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Hierarchy and Graded Inequality Among Dalits: A Study of Telangana State

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Abstract: Caste is the fundamental element in the structure of the Hindu social order. Society in India is built on graded inequality among the people. This inequality is based on the community, initially in Vedic literature known as the Varna. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the champion of the oppressed, fought vehemently against caste-based and graded inequality. Graded inequality is found only in the Indian subcontinent and is the product of the caste system. The fundamental characteristic of Graded inequality, which differentiates it from pure inequality, is – that graded inequality divides the sufferers based on unequal burden and benefits. That means under graded inequality, the middle castes (Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras) are sufferers on the one hand and beneficiaries on the other hand of the graded inequality, i.e., the caste system. Benefits and burdens are unequal from caste to caste. Only the highest Caste of Brahmins, the final beneficiary, and the lowest castes of Dalits (Ati-Shudras, untouchables) are absolute sufferers of graded inequality. Interestingly, the same hierarchical order and graded inequality are found among Dalits (Ati-Shudras, Ex-untouchables), the lowest caste hierarchy, and order strata. This paper attempts to understand the hierarchy among the Dalit Community, its stratification, and graded inequality within the group. Examining the caste order based on the status of sub-castes within the ati-shudra, the untouchables- the paper explains the graded inequality among them. This paper focuses on the Dalit communities of Telangana state, which is almost the same as the rest of India.

Index Terms - Hierarchy, Graded Inequality Dalits, Caste, Sub Caste, Telangana State.

I. INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

Indian (Hindu) social order is based on the graded inequalities among its people. The Rig Veda, one of the four sacred canonical Hindu texts, explains the creation of the universe and human beings in the Purusa-Sukta. The Purusa-Sukta is the 90th sukta in 10th Mandala of the Rigveda. The Purusha-Sukta referred to Prajapati in 1 to 5 verses of the sukta, mentions that the Prajapati created the human being and set one social and cultural tradition to maintain social harmony, becoming Dharma or Religion. Therefore, Sanatana is also identified as a way of life. Prajapati divided human society into four social classes known as Varnas. The four social classes within human society are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Each class has a distinctive set of duties and functions to be performed and carried out. David Mandelbaum stated that "the varnas are the primordial makeup of society" (Mandelbaum 1963). The later verses 11 and 12 noted that "the Purusha was divided into mouth, arms, thighs, feet. The Brahmin was Virat Purusha's mouth; Rajanya (Kshatriya) was formed of both his arms. His thighs became the Vaishya; Shudra was produced from his feet". According to the Varna system, the Brahmin is the highest social class because he cannot be a slave to anybody but is permitted to own slaves of any caste. A Kshatriya, albeit inferior to the Brahmin, can be the Brahmin's slave. While he is superior to the Vaishyas and Shudras due to his ability to hold them as enslaved people, the Vaishyas and Shudras have no right to hold a Kshatriya as an enslaved person. Similarly, while a Vaishya is inferior to Brahmins and Kshatriyas because they can keep him as their slave and he cannot, he is proud that he is at least superior to the Shudra because he can retain the Shudra as his slave while the Shudra cannot keep the Vaishya as his slave. The Shudra is the lowest caste since everyone can hold him as an enslaved person, yet no one can hold him as an enslaved person save another Shudra. The position granted to Kshatriya and Vaishya establishes a system of graded inequality. The caste system is responsible for the entire existence of graded inequality in the Indian subcontinent. This is the origin of the graded inequality later; it spread over to Castes and communities.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is the first person to analyze caste inequality in Indian society. Before him, several sociologists and anthropologists considered caste a social class and did not pay serious attention to its cultural roots. Srinivas (1996) and others in *Caste: It is Twentieth Century Avatar*. The core theme among the essays presented here is that the connotations of and use of caste have changed. However, whether the intrinsic hierarchical character has changed remained in the debate. The juxtaposition of identity versus the hierarchical image of caste remained a central point of the discussion. The identity as the hierarchy manifests in the context of class, power, and regional specificities.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar strongly opined that nothing could be built on the foundation of caste. On the other hand, he worked for the 'annihilation of caste' because he believed that anything built on caste would create inequality. India cannot progress with its caste system, which is the primary source of inequality. Among Indian sociologists, Ketkar (1909) and Ghurye (195,7) and Srinivas (1962, 1972) are considered the early academics to write about caste. Emphasizes the feature as hierarchy, endogamy, graded occupation, food, social intercourse, disconnect in customs and dressing, and civil or religious disabilities. In his first essay, Ambedkar emphasized control of resources, endogamy, immobility in occupation, and operating irrational social institutions as the main issues (Ambedkar, 1916). After the Independence, the understanding of caste has become an essential subject of inquiry with the intersection of social science disciplines such as economics, political sciences, and cultural and religious studies. He termed the caste system as an 'enclosed class,' and in these enclosures, 'some closed the doors and others found the doors closed. His description, taken further in his writing, emphasizes the control of resources and the idea of pollution or purity as the main drivers of sustaining the system.

Caste, Sub-Caste, and Inequality

Caste is usually segmented into several sub-castes, and each sub-caste is endogamous. Traditionally, Sociologists considered the caste as the smallest group which constituted the unity of endogamy, and the identity of this tiny group stood out sharply against other similar groups. However, further stratification is found across the country, particularly among lower caste. It is much more significant among Dalits (Scheduled Castes) in every state. In other words, not caste, but sub-caste is the real caste, its essential characteristic being endogamy. A sub-caste was either referred to as a smaller unit or the so-called caste as a significant unit (Ghurye, 1966, pp. 180–183). The so-called sub-castes, far from being either sub-division or even specialized and differentiated sub-units, are the actual castes (classes within the class), the so-called caste of the terminology, and the written usage of most students of the Hindu or Indian caste system, being really 'caste-cluster' formed by a fusion or so-called sub-caste. The varna organization belonged to the society which brought the Vedas to India. Over time, the varna system was modified, and the varna and jati systems were interwoven to form a very elaborate ranking system. The so-called sub-caste 'arose out of the caste' (Ghurye, 1961, p. 189). He argues that despite the so-called rigidity of caste, it appears that many of the occupational and tribal castes are permitted to wink at the infusion of members of another caste. Sub-caste that bears the name of some ancient city or locality is to be met within most of the caste. Of all the features of caste society dealt with so far, three pertain to the caste as a whole; for the status in the hierarchy of any sub-caste depends upon the status of the caste, from which follow the various civil and religious rights and disabilities, and the nature of the caste determines the traditional occupation. Each of these groups, major or minor, known as caste and sub-caste, has carried specific names of their sub-castes.

Hindus are divided into thousands of castes, with most having many sub-castes. A caste is a social group with two characteristics; each such group has a unique name by which it is called together under a common name, while these larger groups are a sub-division of groups with independent names. The terms 'caste' and 'sub-caste' are not absolute but comparative in signification (Ketkar, 1909). Sub-caste is mainly known to the people of the caste, while caste is the group known to the society at large (Karve, 1955). Locality-based names indicate the realms of social custom in which a change is affected. The tendency towards sub-division, which is inherent in Indian society, seems to have been set in motion by the fiction that men who speak a different language, who dwell in another district, who worship other gods, different social customs, and professions, must be fundamental of a different race.

The minor endogamous groups created the impression that sub-castes were smaller groups derived through the sub-division of an entity called caste. The caste system is divided into the jatis and the varnas. The 'jatis' system allowed innumerable endogamous groups to live separately, entirely different from the 'varna' system, which divided society into four ranks (Karve, 1955). There are criteria to be a member of caste such as in the last analysis; every man is a member of the sub-caste and the caste, the entire sub-caste may be a kin-group recognized as such by any single member further the kinship provides the key to recognition as a caste or sub-caste member; a sub-caste member coming from a distance is treated as such only if their connection within certain recognized degrees of kinship with the local people is established (Mayer, 1958).

The sub-caste also forms a hierarchy within the broader ladder of the caste. Bougle (1971) identified three core elements that make caste hereditary: specialization, hierarchy, and repulsion. The core elements of caste were derived from the given cultural tradition and specific institutional arrangements of hereditary occupations and hierarchy. The sub-caste expands the nature and function of hypergamy.

Ambedkar vehemently opposed graded inequality; he was the first person to question the hierarchy, inequality based on caste and sub-caste; according to him, in no civilized society, the division of labor is accompanied by this unnatural division of laborers into watertight compartments. Therefore, a hierarchy in which this gradation of laborers accompanies the division of labor. It does not provide any scope for developing individual capacities; instead, it imposes parents' social status on the children to go for hereditary occupation. Individual sentiment and preference have no place in it and are based on the dogma of predestination (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 47).

Ambedkar believes the ideal society should be based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. It should be mobile, full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society, many interests should be consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free contact points with other modes of association. Finally, social endosmosis should exist in society (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 57). As per his analysis, caste has two aspects. First, it divides men into separate communities. Second, it places these communities in graded order, one above the other in social status. Each takes its pride and consolation in the fact that, in the scale of castes, it is above some other castes.

Scheduled Castes of Telangana

Telangana has a considerably sizeable Scheduled Caste population. According to the 2011 census, out of 350.04 Lakhs, population SCs consist of 54.09 Lakhs. The comprehensive Household Survey conducted in Telangana in 2014 revealed that there were 10.03 million families in the state, of which 1.82 million families belong to the Scheduled Castes, accounting for 17.53 percent of the total families (Hindustan Times); according to the statement of Chief Minister, at least nine out of 33 districts in the state have more than 20 percent SC population. Mancherial district has the highest Dalit population of 25.64 percent, while Hyderabad has the lowest percentage of Dalit people, 11.71%. The average population of SCs in the state, thus, stands at 17.53 percent.

Sociologically, Telangana feudal practices prevailed for several years, and the Dalit castes were under slavery and subjugated by upper caste landlords. The Feudal lords used to engage Dalits under the *Vetti* and *Bagela* systems and extract work without paying any wages. *Vetti* is a system that legitimizes caste occupational labor, services, and serfdom by the members of the lower caste and untouchables to *Doras*. *Dora* combines landlords, moneylenders, and village officials who traditionally enjoy all the privileges and services of occupational castes.

Dalit communities in the region are two groups viz., Mala and Madiga. Officially there are 59 caste groups among the Scheduled Castes in Telangana, though all these communities do not exist in the region. Since the area was under feudal oppression and an orthodox political regime, this Dalit community's occupational mobility and professional diversity were significantly less. Apart from their occupational differences, Telangana Dalit communities are classified as Mala and Madiga as sub-castes or satellite castes.

Mala: Mala is a laborer community. Malas in Telangana typically perform functions like workers, servants, grooms (safai) of the village, and village watermen. They were the bonded laborers, Badgers in the courts, and Gadis of Doras and Patels of Telangana. Hasan identified 37 endogamous groups among the Malas of Hyderabad state.

Madiga: The other predominant community among Dalits in the Telangana region is Madiga. Madiga community is involved in leather tanning, shoe making, and removal of animal corpses. They also work as Bhagela and Begar (involuntary labor). In this system, each Madiga family is attached to a landlord's family and is forced to work as vetti. According to Hasan (1989), there are 25 sub-caste groups among the Madigas.

These Dalit Castes are not merely occupational groups; they have their hierarchy, social difference, and distance in socio-cultural and ritual matters. The two main caste groups among Dalits in Telangana, Mala and Madiga, have independent social structures. These structures are not only separate from each other within their community but also from the Hindu social hierarchy. The main difference between the Hindu and Dalit hierarchies is that the former is four-fold, and the latter is multifold, where each is independent.

Hierarchy among Dalits

Among the Dalits, apart from the two main castes, i.e., Mala and Madiga, a group of gurus and priest castes and a set of cultural groups exist in each caste. Dalit priestly communities are the gurus to preach to them and purohit to perform their rituals and religious functions and manage other rites. Another set of communities perform the sacred rites and narrate mythological histories of the Caste and its origin and importance of that Caste in society. Certain conspecifics among them perform their Art and Folk traditions. They also play dance and dramas in Harijanwadadas to entertain Dalits.

The divisions, hierarchical groups, and sub-groups among the Dalits emerged as a historical necessity to these communities. Hindu religion's indifferent attitude and oppression is the main reason for forming these new groups within the community. The same is responsible for the emergence of alternative Hindu social order. Since Hinduism denied ritual freedom to Dalits and did not allow them into Hindu temples, Dalits moved closer to village deities. They worshiped the local goddesses for whom there was no need for massive structures.

Since Hindu priests refused to serve the Dalits and refused to preach to them, they developed their own gurus and priests. Hassan (1989) asserts that these priests of village deities are from Dalit castes because of the Brahmin's attitude towards Dalits and their religious beliefs. Moreover, Hinduism denies the cultural rights of Dalits and never allows them to public performances of dances and dramas, which generally take place in temples and *charades*. Since they did not have the chance to enjoy the entertainment activities of various cultural forms, Dalits developed their teams and troupes to entertain themselves and their traditional cultural forms and folklore. In this process, some families dedicated themselves to propagating the art forms and became a sub-caste within the caste.

Table - 1

Hierarchy among Scheduled Castes

| SNO | Caste and Sub Castes of Mala | Caste and Sub Castes of Madiga | Hierarchical Status Position |
|-----|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Mitha Ayyalwar (Mitthu Ayyavar) | Sangari Madiga | Guru Preacher |
| 2 | Pambala | Baindla | Priest and worshiper of Village Deities |
| 3 | MALA | MADIGA | Main Caste group |
| 4 | Mala Mast | Sindhu/Masti/Erupula | Entertainers |
| 5 | Gurram Mala | Dakkal | Satellite Caste (Storytellers) |

The caste groups within the Dalits have their own; Identity and status to find a place in the hierarchy—hereditary occupations, endogamy, Commensalities, and social distance. The main caste groups, Mala and Madiga, are independent and do not have inter-dining and marital relations. Both endogamous groups have their own traditional and hereditary occupations and maintain distance, even at the sub-caste level. They do not have a connection with each other.

Mala Hierarchy

In the Mala hierarchy, the *Mitha ayyavar* will be on the top of the ladder. Mitha salwar is considered a guru for Malas and their satellite castes. They are spiritual advisors and are known as '*Nitya vaishnavulu.*' Apart from spiritual teachings, they also perform funeral rites and marriages for Pambalas. Apart from Pambalas, Jangams and Dasaris are other important priest groups. Jangam is a Shaiva sect priest, and Dasari is a Vaishnava; both will perform the marriage and death rites for Malas according to their sect. The fundamental difference between Pambalas and Dasari and Jangam is that Pambalas do not participate in death-related traditions, whereas the Jangams and Dasari caste people do. Pambalas are exclusive priests and perform the activities related to gods and goddesses of Dalit communities and village deities. The whole village recognizes Pambalas as a priest for village deities.

Mala Masti and Gurram, Malas are in the lower rung of the ladder in the Mala hierarchy. Both the communities fragmented as cultural groups and entertainers of Mala satellite castes. Mala Masti people are acrobats and earn their livelihood by performing physical feats, mainly in the Mala localities". The Gurram Mala also is one such kind of community whose members are the traditional storytellers of Malas. They recite the story regarding the greatness and importance of the Mala community in the whole social system. They are considered the lowest group of Malas.

Madiga Hierarchy

Madiga satellite castes were engaged in more unclean occupations than Mala traditional occupations. They seem to have been placed at a low level in the graded occupational structure. Sangari, the spiritual advisor to Madigas, performs religious functions. Their traditional occupation can be treated as preaching to Madigas. Baindla is also a priestly class of Madigas. Their traditional occupation is for *paradu* (ceremony to remove uncleanness for the home arising from childbirth), invoking and appeasing Goddesses like Muthyalamma, Ellamma, and Mahishamma. A Baindla is free to accept charity from any caste. He goes door to door, singing songs praising Ellamma (the Goddess of Epidemics) and receiving alms offered to him. Madigan's traditional occupation is associated with her goods. "The primary duty of Madiga is carrying the dead and tanning of hides and manufacturing rude leather articles, especially sandals, trappings for bullocks, and large well-buckets, used for irrigation. They are also experts in playing musical instruments known as *Tappetalu* or *Dappu*. They play them on marriage occasions. At the time of any announcement in the villages, Madigas are asked to play Tappeta or Dappu. The attachment to a household is called *Tega*, and Madigan, who is attached to the house, is called Tega Madiga. Madigas earn their livelihood mainly from their traditional occupation and the rest from agriculture labor. Madiga Masti, another satellite caste, make their living by displaying their acrobatic feats in Madiga colonies and receiving regular payments. They visit different villages and exhibit acrobatic feats.

The Sindu, the entertaining Caste of Madigas, earn their living from entertainment and prostitution among the Madigas. "The traditional occupation of 'Sindollu' is to perform dances and Veedibhagavatham in Madiga settlements. They believe that they have a right to beg from Madigas. They attend all Madiga ceremonies and entertain by singing and dancing. They also maintain themselves by indulging in prostitution in Madiga colonies.

The Dakkals, considered the lowest in the social hierarchy and untouchable to Madigas, "give particulars relating to the genealogy of different families of Madigas, that is, they are bards of the Madigas. Every Dakkal has jurisdiction over 10 to 20 villages where he has a right to collect amounts from the households earmarked for him. The practice of begging and telling the genealogy of Madiga continues with the Dakkals in villages.

It is observed that within the Dalit castes, there is a clear-cut division and gradation. They consider themselves independent of each other. Shared meals and water drinking are indicators of Hindu ritualistic gradations. Andrea Beteille (1965) observes that "the common meal express symbolically both unity of those who eat together and the cleavages between those who required to eat separately states it. Ritual separation, having been elaborated to a high degree in Hindu society, maintains the cleavage within the caste system. Generally, two castes will not inter-dine unless the structural distance between them is small. Some castes are more exclusive in the commensal restrictions than others, and Dalits equally practice these restrictions as the system exists in Savarna Hindus".

Commensalities

Specific rules restrict the taking of food, water, and access to the temples within the Dalit communities. The Malas, the higher Caste among Dalits, do not bring food or water from the Madigas. Mala Jangam, Dasari Mithal, Ayyalwar, Pambala and Baidla do not eat or drink from Malas, Madigas and Dakkal. Malas and Madigas have separate wells and temples. Malas do not take food or water from Masti, Gurram Malas, and Madigas. However, all these castes take food and water from the Pambalas. The Sangari, the gurus to Madigas, strictly refrain from eating food touched or cooked by Madigas or other satellite castes. Baidla enjoys a higher social status in Madiga satellite castes; the upper castes of the village do not take cooked food or water from Baidlas. Being worshippers of Shakti, they do not accept food or water from the hands of their satellite castes since they consider themselves sacred. Sindu, the entertaining Caste of Madigas, does not take food or water from Dakkals. However, their food or water is acceptable for Madigas. Dakkals, the lowest social status in the social hierarchy, accepted food and water from all castes except Vishwa Brahman. The food or water of Dakkals is not acceptable to any other caste. Dakkals have to take nourishment or water standing outside Madiga houses. Thus the higher Caste Panchamas do not drink or dine in common. These commensalities indicate social cleavages among the Scheduled Castes.

Social distance

The notion of purity and pollution is another crucial determinant of physical distance between castes. It also indicates their social distance and place in the cultural development and social hierarchy. It is witnessed in the inhabitation of castes in the location of villages, which is the center of social, economic, and political culture. Andrea Beteille (1965) aptly observed that. "Physical structure of the village is, in some measure, a reflection of its social structure. Population distribution is not haphazard or random but manifests a more or less conscious plan. It brings out in a great manner some of the basics unites and cleavages in the village's social structure. People close to each other in the social system tend to live side by side; people whose social positions are widely different live apart, other things being equal, physical distance can be seen as social distance".

It is empirically proved that the houses, the living zones of Dalits, and other castes are not together, as they were planned to the tune of hierarchical social values. Among the depressed classes, Malas live next to Shudras. Malas and Madigas live in separate hamlets. Generally, the habitations of Madigas and its satellite castes live away from the outskirts of the villages located at a distance from the cluster houses of washer-men (Shudras). Usually, the dwellings of Madigas are in the outskirts of towns, where the dirt of the village is lodged in heaps. Dakkal, the last one in the social hierarchy, lives away from the Madiga living quarters. Dakkals are not allowed to enter the quarters of Madigas, but they pitch their huts of bamboo mats at a distance from Madiga houses.

This physical distance of Dalits from upper Caste and Shudras and between their satellite castes is the best indicator of social and cultural distance among the different castes in village India. It can be viewed that the social distance, which is a rooted notion of purity and pollution, is a mechanism for socio/ cultural/ ideological, material (economic), and power (political) deprivation of the Scheduled Castes. In descending order, the Dalits are deprived of the culture as often as there are social layers. In other words, the last man, Dakkal, is denied of the culture by its upper castes: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vysyas, the Shudras, the Malas, and the Madigas. The Pambala is placed between the Shudras and Dalit communities in a village. Generally, the settlements of Pambalas are located near the Shudra cluster in the town and close to Dalit wadas. In a way, the Pambalawadas will divide the village between left and right-hand communities. It is symbolic that Pambala settlements on the border of the main village and Dalit Wada look like an integrating force between the communities. It also acts as mediating section between Dalit rituals and village deity worship. Baidla becomes the fulcrum for the interaction and interdependencies between the two extremes of the community spectrum.

Conclusion

Hierarchy and graded inequality are essential characteristics of the caste system. The Varna, the primary basis for caste, is based on the hierarchy; the same is spread over to caste and sub-caste. Hindus are divided into thousands of castes, with most having many sub-castes. A caste is a social group with two characteristics; each such group has a unique name by which it is called together under a common name, while these larger groups are a sub-division of groups with independent names. The terms 'caste' and 'sub-caste' are not absolute but comparative in signification. Among Dalits, the lowest caste hierarchy group also has several sub-castes. In Telangana State, the government has recognized 59 such sub-caste; each sub-caste is an independent one. Of all the features of caste society dealt with so far, three pertain to the caste as a whole; for the status in the hierarchy of any sub-caste depends upon the status of the caste, from which follow the various civil and religious rights and disabilities, and the nature of the caste determines the traditional occupation. Each of these groups, major or minor, known as caste and sub-caste, has carried specific names of their sub-castes.

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