

CONTEXTUALISING DALIT MOVEMENT IN INDIA: SOCIAL STATUS AND CULTURE

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Social Status of Dalits

In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leatherwork, butchering, or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and waste. Dalits worked as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines, and sewers. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual, and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. For example, they could not enter a temple nor a school, and were required to stay outside the village. Elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other castes. Discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. It has largely disappeared in urban areas and in the public sphere. Some Dalits have successfully integrated into urban Indian society, where caste origins are less obvious and less important in public life. In rural India, however, caste origins are more readily apparent and Dalits often remain excluded from local religious life, though some qualitative evidence suggests that its severity is fast diminishing.

Modern India

Since 1950, India has enacted and implemented many laws and social initiatives to protect and improve the socio-economic conditions of its Dalit population. By 1995, of all jobs in India, 17.2 percent of the jobs were held by Dalits, greater than their proportion in Indian population. Of the highest paying, senior most jobs in government agencies and government controlled enterprises, over 10 percent of all highest paying jobs were held by members of the Dalit community, a tenfold increase in 40 years. In 1997, India democratically elected K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit, as the nation's President. In last 15 years, Indians born in historically discriminated minority castes have been elected to its highest judicial and political offices. The quality of life of Dalit population in India, in 2001, in terms of metrics such as access to health care, life expectancy, education attainability, access to drinking water, housing, etc. was statistically similar to overall population of modern India. In 2010, international attention was

drawn to the Dalits by an exhibition featuring portraits depicting the lives of Dalits by Marcus Perkins. In India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, Dalits have revolutionised politics and have elected a popular Dalit chief minister named Mayawati.

The Social Structure

After defining the word society in a basic manner, we have to define some main types of societies. Especially when the subject is the caste system, we find a timeline of civilization inside India, which was built on the mainstreams of social life; the nomadic and the sedentary. Indian civilization is one of the oldest sedentary civilizations. But just like others it was not sedentary at the beginning. And it is clear for us to see that the whole story of the formation of a social system, which we call the caste system, is at the same time the history of the formation of a new civilization.

So it is hard to make the whole theory dependant on philological evidences and give exact dates of migration of societies. The main evidence of Aryan migrations is the warfare stories of an ancient text, which is called the "Rigveda". The manner of this scripture is mostly religious and literary and it is a very valuable historical source. However, examining the scripture, historians believe that the geographical names used are defining the geography of northern India or the Punjab, and their fierce struggling with their enemies, the Dasas gives evidence. One of the main differences between the Aryans and the Indus Valley civilization is their way of life. Aryans were migrants and that meant that they were probably a nomadic society. The philological links between the Iranian and Aryan languages shows us that at some time in their history Iranian and Aryan tribes were living together and than they were separated. So we can assume that Aryans migrated into India. The nomadic character of the Aryans can also be observed with the religious ritual of horse sacrifice where horse breeding is linked to nomadic life.

On the other hand the Indus Valley civilization was a well-developed civilization with well-established cities with a population of 50,000 individuals. They had their own scripture (which is still not deciphered) and operational harbors making commerce with the antique

Mesopotamian cultures such as Sumerians. This is a brief description of the social structure of India well before the birth of Christ, which gave rise to Hindu civilization and its important part the caste system that is the subject of this study. Later on, based on this structure the researcher will try to explain the birth of caste system.

Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy whether in the singular or the plural form, indicates the real meaning of the word society. The word "hierarchy" can be applied to the history of the societies with big population as a whole and without any effort. Classes and hierarchical systems became much more complicated during the process of alteration from first the hunter-gatherer life, than into agricultural village life and at last into sedentary life where today millions of people call groups what we call city today. To understand this we have to take a look on the diagram (see annex, Figure 1) which shows the percentage of the hunter-gatherer population inside the general human population. Tens of thousands of years ago the whole human population that was a few million was hunter-gatherers. It is understandable for 10 million people to be nomadic and hunter where there were endless lands unpopulated.

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