Degradation In The Status Of The Scheduled Castes: An Analysis Of Western Uttar Pradesh (India)

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Abstract

This paper is related to theoretical base to understand the way in which the Scheduled Caste people have been degraded to the status of untouchables and also have been considered inferior to all other castes. Untouchability, as a social system, came into existence only around 400 A.D. as a consequence of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism in which the broken men or the Buddhists were exposed to disrespect, ridicule and contempt of the Brahmin population. It is also necessary first to comprehend the nature, function and the ways in which the caste system works in India at present time. Since ages, caste system in India has remained one of the exclusive characteristics of Indian society, particularly of the Hindu social system.

Key Words: Schedule Caste, Indian society, Degradation, Status, Untouchables.

Introduction

Caste system divides people into inferior and superior castes and provides them lower and higher statuses respectively. It divides the Hindu society into five major castes –, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Anti-Shudras or untouchables. These Castes have been arranged in a hierarchical social order with the Brahmins at the top followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Anti-Shudras or untouchables. Within each of these five major caste groups, there are innumerable sub-castes placed one over the other. It is a general notion that nobody can change one’s caste from the one in which he or she is born.

Caste was associated with a particular occupation which determined the social and economic status of its members. While the Brahmins were thought to be the priests, teacher and advisors, the Kshatriyas were regarded as warriors or protectors or rulers. The Vaishyas were considered as traders, and the Shudras as cultivators and manual labourers. The untouchables were given the filthy menial and defiling occupations, such as sweeping, scavenging, removing night soil, etc. It is also believed that changing occupations from the given one was difficult and was often discouraged; besides, the other characteristics of the castes system was endogamy. Purity and pollution were strictly observed then and a few of these are even observed today. All these have cumulatively contributed to the degraded and deprived status of the untouchables.
Analysis of the Scheduled Castes

The logical question is who the untouchables or the Schedules Castes are and how they have been socially degraded? There is more than one view on this issue. For example, the racial theory of Stanley Rice states that the present day Scheduled Castes are actually the descendants of the Indian aboriginals who were conquered and enslaved first by the Dravidians and later by the Aryans and were therefore reduced to assume the menial occupations (Ambedkar, 1990: 289-90).

It is also asserted that they were the early inhabitants of the Gangetic plains of Punjab and were later invaded and enslaved to be the untouchables by the Indo-Aryans who linguistically belong to the large family of the people designated either as Indo-Europeans or Indo-Germans in about 2500 B.C. (Ghurye, 1987: 163-64). Another view is that because of continuous associations of this section of people with the unclean and filthy occupation they were thought to be socially degraded and were reduced to be the untouchables (Ambedkar, 1990: 305). However, these views were rejected by Ambedkar who was of the opinion that there is no racial difference between the untouchables and the Hindus; as both of them belong to the same race. In Ambedkar’s opinion, the caste system is a result of superimposition of endogamy over exogamy and there there is no role of divinity in the creation of it. When one looks at the meaning of some terms such as Antya, Antyaja and Antyavasin which are found in the Hindu Shastras, he states that these terms refer to those people who lived at the Antya, i.e., the ‘end’ or periphery of the village and were very different from those tribes who lived a settled life inside the village. They were known as the ‘broken men’ or the ‘defected people’ who lived outside the village from the beginning. Ambedkar concludes that these broken men were Buddhists and moreover that they did not suffer from untouchability prior to 200 A.D.

Untouchability, as a social system, came into existence only around 400 A.D. as a consequence of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism in which the broken men or the Buddhists were exposed to disrespect, ridicule and contempt of the Brahmin population. Initially beef was eaten by people of all castes, but the Brahmins gave it up later to gain supremacy over the Buddhists. The Brahmins made cow their sacred animal, and from then on beef-eating was considered a sacrilege. However, the broken men, being economically poor, could not afford to give up this practice. They continued to eat beef and were considered guilty of sacrilege; thereby they become beyond the people of the society and were reduced to be the untouchables (Ambedkar, 1990).

Though more than one theory exists on who the untouchables were, yet the theory of Manu seemed to have had a greater impact. In order to understand the degraded social status of the untouchables or Chandalas, it is necessary to figure out and understand the countless number of indignities prescribed in the Hindu Shastas like the Manusmriti against the Shudras, the fore fathers (the Brahmin women being the fore mothers) of the untouchables. There is also a claim made that the chandalas followed for sometimes the customs and occupations of the Shudras, because they were actually considered to be a variety of them (Ghurye, 1987).

The law of Manu, as laid down in Manusmriti, was one sided as it provided undue support of the first three Varnas and opposed any kind of social justice to the people of the fourth Varna, i.e., the Shudras and the Anti-Shudras. Though Manu himself declared that the object of the
sacraments and sanyasees was to sanctify the body and purify it from five in this life and hereafter and to make it fit for union with God; he made these avenues open only to the higher caste people and denied the same to the Shudras. He thought of the Brahmans as God on earth and damned the Shudras to be unworthy of even human beings. Social interaction was denied to them, as well as the religious equality. Manu presents the Shudras from setting within the main village boundary but only at the Kirts (Ibid: 97). It is stated in the Manusmriti that “A person who dies with a Shudra’s food in his stomach will be born again as a pig or Shudra” (Ibid: 78). Also adultery with a woman of higher caste entailed punishment, the severity of which increased with the caste status of the women violated. “But contrarily, the “… illicit intercourse with females of lower caste women by males of higher caste was regarded in the nature of a serious offence” (Ibid: 77). Vasishtha, another Hindu law giver, states that the place of the shudra is a burial ground. It is also mentioned that “the Veda must not be recited in his presence, no advice must be given to him, nor must he be asked to perform a penance. The Shudra has no right to perform any of the important sacraments”. It is also declared that “he shall use the old shoes, discarded garments, etc. of the members of the other varnas, and eat the living of their food” (Ibid: 59-60).

It is easily understandable that education is a prerequisite for the upliftment of any individual and community, but the Shudras were denied access to education in the past. As mentioned earlier, they were not even allowed to hear the Vedas which was supposedly the only Sources of knowledge in the ancient times; an additional advantage to the Brahmans as they alone had the right to teach the Vedas (Ambedkar 1987: 36-43). A Brahmin, whether learned or ignorant, was considered similar to a powerful divinity (Ibid: 344). The shudras who attempted to deal with studies where dealt with severe inhuman indignities. It is stated that a “Shudra trying to hear the Vedic texts shall have his ears filled with molten tin or lac; if he recites the Veda, his tongue shall be cutoff, and if he remembers it he shall be disremembered. If he assumes position of equality with twice-born men either in sitting, conversing, or going along the road, he shall receive corporal punishment (Ghurye, 1987: 61-62). These were some of the numerous inhuman laws which govern the social rank of the four varnas and kept the shudras always below the rank of other caste people.

The law of Manu which governed the social status of the Anti-Shudras or the Panchama (the fifth Varna) or the Chandalas or the untouchables was obviously bound to be severely inhuman. As states earlier, there were many laws which have direct bearing on the social degradation of the Chandalas. For example, the verse No. VII. 281 of the Manusmriti declares that “A man of the lowest class (Chandalas), who shall insolently place himself on the same seat with one of the highest, shall either be banished with a mark on his hidden parts, or the king shall cause a gash to be made on his buttock” (Ambedkar, 1987). It further states that, “One who has touched a Chandala must immediately bathe with his cloths on”. Even people of the other Varnas have been directed to treat a Chandala differently. It is said “A householder is exhorted to though some food for them and the outcastes along with that for crows and dogs. Outside the house, after all the members of the households have taken their meals” (Ghurye, 1987). The untouchables were kept both physically and socially away from the caste Hindus as they had to live at the fringes of the villages, i.e, at the outskirts of the village premises. The houses of the untouchables were usually made up of mud walls and
thatched roof and located away from the main village as hamlets which in course of time grew as independent villages, with only untouchables being the inhabitants. Whatever Manu had states as the Hindu Code of Conducts was usually considered sacred and was generally advocated by the priests and rulers of all times and were strictly followed, and if any of the caste rules are broken then people were severely punished (Hutton, 1946).

In the most recent times, there were many examples in which the Dalits or the Scheduled Caste people were forced to eat human excreta and drink urine for participating in human rights activities. These inhuman treatments are meted out to the Scheduled Caste people not only by the caste-Hindus but also by the Police department which is supposed to protect them from such ill-treatment (Hindustan Times, May 24, 1988).

Fifty one years after Dr. Ambedkar drafted the Constitution of India, the Dalits still continue to be the wretched of the earth, are forcibly compelled to follow the dehumanized code of the Varna vyavastha. In the times of aggressive Hindutva, their fate remains unchanged. In the place called Nathdwara in Rajasthan, there is this unwritten law that no Dalit can enter the upper caste temples. Dalits can very easily remember Swami Agnivesh’s padyatra from Udaipur to the Nathdwara temple in the Eighties, when despite days of tension and a national outcry; he was not allowed to enter the temple with the Dalits. Later Chief Minister Shiv Charan Mathur also led a group of Dalits inside the temple, only to be followed by an elaborate cleansing ritual by its priests. (Hindustan Times, April 14, 2001).

In post-Mandal Bihar, the Dalits of Pani and Sarsemi of Nalanda district could not enter the century old Shiva temple. If they dared to do so, they would have to pay a heavy price such as public thrashing or bagaari (bonded labour,) tonsuring of heads, or a blackened face with a humiliating ride on top of a donkey. On March 11, 2001 a day after Holi, Babulal Ahirwar, the Dalit Sarpanch of Semara in Sagar district of M.P. was beaten ruthlessly by the Thakurs during a Holi Milan festival. His crime was that he had dared to put gulal on the Thakurs. It is ironical that the same Thakurs forced the Dalit women to play Holi with them. In Karnataka, most semi-urbs and villages have at least three temples marked for specific castes. The Brahmin temples have banned Dalits in every social spheres. Hence, the low castes have their own ‘untouchable sacred spaces’ (Hindustan Times, April 14, 2001).

Incidentally, the Infosys CEO Narayana Murthi once visited the Kannadiga Temple ‘Mantralaya’ on the Andhra border where he was asked to reveal his caste and demonstrate his sacred thread. Displeased, he refused to do either of them. Consequently, he was made to sit with a non-Brahmin group for food. In Orissa, the Dalits still remember how the infamous pandas at Jagannath Temple in Puri turned away Indira Gandhi from the temple gates questioning her religious credentials. Even today, in most temples, the gates are still shut for the pariahs. In Tamil Nadu, the Dalits are similarly denied entry into temples. This is also due to the protracted anti-Brahmin movement. But the ‘two-tumbler’ practice is still on in many places. Local tea shops keep two sets of tumblers, outside. The Dalit customer picks up one tumbler and his tea/ coffee is poured in it by another tumbler - making sure the two tumblers do not touch each other. The Dalit then has to wash his tumbler from water kept in a separate drum. But there is rare exception when a 55 years old Vanguri Muttaiah is like any other temple priest. The difference is that this priest who presides over the Ram Temple at Vallabhai village in Khammam district, happens to be a Harijan.
What had been prescribed as the Hindu Code of Conduct by Manu very much became a social reality over a period of time and continued to be so. The worst ever affected people of this Hindu Code of Conduct were the untouchables as in the day today social interaction, even their shadow was considered to be polluting, and moreover it is thought that their plight was god-ordained and thus never to be protested against. The social stigma attached to their untouchables’ identity continued unaltered for ages. They were, thus, reduced to a state of an untouchable and unapproachable entity and remained the most gullible, pilloried and socially degraded section on the India society.

Conclusion

The Scheduled Caste people have been degraded to the status of untouchables and also have been considered inferior to all other castes. It is also necessary first to comprehend the nature, function and the ways in which the caste system works in India at present time. Since ages, caste system in India has remained one of the exclusive characteristics of Indian society, particularly of the Hindu social system.

References