



FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES

COURSE: BALLB

Semester –IV

SUBJECT: SOCIOLOGY-III

SUBJECT CODE: BAL-401

NAME OF FACULTY: DR. SHIV

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Lecture-15



Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Dalit, meaning "broken/scattered" in Sanskrit and Hindi, is a term mostly used for the ethnic groups in India that have been kept depressed by subjecting them to untouchability (often termed backward castes).^[1] Dalits were excluded from the four-fold varna system of Hinduism and were seen as forming a fifth varna, also known by the name of *Panchama*. Dalits now profess various religious beliefs, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and various folk religions.

The term *dalits* was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of *Depressed Classes* prior to 1935. It was popularised by the economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who included all depressed people irrespective of their caste into the definition of Dalits.^[2] Hence the first group he made was called the "Labour Party" and included as its members all people of the society who were kept depressed, including women, small scale farmers and people from backward castes. Leftists like Kanhaiya Kumar subscribe to this definition of "dalits"; thus a Brahmin marginal farmer trying to eke out a living, but unable to do so also falls in the "dalit" category.^{[3][4]} Ambedkar himself was a Mahar, and in the 1970s the use of the word "dalit" was invigorated when it was adopted by the Dalit Panthers activist group. Gradually, political parties used it to gain mileage.

India's National Commission for Scheduled Castes considers official use of *dalit* as a label to be "unconstitutional" because modern legislation prefers Scheduled Castes; however, some sources say that *Dalit* has encompassed more communities than the official term of Scheduled Castes and is sometimes used to refer to all of India's oppressed peoples. A similar all-encompassing situation prevails in Nepal.

Scheduled Caste communities exist across India, although they are mostly concentrated in four states; they do not share a single language or religion. They comprise 16.6 per cent of India's population, according to the 2011 Census of India. Similar communities are found throughout the rest of South Asia, in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and are part of the global Indian diaspora.

In 1932, the British Raj recommended separate electorates to select leaders for Dalits in the Communal Award. This was favoured by Ambedkar but when Mahatma Gandhi opposed the proposal it resulted in the Poona Pact. That in turn influenced the Government of India Act, 1935, which introduced the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes, now renamed as Scheduled Castes.

From soon after its independence in 1947, India introduced a reservation system to enhance the ability of Dalits to have political representation and to obtain government jobs and education.^[clarification needed] In 1997, India elected its first Dalit President, K. R. Narayanan. Many social organisations have promoted better conditions for Dalits through education, healthcare and employment. Nonetheless, while caste-based discrimination was prohibited and untouchability abolished by the Constitution of India, such practices are still widespread. To prevent harassment, assault, discrimination and similar acts against these groups, the Government of India enacted the Prevention of Atrocities Act, also called the SC/ST Act, on 31 March 1995.

In accordance with the order of the Bombay High Court, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry (I&B Ministry) of the Government of India issued an advisory to all media channels in September 2018, asking them to use "Scheduled Castes" instead of the word "Dalit".^[5]



The word *dalit* is a vernacular form of the Sanskrit दलित (*dalita*). In Classical Sanskrit, this means "divided, split, broken, scattered". This word was repurposed in 19th-century Sanskrit to mean "(a person) not belonging to one of the four Brahminic castes".^[6] It was perhaps first used in this sense by Pune-based social reformer Jyotirao Phule, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile "untouchable" castes from other Hindus.^[7]

Dalit is mostly used to describe communities that have been subjected to untouchability.^{[8][9]} Such people were excluded from the four-fold varna system of Hinduism and thought of themselves as forming a fifth varna, describing themselves as *Panchama*.^[10]

The term was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of *Depressed Classes* prior to 1935.^[8] It was popularised by the economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), himself a Dalit,^[11] and in the 1970s its use was invigorated when it was adopted by the Dalit Panthers activist group.^[8]

Dalit has become a political identity, similar to how the LGBTQ community reclaimed *queer* from its pejorative use as a neutral or positive self-identifier and as a political identity.^[12] Socio-legal scholar Oliver Mendelsohn and political economist Marika Vicziany wrote in 1998 that the term had become "intensely political ... While use of the term might seem to express an appropriate solidarity with the contemporary face of Untouchable politics, there remain major problems in adopting it as a generic term. Although the word is now quite widespread, it still has deep roots in a tradition of political radicalism inspired by the figure of B. R. Ambedkar." They suggested its use risked erroneously labelling the entire population of untouchables in India as being united by a radical politics.^[7] Anand Teltumbde also detects a trend towards denial of the politicised identity, for example among educated middle-class people who have converted to Buddhism and argue that, as Buddhists, they cannot be Dalits. This may be due to their improved circumstances giving rise to a desire not to be associated with the what they perceive to be the demeaning Dalit masses.^[13]

Other terms

Official term

Scheduled Castes is the official term for Dalits in the opinion of India's National Commissions for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), who took legal advice that indicated modern legislation does not refer to Dalit and that therefore, it says, it is "unconstitutional" for official documents to do so. In 2004, the NCSC noted that some state governments used *Dalits* rather than *Scheduled Castes* in documentation and asked them to desist.^[14]

Some sources say that *Dalit* encompasses a broader range of communities than the official *Scheduled Caste* definition. It can include nomadic tribes and another official classification that also originated with the British Raj positive discrimination efforts in 1935, being the *Scheduled Tribes*.^[15] It is also sometimes used to refer to the entirety of India's oppressed peoples,^[8] which is the context that applies to its use in Nepalese society.^[9] An example of the limitations of the *Scheduled Caste* category is that, under Indian law, such people can only be followers of Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism,^[16] yet there are communities who claim to be Dalit Christians and Muslims,^[17] and the tribal communities often practise folk religions.^[18]

Harijan

Mahatma Gandhi coined the word *Harijan*, translated roughly as *people of God*, to identify untouchables in 1933. The name was disliked by Ambedkar as it emphasised the Dalits as

belonging to the Greater Hindu Nation rather than being an independent community like Muslims. In addition, many Dalits saw the term to be patronizing and derogatory. Some have even claimed that the term really refers to children of devadasis, South Indian girls who were married to a temple and served as concubines and prostitutes for upper-caste Hindus, but this claim cannot be verified.^{[19][20][page needed]} When untouchability was outlawed after Indian independence, the use of the word *Harijan* to describe the ex-untouchables was more common among other castes than the Dalits themselves.^[21]

Regional terms[

In Southern India, Dalits are sometimes known as *Adi Dravida*, *Adi Karnataka*, and *Adi Andhra*, which literally mean First Dravidians, Kannadigas, and Andhras respectively. These terms were first used in 1917 by Southern Dalit leaders, who believed that they were the indigenous inhabitants of India.^[22] The terms are used in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana respectively as a generic term for anyone from a Dalit caste.^{[citation needed][clarification needed]}

In Maharashtra, according to historian and women's studies academic Shailaja Paik, *Dalit* is a term mostly used by members of the Mahar caste, into which Ambedkar was born. Most other communities prefer to use their own caste name.^[23]

In Nepal, aside from *Harijan* and, most commonly, *Dalit*, terms such as *Haris* (among Muslims), *Achhoot*, *outcastes* and *neech jati* are used.^[11]

Demographics

Scheduled Castes distribution map in India by state and union territory according to the 2011 Census of India.^[16] Punjab had the highest proportion of its population as SC (around 32 per cent), while India's island territories and two northeastern states had approximately zero.^[16]

Scheduled Caste communities exist across India and comprised 16.6% of the country's population, according to the 2011 Census of India.^[24] Uttar Pradesh (21 per cent), West Bengal (11%), Bihar (8%) and Tamil Nadu (7%) between them accounted for almost half the country's total Scheduled Caste population.^[25] They were most prevalent as a proportion of the states' population in Punjab, at about 32 per cent,^[26] while Mizoram had the lowest at approximately zero.^[16]

Similar groups are found throughout the rest of the Indian subcontinent, in Nepal,^[9] Pakistan,^[citation needed] Bangladesh^[citation needed] and Sri Lanka.^[27] They are also found as part of the Indian diaspora in many countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore, and the Caribbean.^{[28][29][30][31]}

Social status

Dalits have had lowest social status in the traditional Hindu social structure but James Lochtefeld, a professor of religion and Asian studies, said in 2002 that the "adoption and popularization of [the term *Dalit*] reflects their growing awareness of the situation, and their greater assertiveness in demanding their legal and constitutional rights".^[32]

In the past, they were believed to be so impure that caste Hindus considered their presence to be polluting. The impure status was related to their historic hereditary occupations that caste Hindus considered to be "polluting" or debased, such as working with leather, working with feces and other dirty work.^[33]

History[

Dharavi is a slum in Mumbai, founded in the 1880s during the British colonial era. The colonial government expelled Dalits, along with their traditional profession of leather and tannery work, from Mumbai (Bombay) peninsula to create Dharavi.^[34] Currently, about 20 per cent of the Dharavi population are Dalits, compared to 16 per cent nationwide. Dalits live together with Muslims (who constitute about a third of Dharavi's population) and other castes and tribes.^{[35][36]}

Gopal Baba Walangkar (ca. 1840–1900) is generally considered to be the pioneer of the Dalit movement, seeking a society in which they were not discriminated against. Another pioneer was Harichand Thakur (ca. 1812–1878) with his Matua organisation that involved the Namasudra (Chandala) community in the Bengal Presidency. Ambedkar himself believed Walangkar to be the progenitor.^[37] Another early social reformer who worked to improve conditions for Dalits was Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890).

The 1950 Constitution of India, introduced after the country gained independence, included measures to improve the socioeconomic conditions of Dalits. Aside from banning untouchability, these included the reservation system, a means of positive discrimination that created the classifications of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Communities that were categorised as being one of those groups were guaranteed a percentage of the seats in the national and state legislatures, as well as in government jobs and places of education. The system has its origins in the 1932 Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Gandhi, when Ambedkar conceded his demand that the Dalits should have an electorate separate from the caste Hindus in return for Gandhi accepting measures along these lines.^[38] The notion of a separate electorate had been proposed in the Communal Award made by the British Raj authorities,^[39] and the outcome of the Pact - the Government of India Act of 1935 - both introduced the new term of *Scheduled Castes* in replacement for *Depressed Classes* and reserved seats for them in the legislatures.^[40]

By 1995, of all federal government jobs in India - 10.1 per cent of Class I, 12.7 per cent of Class II, 16.2 per cent of Class III, and 27.2 per cent of Class IV jobs were held by Dalits.^[41] Of the most senior jobs in government agencies and government-controlled enterprises, only 1 per cent were held by Dalits, not much change in 40 years.^[citation needed] In the 21st century, Dalits have been elected to India's highest judicial and political offices.^{[42][43]}

In 2001, the quality of life of the Dalit population in India was worse than that of the overall Indian population on metrics such as access to health care, life expectancy, education attainability, access to drinking water and housing.^{[44][45][46]} In 2010, Dalits received international attention due to a portrait exhibition by Marcus Perkins that depicted Dalits.

According to a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the treatment of Dalits has been like a "hidden apartheid" and that they "endure segregation in housing, schools, and access to public services". HRW noted that Manmohan Singh, then Prime Minister of India, saw a parallel between the apartheid system and untouchability.^[47] Eleanor Zelliott also notes Singh's 2006 comment but says that, despite the obvious similarities, race prejudice and the situation of Dalits "have a different basis and perhaps a different solution."^[15] Though the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability, the oppressed status of Dalits remains a reality. In rural India, stated Klaus Klostermaier in 2010, "they still live in

secluded quarters, do the dirtiest work, and are not allowed to use the village well and other common facilities".^[48] In the same year, Zelliott noted that "In spite of much progress over the last sixty years, Dalits are still at the social and economic bottom of society."^[15]

Economic status

According to a 2014 report to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, over 44.8 per cent of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and 33.8 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) populations in rural India were living below the poverty line in 2011–12. In urban areas, 27.3 per cent of ST and 21.8 per cent of SC populations were below the poverty line.^{[49][50]}

Some Dalits have achieved affluence, although most remain poor. Some Dalit intellectuals, such as Chandra Bhan Prasad, have argued that the living standards of many Dalits have improved since the economic system became more liberalized starting in 1991 and have supported their claims through large surveys.^{[51][52]} According to the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011, nearly 79 per cent of Adivasi households and 73 per cent of Dalit households were the most deprived among rural households in India. While 45 per cent of SC households are landless and earn a living by manual casual labour, the figure is 30 per cent for Adivasis.^[53]

A 2012 survey by Mangalore University in Karnataka found that 93 per cent of Dalit families in the state of Karnataka live below the poverty line.^[54]

Discrimination

Education

According to an analysis by The IndiaGoverns Research Institute, Dalits constituted nearly half of primary school dropouts in Karnataka during the period 2012–14.^{[55][clarification needed]}

A sample survey in 2014, conducted by Dalit Adhikar Abhiyan and funded by ActionAid, found that among state schools in Madhya Pradesh, 88 percent discriminated against Dalit children. In 79 percent of the schools studied, Dalit children are forbidden from touching mid-day meals. They are required to sit separately at lunch in 35 percent of schools, and are required to eat with specially marked plates in 28 percent.^[56]

There have been incidents and allegations of SC and ST teachers and professors being discriminated against and harassed by authorities, upper castes colleagues and upper caste students in different education institutes of India.^{[57][58][59][60][61][62]} In some cases, such as in Gujarat, state governments have argued that, far from being discriminatory, their rejection when applying for jobs in education has been because there are no suitably qualified candidates from those classifications.^[63]

Healthcare and nutrition

Discrimination can also exist in access to healthcare and nutrition. A sample survey of Dalits, conducted over several months in Madhya Pradesh and funded by ActionAid in 2014, found that health field workers did not visit 65 per cent of Dalit settlements. 47 per cent of Dalits were not allowed entry into ration shops; and 64 per cent were given less grains than non-Dalits.^[56] In Haryana state, 49 per cent of Dalit children under five years were underweight and malnourished while 80 per cent of those in the 6–59 months age group were anaemic in 2015.^[64]

Crime

Dalits comprise a slightly disproportionate number of India's prison inmates.^[65] While Dalits (including both SCs and STs) constitute 25 per cent of the Indian population, they account for 33.2 per cent of prisoners.^[66] About 24.5 per cent of death row inmates in India are from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which is proportionate to their population. The

percentage is highest in Maharashtra (50 per cent), Karnataka (36.4 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (36 per cent).^[67]

Caste-related violence between Dalit and non-Dalits allegedly stems from Dalit's economic success amidst ongoing prejudice.^{[68][69]} The Bhagana rape case, which arose out of a dispute of allocation of land, is an example of atrocities against Dalit girls and women.^[70] In August 2015, due to continued alleged discrimination from upper castes of the village, about 100 Dalit inhabitants converted to Islam in a ceremony at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi.^[71] Inter-caste marriage has been proposed as a remedy,^[72] but according to a 2014 survey of 42,000 households by the New Delhi-based National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, it was estimated that only 5 per cent of Indian marriages cross caste boundaries.^[73]

A 2006 article reported incidents of violence, disputes and discrimination against Dalits in Maharashtra. The article noted that non-Dalit families claimed they do not treat Dalits differently. A carpenter caste person said, "We tell them anything and they tell us you are pointing fingers at us because of our caste; we all live together, and there are bound to be fights, but they think we target them."^[74]

There have been reports of Dalits being forced to eat human faeces and drink urine by Christian Thevars, an OBC.^{[75][76][77][78]} In one such instance, a 17-year-old girl was set on fire by Yadav (an OBC) youth, allegedly because she was allowed school-education.^[79] In September 2015, a 45-year-old dalit woman was allegedly stripped naked and was forced to drink urine by perpetrators from the Yadav community in Madhya Pradesh.^[80]