

**A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE CASTE STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL  
MARGINALIZATION IN THE INDIAN SCENARIO**

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**Abstract:**

Investigating marginalized communities and their experiences of social marginalization is a pivotal area of research within the social sciences. In the Indian context, caste studies represent a complex and highly contested field of inquiry, necessitating nuanced and contextualized examination. Sociologists and other social scientists have examined diverse interpretations of caste and class structure through varied lenses, employing a range of historical perspectives to illuminate their complexities. Anthropologists and sociologists introduced themes like subaltern identity in practice, social problems of marginalized people, Indian social structure, economic system, socio-economic status of suppressed castes and social education system, and their conflict with upper castes, etc., giving priority to the issues. In general, the 'marginalized caste' refers to those who are socially and economically backward and are denied full access to different rights, opportunities, and resources commonly enjoyed by the members of the higher social orders. They were the 'broken men' or frustrated people, who had been isolated from the community, or in other ways, these 'broken men' were then allowed to live along with other communities but outside of the main village. The marginalized sections of society were denied political rights and participation in the democratic administrative bodies. This research paper attempts to study the Indian scenario of the social system and its role in the marginalization of subaltern groups and the denial of their fundamental human rights and practices.

**Keywords:** Caste, marginalized community, untouchability, Dr.Ambedkar. Gandhiji

The caste structure plays a prominent role in marginalizing a particular community group. The caste-based Indian society was a peculiar system deeply rooted in the Indian soil since the ancient past. There are perhaps more than three thousand castes and sub-castes in India, and there is no one all-Indian system ranking them in order of status. Each caste has some unique occupation and encompasses a complex ordering of social groups based on ritual purity and pollution. An individual is considered a member of the particular caste into which he or she is born and remains within that caste until death. However, the ranking of the particular caste may vary according to the region and its institutional relationship with the other social group. The traditional Indian society was based on the *chaturvarna* system, which maintains the hierarchical order within the *Varna* framework. A fifth category, called *panjamas*, falls outside the *Varna* system and consists of those known as outcastes or untouchables; they are often assigned tasks too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional *Varna* structure.<sup>1</sup> Sukomal Sen has commented on modern India's caste and bigotry, hatred, and untouchability in his book '*Bharoter Sobhotya o samaj bikashe dhormosreni o jatibhed*' (Bengali) that India's bigotry, mutual animosity, and conflict between followers of different religions and the division between caste and untouchability is aimed at stabilizing this desired intensity of the class struggle. As a result, the beneficiaries and the exploiters will benefit while; the exploited class will suffer. Financially this is why in the heart of this bigotry or caste lies the vested interest of the privileged class of India.<sup>2</sup>

In the history of India, most of the marginalized communities are depressed castes, which include people from all Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other depressed communities. The upper castes treated mostly the unprivileged section of society as untouchables and unapproachable communities. Social reformers have taken many steps to eliminate the cruel practice from society. The elimination of untouchability has been identified as an important issue in the history of India. Although untouchability is prohibited in the constitution of independent India, attempts have been made to diagnose this social disorder in the post-independence period. However, to date, this

problem has not been resolved, and still, the practice is prevalent in some regions and some societies. When Mahatma Gandhi was at the forefront of his political life or movement, he tried to remove the untouchability from the nation, especially the status. Historians observe that Gandhi was also critical of and rejected the institution of casteism prevalent in traditional Hinduism.

Further, though Gandhi distinguished the caste system from the four *Varna*, it is necessary to mention that though he initially defended the *Varna* order, he later acknowledged the need to do away with the *Varna* system. In 1932, Gandhi thought of untouchability as an immense evil and felt it necessary to abolish the caste system first. His fight was restricted to the caste system for a long time, though he did not rule out a later time to struggle against the *Varna* order. Gandhiji strongly opposed the practice of untouchability and wanted to eradicate the practice from society. According to Gandhiji, “the main function of the Sudras is to engage in manual labour or continuous work, and it will be hereditary. Gandhiji later tried to differentiate between religion and caste in Indian politics. Although he never acknowledged the Hindu system, even in two Gandhiji-run magazines, ‘*Young India*’ and ‘*Harijan*’, he often said that caste does not mean high and low. By this, we mean only a variety of perspectives and a way of life that is consistent with it and indicating the different methods of self-culture is called casteism”.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, Rabindranath Tagore also did not accept the caste system and its hereditary hierarchical order in Indian society. In the language of Rabindranath, those who are known by the small names of the society have considered themselves successful by defending the Sudra Dharma very purely. It is also a question of how long the marginalized caste people will accept the dominance of the Brahmins. If they are self-absorbed in foreign education, the ‘samaj patis’ or leaders of the upper caste society will present their competition. Many believe that the white skin and dark skin issue has created the problem of untouchability in India. Not only that, but India is also the country of Sudras. In this case, Rabindranath Tagore has clearly stated in his book ‘*Sudra*’ that India has the most significant number of ‘Swadharma Sudras’(own caste or religion), so from one point of view, Tagore considered the Indian subcontinent as the country of the Sudras.<sup>4</sup>

Jotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar pioneered the Dalit movements in India. They were born in a Sudra family in Hindu society. The conservatism of contemporary Hindu society, the caste system, and hierarchical discrimination was addressed by various Indian scholars, for which Ambedkar felt despondent. Not only that, he opposed Gandhiji’s view on the Harijan. He strongly opposed in the Bombay Legislative Assembly when the term Harijan was sought for legal recognition. According to him, Gandhiji used the word ‘Harijan’ to give a specific name to the untouchables. Mahatma Gandhi established an association called the ‘All India Anti-Untouchability League’ in 1932. It is worth mentioning that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a member of this organization.

However, Ambedkar later withdrew his membership from the institution. The main reason for his withdrawal was that it was decided at the institutional session that untouchability should enter the temple through their education, economic-political development, civil rights, etc.<sup>5</sup> As a result of Ambedkar’s resignation, Gandhiji changed the association's name from ‘All India Anti-Untouchable League’ to ‘*Harijan Sevak Sangh*’. Gandhiji thought that untouchables should be given a social status equal to the other social group. However, for political reasons, Gandhiji did not oppose the *Varna* system of Hindu society, but he was totally against the practice of untouchability. In social and philosophical ideas and political treaties, Ambedkar's viewpoint differed from Gandhiji's. In the meantime, in 1936, Ambedkar was made the President of the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress. Ambedkar's written speech was suspended from being read by the Lahore Congress. However, this address of the Lahore Congress was later published by Ambedkar. It is worth mentioning that in his address to the session, Ambedkar discussed in depth the problem of untouchability in Hinduism. This was Ambedkar’s keynote address, “what we call Hindu society is a fictional name. Hindu society is made up of many castes. Every nation or *Jati* knows its existence, and its sole purpose is maintaining it. Again, there is no combination of these species or relationship between one *Jatis* and another. The different castes of Hinduism come together only when Hindu-Muslim riots take place. At other times these nations are different from each other”.<sup>6</sup>

In the Indian social system, Ambedkar disagrees with Gandhiji over-interpreting the four *Varna* systems. In his book '*Annihilation of Caste*' Ambedkar made it clear that the orthodox copied the four *Varna* systems that aroused disgust towards me, and my mind rebels against conscience and existence.<sup>7</sup> Gandhiji tried to refuse the views expressed by Ambedkar in his newspaper 'Harijan'. Later, Gandhiji and Ambedkar's notion of untouchability became clear. Gandhiji's movement was only against untouchability; on the other hand, Ambedkar's movement aimed to eradicate Hindu society's caste system, which Ambedkar considered as the source of untouchability. However, afterward, they did not participate in any national movement. Ambedkar emphasized the issues such as social inequality in Indian society, which were inextricably linked with political power. In his eyes, the Jati system means "militate against the fraternity, *Sangathan* (organization) and cooperation for a good cause, public charity, and broad-based virtue and morality." Not only that, he meant an ideal society, "my ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity, his ideal society would be mobile, there would be 'social endosmosis,' there would be fraternity, which was only another name for democracy and democracy was primarily a mood of associated living, of conjoining communicated experience and breeding and attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow human beings".<sup>8</sup>

Ambedkar realized that the backward class could solve the problem if political power were in their hand. Meanwhile, when the British colonial government declared (the mass depressed classes of electors) in 1932, a re-agreement called the Puna Pact was signed between Ambedkar and Madan Mohan Malviya on 25 September 1932. Under the terms of the agreement, Dalits won 148 seats in the Legislative Assembly. This was one of Ambedkar's far-sighted political achievements. As the Government of India passed a bill in 1935, in the British colonial government, the Dalits in Indian society came to be known as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. After the discussion on what will be the protection of SC, ST, and OBC after independence, the policy of protection of SC, ST, and OBC was given recognition. He also introduced several settings in the reservation system, including the provision of reservation in civil service education, especially in the state Assembly and Lok Sabha seats. He believed that the reservation system would solve many problems, especially socio-economic inequality in Indian society. Depressed classes would be able to present themselves through socio-economic development.

Maharashtra was the land of the anti-Brahmin movement. One notable anti-Brahmin movement that took place here was the Satyasadhok movement. On the other hand, Ambedkar, as the spokesperson of the lower class and Harijan society, demanded that the legislature reserve separate seats for Harijans and hold separate elections. The main reason for this was that the Harijans of contemporary society were humiliated in various ways. Especially since the Harijans were not allowed to enter the temple, use public ponds, drink water from the common well, etc. They started protesting against it. As a result of the Dalit movement, '*Manu Smriti*' was burnt as a symbol of caste discrimination. In such a situation, Gandhiji declared that the sins committed by the upper caste Hindus toward their families should be atoned. However, Ambedkar could not be satisfied with Gandhiji's statement. Noticing Ambedkar's dissatisfaction, Gandhiji again said they had the right to distrust me because I am a high-caste man.<sup>9</sup> Gandhiji believed that Hinduism would be destroyed if there was no attempt to reconcile with the lower-caste Hindus. Gandhiji's eloquent speech probably attracted the lower caste Harijan community; as a result, during the lawlessness movement, he got the full support of the people of the Dalit community from all over India.

Ambedkar described the caste system as a congested division.<sup>10</sup> He was the first person to feel and explore the division among the untouchables, who were, in his opinion, a disunified body.... when faced with the caste system, in which they believe as much as does the high caste Hindu believes.<sup>11</sup> In the caste system, ordinary people fail to show general protest against the upper castes due to the infighting among themselves.<sup>12</sup> Ambedkar was a marginalized caste in the Jati system, and in his childhood, he had to endure various oppressive tortures. However, he was extraordinarily talented, the pioneer of the reformist movements, an extraordinary jurist, a famous economist, and a powerful politician. Although the caste Hindus could not free the Dalit community from oppression just for the sake of birth, Ambedkar awakened the Dalits about the spread of education and the

spread of Women's education, human rights, etc. He felt that "the Dalits should have the power to influence governmental action by seats in the legislature, and the particular classes should have the opportunity to frame the government's general policy. He believed they could do only if they could find a seat in the cabinet. The depressed classes, therefore, claimed that in common with other minorities, their moral rights to be represented in the cabinet should be recognized".<sup>13</sup>

Constitutional rights were instrumental in enhancing the socio-economic and political status of the marginalized community. Ambedkar's reservation policy protected the contemporary Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other suppressed communities from the bloodshed of the so-called Hindu community. When Ambedkar was persecuted by the caste Hindus in his childhood, many Kshatriya Brahmins from different parts of India started a movement to become Brahmins. One such notable movement is the Kshatriya movement in the Tinniveli district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. There were many such movements in Bengal as well. Notable among them is the Mahishya movement of the Medinipur district of Bengal. In the northern part of undivided Bengal, the Rajbangshi community started the Kshatriya movement, and Panchanan Barman joined the movement led by the Barman community. Even central Bangladesh, including Jessore, Pabna, and Khulna in East Bengal, was involved in the Namasudra movement. The social position of these Namasudras was excruciating. The upper caste Brahmins considered them as Chandal or Charal. Under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur and Tekchand Thakur, the Namasudras were able to unite. Guruchand Thakur took the initiative to spread education among the community. Even Jogendranath's role in the independence movement of India is no less. Although some of the Namasudras later remained a part of Namasudra, another is now known as Matua.

The Kshatriya movement of the Rajbangshis of North Bengal is slightly different regarding caste discussion. Most of the Rajbangshis believed they were once Kshatriyas, bringing various Tantra, Mantras, religious scriptures, and *Smriti Shastras*. If the Rajbangshis were considered Kshatriyas, why did they need the Kshatriya movement again? Some Hindu communities in South Bengal always exploited the working people or the peasantry class of North Bengal. They called them untouchables and treated them as marginalized for their education. The Rajbangshi community was the largest population in North Bengal. We will see that this dynastic community was the people of the Koch tribe. Agriculture was their primary occupation, and they were under development in education. Judging from this point of view, the Rajbangshi community was much more extensive and included in the list of the Schedule Caste community. Other Dalit communities in Bengal include the Sunri and Chain communities in Malda and Murshidabad regions. There is an attempt by the Chain community to call oneself a Brahmin by taking some modern education and adopting Brahmanical rituals.

Most of the people of India belong to suppressed and marginalized communities. They played an essential role in perpetuating the culture of the nation. It is a deep conspiracy of the upper castes to deprive the marginalized class of political education and economics only for innate reasons. However, a representative of the Dalit community like Mayawati in India became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Further, the current President of India is from a marginalized caste. All of these have come to happen because of Ambedkar. The main goal of the Dalit movement is to protest against injustice and realize the social status of suppressed communities. Dalit practice is the way of life, and their custom is to respect the people of India and build a non-discriminatory society where; people are the main preoccupation. For the most part, mainstream historians of Indian national history have not followed this formula of history, "no one is quite sure of the ground on which they stand, which direction they are facing, or where they are going".<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

No history comes to an end, no matter what history we practice. There must be an antithesis against the thesis. Always remember that history is a continuous interaction between the present and the past. Contemporary Indian historians have nurtured the European concept of studying Indian history. The history of Indian society needs to be rewritten based on the indigenous traditions and culture, way of life, and social customs of the marginalized people. Even in the twenty-first century, the word

Dalit and the practice of Dalit have provoked the people of the modern civilized world. Adding more modern research on the Dalit movements and practices will open new horizons in Indian history, especially human history.

**End Notes:**

1. For more details, see M.N. Srinivas (ed.), *Caste: It's Twentieth Century Avatar*, Viking, New Delhi, 1996.
2. Sukomal Sen, *Bharater Sobhotya O s O Samaj Bikashe dhormo Sreni o Jatibhed* (in Bengali), Koklata, 2010, preface part.
3. M.K. Gandhi, *Horizon*, 1937, 6-3 no Article, p. 43.
4. Rabindranath Tagore, *Sudra Dharma*, Prabashi Patrika(in Bengali), 1332 B.S, p.219.
5. W.N. Kuber, B.R. Ambedkar, Builders of Modern India Series, Publication Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1978, p46.
6. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste, Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I, First Edition, Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, 1979, pp. 33-44.
7. *Ibid.*,p.57.
8. Frontline India's National Magazine, Vol. 27, 2010.
9. Prabhatangshu Maity, *Bharat Parikrama*(in Bengali), Calcutta, 1990, p.266; also see Bipan Chandra, *Struggle for Independence 1857-1964*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989.
10. B.R. Ambedkar, "*Castes in India, their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*," *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 61, May 1917, Reprinted in Basant Moon (ed.), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. I, Govt. of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1979, p. 15.
11. Christophe Jaffrelot, Dr. *Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste*, New Delhi, 2005, p. 37.
12. Basant Moon (ed.), *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches*, Vol. V, First Edition, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989, p. 266.
13. Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 378-380.
14. Kancha Ilaih, "Productive Labour, *Consignees and History: The Dalitbahujana Alternative*," in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Subaltern Studies 9 : Writings on South Indian History and Society*, Oxford, 1997, p. 164; Also see, Rup Kumar Barman, *Jati-Rajniti, Jatpat O Dalit Pratarka Poschimbonger prekhhapote Tapashili Jatir Abasthan* (in Bengali), Kolkata, 2019,p.145.