CHAPTER - II

DALITS BACKGROUND
CHAPTER - SI
DALITS BACKGROUND

Introduction

One section of Indian society, which has drawn considerable attention during the last decade of scholars and activists, are the people who call themselves Dalits (oppressed). How were the Dalits suppressed and marginalized. Who are these Dalits? What place do they belong to? How has the present state of the Dalits been created? Who is responsible for it? There are number of other questions which can be raised concerning the Dalits. An attempt is made here to make use of sources available and reconstruct the history of the Dalits. There are some archeological and literacy sources which lead to the possible historical roots of the Dalits. The people known as the Dalits today had definitely a beginning, similar to the beginning of other human beings on earth. The archeological sources are findings of excavations since 1920 AD at various sites in Greater Punjab, part of which is now in Pakistan and other parts of India. The most famous sites of these excavations are known as Mohenjodaro I, Mohenjodaro II and Mohenjodaro III. These three foundations indicate that Mohenjodaro was destroyed more than once. Along with other related areas excavated this is known as the Indus Valley civilization. It was called the Dravidian culture. The Dravidian culture denotes Adi Dravida culture. There was no caste system in the Dravidian culture. Aryan culture was entirely different from Dravidian culture which was highly civilized. Aryans lived a nomadic life. The Aryan civilization in India has its upper limit at 1500 B.C\(^1\). According to B.R. Ambedkar\(^2\), “the untouchables were descendants of the original ancient Buddhists. The Brahmins forced them to eat beef and made them
untouchables and so "they have remained to this day, broken, polluted, deprived of their land and relegated beyond the periphery of respectable society".

The literary and the archaeological sources deal with two groups of people, on the one hand an already settled group and on the other an intruder or disorderly group and the violence which took place between these groups. The Rigveda names these people as the Aryans and the Dasyus, or the Wases. The groups of people mentioned in the Rigveda are the same as those established by the archaeological findings at places like Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Basically they belonged to two groups one already settled at these places and the other invaders. Both the Rigveda and the archeological findings testify that calamity struck the people and their sites in the form of floods, climate changes, and in a major way, invasions. The conflict between the two major groups of people took place around the middle of the Second Millennium (1500 B.C.). This is the point of history from which the history of the people known as Dalits begins. The history of the Dalits began almost 3,500 years ago. H.G. Wells tells how, at that point of history, one group (the nomad folk) defeated the other group (the settled folk) and how, as a result, the histories of both the groups completely changed. In the Rigveda, which is supposed to be the oldest literacy source available to us, the famous Purushasukta hymn mentions the extent of four castes when it says: 'The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was a ksatriya made, his thighs became the a vaisiya, from his feet the sudras were produced.' On the basis of this hymn, orthodox people believe that the four fold division of Indian society exists from the earliest times. So the Dalit problem took root in the Rigvedic times as a result of the conflict between two hostile groups. The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha explicitly tell us how far the condition of the Dalits had deteriorated by the time these were composed. Valmiki, in his text of the Ramayana, tells through a story how
much sudras, the fourth caste, had become degraded. According to this story, in Lord Rama's time, only the three upper castes were allowed to do tapasya (penance and montification). Yet a sudra undertook penance in order to attain divinity, as a result of which a Brahmin boy of 15 years died. The bereaved father complained to Lord Rama who, after learning cause of the death, went in search of the sudra. On meeting him, Lord Rama said to him:

“You are indeed blessed. Tell me in which caste you have been born. I am Rama son of Dasaratha. Are you a Brahmin, a Kshatriya or a sudra?”

The boy replied, “I am born of the sudra caste and my name is Samboka”. As soon as the boy uttered these words Rama drew forth his sword and severed Samboka’s head. In the *Mahabharatha* also there is a reference to the degraded state of the Dalits. The story of Ekalavya, an indigent boy, tells how he had to lose his right thumb because he had learned archery and was in no way inferior to Arjuna in his skill.

The main point of the story is how, at the time of the *Mahabharatha* low caste people did not have the right to education. The *Bagavd Gita* also confirms faith in the four castes created by Lord Krishna. *Manusmriti* also justifies the caste system. Buddha and Mahavira preached against the so called primacy of Brahmins.

According to G.S. Gluirye† “The Sudra is represented as being inclined to accept the divisions, basing them only in the individual’s action and not on his birth. In course of time the protest of Jainism and Buddhism against Brahminism or the caste system was diverted. The *Manu Smriti* reached its final literary form with its strict social and religious discipline to govern the graded Indian society. The religion of Prophet Mohammed also came into existence in the Arab world. The Arabs first conquered the Sind in AD 712, but only in AD 1206 the Slave dynasty established its rule in Delhi. The Muslim invaders continued to come and go with their leaders like
Sultan Mohammad of Gazni and Muhamed Ghori. After the Slave dynasty 
India was rtf led by different' rulers and dynasties. During this long period of 
Muslim domination in India, one would have expected some changes in the 
lot of the Dalits as Islam upholds the principle of equality of all human 
beings, but during the Muslim period too one sees that more or less the state 
of the Dalits continues as before. During the British period the Indian army 
was dominated by upper caste Indians. In 1857 a major revolt took place due 
to the caste system and its practices. After crushing the revolt, the British, 
through a proclamation of Queen Victoria in 1858, transferred political 
authority from the East India Company to the English crown. During the 
British period a number of events took place which finally led the country to 
freedom in 1947.

In the case of religions and social practices, the British maintained the 
status quo and followed a policy of non-interference, actively upholding and 
supporting the caste order. The work of Christian missionaries influenced 
the situation in India, particularly in challenging the various religious 
traditions to evaluate and rethink their approach to the Dalit groups. But the 
missionaries also upheld the Vanina system. The caste system was accepted 
in the Christian church. During the British period a number of movements 
expressed concerned for the Dalits. There were some leaders who were 
involved directly in the struggle to reform the Dalit community. They 
included Jotiba Bhule, B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi. Among these, the first 
two were for the total uplift of the Dalits. Gandhi’s work was to reform them 
within the Hindu society. At the Round Table Conference, Gandhi and 
Ambedkar were the key members. Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate 
for the depressed classes, whereas Gandhi advocated joint electorates. In this 
way one more chance of effective liberation and freedom was lost by the 
Dalits. But Ambedkar at least got a large number of seats reserved for the 
Dalits, which, of course, was an achievement. The Dalit problems have
continued even after Independence. The Indian Constitution empowers the President of India to specify the castes which are to be deemed to be scheduled castes. Reservations is followed in education, employment and parliamentary/assembly seats. But even after the implementation of the reservation these people are living in abject poverty. They have not been able to get the minimum of food, shelter and clothing.

Social and Social-Psychological Situation

Indian society is divided into various caste groups. One’s caste is regarded as one’s reference group in deciding the interpersonal relations. In this social order of caste system the Brahmins maintained their superiority through the principle of homogeneity, branding all others lower castes, namely, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisiyas and Sudras. The Sudras excluded the untouchables or outcastes. They segregated untouchables. The caste system forms the steel framework of Hinduism. It was the feature of the ancient Hindu society and continues to be so. The *Rigveda* did not mention the world Sudra but its Purushakuta contains a myth about the origin of the four fold social structure. The Brahman has been called the mouth of the Purusha and is placed highest in society. His special function pertains to speech. Being a priest, invoking gods in his privilege.

The origin of caste is obscure. There are as many theories as there are writers on the subject. These can be grouped under eight leading theories on the origin of caste: political theory, economic theory, ethical theory, ethnic theory, theory of Manu, occupational theory and religious theory. But none of these seems to give an adequate explanation of the real origin of caste in India. To those familiar with the evaluation of the Indian people and the historical background, different tribes of warring people invaded the Indian subcontinent and occupied the land. Quite naturally the conquerors mingled with the local population. Therefore, the multi-facted explanation is preferred
by a large number of authors. The caste system and Hindu religion are closely related. J.H. Hunt says that the ancient caste system is the natural result of the interaction of a number of geographical, social, political, religious and economic factors which are not found elsewhere in conjunction. The caste system is a unique feature of Hinduism. The Hindu religion did influence the caste system and caste practices.

How was the caste system developed in India? To understand the caste system, we have to look at the ethnic diversity and the social constraints it imposed on the early settlers in India. The Indian population was made up of six races with their sub divisions. They were Negroids, the broad faced Negroids from Africa; the austrics, who properly came from India-China or from the Mediterranean plains; the Dravidians, who originated from Asia Minor; the mongoloids; and, the Nordic Aryans. All the invaders influenced the Indian people and their culture and civilization. Of these, the Aryans influenced India very much. The Aryan invaders deprived the Dalits’ and encroached upon their lands and reduced them to slavery. S.Manickam’ says that Mu.Varadharajan, a reputed Tamil scholar, has also expressed a similar view, namely, that the people who conquered the Indus region slowly started spreading into the Gangetic plains to enforce the new civilization of the conquerors. Those Dravidians who accepted the exotic culture became their allies. Those unmixed Dravidians who refused to embrace the strange alien civilization were condemned to slavery and treated as untouchables. As a result of their enslavement, the Dalits perceived life as permanent struggle in the form of endemic famine, unemployment, inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future. Under these circumstances the Dalits resisted the domination of the Aryans and their culture. Buddhism was the main source for the Dalits to oppose Hinduism and the Brhaminical culture. The Vishnu Parana says, “Brahman made this four fold system for the performance of sacrifice.” Lord Krishna also says “ the four fold system of
Chaturvarna was created by me according to the division of qualities and functions.” J.H. Hutton feels that the Aryan invaders in India, with their distinct ranks, introduced the principle of social stratification into society. The Aryan invaders maintained social distance between themselves and the Dravidians.

The caste system gives to Hindu society a segmentary character. The Purushaskuta contains a myth about the origin of the four fold social structure. The occupations of the four ranks originated from the great sacrificed Purusha. The Brahmana has been called the mouth of the Purusha and placed highest in society. His special function pertains to speech. Being a priest invoking gods is his privilege. The second rank Kshatriya is born of the arms of the Purusha as the warrior group. The thighs being the lowest part of the body, the Sudra is the lowest in society. The Sudras were subdivided into clean and unclean. The clean Sudras got assimilated into the Hindu social order, while the unclean were regarded as the Panchamas or outcastes (fifth order). The Hindu dharma, karma and samsara supported the said order. The untouchables were engaged in polluting jobs as servants of the upper caste people. Economically they were dependent upon the upper caste and politically subordinate. The Dalits were employed as agricultural labour though some Dalits owned small parcels of land. Many movements and social organizations have tried to bring about some changes but have not altered the fundamental structure. Conversions to other religions helped to improve the social status of the Dalits. Whatever be the origin of the untouchables the fact and practice of untouchability is accepted and, despite so many years of reforms and legislations, untouchability continues even today.

The caste system in Tamilnadu is basically of the same pattern as in the rest of India. But there are distinct variations. G.S.Ghurye, discussing the Tamilnadu situation, says that historically Tamilnadu has remained aloof
from the rest of India. It is claimed that the South Indians were of Dravidian blood while Brahmins were an imposition from the North.

Even the tradition of Ramayana would seem to maintain that the people of Southern India were descendents of Hanuman, the monkey chieftain, who helped Lord Rama to rescue Sita from Ravana, and therefore different from the rest. The story of Agastya, purported to be the founder of the Tamil language, is said to be the beginning of the Brahmin invasion of Tamilnadu. While in the North, the Vedas and all religious literature were in Sanskrit, in Tamilnadu original religious literature in Tamil abounded. Even the Brahminical literature came to be translated into Tamil. It is believed that the Brahmin invasion took place around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Though the religion was known as Hinduism not all accepted Brahma as the supreme god. It is believed that Murugan was the Tamil God. The Brahmanic culture came to Tamilnadu in the third or second century BC, The Sangam literature refers to organization in all spheres of life of the people, art and literature. The Brahmins held a monopoly over education. The people of the other castes were denied education. The Manusmriti says that the Sudras should not be given education. K. Ponmudi says that the Indian caste system has exercised considerable influence on the theory and practice of education in India.

*After five decades of Indian independence and its positive commitment to the welfare of the weaker sections of its population, serious doubts and questions are being posed about the politics and programmes of the government to achieve an egalitarian social framework in India. According to the 1991 census India has a literacy rate of only 52 percent. But among the SCs only 37% are literate. After 50 years of independence not all the children of school going age enroll in schools and all those who enroll do not pursue studies for more than two to three years. Every second child enrolled from the Dalits drops out before completing primary education till*
the fifth standard and is forced to sell his/her labour though the state provides scholarship, hostel facilities and other incentives covering a small fraction of the SC population. However, a small section of the Dalits has benefited by the facilities given by the government, though seats reserved for the SCs (15% in Central Government institutions), particularly in medicine and engineering, have not been fully utilized. In order to improve the situation, various commissions for the SCs have suggested that intensive coaching be provided for SC/ST students. It is often argued that education introduces bourgeois values among the SCs and inhibits the upsurge of radical consciousness about their oppression. It creates division between educated and uneducated SCs. Preferentially given educational opportunities are a mere token and an instrument for curbing disruption. Due to this kind of activities most of the Scheduled Castes cannot reap the educational benefits. To remove the obstacles a mass education policy should be adopted, to transform the Dalit community. Brahminical caste hierarchy should be removed.

The non-Brahmin movement was started to eradicate Brahmanism. In 1944, B.R.Ambedkar pointed out that the non-Brahmin movement was an important development in the history of India. After 1917, non-Brahmin and the Dalit movement arose as separate movements, though interlinked and drawing on common ideological themes. The Dalit movement were actually wider in spread among the weaker sections of South and West India. Within the non-Brahmin movement the Dalits were neglected. Large sections of non-Dalit caste Hindus, who were predominantly peasants and artisans, experienced economic exploitation at the hands of the caste elite. Comparing the Dalits and the caste Hindus, the latter were able to develop greater solidarity and assertiveness. So the Dalit community did not trust the caste Hindus who were responsible for continuing atrocities. The non-Brahmins could not understand the difference between their movement and
Brahminism, because, they were steeped in Brahminism and caste ideology. The caste Hindus often felt proud of their sub-Sudra position. So their struggle with Brahmins or Brahminism was withdrawn long back and they are still hand in glove with the Brahmins in the inhuman project of caste system. Tamil nationalism engenders conflict among the Tamil speaking groups because of the caste problem. The Dalits are Tamil speaking citizens of Tamil Nadu but they deprived of their fundamental rights to live, to speak and so on. Tamil nationalism did not liberate the Dalits from caste oppression and in the socio-economic sphere.

Economic Conditions of the Dalits

India is a predominantly agricultural country. The agricultural sector provides livelihood to about 64 percent of the labour force, contributes nearly 26 percent of the gross domestic product and accounts for about 18 percent share of the total value of the country’s exports. About one third of notional income is derived from agriculture and allied activities employing about two thirds of the work force¹. The Dalits are 70% landless labourers and tenants. The Brahmins and caste Hindus are having own land and perpetuate and maintain inequality.

Discrimination, which, is the all pervading character of the caste system, is not confined to production relations alone, but permeates the whole socio-economic sphere. The majority of the Dalits, that is, 84 percent, live in rural areas. They are agricultural labourers, share croppers or self cultivations. Among bonded labourers, estimated at over twenty lakhs, SC labourers constitute a sizeable proportion. They are bonded against the debts that they either incurred for investment or for day-to-day expenses. Various land reforms related to ceiling and distribution of land have somewhat enhanced the SCs’ access to land, but these measures are not sufficient. A section of the Dalits, sometimes, along with agriculture, pursue traditional
occupations such as leather work, scavenging etc. The market oriented economy and catalyst mode of production have certainly opened up avenues which have economically improved the condition of certain section of the Dalits. But their social position has not changed. They still suffer the stigma of untouchability.

So far we have reviewed the economic position at the all India level. Now this study concerns Tamilnadu. The SCs/STs constitute nearly one fourth of the population of the country. While the Constitution has prescribed certain protective measures and safeguards for the people, the succession of Five Year Plans have regarded their progress as a major objective of national policy. There are schemes and projects undertaken officially which would help the economic advancement of Scheduled Castes. Under educational development the Dalits were given free education to get technically qualified in industrial training centers (ITIs) and elsewhere. The special component plan was started in 1980-81. This was to help at least 50 percent of the SCs and STs below the poverty line to cross the line. These people would be provided amenities like drinking water, electricity and health facilities, housing and schools. The Central Government provided a matching grant to any State undertaking such programmes for the target people. The Central Government came forward to assist the States for the speedy execution of economic development schemes for SC/ST people. The assistance was released through the Tamilnadu Adi-Dravida Housing and Development Corporation (THADCO).

There is a Protection of Civil Rights Act to remove untouchability. Propaganda films are screened. There are several training programmes for SC and ST people. Reservations for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes at 18 percent is the rule for direct recruitment from 1989. Even though several schemes are being launched to uplift the Scheduled Castes their position has not changed much. There are many obstacles to forming an
egalitarian society. Due to globalism, privatization and liberalization the reservation policy has been affected. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been much affected. The Government’s concessions and priorities in employment opportunities have not helped the Dalits much. They are marginalized by the caste Hindus. The Dalit people are denied even basic amenities. The government’s policies and programmes have helped the SCs and STs upto a certain stage in the economic aspect. The Brahmins and Hindus are having a monopoly over the land, The Dalits are merely landless agricultural labourers and tenants. Only a meagre portion of land is owned by the Dalits. Merely giving concessions and priorities will not create a just society. Complete social transformation is needed.

Political Situation of the Dalits

The annihilation of castes constituted the main agenda of the Dalit struggle. The Dalit community was well aware of the fact that elimination of castes is a long drawn out struggle which has to be waged in the political arena. With this object many political parties were formed over the years. In ancient India the Dalits were not allowed to take part in politics. They were only subordinate. They had no access to power and authority. They were never treated as citizens or human beings. Therefore the Dalits attach more importance to securing political power. In 1860 the Indian Penal Code was passed which treated all persons equally, irrespective of caste or creed. The British government appointed a committee under Lord Southborrow in the year 1919 to suggest suitable reforms in the franchise system\(^\text{14}\).

The Indian Constitution prescribes protection and safeguards for SC/ST people by insisting on educational and economic concessions and removing disabilities. The main safeguards are: (1) abolition of untouchability in any form (Article: 17, Article:46) deals with promotion of educational and economic interests and protection from social injustice and
exploitation. Art.330(1), 332 deals with seats reserved for SC/ST people in the House of the People and the State Legislative Assemblies respectively. Even though Constitutional safe-guard are given to the Dalits, they are still marginalized and exploited by the upper strata of society. To remove such barriers the Dalit movement was needed.

The Dalit consciousness had been brought about by various factors existing in the post-Mutiny period. It was properly institutional and was formed as a mass based movement which would be a force to reckon with. The Dalit movement in India is emerging out of the Scheduled Caste identity and untouchability consciousness. It is not just against the systematic and continuing onslaught by the rural upper castes or in fear of a political party like the BJP. The new Dalit movement is interested in the right transformation of civil society, thereby transforming the nature of the stale and in attaining an egalitarian human society in India and rest of the world. Tamilnadu also sees the movement in different approaches towards human changes and reconstruction of civil systems. The political history of India indicates the political situation in Tamilnadu.

The British system of administration introduced the democratic process. They introduced limited franchise in India. Through this system of administration the Brahmins dominated the government services. The Dalits were neglected. The Congress Party held a monopoly over the administration controlled by the Brahmins. The Dravidian movement emerged as the ruling party from 1967 onwards. From that point onwards, the non-Brahmins are enjoying the government loans and concessions. The Dalits are enjoying them to a certain limited level. The non-Brahmins dominate the overall administrative setup.
Notes and References


5. James Messey, op.cit. p.50.

6. J.H. Hutton, Caste in India, New Delhi: Oxford University Pres.1, 1983, Chapters 1 & XI.


16. Ibid., p.796.