Modernity and Caste: Institutionalization of Scavenging In Telangana

Abstract

In India, villages have always been constructed, resources accessed and owned along caste lines. The Brahmanical castes have carried and safeguarded caste through the institutions of marriage, family, village and religion etc. and this is the social reality. This acquired further prominence after independence, affecting marginalized communities in myriad ways. Today, caste as an institution, not only manipulates private institutions such as marriage, family, village, religion and the personal life of individuals, but has also become a live force in shaping Indian modernity, affecting the overall functioning of the government and the entire public life of the people, both the beneficiaries victims of the caste system.

Caste is reconfigured in modern India and operates everywhere as an ideology of hierarchy that treats untouchables and other marginalized communities as 'lower' human beings. Caste ideology discriminates against Dalits and denies them their constitutional rights and opportunities that they are entitled to. Every sector in India is today occupied and operated by the Brahmanical dominant castes--be it private organizations and corporations or the government administrations. This situation is the reason for the failure of the affirmative action that was aimed at the development of the untouchable and marginalized communities. This ideology of caste has also reincarnated in the form of nationalist ideals. The ideology of caste that has been reconfigured in the public space and has been naturalized as a social commonsense in the society and in the state apparatus is the general concern of this thesis.

Why there is no consensus among the state apparatus to implement reservations, and why there has been poor implementation of reservations meant for the empowerment of SC, ST and BC communities can be understood only by
looking at the ideologies of caste in modernity and the ways in which caste as a living reality in Indian modernity and state apparatus resists any form of development for untouchable communities. This thesis presents the insights from the fieldwork that shows the ground reality of caste in today’s Telangana region. Scavenging is an instance where this age-old caste forced slavery of untouchable communities is continuing today with all modern means in the civic bodies of Telangana.

The findings from the fieldwork include interviews of Dalit activists, writers, intellectuals and victims from Telangana villages, of a 100 sanitation workers employed with the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC), officials of the GHMC and South Central Railways. A survey under the Right to Information Act, 2005, data on the caste composition of scavengers and review of literature suggests that the mainstream understanding of caste and scavenging is different from the ground reality. The scavenging occupation and communities of Telangana are then the main concerns of this thesis.

In the initial sections of the thesis, feudal caste practises with Brahmanical cultural influence in Telangana society, based on the Chaturvarnya principles of hierarchy have been examined and presented. We find that the reconfigured caste practices in secular institutions have resulted in the fact that all sanitation workers and manual scavengers belong to the untouchable communities.

This thesis also aims at examining the problematic arguments made by scholars such as 'caste is disappearing', 'caste is not a hierarchy', 'caste is secularizing', or that 'scavengers are willingly engaging with scavenging work', etc. These do not resonate with the living reality of caste in Telangana. This may be understood when we engage with the history of caste practises that have resulted in upholding age-old caste inequalities in modern Telangana leading to the institutionalization of caste and institutionalization of caste forced scavenging in secular institutions.
Every occupation in India is attached to a caste (community) according to the Chaturvarnya system of Hindu hierarchy. Scavenging is a slavery that is assigned to Dalits and has continued in independent India in all its secular state institutions. All scavengers/sweepers are from the oppressed castes, known as the scheduled castes and other marginalized communities. Scavenging is a slavery that is enforced by the caste system on the untouchable communities. Sometimes, the occupation is literally forced, but most often the local caste society and its dynamics creates a situation that forces them to enter into scavenging.

In spite of legislations and commissions for the total eradication of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of scavengers, the situation remains the same due to non-implementation of the legislations and schemes. There is no social acceptance of the law in caste society and there is no awareness in caste society to respect fellow untouchable individuals whom they have been forcing to clean the human faeces with their bare hands.

This situation is the result of ignorance of caste by the scholars and intellectuals who are the primary opinion makers, and who deny that caste continues in modernity. They falsely claim that scavenging is a secular profession and valorize scavenging as 'social service' or something that is ordained by divinity. Some of the mainstream intellectuals argue that caste is not a social hierarchy but only a social difference. Some other intellectuals argue that Dalits themselves want to engage in the filthy jobs and only choose it because it offers the safety of a government job. These misconceptions make any reform for the empowerment of those communities futile.

Given this context, this thesis examines, what has become of the untouchable communities who are condemned to the slavery of scavenging by Hindu religious notions and practices. There had been occupational mobility
among castes, but that mobility is not about the occupation of scavenging. For example, a Brahmin can easily change his occupation from priest to a lawyer, judge, and engineer; doctor etc. but would never opt for a scavenging job. This applies also to brahminized caste individuals in the same manner. Gandhi, who advocated for caste forced scavenging to be ordained for the untouchable communities, but left his traditional caste based occupation of 'trader' to become a 'lawyer', himself serves as a glaring example of the possibility of inter-caste mobility.

This thesis concentrates on the issues of caste in modern India in general and discusses caste in specific in the Telangana region. Similarly, it discusses caste forced scavenging in general and specific examples of it in Telangana and GHMC in particular with the life experiences of 100 scavengers engaged in cleaning Hyderabad and contractually employed with GHMC.

Keeping in view that scavenging deals with dirt and filth, it is not a voluntary choice of anyone. It is important to understand what made those untouchable communities remain in the same work even after half a century of independence with an egalitarian constitution. Reviews of the literature will again significantly suggest that caste is an ideology of hierarchy that operates in the entire state apparatus.

This thesis further highlights the lack of any/sufficient efforts to inculcate anti-caste ideals and to appreciate anti-caste heroes such as Buddha to Phule to Ambedkar to Kanshiram in the mainstream intellectual discourses, specifically in academics, media, and the judiciary and all these institutions have consistently ridiculed, condemned and rejected the idea of reservations on many an occasions which provides the representation to the marginalized communities and caste diversity.
Chapter 1, "Social landscape of Telangana and caste practices", examines characteristics and extent of caste in the Telangana region, and describes specific nature of Telangana caste system that is feudal and Brahmanical. Further explains the caste practices against untouchable communities, such as Vetti, Bonded Labour, Devadasi and Banamathi which are prevalent in the Telangana from centuries that marginalized untouchable communities of this region. Further explains the role of caste based organizations of feudal castes and their consolidation and mobilization in the politics, business and education that strengthened their social positions in the post independent India in Telangana after Hyderabad merged into the Indian union in 1948. All sectors including the social sectors are occupied and controlled by the dominant Brahmanical caste groups. Be it media, academia, politics, judiciary, all industries including cinema. This situation did not create a social atmosphere where the untouchables can imagine their development and empowerment but further marginalized and forced to continue in the age old slavery of scavenging, and also forcing the non scavenging untouchable families to adopt the scavenging as an option of livelihood

Chapter 2, "Caste and modernity in Telangana", explores how caste continues from feudal traditions to modern day urban and rural settings in Telangana and explores the caste practices that have remained intact and have adjusted and modernized in villages as well as in the cities. It also discusses the modernity of Telangana society and the institutionalization of caste practices in today's Telangana. The feudal caste traditions and the parallel societal understanding of caste by the state apparatus and civil society have reproduced the same caste hierarchies in all the institutions and organizations. The metaphors of the Chaturvarnya caste structure, which has resulted in the literal village structure in Telangana, now re-appear as slums and bastis in urban and cities, and Dalits as sanitation workers. And the same is visible in all the secular modern institutions
This chapter further discusses the modernity of society in Telangana. Telangana state is advanced in utilizing the modern technology, the computers, mobile phones, and TV channels. But adoption of those technological inventions by Telangana society, did not makes itself modern in term of modern values of equality, democracy and liberty, which are also the constitutional spirit of India. And the education system is also reminds the Chaturvarnya system of caste hierarchy. There are street schools for the uneducated Dalit families, residential schools for employed educated families of marginalized communities and there are private schools for the middle class and central government schools for only central government employees who are majority the Brahmins and their allied castes. The Hindu festivals, that are declared as "State Festivals" of Telangana state are not inclusive of Dalits and discriminatory towards untouchable communities, but the government of Telangana has not considered the view of Dalits while declaring those festivals as state festivals. Thus the discrimination that Dalits are facing in those festivals is an official ritual of state administration. This kind understanding of modernity justify the discrimination of Dalits and marginalized communities in the institutional setup of state administration.

Chapter 3, "Caste and scavenging in Telangana", examines the caste and inquires specifically into the profession of scavenging, and discusses the origin and practice of scavenging in Telangana. And explores the connection between the feudal caste practices and how they have resulted in forcing Telangana Dalits in to modern forms of slavery (scavenging) in Telangana. It is because of feudal Brahmanical caste practices that the Dalits, Madigas and Malas, and other marginalized communities are forced to work as scavengers in Telangana. Telangana Dalits are the worst victims of feudal caste practices. Historically, the Madiga, Mala and other marginalized communities were treated as untouchables and assigned filthy and degraded forms of employment in villages.
The ideals of condemning Dalits into scavenging is a tool of oppression to deem Dalits as sub humans and relegate them to the bottom of caste society. As observed in one of the incident, a landlord forces a Dalit (Madiga) Bakka Lachaiah to clean the human excreta with bare hands even though there is no need of the scavenging work. The landlord has created a scavenging work by defecating in the very place where he is sitting and asking Lachaiah to remove it. It is simply to humiliate him, because he is a Madiga. Therefore, the activists who are engaged in fighting against manual scavenging are defining scavenging as slavery and rejecting to call scavenging as work or job or profession or occupation.

All scavengers in Telangana are Dalit. And, the very few non-Dalit communities who engaged in scavenging as a profession were also relegated to the status of Dalits. Dalits are condemned to scavenging because of the ideology of caste; they are forced into this slavery despite of the availability of modern technology that is able to perform some of the scavenging activities such as sewage clearing etc. The reason for the continuity of such slavery today is the reconfigured form of casteist practices in the modern administration that forces the untouchable communities, controls their socio-economic conditions, and regulates their economic development.

Chapter 4, "Scavenging World", studies the socio-political dynamics, politics and implications, and every-day lives of oppressed classes that are forced into scavenging as a profession. This chapter is devoted to an exploration of the world of scavengers, their migration to the city of Hyderabad, recruitment as scavengers, their work and day-to-day experiences, humiliations, ill-treatment, harassments on the roads, in the streets and how they are looked down by their employers, the civic bodies and by the public. The scavengers are not part of the human resources of the civic bodies as they are untouchables. This reveals the casteist Brahmanical nature and irony of such "civic" bodies.
GHMC has a wing named Urban Community Development (UCD); according to its project officer Vijaya Laxmi, the organizers of UCD form the SHGs of women and the criteria includes, The SHG groups will be formed in slums He/she should have been in the similar kind of works that of scavengers, Priority to the BPL families. When GHMC looks for people who have engaged in similar kind of work, it effectively seeks out Dalits who have engaged in scavenging slavery historically. The irony is that if we look at the criteria, GHMC is obliquely referring to Dalits because the majority of people living in slums are Dalits and the majority of Dalits have the BPL (Below Poverty Line – White ration cardholders) cards. The GHMC continues to subscribe to the historical practice of offering the scavenging jobs to only Dalits.

Chapter 5, "Scavenging and Civil-Society", tries to understand how modern caste based society has understood slavery of scavenging, what actually constitutes the civil society in Telangana, how it is intervened and responded through the activism. This chapter will explains how caste based society in Telangana has understood this modern slavery of scavenging, what actually constitutes the civil society in Telangana, how it is intervened and responded through the activism. And argues that no civil society has formed in Telangana when it comes to the issues of untouchables, or at least we cannot say that the Indian civil society is free from the caste biases except very few individuals, as nothing is free from caste in India including all progressive -isms

The civil societies across all political, socioeconomic formations are dominated by Savarna Brahmanical castes, which inherently maintain their caste privileges and discriminate against Dalits, reject Dalits aspirations and participation in real life world. This is because of the underlying understanding of civil society in India has never taken into consideration anti-caste perspective as a discourse for the formation of a civil society. Instead the so-called civil society upholds the Gandhian ideals; that advocated for his own Chaturvarnya system of social hierarchy and advocated for the caste based occupations, scavenging and
other menial works to only Dalits.

Telangana has seen all types of progressive movements and isms over a century, but the caste and its ugly evil social practises have remained the same, and the situation has even worsened. All of those progressive isms and movements have failed to create a civil society, because all those progressive isms are received ideas, those idealism were applied without considering the local social structure that is the caste system. The Brahmanical dominant castes have become the communist leaders by default due to their social location as upper castes and having English education and they started representing the Bahujan masses by placing them at the end receivers of knowledge. And at the same time, the core social issue of Dalits and other marginalized communities who have been denied education and self-respect is not considered as an issue by these upper caste communist leaders. It is this situation that has resulted in continuation of caste in newer forms, in all progressive isms and all progressive parties and movements. Nothing is free from casteism today.

The age-old caste practice of forcing Dalit communities into scavenging has been institutionalized in Telangana with all modern, covert caste practises by the entire state apparatus. Caste forced 'scavenging' is institutionalized because 'caste' is institutionalized. This is the result of stability of Brahmanical caste system that strengthened in post independent India that effected Telangana region with its merger into Indian union in 1948.

Scavenging is the form of slavery that has its origins in the Brahmanical caste system in Indian subcontinent. The same practice is continuing as a 'modern slavery' in today's independent India with a secular democratic mask of modernity. The Hindu Brahmanical philosophy, in which Brahmanical Hindus believe and practice, is a philosophy of principles of inequality that treats some communities as untouchables and condemned them to the scavenging; it is a sickness that prevents a person from treating people equally has become a
nationalist discourse. Therefore every government offices have the portraits of Hindu Brahmanical gods, and practice of rituals. This covert caste system in state apparatus suppresses Dalit communities and prevents them from development by placing them at the margins deny access to the power centers deny access for entitlements.

In conclusion, I summarized the findings of chapters and argued that the elimination of this modern slavery of scavenging is possible only through the annihilation of caste and of Brahmanism, which is possible only through a thorough and comprehensive revolution; it is not possible to eliminate this slavery through reforms. As observed by Bhagwan Das, a Bhangi by caste and a great Ambedkarite

"I do not want reform, I want revolution. Reform might reduce the trauma of my slavery a little, but it won’t end it. My progress will be possible only through complete freedom, self-rule and revolution. Revolution too would be successful only if it’s led by me. It would be meaningful only if its leadership comes from the Dalit, oppressed classes. Using a lathi instead of a broom, or changing my name, or obtaining a raise in my wages, or shifting the excreta filled basket from my head to my hand or a hand cart – these are not a solution to my problems. The permanent solution to my problems is to completely give up this occupation. My freedom lies in giving up this religion and everything associated with it, rejecting all the customs and traditions that are a part of it, all practices that carry the stench of slavery that emanate from it".1

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1 Bhagwan Das, *Nenu Bhangeeni*, Hyderabad book trust, 2011, p.125.126, the book translated into Telugu from the original book *'Maim Bhangi hun'* by Dr GV Rathnakar, this particular quote is translated from Telugu to English by Kuffir Nalagundwar