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ANALYZING THE ROLE OF PRESS IN BRINGING DALITS OF INDIA IN THE SOCIAL MAINSTREAM

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Analyzing the Role of Press in Bringing Dalits of India in the Social Mainstream

Introduction

Press and media being recognized as the fourth pillar of democracy play significant role in strengthening democracy. In the present times, the use of Press is a means for communicating information from person to person and place to place. The spread of thoughts, ideas and information can influence the present and future of the society. On this basis, one cannot discount the fact that press has power to make and unmake the governments. Recognizing the role of press as well as media in this process, Indian apex court, has extended the existing ambit of, Freedom of Speech and Expression, enshrined in Indian constitution as fundamental right. The freedom acknowledged through this right also cover, freedom of press and free media. The importance of press in the today's world is evident from the fact that it has the power to influence the lives of ordinary people in various ways.

The Constitution of India aims at 'Justice'. The term justice does not mean justice in abstract sense as a moral virtue of ideal, but it means justice according to law, or in other words enforcement of rights as they are defined by law. Administration of justice is one of the essential functions of the state. The press and media is vital medium to secure such justice because it brings transparency in day to day affairs by highlighting information to readers of current and contemporaneous events. While doing so, press has to be fearless and courageous, particularly in the matters of public interest. In a democratic set up, public interest also need to be interpreted as, inclusive of providing equality before law to marginalized section. Bearing this as a constitutional objective, one can't undermine the role of press in forwarding these, as goals yet to be realized, by highlighting the instances where these goals have been set aside in order to give preference to dominant classes. Considerable role of press needs to be recognized where it has supported the voices of those who are marginalized and can't have access to adequate mechanism for securing justice, because of the historical, social and cultural reasons. Free press has enabled to reveal the true picture of those strata of the society which remained deprived of economic and social, political or cultural rights. It was through the material published and by highlighting in the print media i.e., Press, that, today, bundle of rights and legislative protections have been given to Dalits.

Genesis of Caste System

Dalits are considered underprivileged in all social, economic and political fronts leading to their misery, discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated society. The theory of the caste system is interlinked with the varna model which

divided the Hindu society into four orders-the Brahmins, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudras.¹ Beyond the four varnas were the *achhoots* (the untouchables). These categories occupied different positions in the status hierarchy. The first three castes are considered twice born or 'dvija' since the men from these castes were entitled to use the sacred thread at the Vedic site of Upanayana, which the Sudras were not allowed to perform.² Sudras were the people who cultivated the land, mended the shoes, washed the clothes and did all types of menial works. Members of this caste, however, shared the stigma of untouchability. Frequently they were denied chances to eat, smoke or even sit with members of the upper castes. In villages, it was quite common that Dalits were supposed to use wells, separate from those maintained for the use of higher caste people.³ This pitiable condition of Dalits was seen and well addressed by some eminent social and political philosophers like Joytiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and others during their long careers they had taken some ameliorative measures in order to raise their social status.

Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables, who have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. In many cases, Dalits are easily targeted even now in this independent nation where the constitution guarantees equal rights and privileges to every citizen. Throughout the century they have been victimized religiously, socially, culturally and most of all economically. Dalit is an expression of the existing contradiction, inequality and exploitation in the Indian hierarchy. In the annals of Indian history, Dalits were referred to with different nomenclatures like Chandals, Avarnas, Achhuts, Adi-dravidia, depressed classes, oppressed Hindu, Harijan, Scheduled Castes etc. at different points of time.⁴ However, after the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement, they preferred to be called as Dalits.

The term Dalit is derived from the Sanskrit root '*dal*' which means burst, split, broken, down trodden. Dalit has become part of the vocabulary of the North-Indian languages. For example, in Punjabi the well-known Punjabi dictionary 'The Mahan Kosh' by Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha defines Dalit as one who belongs to the lowest caste (Hini jati) and has been trampled down by or broken under the feet of the upper castes (*Unchi Jati*).⁵ It was used in the new context in Marathi by New Buddhist activists, the followers of B.R. Ambedkar in the early 1970s. Dalit refers to those who have been broken, grounded down by those above them in a deliberate way, and justified caste hierarchy.⁶

¹ John Campbell Oman, RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA 42 (2003).

² Ranjit Rajadhyaksha, ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL CHANGE 235 (2004).

³ Mark Juergensmeyer, RELIGIOUS REBELS IN THE PUNJAB: THE SOCIAL VISION OF UNTOUCHABILITY 14 (1988).

⁴ Vivek Kumar, *Situating Dalits in Indian Society* 54 (3) SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN 514 (Sept-Dec., 2005).

⁵ Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, MAHAN KOSH: ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF SIKH LITERATURE 468 (1930).

⁶ Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, THE UNTOUCHABLES: SUBORDINATION, POVERTY AND THE STATE IN MODERN INDIA 4 (1998).

The recent use of the term Dalit has been developed in the manifesto of Dalit Panther movement in 1973: "Who is Dalit?" in this regard, this manifesto says members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited socially, politically, economically and in the name of religion.⁷ So Dalits are exclusively the socially and economically marginalized people of India. A variety of other names have been used in both English and Indian languages before and after independence to designate these people who are at the lowest rung in the social structure.

Caste system is commonly viewed as a hierarchical system. It also evinces some of the properties of a segmentary system i.e. there are several levels of differentiation and these levels are related to each other in specific ways. First, membership in a caste is by birth; second, a caste is an endogamous unit; third, members of each caste traditionally had an occupation or trade to pursue; fourth, castes are graded in a local hierarchy and fifth, notions of pollution and purity govern the nature and extent of the relationships between castes.⁸ To sum-up, the caste system is a segmental division of society into endogamous, hereditary descent groups. These groups constitute a hierarchy in which the Brahmins occupy the top position and the Dalits the bottom one. In Rigveda period, the earliest works of the first three classes of society are very frequently mentioned and named Brahma, Kshatra and Vaisha. It is only in one of the later hymns, the celebrated Purushasukta, that a reference has been made to four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the primeval being. The names of those four orders are given there as Brahimana, Rajanya, Vaishya, and Shudra.⁹

It is not only that these four varnas have been mentioned in the sacred texts, but they have also been assigned their duties as well. The Brahmins was directed to the ritual process which was associated with pastoral or agricultural work, the Kshatriya defended the territory and also conduct fire scarifies for the prosperity of his subjects, the Vaishya looked after economic exchange of goods and service and management of livestock and the Shudra toiled in the field and rendered services such as delivering message etc.¹⁰ The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, describe further deterioration of the Dalits' condition. Indeed, a story from the Ramayana shows how even to the Sudras had become degraded in the Rama's time only. The three upper castes were allowed to do Tapasya (Penance and meditation).¹¹

⁷ Gopal Guru, in Mohanty Monoranjan (ed), *CASTE, CLASS, GENDER, READINGS IN INDIAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS*, 2004, New Delhi Sage Publications, Op-cit P-257.

⁸ A.R. Desai, *SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN NATIONALISM* 241 (1976).

⁹ S. Srinivasm & Sanjay Kumar, *Economic and Caste Criteria in Definition of Backwardness* XXXIV (16) *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY* 3052 (1999).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Bhai Ashok Singh, *Contribution of Guru Nanak to the Indian Social and Religious thought*, *ABSTRACT OF SIKH STUDIES*, X (I) 49 (Jan-March, 2008).

Constitutional Safeguards for Dalits

The constitution aims at the establishment of just and equitable order. It has established the rule of law. It is itself a fundamental right. Truly speaking, constitution of India is excellent piece of social engineering. It provides special safeguards in favour of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes with a view to maintain balance in the society and to guarantee social equilibrium and to serve as an effective tool of social engineering. The state has been put under an obligation to strive hard to promote the welfare of depressed classes. To secure this end a number of provisions have been incorporated to protect them from various types of atrocities and exploitation to catch up with the rest of the society in all walks of life.

To overcome the historical discrimination of dalits in India, the constitution of India has guaranteed several rights to them. Article 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24 and 25(2)(b) of the constitution enjoins upon the state to provide social safeguards to Scheduled Castes. Article 17 relates to abolition of untouchability being practiced in society. The Parliament enacted the protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to tackle the 98 problem of untouchability, which is being practiced against Scheduled Castes.

Press as Voice of Dalits

As the role of press we talk about it went only with its hegemonic practices and never felt it necessary to head the voice of the majority of the population fighting against social order set up by upper caste society. Ambedkar has pointed out towards the lack of media support for Dalits. He wrote, "Dalits have no press and the congress press is close to them. It is determined not to give them the slightest publicity. They cannot have their own press..."¹² He also contended that as there was no proper media for Dalits, there will not be any press which made great men among them. Dalits who are invisible are also living in this country. They also know each and every thing and could function as better players in the long run.

When we talk about writings in the context of Dalits, the classical orientalist writings provide a large framework for understanding the Indian/Hindu society and its difference from the modern societies of west. The supremacy of the religious principle articulated in the form of oppositional unity of the pure and impure also meant that in India, the secular dominion of power was independent of religious domain, and inferior to it.¹³ These writings also produced social and intellectual conditions where 'caste became the single term capable of expressing, organizing and above all "synthesizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization.

¹² Ranjith Thankappan, *INVISIBLE DALITS*, Retrieved from <http://www.thehoot.org/> 6956 visited on 12 June, 2017.

¹³ L. Dumount, *HOMO HIERARCHIUS: THE CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS* 54 (1970).

In this context, writings of Ambedkar can't be overlooked. He spread knowledge among Dalits by his writings and encouraged them to come forward and fight for their rights. In 1920, Ambedkar started a fortnightly called *Mooknayak*. In its opening issue, he pleaded its necessity as a forum to deliberate on injustices let loose or likely to be imposed on him and other depressed people and to think of their future development and appropriate strategies towards it critically.¹⁴ It was the outcome of fortnightly that he was able to form a forum for the depressed classes in collaboration with Shahu ji Mahahraj of Kohlapur. Only after that Ambedkar was able to found the Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha in 1924.¹⁵ On 3 April 1927, Ambedkar had begun publishing a fortnightly journal *Bahishkrit Bharat*. As the name suggested, it was an attempt to wrest the initiative for the depressed classes in their struggle. Ambedkar also started a fortnightly, called *Janata*, on 24 November 1930 which became a weekly after a year. It was later published as *Prabudd Bharat* from 4 February 1956. This was also emphasising the condition of *Dalits* in India. It was through the various writings that these people got enlighten and also fought for their rights.

A publication by Human Rights¹⁶ in 1999 demonstrates, more than 160 million people in India remain at risk of systematic human rights violations on the basis of the caste into which they are born. Despite the fact that India constitutionally abolished the practice of "untouchability" in 1950, still it is practiced and violence has become a defining characteristic of the abuse. This report not only talks about caste, but also about class, gender, poverty, labor, and land. For those at the bottom of its hierarchy, caste is a determinative factor for the attainment of social, political, civil, and economic rights. This report is a critical understanding of the conditions of the Dalits in India significantly Tamil Nadu. It documents that the State agents have acted directly and forcefully against those attempting to claim their rights. In an important interview of V.T. Rajshekar, the editor of *Dalit Voice*, India's most widely circulated Dalit journal. Rajshekar has often come under attack for his writings. In 1986 his passport was impounded because of "anti-Hinduism writings outside of India."

The report, "Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination against India's 'Untouchables,'" was produced as a "shadow report"¹⁷ in response to India's submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which monitors implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in February 2007. It confirms the practice of untouchability against Dalits by segregating Dalits in housing colonies, schools, relief camps and public life. This report questioned the position of the Government in the eradication of untouchability against Dalits.

¹⁴ See *Mooknayak*, 31 January 1920, p 7.

¹⁵ Valerian Rodrigues, *THE ESSENTIALS WRITINGS OF B.R. AMBEDKAR* 9 (2002).

¹⁶ Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables, Human Rights Watch, 1999, Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org.html>, visited on 12.03.2017.

¹⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/02/13/india-hidden-apartheid-discrimination-against-dalits.html>. visited on 04.02.2018.

Articulating the mainstream position on the subject among the middle-class elite of the country in his well-known book Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that in context of the society, the caste system and much that goes with it is are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive and barriers to progress. There can neither be equality in status and opportunity within its framework nor can be political democracy.....between these two conceptions conflict is inherent and only one of them can survive.¹⁸ The chairman of India's Constituent Assembly and the first Law Minister of Independent India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was even more emphatic on this. He wrote, "You can't build up a nation; you can't build up a morality. Anything you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole".¹⁹

A large volume of historical and anthropological research shows that notwithstanding the claims of ideological consensus, those located at the lower end of the hierarchy didn't always accept their position in the caste system as a natural consequence of their past karma. They often attributed it to the manipulations and deceitful actions of others. In other words, political and material struggles would have also played their role. Interestingly, the protest movements and contestation of caste invariably appeared in religious forms. Perhaps the first major movements against the caste system were the rise of Buddhism in the ancient times. Buddhism underlined the unity of mankind and professed that all human beings, irrespective of their caste and creed, have common predicament of the life and face sufferings. Buddha taught the essential equality among of the possibilities of liberation available to all. The order of caste and the supremacy of the Brahmin were challenged again during the so called medieval times by the Saint poets like Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak among many others. Kabir and Ravidas are believed to have themselves from the communities located close to the bottom of the traditional caste hierarchy. They both attracted a large following. An evidence of their writings is the fact that Sikh Gurus included their writings in the holy book during 16th and 17th centuries. During the 1970s and 1980s, the activists began to reinvent some of these writings and symbolisms to inspire many in the contemporary Dalit movements.²⁰

In recent times Dalit literature has become a new genre. The writers of Dalit literature have started depiction the tormenting experiences of Dalits exposed to present the contemporary social, political, economic, educational and mental conditions of Dalits before Dalit and non-Dalit readers. Mulkraj Anand was the first writer to touch upon this genre of Dalit literature in his novels like *Coolie* and *Untouchable* in English. They are simultaneously translated into different regional and world languages. The Dalit literature is made popular in Marathi by Maharashtra Dalit Poetry. It mainly aims at creating awareness of Dalits about their social conditions in the society to all conscious readers. Thus we have a great deal of Dalit literature in which we find the poet's expressing the violent lashing experiences of poet's life effectively.

¹⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, *THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA* 257 (1946).

¹⁹ B.R Ambedkar, *ANNIHILATION OF CASTE, CRITICAL QUEST* 102 (2002).

²⁰ Surinder S. Jodhka, *CASTE* 112 (2012).

Conclusion

The press has played a vital role for mainstreaming of Dalits in the current Indian society. The reaction after the various writings was that whatever might have been the caste in past, there would be very few among the ex-untouchables today who would regard themselves as impure or justify their low status on ground of their misconduct in some previous life. The two most important things that have happened in relation to the practice of untouchability are: (a) its legal de-recognition and (b) a near-complete change in the consciousness of those at the receiving end of the hierarchical system. The Dalit communities have almost become more assertive about their human and political rights. Today they all aspire to more comfortable material circumstances and all demand more dignity. The process of economic development, urbanization and political change has also introduced new spheres of social interactions, which were designed to be caste-free or open to all. For example, the introductions of a public transport system, state-funded primary and higher education, healthcare and many other modern day services to rural areas are provided to all, irrespective of caste and creed. Some of the provisions such as tap water were also become an alternative to traditionally available services, such as community well.

The Untouchability Offences Act was passed in 1955 followed by the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976 and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act in 1989. Besides several state Governments also enacted legislations focusing on 'removal of civil disabilities'. The Government of India also developed administrative structures to oversee the working of the various safeguards provided to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities. The central and state governments also included various schemes/programs directed at enabling SCs and STs to actively participate in the emerging economy and new avenues of employment. Hence, the press after reflecting the true picture of the Dalit community has been successful in mainstreaming the Dalits in the society in which they were not even been recognized.

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