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Dalit Discrimination and Efforts for Change

Perspective for Emancipation

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Perspective for Emancipation

P. Surya Prakash

Indian society is the product of a long and complex historical process and marked by considerable cultural heterogeneity. As one observes the complex structure of Indian Society at the turn of the century, four major trends (T. K. Oommen, "Understanding Indian Society: The Relevance of the Perspective from Below," in *Understanding Indian Society: The Non-Brahmanic Perspective*, ed. S. M. Dahi-wale, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2006, 34) of social transformation are in evidence, they are, transition from *cumulative to dispersed dominance*, a gradual movement from *hierarchy to equality*, resulting in the decline of traditional collectivism and the emergence of individualism, third is the *simultaneous demands for equality and the assertion of collective identity*, and the fourth is the *movement from plural society to pluralism*. The remarkable development in the spheres of technology, communication, education and other possibilities of getting aware of what is happening around, had fostered a growing sense of the identity-consciousness among these indigenous people called 'Dalits'. On the other hand, the country has embarked on a journey to build the nation on secular ideal with an endeavor to provide a just and equitable society for all its citizens, with its Constitutional provisions and other benefits to uplift the oppressed communities. In spite of all these signal changes in various sectors, poverty, discrimination, denial, injustice and misery is the lot of a large number of people.

A majority of them are the poor and the Dalits- generally the victims of Caste System.

An Oppressed people:

Dalits in India are ancient ethnic-social groups, whose lot has been oppression and ignominy for centuries. The etymology of the term can be traced to the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning 'ground down', 'downtrodden', 'crushed', and 'destroyed.' (James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: Wcc Publications, 1997, 11) It refers to physical weakness and to a lowly insignificant position of these particular groups in the society. The Dalits are described as poor, socially placed outside the fourfold caste-system of Hinduism. They are at times referred to as the 'fifth caste' *panchamas*, but usually treated as 'outcastes.' These, outcastes suffer the stigma of un-touchability, even though it has been legally abolished by Indian Constitution and its practice has been declared as an offence. Historically Dalits were called by various names, such as "untouchables", "Har-rijans", "Exterior Castes", "Depressed Classes", "Out Castes", "Mlecha", "Chandala", "Panchama", "Avarna", "Nishada", "Paulkasa", "Antyajaja", and "Atishudra". (M. C. Raj, *Dalitology: The Book of the Dalit People*, Tumkur: Ambedkar Resource Center, 2001, 95) Dalits account for 15.5% of the total population of India. It is a fact that 75% of SCs communities live below poverty line, many continue to be illiterate, and about half are landless agricultural laborers. Only 7% have access to safe drinking water, electricity and toilet facilities. (Jimmy Dabhi, "Dalit Human Rights: Issues and Perspectives," *Social Action* 54, no. 1, 2004, 35) Thus, it is evident that, most of the terms used to denote 'Dalits' are

found with implications of marginalization and oppression. They are clearly demarcated from the caste-groups. 'Dalits' are those communities which have for many centuries occupied a deeply ambiguous place within Indian society.

Out-Castes and Untouchables:

It is important to direct our attention briefly to the inhumanity to which the dalits have been subjected. The worst of all is the ascription of untouchability, on the basis of the principle of purity and pollution. This social marginalization is the root of all kinds of discriminations they suffer in every day life. They are the ones who are outside the pale of the Hindu caste hierarchy. For they have no place in traditional order of society which is constituted of *chaturvarna*- the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaisayas* and the *Sudras*. As they are the communities that fall beyond the four-fold *Varna* system their position is much inferior to the *Sudras*, who are the lowest caste in the four fold *Varna* system. It is to be kept in mind that though the Dalits are accommodated in the local *jati* system in the villages, they are discriminated against both in the *Varna* and *jati* systems. The dalits are thus truly out-castes. This social marginalization is glaringly visible in the very physical set-up of their hamlets at the periphery of the village, referred as *cheri*, or *palem*, and *gudem*. They were forbidden to draw water from the village well, enter temple, wear sandals, use public roads, own land and their presence itself was considered as polluting. Further they were denied of knowledge, and learning, they are deprived of privilege of reading, learning or even listening to the *Sastra* the sacred scriptures of Hinduism.

However, today by rejecting these terms the outcaste Indians have appropriated the terms 'Dalit' as an expression of self-identity. (Samuel Jayakumar in his book, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1999, p. 15. Here the author argues and identifies that this term as another 'imposed identity' from elite intellectuals, and thus rejected by the poor and oppressed in many parts of the country.) They use it in a spirit of pride and militancy, an indication of revolutionary progression made within the Dalit Community. The fact is that the name *Dalit* is not merely a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or untouchability; it reveals a sense of a unified class or a movement toward equality and societal justice. It connotes the consciousness of their existence without freedom and outcaste experience, (Antony Raj, "Dalit Christian Reality in Tamil Nadu", *Jeevandhara*, vol. Xxii, no.128, Mar 1992, 96) and stands for an affirmation and assertion of the fact that 'we are broken people' and 'we are people crushed by oppression and exploitation'. This can be framed as collective monologue of resistance: 'yes, we were 'dalits'; the broken people; we were crushed, but now we will not allow ourselves to be broken or crushed by you, to break us or crush us any more.' (The term "Dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Dal,' which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed. Though the term has ancient roots, its contemporary usage to specify a section of the people of India who have suffered oppression throughout history under the prevailing religious and social norms goes back only a few decades. In this study, the researcher intends to suggest that in my understanding of the term 'Dalit,' means, 'a people with a sense of positiveness striving towards regaining wholeness from a broken human condition as scheduled castes, oppressed by the caste-class nexus. I believe this, because, neither the brokenness nor the caste of people, but people themselves are the subjects of liberation.)

The term ‘*Dalit*’ also implies an inherent denial of ideology of purity and pollution, caste hierarchy justified and legitimized by *karma theory*. (Fernando Franco, (ed), *Pain and Awakening – The Dynamics of Dalit Identity in Bihar, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2002, 8) It was initially coined in the nineteenth century by Marathi social reformer, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, was adopted in the 1970’s by the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra, and is today widely accepted by Dalit Theologians. (James Massey, ed., *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, 6) The Dalit Freedom Network estimates that there are C. 250 million Dalits in India today. (See <http://www.dalitnetwork.org/>) Although there is no clear cut consensus among the Dalit theologians as to who constitutes ‘Dalit’, invariably the term is used in reference to the Scheduled Castes. It is in this connection Samuel Jayakumar says: Though most Dalit liberation theologians restrict their use of the term to Scheduled Castes, a few leaders of the Dalit movement say that the term Dalit is comprehensive and includes all oppressed peoples except the upper-caste Hindus. But the word is not widely used to refer to all the poor and the oppressed. It usually refers to one particular group of castes, the SCs that are those castes admitted to the special schedule by the government of India. (Samuel Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, 12-13)

I. Dalit Discrimination in India:

Understanding Dalits inevitably entails understanding the Indian Caste System. In the Indian context, the word ‘caste’ denotes not only ‘*varna*’ but also another concept called ‘*jati*’. The European term ‘caste’ conflates the indigenous concepts of *varna* and *jati*. (Ursula M. Sharma, *Caste*, Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999, 5-6) The significant feature of the Indian social structure is a deep-rooted caste system based on the *Varna* ideology mediated through its purity and pollution norms.

1. Reasons for Caste Discrimination:

Several theories have been propounded to describe the origins and practice of discrimination against the dalits. However the two prominent theories are: the Aryan theory of caste system and purity and pollution theory. (Ghanshyam Shah and Harsh Mander, *Untouchability in Rural India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006, 23-31)

2. Aryan Theory for the Origins of the Caste:

This theory is popularly known as the Aryan invasion theory, it is a racial theory. According to this theory, the present day dalits were the ‘black race natives’ similar to Dasyus who were conquered and enslaved by the white Sanskrit speaking Aryan invaders around BC 1,500. (Ghanshyam Shah and Harsh Mander, *Untouchability in Rural India*, 23-31) According to this theory, it was the ‘varna or colour’ is an important dividing category; it is supported by the ancient texts like Rig Veda. (Roweena Robinson, *Christians of India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003, 45) According to this theory, the dissenter indigenous people the *dasa*, *dasyus*, *rakshasa*, *asuras* who did not submit themselves to the hegemonic Aryan invaders and they were considered as a threat to the Aryan way of life. Consequent-

ly, they were hated and constantly attacked by the invaders. Their eventual subjugation resulted in the exclusion of the *dasa* from their economic activity of the time and assigned 'unskillful, unproductive, lowly and menial jobs and treated with utmost contempt, segregated as a residual category of people to employed as and when necessary. (Ghanshyam Shah and Harsh Mander, *Untouchability in Rural India*, 23-31)

There is an alternative view, which argues in favor of indigenous Aryan position; claiming that the Aryans were indistinguishable with the people of Indus civilization. In spite of the ambivalence surrounding the debate of Aryan origin, these two theories are used by people according to their interests in developing an argument. The appropriation of these theories by fundamentalist groups implies a careful structuring of the knowledge of the past, and legitimization of the present day conflicts. However, the anti-caste movements such as *Adi-drawida*, *adi-dharam* movements were a check to the Hindu claims. These were the movements through which indigenous people attempted to formulate an autonomous identity as the original inhabitants, sons of the soil. (Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India Local Practices, Global Connections*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, 58) Thus J. H. Hutton, the eminent anthropologist locates the origin of the caste system in the taboos and divisions of labor found among the pre-Aryan tribes of India, and in their efforts for self-preservation at the face of invasion. He asserts that untouchability is the result of ritual impurity. To him, "the origin of the position of the exterior castes is partly racial, partly religious, and partly a matter of social custom." (J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, 207) Von Fuerer Haimendorf, believed that untouchability is an urban development and a resultant of an unclean and ritually impure occupation. (Von Fuerer Haimendorf, "Foreword," in *The Children of Hari: A Study of Nimar Balahis in the Central Provinces of India*, ed. Stephen Fuchs, Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1950, i) In most cases, caste is exhibited only in terms of certain practices like untouchability, although untouchability is not a typical attribute of the Dalits alone. However, the practice of untouchability is an essential condition for the existence of the caste system, without which it is deemed to be difficult to maintain the social order in Hindu society. (Chalam argues that in the Hindu Society, untouchability is practiced at different degree for different castes. It is to be measured from that of the kitchen of a Brahmin. Even Sudras, untouchables and even *dvijas* are allowed to enter Kitchen of a Brahmin from various distances. K. S. Chalam, "Post-Ambedkar Scheduled Castes' Agitations and Social Exclusion in Andhra Pradesh," *Social Action* 57, no. 3, 2007, 294-306)

However, both theories tried to establish their own identity based on their ideology, but the main drawback of this theory of *indigenous people* does not give us the reasons why the Dalits were discriminated and the practice of 'untouchability' and caste-based discrimination of the Dalits.

3. Purity and Pollution Theory:

It was generally believed that it was the notions of purity and pollution are the foundations for caste system in India. It was Louis Dumont who developed the purity and pollution ideology into a systematic theory. According to him Caste is little more than the working out of the complementary opposition between the pure and the impure on a substantial level. Superiority and superior purity are identical; it is in this sense that the ideologically distinction of purity is the foundation of status. (Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, London: Paladdin, 1972, 56) Though

Dumont speaks of purity and pollution in intellectual terms, as does not imply to mean these as the foundations for purity and pollution in the society, his argument seems to be pointing suggestively to the fact that notions of purity and pollution became referential for the behavior and interaction of the caste groups. According to M. N. Srinivas, the ideas of purity and pollution cover a large sector of life. Inter-caste relations are governed at many points by the idea of pollution. (M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay: Asia publishing House, 1962, 151)

G. S. Ghurye attributes the idea of ceremonial purity to an exclusive social stratification. He says, "Caste in India is a Brahminic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganges and the Jamna (the holy river) and from there transferred to other parts of the country." (G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1969, 176) These rules of purity and impurity were not only applied to treat the different social groups hierarchically, but also to put restrictions on marital, social and occupational relations of all castes. Dalit communities are considered capable of polluting everything within the range of 74 feet. Their shadow is believed to pollute well water, they had to cover their mouth while speaking to the high caste people, to avoid physical contagion they usually live in segregated areas outside of the villages, their touch was considered to be polluting. (V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology* ed. A. P. Nirmal, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, 1-22) One should not ignore the most notorious term used to refer Dalits-untouchable; this term very subtle manner condenses the notion of purity and pollution which governed the social interaction and inter-relationships between various caste groupings and Dalits in India.

On the basis of notions of purity and pollution the origins of Dalits are identified being 'debased' and 'disruptive' thus justifying their exclusion from the contours of society. Therefore, 'Dalits' in our country are those who have been marginalized and treated as objects of rather than subjects of the history. Dalits were often underprivileged and deprived of basic human rights, suppressed on the account of their status at birth. They have become the objects of philanthropic and social work. As objects they were pushed around, subjugated and exploited at every point in their life. Thus, the term 'Dalits' refers to caste groups who are constitutionally considered as ex-untouchables and unnaturally exterior or prohibited social communities, the out castes. (Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jai Deva, eds., *Through the Ages*, Encyclopedia of Dalits in India, vol. 1, Delhi: Kalpaz, 2002, 59-94) This name 'Dalit' does not merely gave them another name or identity; it has also turn out to be an expression of hope in recovering their past and re-claiming their self-dignity as full human beings. The 'self assertion' of Dalits not only established their common identity, but also implies their state of being conscious of their imposed identity. The term 'Dalit,' which signifies, ground down, downtrodden, or oppressed, is now being used by the low castes in a spirit of pride and militancy to reveal a sense of unified class or a movement towards equality and liberation for a new society based on egalitarian values, social justice and human dignity. (S. M. Michael, "Introduction," in *Untouchable Dalits in Modern India*, ed. S. M. Michael, London: Lynne Rienner, 1999, 6) Unfortunately, the reaction of the Indian traditional dominant caste people is not favorable and they continue to put a check to any kind of development or awareness among Dalits. As a result, Dalits continue to face violence and these atrocities are increasing day by day. (Joseph Benjamin, "Caste-Class Situation in India and Human Rights," *Social Action* 54, no. 1, 2004, 53)

4. Class – Caste Nexus:

In India, caste and class are inseparably linked together to form the ‘caste-class-and power nexus’ which underguards and permeates all socio-cultural and politico- economical relationships of social institutions and communities. Historically, Dalits were a people without a history of their own. (Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jai Deva, eds., *Through the Ages*, 2002, 59-94) The educational institutions also have peculiar methods of perpetuating casteism and caste discrimination which often gets demonstrated in their continued thinking along caste lines. The upper caste children are advised by their parents to boycott the classes of SC/ST teachers. Children are asked not to eat food served at schools as midday meal program implemented by the Government. As a result the Casteist culture got institutionalized at every sphere of life in the society and led to total destruction of the social fabric.

Caste-based discrimination is also evident even in the labor market where globalization and liberalization of the market economy are at the forefront. The recent book entitled, *Blocked by Castes: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*’ by Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Newmann, describes clearly this nature of caste based discrimination in India. This recent study of the job market clearly indicates the binary comparisons of outcomes for low and high caste candidates and scientifically proved that Dalit and Muslim applicants do face a significant discrimination in the white-collar job market on the basis of their caste identity. (Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Nowmann, eds., *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, 45) Further, it is obvious in every area of human life such as housing, health, school, business and public services. Once they were free natives but were subjected to a process of being de-historized, de-culturised, de-economized, and above all de-humanized. Hence, the lot of the Dalits is deprivation and disfiguration. (M. N. Srinivas, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Delhi: Viking, 1996, 56)

II. Perspectives of Change:

The continuous struggle of Dalits forced others to provide solutions to their question. These solutions can be divided into two segments: one is the non-dalits and the other is the dalits themselves, in the case of the Dalit Christians it was the Church which played a major role in affirmation of identity and change seeking efforts.

1. Non-Dalit Response: Integration in the Fold of a Reformed Hinduism

The traditional Hindu social order relegated the dalits to ignominious existence, where as the reformist efforts tried to integrate them within the Hindu fold by re-interpreting its tenets. Efforts were made especially by Arya Samaj in the 19th century to fight against caste inequality. There came into existence many associations and societies with the idea of promoting welfare of the dalits. (Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity*, Madras: Department of Christian Studies University of Madras, 1995, 109) Most of these efforts sought to accord the untouchables a place within the Hinduism, which was a pragmatic strategy to arrest the conversion of the dalits from Hinduism. One such effort which stand of symbolic event was, Gandhi’s integrative approach, he

gave a new name '*Harijan*' to dalits, which means the 'children of God'. It was intended to elevate their social position and give them a sense of identity. However, this could not challenge the deep-rooted caste-structure, which was accepted as the foundational social-order. This clearly indicates that the social situation of dalits is not just confined to the strong social stratification, but their position in the society is inextricably connected with the religious legitimization of social order given by the upper castes and governed by the laws of Manu.

2. M. K. Gandhi's Efforts: Gandhi called them 'Harijans' meaning children of God – tried his best for temple entry. The term is now disliked.

Sanskritisation:

Sanskritisation is another avenue open for the social change. According to M.N. Srinivas, Sanskritisation is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than the traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. (M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972, 6) We need to note is that Sanskritisation is not a free and spontaneous step on the part of the untouchables or other backward castes, but an induced process. Here the Hindu way of life is believed to be as ideal to be followed and internalized by the lower castes. As a social process Sanskritisation may account for change for some extent, but it is another variation within the walls of caste-prison. It alienates the dalits from their authentic self and leads them to assume a false identity.

3. Constitutional and Legal Support:

The modern Constitutional and Legal provisions are another way or the means opened to remove the stigma of untouchability and eradicate the situation of discrimination and inequality connected with it. According Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the untouchability was abolished and forbidden, there were subsequent legal acts in 1955 and amendment in 1976, which made offences relation to untouchability punishable crime. In the year 1977 the Protection of Civil Rights rules such as Human Rights, Dalit Human Rights (Jimmy Dabhi, "Dalit Human Rights: Issues and Perspectives," 35) and Minority Rights (Abdulrahim P. Vijapur, "Withering Minority Rights in India? Domestic Implementation of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," *Social Action* 53, no. 3, 2003, 45) were passed both by Central and the State governments. The laws of abolishing untouchability remained by and large a revolution on paper. The Government sanctioned several other Constitutional rights (James Massey, *Dalits: Issues and Concerns*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1998, 5-9. In this book the author gives the detailed information regarding the Constitutional rights granted by the Government of India with a view to emancipate the oppressed groups in the society.) to its citizens, recognizing the need of the emancipation of the Dalits, which included the social, economic, educational, political and religious aspects of life in the secular and democratic nation. To mention some Acts are, SCs and STs Act in 1989 to prevent atrocities, the rules for the Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act including schedule of punishment and relief to victims in the year 1995. (K. S. Chalam, D. Francis, and M. R. Mohan Rao, "Offences and Atrocities against Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh: An

Empirical Investigation," *Social Action* 54, no. 1, 2004, 18-32) Affirmative Action Policies (Suresh Babu G. S., "Affirmative Action Beyond the Quest for Merit Verses Quota," *Social Action* 57, no. 2, 2007, 318) was made to increase the access of the erstwhile disadvantaged groups in the high echelons of the state institutions.

Right to development is affirmed in all the above mentioned laws or policies. It lays emphasis on active, free and meaningful participation and fair distribution of benefits resulting from development. The ground reality in India suggests that Dalits are excluded from both. As part of development and empowerment efforts many self help groups (SHGs) DWACRA groups promoted by government in collaboration with NGO's have done a considerable work to meet some needs of the downtrodden including the SCs. Larger financial interactions, organization and administration capabilities are not meant for them. Often right to development of these sections of people is curtailed by the so called well wishers, because these well meaning people often from Government and bilateral agencies, do not have enough faith in the people whose development they are working for. Constitution has to be protected by both the State and the Central Governments, however, cases of human rights violation in India are permanent feature of the system and often the government itself acts as a major culprit. (Aftab Alam, *Human Rights in India: Issues and Challenges*, Delhi: Raj Publication, 2000, 33)

4. *NGO's* are often involved in human rights issues in general, while a few are committed with discriminated communities like that of SCs in particular. Acknowledging the commendable work some of the NGOs have done in human rights in India, there is a lot to be desired. Many of these organizations are known to highlight the issue but then leave at that and do not follow up. In short, the Constitutional rights became source of violence and a reason for committing atrocities against the Dalits in general. Even today many of them continue to live below the poverty line in rural areas and engage in daily wage labour to eke out a meager livelihood. (Jayshree P. Mangubhai, *New Economic Reforms: Hope or Mirage for Dalit Livelihood?*, Hyderabad: Sakshi Human Rights Watch, Andhra Pradesh, 2004, 3)

III. Conclusion:

Response of the State

The Government of India constituted the following commissions for the welfare of the minorities especially Dalits

1990 – National Commission for Schedule Castes And Tribes

1997 – Protection of Civil Rights Act

1989 – Prevention of Atrocities Act

1993 – Protection of Human Rights Act

1993 – Employment of Manual Scavengers Act

1994 – Panchayat Raj Act

Besides these, abolition of Zamindari system, bonded labour and introduction of reservations have been great attempts for liberation. Ambedkar embracing Buddhism, thereby rejecting caste was a tremendous effort that shook the Hindu strong hold.

Role of Globalization and Liberalization of Economic Policies

Emergence of Dalit political party such as Bahujan Samaj in 1984 in Utter Pradesh

Puthiya Tamilagam in Tamilnadu - 1996

Dalit Solidarity People's Movement – 1997

Federation of Dalit Action for Liberation – 1997

National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights – 1998

Dalit Liberation Education Trust – 1985

National Alliance of People's Movements

Dalit Theology and Dalit literature

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