION

Some Concerns about Work and Health

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Concerns Today

In the guise of constitutional equality, there continues to be widespread though often subtle caste inequality and caste discrimination persisting in India even today. Why else does the high caste judge get his official chair washed with 'ganga jal' after he takes over office from his predecessor who happens to be from a Dalit community? Why else did the followers of the all-embracing religion of Hinduism not allow a Dalit to offer *puja* to the goddess on *Mahanavami* like others on 6 October 2003 in Bahera village near Patna? Why else are Dalit leaders rated as some sort of 'mock stock' - be it Shri (not Mr.) Laloo Prasad Yadav or Kum. (not Ms) Mayavati? From their appearance to their involvement in scams, all seem to evoke some sort of scorn which borders on disdain. Mayavati bejewelling herself to celebrate her birthday is found scornfully amusing, but Jayalalita's love for adorning herself with diamonds on the occasion of her foster son's wedding is considered her sophisticated sense of style and dressing up. Her thousands of expensive saris and countless pairs of footwear, which leave the famous Filipino president with a shoe fetish miles behind, have created a furore but all within the perimeters of some inexplicable pride, not prejudice.

When an international image is to be projected, Mr. L. P. Yadav's visit to Pakistan is captioned as that of a grassroots leader, an important national politician whose dictum cannot be ignored. Within India, however, he is considered to be a buffoon, immortalised by the likes of Shekhar Suman who imitates the politician's gestures and body language on his TV show. Mr. Yadav's spitting right into the camera is repeatedly telecast, not to reflect his simplicity but as a pointer towards his lack of sophistication, as perhaps has been the case with Ms Mayavati's ponytail and her present hairdo. Both of them have headed inefficient and corrupt governments.

The cases of Narayan Rane in Maharashtra and P K Mohanta in Assam

are similar but inefficiency and its description are exclusively reserved for the likes of Laloo and Mayavatis.

If a Dalit student performs well or gets a job, the achievement is credited to reservation and never to the ability of the achiever. Quotas and reservations in the seats of higher learning seem to affect the efficiency/quality of work/worker, but, strangely, not the payment seats offered by centres of higher education and professional courses. For sure, payment seats can more easily be bought by high caste Hindus than Dalits. The former are considered to be more efficient and competent. Why they then fail to pass the entrance test or get a place in the merit list is anybody's guess. The latter's inaccessibility to payment seats is ascribed largely to two reasons. One, they do not have the propensity and two, it's very rare that they are in a position to claim or even aspire to such resources.

In the backdrop of such a scenario, it is natural to investigate the reasons for this aspect of Indian society. It is extremely important to understand the subtleties that create and enlarge the divide and imperative to examine the dalit question, the way they perceive themselves and the way others perceive them.

The Dalit Question

The word 'Dalit' in itself has been a matter of extensive scholarly debate. Every society has some kind of social and literary explanation for its own social structure. The uniqueness of the Hindu caste system is that a person is bound to follow the traditional occupation of the family and is associated with it until his death. The relative understanding of the term 'Dalit' is crucial. The Dalit question has now become a fashionable issue but the important point is - how much is it relevant to discuss? Its relevance lies in the fact that a large number of people are still unable to lead a normal human life. Caste oppression, particularly in rural

areas remains acute while infringements of caste rules of moral and sexual conduct have been known to lead to the death of those who dare to transgress. Despite promises made by ruling parties, the abuse of women, especially dalit women, continues virtually unabated.

The major constraint in the life of a dalit is to be a dalit. There have been several attempts to break down the barrier of caste foundation, but the reason cited is that the Hindu social structure cannot be transgressed. The genesis of the caste system is deep rooted within the life of Indians and their social-economic and political spheres the manifestation of which can be seen in all the activities of an individual. Yet the dalits do not have a recorded history. Some 250 million outcastes comprising of untouchables and tribals were grappling with history and survival at the turn of the millennium. The untouchables remained a part of the village economy but were segregated, remained outside the village and performed menial services. Dalits have, throughout the centuries, suffered the most barbaric forms of oppression, unparalleled in world history. (Bhopal Document, 2002).

Evolution and background

The question of dalits is sensitive and carries a lot of debate in itself. Why are dalits dalit? Who are the people being deprived of social status in terms of high ranking? The question raised by Webster, (1994), "...who were the ancestors of today's Dalits; how and why did they become untouchables?" generates some queries among concerned academicians. Dalits are defined as "downtrodden, deprived and exploited" but this kind of explanation is not found at the level of social interaction. They are discriminated against socially, economically and politically. The most frustrating concept in their lives is the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution'. They are the symbol of 'pollution' and hence 'untouchables'.

There are twenty-two (22) Scheduled Castes listed in the Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the 1981 Census of India. They are as follows: -

Bantar, Bauri, Bhogta, Bhuriya, Bhumeej (excluding north Chotanagpur & south Chotanagpur division and Santhal Pargana district). Chamar, Mochi, Dabgar, Dhobi, Dom/Dhangad, Dusadh/Dhari/Dharhi, Ghasi, Halalkhor, Hari/Mehtar/Bhangi, Kenjar, Kuraniar, Lalbegi, Musahar, Nat, Pan/Sawari, Pasi, Rajwar and Turi.

Most of the above castes are engaged in different kinds of jobs. Mehtar and Bhangis, Lalbegi and Halalkhor are the common caste groups who are found engaged in polluting jobs such as carrying night soil (Lal, 1999). The Census of India, 1981 in the Special tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes mentioned 22 Scheduled Castes. But only a few of them are still found engaged in 'polluted jobs'. They are categorised as main workers engaged in 'special occupations'. In this category, there are the following sub-categories-

1. Seeking / available for work
2. Scavenging
3. Tanning & currying of hides and skins

Hutton (1963) illustrates the origins of caste in the taboos and divisions of labour in the pre-Aryan tribes of India as well as in their efforts at self-preservation in the face of invasion. A dominant group is of the view the origin of caste and untouchability can be traced to the Aryans themselves and to their ways of locating the indigenous population of India with whom they first had interaction. They always looked down on the indigenous peoples as inferior and weak and sidelined them from the rituals as being unclean. In later Vedic literature, there were frequent references to primitive forest dwellers who were kept on the fringes of Aryan society in the conquered regions. Among these were the Chandala (Webster, 1994). Manu not only gave the 'law of caste' but also was an upholder of it. He gave the code of conduct of the existing castes and preached the varnashramadharma. The one-man theory based on Shastras, however, has not really ignited discussion among Indian social scientists but western scholars, probably not much given to hero-worship, have tried to provide a scientific explanation. According to them, the nuclei round which have "formed" the various castes are (1) occupation; (2) survival of tribal organizations etc., (3) the rise of new

beliefs, (4) cross-breeding and (5) migration. Basically then, untouchability is an infliction and not a choice.

The first general census of India was taken in 1881. Members of different castes and creeds were added up to calculate their total population. The first attempt in the census of 1891 at the classification of Hindus on the basis of caste and race was crude. The next census of India, taken in 1901, categorised the population "by social precedence as recognised by native public opinion". A crucial step was taken in the census of 1911, which led it to mark off so-called untouchables from those who were touchables. It also perhaps gave birth to the very popular number game! Untouchability has been a hereditary order both in status as well as in function. The established order is based on an inexorable law of Karma or fisting, which is fixed once for all and never changes. According to the Census of India, 1961, only 48.2% of the total number of persons engaged in sweeping, scavenging and allied occupations belonged to the category of SCs.

Chaplin (1997) gave different accounts of the failure of governmental initiatives. Scavengers still carry night soil and perform other sanitary services in cities and towns. Hence scavengers are segregated by other untouchable castes. He rightly says that the discrimination means that scavengers have extremely limited job opportunities other than sanitary work. They live in acute poverty in segregated communities, and have extremely low levels of literacy and job mobility. Such socio-economic conditions persist despite various articles in the Indian constitution that stipulate that the state should promote the economic and educational interests of scheduled castes and protect them from discrimination and exploitation. The constitution of India takes serious note of the existence of a problem regarding untouchability. There are many provisions under various articles, 15 (2), 17, 29 (2) which consider the practice of untouchability to be an offence under the Indian constitution.

Dalit Movement

The question of 'social status' has, at least apparently, been central to

"untouchables", though their economic standing and political power continue to remain substantive issues in determining their position in Indian society (Sharma, 1997). The principle of purity-impurity is a scalar yardstick, and it appears to keep different castes separate from one another (Dumont, 1972).

The Dalit movement can be classified as (i) reformative and (ii) alternative. Reformative movements focus mainly on the study of changes in the caste system and the institution of untouchability. Issues relating to conversion to other religions for example, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, through education, economic status and political power are taken up in the study of alternative movements (Shah, 1990). He also highlighted Mahatma Gandhi as an ardent champion for removing untouchability within the Hindu Chatur Varna framework (Shah 2001). Freeman (1997) has done an extensive and well-versed life history of untouchables. He has sketched the life history of a person belonging to Bauri caste in the state of Orissa. Ilaiah's (1996) experience of everyday life gives him a platform to take revolutionary steps to criticise the Hindutva ideology. The idea that, 'Hinduism is a religion of humanity is totally rejected by the followers of Ambedkar and later by the Dalit Panther Movement in the seventies of post-independence.

Dalits are stigmatized from birth as 'spirituality defiling' and therefore potential 'polluters' of clean, high caste people. India's untouchables have lived for centuries in segregated haunts and villages. High castes have denied them the use of public wells as well as entry to schools, shops and high-caste shrines, and have forced them to perform the most despised and defiling jobs of society, 'special occupations' according to the Registrar General of India - scavenging, cleaning latrines, carrying off dead animals and exhausting unskilled physical labour.

Dalits- Their Work and Perception of Health

Despite the fact that the dalits are 'entrusted' with the responsibility of cleaning the filth of society, no or very little concern has been shown regarding their

health. Very scanty literature exists on this issue. Ravindran (1997) focused on dalit children, which initiated a debate regarding their health. Some studies have been done on health care services utilisation among dalits (scheduled castes) based on the NFHS data (Ram, 1999), census (Bhattacharya, 1999). Not many studies have examined the socio-psychological dimension of stigmatisation of dalits and its impact on health.

A perusal of differentials in health status among socio-economic groups reflects upon the fact that dalits have higher levels of mortality and malnutrition among their children compared to non-dalits (Table 1).

There are rules and legal provisions to stop manual carrying and cleaning of night soil. Parliament, in the Budget session of 1993, passed the "Employment of manual scavengers and construction of dry latrines (Prohibition) Bill, 1993" to abolish scavenging and put a ban on the construction of dry latrines and engage in or employ for or permit to be engaged in or employed for any other person for manually carrying human excreta. It lacks time limitation, though several states have followed the purpose of the bill as in Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar & Delhi (Srivastava, 1997). It is rightly declared that 'Health is fundamental to national progress' and more so for the people who are engaged in cleaning others' filth at the risk of their health.

Table 1- Mortality and Malnutrition among Children

Indicator	Infant mortality / 1000	Under 5 Mortality / 1000	% of those Children underweight
India	70	94.9	47
Scheduled castes	83	119.2	52.5
Scheduled Tribes	84.2	126.6	55.9
Other Disadvantaged	76	103.1	47.3
Others	61.8	82.6	34.4

Source: National Health Policy 2001, Delhi Science Forum Saket; New Delhi- 17

Also evident from Table 2 is the fact that among children aged between 12 and 35

months, who received at least one vitamin A dose, 27% dalit (scheduled caste) children were reported as against 34.8% non-dalits. Among children aged less than 3 years, more dalit than non-dalit children suffered from acute respiratory infection and diarrhoea. (NFHS- 2, 1999).

Table 2- Morbidity among Children

Groups	Vitamin A dose received	Acute respiratory Infection	Diarrhoea with blood
Scheduled Castes	27.1	19.6	2.9
Scheduled Tribes	26.0	22.4	3.7
Other Backward Castes	26.8	19.1	2.6
Others	34.8	18.7	2.1

Source- Tables 6.14 and 6.16, National Health and Family Survey 2, 1998-9

As regards resources for economic development, nothing can be considered of higher importance than the health of the people which is a measure of people's energy and capacity as well as potential in terms of working hours for productive work in relation to the total number of persons maintained by the nation. For efficiency of industry and agriculture, the health of workers is an essential consideration. Thus the health of those who put at stake their right of living healthily for the upkeep of cleanliness for others is of utmost importance. Their ill-health and consequent absenteeism is bound to impact upon the health of those they serve. The majority of those who are marginalised are dalits and among them are the scavengers. Seasonal epidemics causing higher mortality among dalit scavengers are diseases like dysentery, malaria and tuberculosis. The residential quality of these people is highly conducive to sickness and disease. The focus of five-year plans has been to control communicable diseases. Public Health is an important issue for the marginalised. A good number of provisions are in place but dalits' access to these resources, like many others, raises many unanswered questions.

Health and occupation interlinkages

The most significant factor in determining the health situation of any community depends on its socio-economic conditions. Studies on dalits and especially, scavengers do not describe the distribution and size of disease problems among them. Secondly, they fail to identify aetiological factors in the pathogenesis of disease among dalits. Consequently they are unable to provide the data essential for the planning, implementation and evaluation of services for the prevention, control and treatment of disease in these groups.

Most dalits engaged in 'special occupations' explore alternatives to cope with their working conditions. Lifestyle habits such as tobacco chewing, paan chewing and consumption of alcohol are encouraged, developed and continued. Perhaps these habits help them overcome the stench and foul smell which form an integral part of their jobs and prepare them mentally to carry the night soil on their heads and lower themselves into manholes which emanate gases that not only have bad odours but are injurious to health too. The use of alcohol in heavy doses becomes a necessary part of their working conditions and thus for livelihood. Carrying night soil and cleaning toilets/latrines every day is not a healthy job. It carries certain infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and skin disease through exposure to filthy working conditions.

India has one of the lowest investments in public health in the world. Worse still, during the nineties, the percentage of Gross Domestic Product declined from 1.3 % in 1990 to 0.9 % in 1999. Public Health has been neglected since the liberalization of the Indian economy. One must illustrate the issue of dalits in the context of the new economic policy based on the spirit known as 'privatisation' of all public sectors. Even more than five decades of independence, the basic tenets of the constitution have not touched the life of the common Indian, so how can they be expected to improve the condition of dalits who do not have a voice before high-born (*dwija*) caste members? The essence of caste is characterized by the presence of hereditary groups in a hierarchy with

Brahmins at top and dalits at the bottom, and the bottom being forced to do unclean occupations (Srivastava, 1997).

Dalits and their health need to be explored. Caste plays an important role in moulding the behaviour of an individual, particularly that related to the perception of health, care needs and services utilization. The utilization of health care and related services is governed by the social status within the society. Therefore, tracing the link between those engaged in polluted occupations and their socio-economic status, their perception of self and others' perception of their 'self', is pertinent to an understanding of dalits and their health scenario. The worst atrocities against Dalits are in various forms such as murder, grievous bodily harm, arson and rape (Kamble, 1992). Paradoxically, labelled as 'special occupations', they remain a complicated socio-economic problem; they require adequate funding for their redressal but also essentially need a "radical change of mental outlook" by Indian society (Chaplin, 1997).

Conclusion

The intensity of the divide between dalits and non-dalits is very strong, with both believing that the former are 'lesser' than the latter! Acceptance is evident in more than one form - in the workplace, in education, in bureaucracy and in politics, to list just a few. Reactions to acceptance range from satirical comments to physical violence with or without retaliation. The most vulnerable among dalits are those groups who are engaged in jobs such as cleaning and scavenging. Strangely enough, they are termed 'special occupations' by the Registrar General of India in listing workers engaged in these occupations in the Special Tables on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the censuses of India. This seems akin to Gandhiji's '*harijan*' or '*children of god*'. The same children are forbidden entry into the temples of their 'parents' and the 'special jobs' reserved for them have never attracted the attention of high caste Hindus! Thanks to the privatisation of sanitation on the Navi Mumbai railway stations, one sees a Bapat or a Shinde attired in the uniform of the cleaning brigade, complete with a photo identity card around the neck!

The different yardsticks for Dalits and non-Dalits show that Indian society has not accepted Dalits as equals, neither as commoners nor as bureaucrats, intellectuals and politicians. Till Indian society grows up, matures and accepts Dalits and other 'lesser' Hindus as equals, the road to development, both social and human, will continue to be caged in one-minute slots on Doordarshan and other channels.

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