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Caste Orthodoxy In Socio-Cultural Practices And Its Depiction In Dalit Writings In India

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Abstract

The regional Dalit writers depict their different cultural dimensions, geographical variations, socio-political domains that establish a cultural narrative of the Dalit writers. The paper puts forth the underlying politics against lower and the lowest strata in the Hindu social ordering, especially in the religious sanction. The paper poignantly explores although regional variation of/with caste combinations yet the meta-narrative of prejudices against Dalits is a pan-Indian phenomenon even in the contemporary times. Furthermore, politicizations and coercive interpretative tactics over the constitutional provisions meant for Dalits have further multiplied their sufferings have been poignantly discussed in this paper.

Key Words: Cultural Dimensions, prejudice, politicization, suffering

Dalits and Hindu Culture

An ideal social institution nurtures harmonious social relationships among the members and socializes their emotional sensibilities in the specific institutional values of present and past over a geographical stretch. A social institution is a group of like-minded people who have a common minimum program to live together with safety and security within and outside of the social group. The socialization process involves the wholeness of all social groups and plays a nucleus role to ascertain their respective identities in the larger framework of society. The smooth process of social transition not only shows its dynamic features but also keeps up the vibrancy of cardinal values of the society. Moreover, a vibrant social institution always respects the dissent and individual liberty of its members in incorporating the socio-cultural changes under the existing circumstances. Social institution is "...a complex of positions, roles, norms, and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing

life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment” (Peters, ix). Whenever social institutions try to impose cultural restrictions over personal liberty, it gets opposed in different modes at the individual level. Furthermore, group-level opposition against rigidity brings rapture in any social organization to seek justification for their genuine reasons like fraternity, equality, and liberty. World history is replete with the instances of revolutions initiated at an individual (due to personal relationships) and community (for community reasons like in the French revolution) level. The dissents or revolutions within a social group not only oppose the social restrictions but also bring new cultural denominators to the society. The famous anthropologist Peter Murdock describes various denominators of culture in *Common Denominator of Culture* (1995) but responses of an individual within the social groups determine the cultural traits of a society. The cultural specifications are as under:

The actual components of culture are elements of behaviour –motor, verbal or implicit –which are habitual, in the appropriate context, either to all members of a social group or to those who occupy particular statuses within it. Each such component, whether called a folkway or a cultural trait or item, can be described with precision in terms of responses of the behaving individuals and of the stimulating situations in which the responses are evoked. (Murdock 90)

Hence, the social transition remains subjected to the intensity of either individual or community oppositions against cultural stereotypes. A vibrant society, however, is resistant to oppressive practices and follows humane social practices. Therefore, the smooth incorporation of new and desirable practices like tolerance, compassion, unbiased attitude, etc. maintains social values.

The existence of classes as social groups is not only an evolutionary process, but also a universal phenomenon in any society. Even the Roman culture has two classes in a society formation– Patricians (the wealthy elites) and Plebeians (the common men). Similarly, the Egyptian culture has eight classes of society – Pharaoh, Nobles along with Priest, Soldiers, Scribes, Merchants, Artisans, Farmers, and Slaves/servants. But Ambedkar describes in his Writings and Speeches, “The Roman Law was only contingent. So long as conditions lasted, they give rise to certain disabilities. The moment the conditions changed, the disabilities vanished” (63-64). Indian culture is one of the oldest cultures in human history and is known for socio-cultural diversity that gets manifestations in different religions, customs, rituals, rites, and habits in different historical phases of foreign invaders including British rule in India. In a larger framework, Hindu cultural practices emerge from the religious narrative that determine the social structure and get religious sanction to the Varna system in Hindu scriptures even in the recent times.

Sensing of Dalit Reality in Mainstream Writings

The caste system emerges from the Varna system and determines hierarchical division in social grouping with permanent privileges (for the upper castes) and prohibitions (for the lower castes) through religious sanctions. Therefore, socio-cultural oppression of the lower castes (especially the Untouchables) is the outcome of Hindu caste rules that find no parallel history explaining the permanent nature of privileges and prohibitions in any civilized society. The study describes how the caste discrimination against the untouchables continues despite existing laws to stop caste oppression because, “Law is not the only sanction which goes to sustain social institutions” but “institutions are sustained by other sanctions also” (Ambedkar, 13). No society in human history either enforces or endorses the biased rules (permanent privileges for upper castes and permanent prohibitions for lower castes) for social groups as Hindu culture does in the name of caste specifications—a social grouping. Ambedkar describes:

Rights and disabilities of the Roman Law may well give comfort to Hindus that the Brahmanic Law was not the only law which was guilty of putting certain classes under disabilities although the disabilities,

imposed by the Roman Law have nothing of the cruelty which characterizes the disabilities imposed by the Brahmanic Law. (59)

All sociological studies give basis to the premise that caste system has exploited the last strata even in the present socio-cultural circumstances. Despite the fact, the mainstream writers have neither showed a sensitive approach towards the socio-cultural realities of these people nor portrayed their concerns in the realistic ways. The religio-historic perspective of the Hindu caste system and the socio-cultural identity of the untouchables, who were denied basic human rights to uphold caste rules in the past pushed Dalits not only in socio-educationally backwardness but also compromised their roles in the democratic set up even in the post-Independence times.

Untouchables suffer not only in socio-cultural and geopolitics that keep them in the peripheral position but also financial, political, socio-cultural and literary misrepresentation are common grounds of marginalization. The continuity of untouchability in India is described by Ambedkar, “The Varna system has a religious sanction. Because it has a religious sanction, the Varna system has the fullest social sanction from Hindu society. With no legal prohibition, this religious sanction has more than enough to keep the Varna system in full bloom” (13). Another social scientist Prabhati Mukherjee in *Beyond the Four Varnas: Untouchables in India* (1988) also describes:

The phenomenon of untouchability underwent a long and gradual process. Its emergence is an obscure area in the sense that not much work has been done on it to date. Compared to that, there are more studies on the contemporary situation of the untouchables, and measures adopted for their betterment are all based on these studies. But upliftment of the untouchables or the measures to induct them into the mainstream of Indian life will not be effective unless the reasons for the emergence of untouchability in society are ascertained definitely. (Introduction, 1)

The nomenclatures like the SCs and Dalits describe their cultural assertion from the Hindu Shudras to Dalits in the present socio-cultural and literary scenario, particularly after Phule-Ambedkar activism. Mukherjee further defines untouchability, “Ambedkar concluded it was based purely on political and religious grounds” is beyond the classification of Varnas system. Hindu socio-religiosity of caste rules (against untouchables) shows not only Dalits’ non-acceptance, but also illustrates their socio-cultural stagnation in different time frameworks (5). Dalit writings explore the socio-religiosity and caste rigidity towards untouchables – why Dalits neither get social acceptance nor become an integral part of Hindu fraternity. As constitution bestows equality on every citizen and makes special provision to stop violation of their rights, it leaves no reason for their exploitation in any aspect. The grey area between legal provisions and social sanctions to these provisions get subtle manifestation of their sufferings. Under the Brahmanical cultural narrative (of their ‘being Hindus’ approach), Dalits never attain legal rights despite the fact that various socio-religious reforms have been initiated to ameliorate their miseries. Moreover, their issues fall in the delaying and denying tactics in implementation due to the caste biases of the upper-caste politicians in India.

Representation of Dalit Sensibilities in Dalit Writings

Untouchables are unable to fathom an appropriate justification of their sufferings (in execution and implementation of policies) except that they are given different nomenclatures instead of practical solutions to their sufferings. The underlying issues become crucial in Dalit writings that explore how and why Dalits get different nomenclatures in Indian society and literary narratives. Dalit literary ‘pulls and pushes’ in pursuit to resettle the progressive social system against the perpetual practices of oppression ‘accepted’ in the mainstream

literature is theoretically discussed in Dalit writings (in scheduled and regional languages). In Ambedkar and post-Ambedkar era, how Dalits create their socio-literary space finds expression through their religio-political, economic, and ideological consolidation against oppression in the Indian society. Dalit literary endeavor poignantly opposes the caste hierarchies and their socio-historical subjugation in present perspectives. Most of the Dalit writers write about Dalit protest against their socio-cultural oppression in their literary world in contemporary times and they critically analyze the socio-cultural issues in portraying Dalit issues in the contemporary Indian society. The writers dissect the cartography (done by the mainstream literature that set a narrative of Dalit despondency) **and resist caste** oppression in their works and gives basis to this paper.

Dalit writers dissect that the sociological nomenclatures bring no considerable change to bring the Dalits out from socio-cultural and financial exploitation. The nomenclatures are either thrust upon them or given to placate them in Hinduism. Generally, in the name of redressing their socio-economic circumstances, Dalits have been given new name by the social reformers (like Gandhi) in the pre-Independence times and (by Government agencies) in the post-Independence India. Contrastingly, the nomenclature 'Dalit' is acquired by Untouchables that show their socio-cultural activism that they were down but not out, particularly in the (post)- Ambedkar era in India. The study discusses how these Hindu outcastes came to be known as Dalits despite their different annotated titles and analyses the anatomy of their exploitation in the caste-mechanism in India. Who are these people and from where did they come into being as Dalits find a basis in the historical background of the Hindu Varna system? The only source of information is Hindu scriptures written in the ancient Post-Vedic period. The word 'caste' evolves from 'Casta' used in Spanish and Portuguese languages to denote a distinct identity that 'something is not mixed'. The word caste in English represents jati in the Hindi language that has a distinct narrative of social identity to the social group. Dalits' different nomenclatures [Outcastes, Untouchables, (Ati)-Shudras, Depressed Class, Harijans, and Scheduled Castes] are analysed from a historical perspective. The Hindu society not only appreciates the Varna system, but also follows social interactions in the caste system even though its origin either has no theoretical description in Hindu religious scriptures or finds various contradictory interpretations. The origin of the Hindu social pyramid and positioning of different castes in descending order as -Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya, and Shudras constructs contradictory descriptions in Hindu scriptures. Especially, the fourth Varna either gets sociologically misrepresented or historically incorrect instead of giving factual details. Moreover, the mainstream sociological and historical perspective is either silent or contrary specifically over the fourth Varna in the Hindu society.

Ambedkar discusses Shudras in the Hindu caste system in his book, *Who Are The Shudras?* (1946) and potentially finds how these people get termed as Shudras therein. He explores various theories including Brahmanic theory as well as the Western theory to describe the origin of the caste system. He presents varied responsible factors including sociological, political, historical, and religious for nomenclature change and inclusion of these people in the Hindu social pyramid. As Hindu scriptures are based on Shrutis and Smritis including other religious texts, so he analyses the socio-historical development to understand the Varna system. He explores whether the Hindu society was the trivarnic and the fourth Varna of Shudra was a later development. The contradiction either three Varna or four becomes evident, "For the Rig Veda, apart from the Purusha Sukta, does mention Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas not once but many times. The Brahmins are mentioned as a separate Varna fifteen times, Kshatriyas nine times. What is important is that the Rigveda does not mention Shudra as a separate Varna" (Ambedkar, vol.7, 133). He further describes that people (known as Shudra) were earlier Kshatriyas. As once there happened a fight between Brahmins and Kshatriyas so Brahmins stopped to do Upanayana (Hindu ritualisation for the later), which led to the socio-cultural degradation of Kshatriyas and termed them as Shudras with time. Another contradiction in the earliest reference of the word

Shudra rests on “the ninetieth Hymn of the Tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda” (Ambedkar, 21). Only Purusha Sukta illustrates a reference to the Chaturvarnya of the Varna system in the social composition. The Chaturvarnya is the social structure of the Indo-Aryan system which means the division of society into four classes- Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (menials). The social division is based on the traditional occupations with embedded further stratifications within the Varna system. As there is no substantial study on Shudras except the smriti and shruti, therefore, the sole Hindu sources give a contrary explanation. Hence, the Hindu theory on the origin of Shudras presents a contrary explanation of social stratifications. Contrarily, the later interpolations are made by the Brahmins to secure their interests that begin from the post-Vedic period and continue to serve political and religious purposes even in the present times.

Western Perspective on Dalits Sensibilities

Dalits The western theory on the origin of Shudras indicates a natural explanation but has a definite ‘colonial purpose’ on caste historiography to establish a more focused study in the Hindu sociological framework. In his Writings and Speeches Ambedkar says:

The Brahmanic writers do not give us any clue as to who the Shudras were, and how they came to be the fourth Varna. Therefore, Western writers have a definite theory about the origin of the Shudras. Though all of them are not agreed upon in every aspect of the theory, there are points on which there seems to be a certain amount of unity among them. (65)

The western writers describe “Vedic Literature belonged to the Aryan race” and ‘came from outside India and invaded India not only to establish “the Indo–Aryan society (66)” but also to endorse the superiority of the European race over the Asian. The western theory neither gets opposed nor scrutinized by the Brahmanic theory. The Brahmins accept the theory due to its fitness of the things for themselves as well as for the British. Hence, the western approach to Shudras shows contradictions and is accepted by both (the Brahmins and the Westerners) yet gives a different perspective to the Brahmanic theory. Another scheme on the origin of Shudras revolves around their Mool Nivasi narrative– native people who propagate along with tribal communities of India. The social theorist ‘Vimalkirti’ quotes Jyotiba Phule’s perspective on Brahmanic rules against Untouchables, “The chains of perpetual bondage and slavery which their selfishness and cunning have forged...It is surprising to think what a mass of specious fiction the interlopers invented with a, view to hold the original occupiers of the soils fast in their clutches and rule securely for ages to come through the means of their credulity” (128). The origin of untouchables interlinks how Shudras get exploited in the hands of Brahmanic interpretation in the different religious narratives. Ambedkar describes, “There are other riddles regarding the position of the Shudra which arise out later developments of the ideal Chaturvarnyais the creation of the fifth class next below the Shudras” (35). The social conditions of Shudras as described in the Chaturvarnic Hindu society (under Brahmanic caste rules) deprive these people of civil rights and Upanayanas reduce them to social backwardness. Furthermore, the nomenclature changes for social groups in Purusha Sukta- the Hindu religious book. Ambedkar describes:

These terms are: Savarnas, Avarnas, Dvijas, Non-Dvijas and Traivarnikas. They stand to indicate the sub-divisions of the original four classes and the degree of separation between them... Savarna means one who belongs to any one of the four Varnas. Avarna means one who does not belong to one of the four Varnas. The Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are Savarnas. The Untouchables or Ati-Shudras are called Avarnas. (35-36)

On this basis, Untouchables are outside of the Chaturvarnaya. Hence, their inclusion in the Varna system is a lateral entry in the Hindu religious books. Moreover, the description of Dvija and Non-Dvija, Shudras, and Ati-Sudras fall into a different category in their social positioning in Hindu society. The distinguished study of Dvija and Non-Dvija are described as, “Dvija means twice-born and non-Dvija means one who is born only once. The distinction is based on the right of having Upanayana. The Upanayana is treated as a second birth. Those who have the right to wear the sacred thread are called Dvijas. Those who have no right to wear it are called non-Dvijas” (Ambedkar 36). So, Hindu religious books either give no specification or contradictory references on the dissimilarities and similarities over the social positioning of Shudras and Untouchables as their respective narrative of Svaranas and Avrnasas well as in Dvijas and non-Dvijas in the post-Vedic period.

Inconclusiveness of Dalits Subjugation

Ambedkar’s efforts to secure equality for the Depressed Classes failed due to Congress leaders’ opposition against the provisions in the Round Table Conferences in 1932. Ambedkar described in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables?* That the namesake shifting included, “a variety of nomenclatures such as Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Harijans and Servile Classes, to designate the Untouchables” (vi). During the British Raj, Ambedkar submitted the serious issues of untouchables to the then Viceroy in 1930 that the Depressed Classes must be given special status as a corrective measure. Unfortunately, the redressing of untouchables’ issue never gets sincere consideration to ensure their equal stakeholder ship in the opportunities to earn and learn in the Indian society. Even Ambedkar tried to ensure their representation in socio-economic spheres by presenting them as a Depressed Class. After a lot of deliberations with British rulers in India and their representatives, he convinced them to make provision of a separate electorate to ensure their representation in the Indian society. At the time of Independence, the society diversified into different social specifications despite a change in political spheres in India. The societal specifications are described as:

The Hindu civilization has produced three social classes whose existence has not received the attention it deserves. The three classes are (1) “Criminal Tribes who number about 20 million or so; (ii) The Aboriginal Tribes who number about 15 million; and (iii) The Untouchables who number about 50 million... a mass of people who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution? (239)

In this way, the inhuman status of the Untouchables and their poor social positioning in Hindu society specifies their mistreatment in the caste system. The issue of untouchables’ identity and their socio-cultural positioning in Hindu society kept shifting along with swift movements in the Indian freedom struggle, at least in nomenclature. Due to their earnest efforts by the contemporary freedom fighters (led by Mahatma Gandhi), the national freedom movement achieved the momentum, so untouchables’ social awareness became potential with Indian leaders and the foreign rulers those times. Therefore, the socio-political leaders showed a rational approach towards untouchables’ suffering in the Hindu society. Moreover, Dalit leaders’ assertion and the British’s circumstantial responses to the Ambedkar movement for Dalits’ mainstreaming process turned out to be another fiasco for Depressed Classes. The socio-political leaders (lead by Gandhi) again appeased untouchables to give another nomenclature instead of securing their human right and equal opportunity to eradicate discriminatory caste system in Hindu society. The British regime sees new aspects of the caste system in Hindu society that happens to be very different from the respective leaders including even soft Hindu and non-Hindu leaders. Ambedkar – as a representative of untouchables, neither gets support from mainstream politicians nor from other untouchable leaders (like MC Rajah) despite his (Ambedkar) fight for the practical solutions of their under-representation due to discriminatory caste system. Ambedkar says in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables?* “All these names have been used officially and unofficially at one time or other for the Untouchables. Contrastingly, whenever these people get new nomenclature, every time their genuine issues

become either secondary or get neglected under different socio-cultural narratives. Opposite to the earlier nomenclatures for low caste people, the latest one- Dalits, is an acquired one that not only shows their exploitation in the historical perspective but also asserts their undying zeal to regain their lost socio-economic and political entities being Indian citizens. The word 'Dalit' implies that they are aware of caste sufferings and oppose their oppressors. The usage of this word unites them in socio-cultural paradigms particularly in the 1970s. The usage of this term is an ideological assertion against their caste oppression. Hence, the term 'Dalit' is assertive and is an embodiment of their socio-cultural counteraction against their caste oppressors. The scheduled castes get inspiration from Ambedkar's perspective on constitutional equality for every citizen in the country. These people get socio-cultural momentum from his Writings and Speeches that lead them to attain Dalithood i.e. – untouchables are common sufferers in the Hindu caste system. The Dalithood represents a counter-canon to Brahmanic ideology that endorses oppression of untouchables. The socio-cultural exploration brings them to celebrate their undying quest of identity as even the failures give momentum to untouchables' undying pursuit for socio-cultural equality in the Indian society. Furthermore, 'Dalit' becomes a socio-cultural vehicle of their assertion specifically in socio-political as well as in the Dalit literary world. The earlier nomenclatures (either assigned by Ambedkar or by Gandhi) denote their circumstantial identity in the Indian society. The nomenclature 'Dalit' is a self-acquired identity that not only brings them out of complex(ity) of different caste narratives, but also expresses their pursuit for socio-cultural equality in a Hindu society.

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