

The Root - Cause of Discrimination in India

Dr.V. HANUMANTHAI AH

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Principal

Veda and Sanskrit College, Mulapet, Nellore-524201, SPSR Nellore, Andhra Pradesh.

Abstract

India, the cradle of civilization for long, is now beset with a number of social evils. They are so numerous that one shudders to think of them. Some social reformers fought against social evils, but these evils were so deep-rooted that some of them do persist even to this day. There is certainly a change widely visible in the lives of the underprivileged groups and classes in our society today. It's time we duly and dutifully thank those great people for their unstinted, sincere efforts. But, still there are a number of social evils which cry for our urgent, special attention. Not only in India, but also in other parts of Asia and in parts of Africa too, caste, known as a tribe, is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. More than 250 million people worldwide continue to suffer under what is often a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery, and other extreme forms of discrimination. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The present paper discussed about the chronicle of discrimination in India.

Key words: *Untouchability, Caste etc.,*

I. INTRODUCTION

India is said to have a number of social evils from its inception onwards. The discussion on the past may instigate a section of people to rebel, but it is essential to know the root-cause of this discrimination. This discrimination, inhuman and degrading treatment of a section of people, has been justified merely on the basis of caste. Not only in India, but also in other parts of Asia and in parts of Africa too, caste, known as a tribe, is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. More than 250 million people worldwide continue to suffer under what is often a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery, and other extreme forms of discrimination. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. As Narendra Jadhav rightly observes, "Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an untouchable. For thousands of years, the untouchables or Dalits, the people at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, have been treated as subhuman". They are so numerous that one shudders to think of them. Some social reformers fought against social evils but these evils so deep-rooted that try as they did some of them persist to this day. Discriminatory and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of a vast global population has been justified on the basis of caste. In much of Asia and in parts of Africa, caste or tribe is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. Over 250 million people worldwide continue to suffer under what is often a hidden apartheid of segregation, of modern-day slavery, and other extreme forms of discrimination, such as exploitation, and violence. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Caste is descent-based and thus hereditary in nature. It is a characteristic determined by one's birth into a particular caste, irrespective of the faith practised by the individual. Caste denotes a system of rigid social stratification into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation. Under various divisive systems throughout the world, caste divisions also dominate in housing, marriage, and in general social interaction and they are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycott and even physical violence. Today, there are about 165 million untouchables or Dalits and they continue to suffer under India's 3500-year-old caste system that is a blot on humanity. However, Dalits are now actively engaged in fighting against caste discrimination, illiteracy and poverty. Their weapons are education, self empowerment and democracy. Hindus believe that God had created the caste system. The sacred Rig-Veda, the earliest literary source available in India, dating back to around 1000 B.C, describes how human stratification came about: a cosmic giant, Purusha, sacrificed parts of his body to create mankind. From His mouth came into being the Brahmin, the priestly caste; from His shoulders the Kshatriya, the warriors and land owners: from out of His thighs the Vaishya, the merchants; and lastly from His feet were born the Shudra, the servants. The fourfold division of society is called Four Varnas, the Chaturvarna system or the four fold system of division. The untouchables are placed below the lowest, the Shudras. Thus, yet another group of people had been thrown out of the system. These are called the panchamas, i.e., the fifth, also popular as the Dalits and untouchables. This division might have suited the then

existing society since there were limited people and most of them were ignorant of their self respect. Ancient Hindu law books such as Manu Smriti and Goutama Dharma Shastra didn't allow Shudras and Dalits to possess any wealth other than 'Dogs and Donkeys'. The door for education was shut and they consider that a shudra has no right to get educated. They were forced to be dependent on the higher castes for everything. They were forced to accept their fate and suffer. All these they suffer because they are ignorant. So Dr. B. R. Ambedkar with an emphatic voice argues that the root cause of untouchability lies in prolonged cultural or racial differences, contempt and hatred, coupled with a close economic dependence of weaker society on the stronger one.

In the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, dated around 1000 B.C., there is the well-known story of Ekalavya, a tribal boy and an outcaste. One day, he saw a group of young boys listening to the then famous guru Dronacharya. Ekalavya wanted to make friends with the group of young boys, but he was soon surrounded by four armed guards, who roughed him up. The princes were learning the art of archery, if ever Ekalavya had at any time dare cross into their territory, was seen again in the vicinity, they warned, he would be instantly killed. But curiosity got the better of Ekalavya, who began rising at dawn to furtively watch the training of the young princes. He would strain to hear everything that was taught. By night in the moonlight, he would practice, reciting the instructions he had heard the guru utter. He soon mastered the art of archery. At the end of the story he had to lose his art only because he was of a low caste.

In the Hindu mythology, one finds Shambuka an ascetic, in the Adyatma Ramayana version of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Book -7, the *Uttarakanda Sargas 73-76*. According to that version Shambuka was slain by Rama for venturing to perform penance in cross violation of the then Yuga Dharma, and thus eventually resulting in the untimely death of a young Brahman boy. It is believed that Shambuka was beheaded in a hill cave at Ramtec, near Nagpur in Maharashtra. (C.D. Narasimhaiah,10). When Rama, the virtuous king, was the ruler of Ayodhya, a humble, aged Brahmin comes weeping for him with his dead son in his arms. Sage Narada explains to Rama that an outcaste is practising penance, and that is the cause of the young boy's untimely death. Rama goes on a tour of inspection in his flying chariot, and finds an ascetic doing austerities, and asks 'Who he is' and what he has been doing.

On hearing the words of the renowned warrior, the ascetic, his head still hanging downward (as part of his austerities) answered, "O Rama, I was born of a Sudra, an outcaste, and I am performing this rigorous penance in order to acquire a status of a god in flesh and blood in this life itself. I am not telling a lie, "O Rama, I wish to attain the Celestial status. Know that I am a Sudra and my name is Shambuka." As Shambuka was still speaking, Raghava Rama drawing out his brilliant and stainless sword from its scabbard cut his head off. At that time, all the gods cried out, "well done, well done !!!", overwhelming Rama with praise, and a shower of Celestial flowers of divinely fragrant fell on all sides, scattered by Vayu, the God of the air.

Some critics interpret this event, as injustice meted out to Shambuka and are of the opinion that Rama had slain Shambuka because of his birth as an outcaste Sudra. Dravidian movements hold the position that Rama murdered Shambuka to reinstate the apartheid Varna system which is an important feature of the Hindu Dharma. Certainly, revolts against the caste system did take place. The first revolt against the caste system was done by Gowtama, the Buddha in the 6th century B.C. He questioned and discarded the Chaturawarna and the caste system arising from out of it. Buddhism gained prominence over a large part of India and spread to other countries such as China and Japan and Southeast Asia. The Bhakthi movement established equality before God; its followers began to believe that even untouchables shared the grace of God. As they have been let into temples, they began to feel one to one with others of high-caste Hindus. Even saints and poets teach oneness of the entire humanity. Thus the Bhakthi movement raised awareness, but there was no radical change in the society. There was slow but steady change in the society.

The origins of caste and of untouchability lie deep in India's ancient past and the evidence of those origins provided by the archaeological and literary sources now available is, at best, circumstantial. Consequently, scholars gainfully engaged themselves in considerable speculation in their efforts to reconstruct the history of untouchability. What they now have are not hard and clear facts, but a variety of competing theories, all of which have proved inadequate to substantiate in a convincing manner. The dominant view traces the origins of caste and untouchability to the Aryans themselves and to their ways of relating to the people of India with whom they came into contact. The Aryans, a set of related and highly self-conscious tribes, sharing a common language and religion, began their invasions of India from the northwest, around 1500 BC. For centuries, they remained in seemingly constant conflict with the indigenous people, whom they looked down upon as culturally inferior and shunned as ritually unclean. Once conquered by superior military technology, some of these people withdrew into regions yet unoccupied by the Aryans, while others were incorporated as separate and inferior castes within the Aryan dominated society.

In the Post Rig Vedic literature, there are more frequent references to primitive forest-dwellers who were kept on the fringes of Aryan society in the conquered regions. Among these were the Chandalas. Although the Chandalas had been severely stigmatized in the later Vedic age, it was only in the period between 600 B.C.

and 200 A.D. that untouchability made it itself clearly visible. In the *Dharmasatras* and in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the Chandals had been treated as Untouchables and the mixed caste theory of the origins of untouchability is enunciated; however, it is in the Manusmriti that "this factor as well as the Verna theory and the classification of castes in a hierarchy based on occupation and degree of pollution, receives its classic statement." (S.M. Micheal, *Dalits in Modern India*, 17). Discriminatory and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of a vast global population has been justified on the basis of caste. In much of Asia and in parts of Africa, caste or tribe is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. Over 250 million people worldwide continue to suffer under what is often a hidden apartheid of segregation, of modern-day slavery, and other extreme forms of discrimination, such as exploitation, and violence. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Discrimination and Untouchability were officially abolished by the Indian constitution when the country became Republic on January 26, 1950. Reservations in all walks of life enabled the suppressed to gain their due position in the society. Here one should say that the caste discrimination may have changed the form, but it has not totally disappeared. Practically some sections of people even today suffer in this modern society too. Particularly, education, which was once the privilege of the upper caste, gradually moved towards the lower caste and it paved the way for the all around development of the masses. It gave them the urge to be recognized and respected in the society they live in. It is not out of place to mention one great historic event that took place during the British Raj in India. "In a historic event in 1873, Jyotiba Phule, a teacher in a Christian school whose origin is a gardener community, established the first non-Brahmin social organization that emphasized education for the masses and advocated the reduction of Brahmin virtual power. Phule educated his childless wife, Savitri, who started a school for women. Over the years, Phule established many schools for exclusively untouchables and women". (*Untouchables*, 5-6).

Women are suppressed almost in every society. They are not supposed to be free to choose their career. Indian tradition too is male-dominated and automatically women have been neglected. She is compared with the most humble animal 'cow' for she knows only to give everything for the sake of the house. Women are just no more than a commodity and their voices are subaltern voices. In Indian mythology too, she was either a Devi or a Dasi without any individuality. Since the society was totally dominated by men, it was thought "Men are for God and women for God in Men." From ancient times onwards men have been managers of not only public institutions but also of administration of all affairs of the family. Women were not allowed to have anything to do with the organized social structures and with this, view our society had put in so many 'do's' and 'don'ts' on women such as Sati, Paradah, Child marriage, Dowry, Inequality, Social harassment, Illiteracy, Untouchability, Child labour, Prostitution etc.

For many years, Dalits have been treated carelessly not only by the British but also by their fellow Indians who believe that Dalits should not even be treated as human beings. His family rebelled against the caste system because they wanted to free themselves and their children from the life of an untouchable, which is filled with fear, abuse and cruel humiliation. Ancient Hindu law books such as Manu Smruti and Goutama Dharma Shastra didn't allow Shudras and Dalits to possess any wealth other than 'Dogs and Donkeys'. The door for education was shut and they consider that a shudra has no right to get educated. They were forced to be dependent on the higher castes for everything. They were forced to accept their fate and suffer. All these they suffer because they are ignorant. So Dr. B. R. Ambedkar with an emphatic voice argues that the root cause of untouchability lies in prolonged cultural or racial differences, contempt and hatred, coupled with a close economic dependence of weaker society on the stronger one.

To avoid complications in the society and to allow it to develop, it is inevitable to change the social order based on casteism. The three writers stress the lack of planned and united action of the poor artisans who are still in the grip of age old tradition. Throughout their writings they describe the distinctive binary opposition such as the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, simple innocence and wide range of cheating. They thus express their distrust on the privileged upper classes that are directly taking part in the oppressive dynamics of Indian society, or living in ivory towers, preferring to ignore its ugly realities.

Ambedkar's call for equal rights for women on a par with man as given a new dimension to feminism. He stated : "Education is as necessary for females as it is for males." (S.N. Mandal. *Ambedkar's Work and Mission, Ambedkar and Social Justice*, 195) women who belong to the weaker section of society such as Dalits and Adivasis have realized their double exploitation, double inequality and double injustice. There is nexes, though weak, between Dalit problem and women's problem, at least in Indian society. Both problems are products of *Chaturvarna*. *Manusmriti* denied education to women, it did not allow them to even touch Vedas; women were not *Dwijja* like the Shudras.

II. CONCLUSION

In this way the problems taken into account in this paper include untouchability, religious hypocrisy, child-labour, economic exploitation, the plight of workers in a factory, the evil effects of caste system, superstition, belief in fate, class consciousness, partiality of Police, male chauvinism and such other various malpractices practised in Indian society. This paper focuses on these problems and tries to draw our attention with a view to realizing a better, egalitarian society may be formed where man is treated as man, and not on the basis of caste, class or creed. It is possible because the sufferers are not the victims of fate or God only, but of manmade society. It is the social force which is responsible in creating most of these problems due to lack of love, compassion, sympathy, and human consideration among men.

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