

Outcaste Tribes and Untouchable Castes as Dalit Collective: A Critical Study

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Abstract: The Indian caste system, by and large, has been constructed so as to encompass, under its fold, everyone and everything in the subcontinent. But in reality, in its project of all-inclusiveness, it conveniently forgets or expediently neglects certain sections such as the untouchable castes and outcaste tribes, commonly known as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. They remain outside the Hindu *varna* hierarchy and together constitute the *avarna* category. Though they constitute a sizable segment among the Indian populace, both are, on account of their age-old segregation and oppression, far away and miles behind the mainstream castes in many respects. While many, going back to the times of Aryan invasion, argue that outcastes and tribals have the same lineage, some like B. Goswami argue that they are separate categories as there is nothing common between them (*Constitutional Safeguards* 18) and, therefore, should not be treated as belonging to the same group. However, while casteism and its repressive strategies are considered, outcastes and tribals are invariably treated on similar lines, and are brought under the nomenclature SC/ST. In this paper, there is an attempt, in the light of the findings of some notable historians, sociologists and Dalit leaders, to analyse whether they form a single unit or they are totally different categories altogether.

KeyWords: Dalits, Tribals, Untouchables, Outcastes, Dalitbahujan

INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, the Untouchables and Tribals are believed to share a common history and ancestry and it is proper that they have assumed a collective identity as Dalits. There have been many conscious and concerted attempts by different leaders and movements to bring them together under a common name and identity. It was the Dalit Panthers Movement that widened the definition of the term Dalit whose scope, for them, goes far beyond the confines of a single caste group and strives to articulate the fears, hopes and aspirations of a whole class of exploited segments of the Indian population/society (Gokhale 77). The Manifesto of Dalit Panthers of 1972 declared, "Dalits are all those who are oppressed, hill people, neo-Buddhists, labourers, women, destitute farmers and all those who have been exploited politically, economically or in the name of religion" (Holmstrom xviii-xix). For radical Dalit thinkers like Baburao Bagul, the category is constructed and extended to include the history of the revolutionary struggles of all Dalits and has the "ontological ability to define itself with all the lower castes, tribal people, toiling classes and women" (Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit* 267). John Webster has pointed out that the Dalit Movement has been used to describe many similarly placed primordial Dalit collectivities with similar histories of oppression, simultaneously seeking to overcome similar deprivations within a common social system but with differing visions of their own

and society's future (Pai xiv). In Zelliott's view, Dalit, as a self-chosen identity marker can include all who identify themselves as oppressed by the caste system and its stakeholders (Zelliott, *Growing Up Untouchable* xi).

Chandra Bhan Prasad is of the view that the modern-day Dalits and Tribals share common ancestors (186) and Baidyanath Saraswathi insisted on the cultural oneness of tribe and caste. He wants 'tribe' to be treated as 'caste' and 'caste' to be understood as a cultural unit (115). Prasad says, "In many parts of India, Dalits and tribals, counted together, make nearly similar percentage pointing presumably to a common ancestry" (50). He observes:

Dalits and tribals, put together, look similar in terms of their population in Tamil Nadu (20.0%), Karnataka (22.8%) and Andhra Pradesh (22.8%). Is it a mere coincidence that Dalits and tribals put together in the states of Maharashtra (19.1%) and Gujarat (21.9%) constitute almost the same proportion of the total population of these states? It is also a coincidence that in the north-west states like Himachal Pradesh (28.7%), Dalits and tribals put together are the same as in West Bengal (28.9%). (50)

There is scriptural evidence to corroborate that tribals had been counted as belonging to the same section as outcastes. Vivekanand Jha points, "The aboriginal groups of the Bhilla, the Kaivarta, the Dasa, the Meda and the Kolika are listed, in *Atrisamhitā* (v. 199), *Yamasmṛti* (v. 33), *Vedavyāsamṛti* (1.12), among the *antyajas* and Untouchables" (112).

Ambedkar attempted to trace the common history of the Indian aboriginals, whom he calls as settled tribes or Dalits. For him, Aryans were originally nomadic tribes who arrived in the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia and fought with the settled tribes (Muthaiah, "Politics of Dalit Identity" 386). Robert Ernest Hume observes, "The settled Aryans succeeded in pushing the Dalits to the peripheries, using their religious texts. Rigveda, Upanishads, Manusmṛithi and Mahabharatha gave a degraded picture of Dalits. Rigvedic narration of Tribal wars between Dalits and Aryans portrays that Dalits were subjugated by Aryans when the former were at primitive stage of society" (qtd. in Muthaiah 387). The war between the settled Tribes (Dalits) and the Nomadic Tribes (Aryans) in the primitive stage was nothing but a war for economic benefits and existence. The reasons for the Aryan war against the Dalits, according to Ambedkar, were for stealing their cattle and women and grazing their cattle in the pastures owned by the native tribes (Moon 275).

Thus, the nomadic Aryans settled in the *newfoundland* turning the settled tribes (Dalits) landless who thereafter had to rely on the alien Aryans for their sustenance. Being already organised into the four-fold varna system and strongly conscious of their racial, military and cultural superiority, they proceeded to amalgamate the native populations into their economic, social and political structure. The Tribal communities were confronted with the choice of either retreating into the agriculturally unattractive hills and forests or getting assimilated into the expanding agricultural society (*Tribe to Caste* 147-148). Thus, the aboriginal tribes were left in dilemma—either to submit themselves to Aryans as serfs or leave the place and go elsewhere (Vijendra Kumar 36).

Misra and Nagar observe:

Different tribal groups would appear to have adopted different choices. The most enterprising among them took to agriculture as a full-time occupation. Some groups, especially those in the semi-arid region of the western part of India, took to animal husbandry. Certain tribals who had craft skills of working in wood, bamboo, reeds, fibres and other plant materials etc. became carpenters, potters, metal smiths, weavers, oil pressers etc. Others took to providing entertainment through dance, music, animal pets like snake, monkey and bear, acrobatics etc. Yet others, who were too unskilled, lazy or unenterprising to adopt agriculture, manufacturing occupations or entertaining activities, became labourers and menials, working in the fields and homes of farmers and as village watchmen, washer men, scavengers etc. Lastly, some hunter-gatherers, deprived of their habitat and scope to continue their traditional way of life, took to crime as a means of survival, much like the big cats which become man-eaters when deprived of their natural prey due to indiscriminate deforestation. (148-49)

In the 1860s, the British, armed with the Indian Forest Act of 1865, started taking control of forests and common pastures. However, it should be viewed as a combined project of the colonial rulers and their indigenous allies to control the dangerous and volatile nomadic and pastoral tribal communities (Krishnan 81). With this, nomadic tribes lost access to grazing lands as well as forest products needed for their sustenance and craft. They were used to taking whatever they wanted from the forest just as the fisher folk did with respect to the sea. Evacuated from forests, they carried on with the same mode of living which was called 'stealing' in the outside-forest parlance. Some among them gradually learned to make and sell useful articles like baskets, brooms and mats. But those who followed their earlier habits were labelled criminals while those who became artisans were considered nomadic itinerant tribes. Thus, due to deforestation and evacuation during the colonial period through the combined efforts of the colonial masters and their indigenous high caste allies, some tribes became nomadic and some criminals.

Which tribes became agriculturalists and which tribes turned into agricultural labourers and watchmen? In his Kosambi Memorial Lecture at Bombay University, Irfan Habib put forward the hypothesis that the caste into which tribes were assimilated depended upon their prior status as agriculturalists or gatherers. The agriculturalist-tribes became middle, peasant castes. The hunter-gatherers—who were not successful in agriculture—became the menial castes and agricultural labourers, Untouchable Dalits. The above hypothesis is supported by the correspondence in gender relations between the hunter-gatherer tribes and the Dalit Untouchable castes. (Nathan 14). At the lower end of the caste spectrum, there is hardly any difference between the social customs and religious beliefs and rituals of the Dalits and the tribals (Misra and Nagar 152) which points to a common tradition they shared early.

Misra and Nagar write:

There are tribes which are even today tenaciously holding on to the prehistoric hunting-gathering way of life like Birhors of Chota Nagpur, Chenchus of the Eastern Ghats, Kadars of Kerala . . . To be able to survive in their impoverished environment a number of them have

taken to one or more subsidiary occupations. They make and supply rope articles to peasants, sharpen grinding mills, grinding stones, trap and sell birds, collect honey, entertain other communities by dance, music and acrobatics etc. Some of these communities have taken to crimes as an important means of survival. The Bawariyas, Aheriyas, Shansis, Kanjars, Haburas, Berias and several other groups in north India, the Kuchbandhias and Pardhis in central India and the Pardhis in western India had acquired considerable notoriety as thieves, dacoits and highway robbers and were officially declared as criminal tribes. (115-44)

According to V. N. Misra and Malti Nagar, castes came out of tribes. They note that the tribes (or aboriginal communities), officially designated, after Independence, as Schedules Tribes (STs), which constitute about eight per cent of the country's population, antedate the castes by many millennia, and have been the primary source for the formation of castes and recruitment of members to different castes, particularly those within the middle and lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. (136)

The tribe-caste continuum is not just an ancient phenomenon. During different periods, many tribes assumed the status of a caste while some kept their tribe status intact. Many tribes that retained their distinct tribal social structure and identity had not transformed themselves into castes. But in certain cases, some tribal groups transformed themselves into castes adopting Brahmanical culture and ideology (Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function* 5-6). The tribals of the Royalseema of South gained tribal chieftaincies through their role in the wars between the Chalukyas and Pallavas in the eighth-ninth century AD. Later, they followed the *varna/jati* (caste) model and were placed either at the middle or mostly at the lower level in the local caste-hierarchy (Ram 22-23). Vijendra Kumar observes, "The present trend of Tribes is to move to caste hierarchy under many direct and indirect pressures. The Banjaras are both tribes and backward caste. The Kuruvis of Jharkhand, a group with tribal identity, have become backward caste" (31).

Today, both tribals and low castes are generally considered as belonging to the lowest stratum in the caste system. Kumar writes, "There is no need of going to Marx or anyone else, for low castes and tribals have the socio-cultural resources for a common ideology in their struggle for liberation" (33). Many tribes have recognised and accepted their Dalit identity as they have become aware of the Untouchable status that they share with other low castes in the Hindu caste system. Laxman Mane, a tribal author, notes in *Upara*, ". . . my caste was included in the list of backward Classes. So, I started getting a scholarship reserved for B.C. students" (159).

Dalits, by and large, have declared solidarity among themselves and fight for their fundamental rights. They have launched many social, cultural and political movements to gain their rightful place in the public domain. On account of these diverse and united efforts, some marginalised groups among the Dalits have emerged successful in terms of education, jobs and politics. Further, there have been successful attempts to enlarge the scope of the group by including them under the common label *Dalitbahujan*, thanks to the efforts of Kanshiram, an eminent Dalit leader who tried to line up the marginalised behind the banner of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). These consolidated efforts to bring together the marginalised sections, especially the SCs and STs, under a common canopy have largely been successful.

In spite of *Dalitism*, many nomadic and criminal tribes are still impoverished and remain *Dalits* among the *Dalits* and *marginals* among the *marginals*. They are invisible because of their lack of education and absence of any effective leadership. These tribes are varied and scattered all over and, when taken together, constitute a sizable number in population. But they do not get their due share in the resources of the nation as their bargaining power is minimal and do not pose any challenge or threat to any. The criminal and nomadic tribes figure among the invisible sections that are still on the fringes of the society.

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