CHAPTER VIII

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I

The Harijans or Dalits live in sub-human social existence, abject poverty, economic exploitation, a sub-culture of submission and political powerlessness. They have withstood the psycho-economic pressure of social conformity for centuries. They have degraded nature of working relations with the higher castes and they are involved in degraded works like scavanging and sweeping. They are considered to be visited by a curse and are treated as untouchables. Their shadow, when it fell on people, polluted them. In ancient India they had to strike a bamboostick on the floor, while travelling on the road-side, so that people might take precaution and were not touched by them. They announced their entry into the town by shouting loudly so that people might keep away from them. The status quo was maintained by sanctions and the Harijans were kept in a state of constant fear under a permanent threat of violence.

During the Muslim rule, many of these untouchables and low caste people embraced Islam and joined the invaders partly to avoid prosecution and partly in search of freedom.

Without access to the vital economic resources and bargaining power, they became the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society. The social customs deprived the Harijans of their right to seek higher social status by taking to occupations other than the hereditary ones.
To the days of British period, economically they were the poorest of the poor, toiling in most unremunerative and often degrading occupations. Traditionally, predominantly rural, they have been mainly landless rural agricultural labourers and marginal share-croppers and peasants—commonly indebted beyond redemption and held in varying degrees of bondage in different parts of the country.

Historical evidence shows that the Harijans have been completely bypassed by the controlling elite group. They have been neglected by the elite formation and circulation process such as wars, pre-British royal landgrants, British-Indialand settlements, Industrial expansions and spread of English education. The British rule awakened Harijans to the enquiry of certain social customs and religious traditions. One such socio-religious tradition was the practice of untouchability among Hindus. Before independence, the reform movements and political awakenings during 19th century were urban. Western education dispelled from their minds the age-old superstitions and caste rituals.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress stood for a kind of gradualist, reconciliatory and co-operative political mobilisation of Harijans, whereas B.R.Ambedkar advocated for rapid political participation of Harijans. Gandhi believed that untouchability would not be removed by the force even of law. It could only be removed when there was a change of attitudes among the caste Hindus. His campaign against untouchability was an integral part of his political
move for Swaraj. Political participation and mobilisation of Harijans were considered as signs of advancement by Ambedkar. He fought for such legislative measures as would give a clear weightage to the Harijans in political bodies. Poverty did not seem to disturb him so much as lack of education, political power and self-respect. Ambedkar emphasized the fact that political power was the key to all progress and that the scheduled castes could achieve salvation if they captured power by organising themselves into separate party. Ambedkar believed that only when they achieved political power could the social and economic conditions of the Scheduled Castes be improved. The Constituent Assembly of Independent India passed a provision legally abolishing untouchability on November 29, 1948. Article 17 States "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law". In 1955 the Untouchability Offence Act was passed by the Parliament providing measures to punish those who practised Untouchability. In 1976 the Protection of Civil Rights Act was passed by the Parliament making the law more stringent to punish those who practised Untouchability.

A study of the contemporary Indian Science shows that the Dalits have been kicked, raped, burnt, refused minimum wages, their properties have been destroyed and they have been killed. Even in some cases, Dalits have been forcibly made to eat human excreta. It became clear that the Constitutional equalities for Harijans existed merely on paper.
In Contemporary Orissa, Harijans have been victims of violence and atrocities. They have been killed and their females are raped. They are victims to loot and their houses are set on fire. They are also denied minimum wages.

In view of trouble and expense, often accompanied by economic hazards and physical danger, the uncertainty of securing a conviction, the Dalits feel nothing to be gained by instituting a suit under PCRA. It is not awareness of PCRA's existence that inhibits the use, but awareness of its future hazards and weaknesses. The Harijans who seek extra-legal support donot find the act as promising means of redress and instead resort directly to protest political actions.

In view of this political will is required to implement the various provisions of PCRA. Today's requirement is not legislation but effective machinery and willingness of the executives to act. The implementing agencies are dominated by upper caste Hindus whose indifference is responsible for the failure in working it out. Provisions of PCRA can be implemented effectively and realistically if there is more systematic and co-ordinated effort by different voluntary agencies, social workers and journalists in unearthing atrocities, harassments, offences against the Harijans and taking legal action against such practices. This must be accompanied by organised social action of the people through Morchas, Dharanas and public meetings to exert pressure on the administration and law enforcing machineries.
Press can support these movements through investigative journalism and timely publicity.

Many social evils have been fought and nearly rooted out successfully in the past. Human sacrifice, the practice of Sati and child marriages are cases in point. It can happen in case of untouchability if there is a will.

II

The study reveals that the Harijan in both the villages i.e., Kesharpur and Jari, remain in abysmal poverty, illiteracy and ignorance because of their low level of income. They are underemployed and are economically dependent on the caste Hindus. Numerical strength, better economic opportunities, frequency of urban contact, better communication, better exposure to mass-media, help of external leadership having an all Orissa base, the presence of Harijan elites in the village, greater economic benefits due to better awareness of government programmes, participation in political process through general elections and panchayat elections have helped Harijans in Jari to resort to protest political action against their socio-economic disabilities. Small number, less urban contact, underdeveloped communication, less exposure to mass-media, absence of the help of and external leaders, absence of Harijan elites very low political participation have discouraged the Harijans in Kesharpur to resort to protest political action against their socio-economic disabilities.
From a study of economic disabilities it is found that the Harijans in both the villages are denied a living wage and they remain semi-starved. The overwhelming majority of Harijans are landless agricultural labourers. The dependence of Kesharpur Harijans on traditional occupations is greater than that of Jari. As the capacity of the traditional occupations to absorb the unemployed is limited, the Harijans look for alternative employment. In Kesharpur, such opportunities are hard to come by. But in Jari the Harijans pull rickshaws, trolleys and do small businesses being financed by banks under different government welfare schemes.

In both the villages the wage for the landless labourers is still determined by the caste Hindus. In Kesharpur the caste-Hindu employers do not touch the Harijans while making payment. The wages given by the caste Hindus is lower than the government rate. In both the villages female Dalit labourers are paid much less than the male labourers. The availability of plenty of cheap labour in neighbouring villages of Jari is a factor for wage discrimination. The Harijans in both the villages are loanees. They make loan for their consumption needs. The Hadi Harijans in Kesharpur do not get loan from the village common-fund. The Study finds that the Harijans are victims of exorbitant rates of interest of the money-lenders. In Jari majority of Harijans do not get loans from high castes because of their increasing assertiveness. Discrimination in interest rate in money-lending in Jari is less than that of Kesharpur due to the organised character of the Harijans in Jari. The Kesharpur Harijans do not
get loan from the co-operative societies and banks due to their extreme economic and educational weaknesses. Their bargaining power remains very very low.

It is found that an overwhelming majority in Jari bring their drinking water from the river, whereas in Kesharapur an overwhelming majority bring their drinking water from the well/tube-well of their own street. An overwhelming majority in both the villages are prohibited drinking water from the public well and public tube-well. In establishing the public wells/public tube-wells the convenience of the Harijans are not taken into account. In Kesharpur some government decisions take care of the convenience of the Harijans. In Jari the officials consult the Harijans in name sake only but they go by the decisions of the High-castes.

The public disabilities most often reported are exclusion from tea-shops and restrictions on the use of utensils. In the grocery shops the Harijans are discriminated against. They are denied the services of barber, dhobi, cowherdsman and priest. Majority of the Harijans donot participate in the marriage feasts of the high-castes, as they are not served food along with other caste Hindus. Caste Hindus do not marry the Harijans.

Harijans also suffer from social disabilities like denial to take part in the decision-making process of the village council and the denial to enter temples. In both the villages the Harijan communities are discriminated against by the Dhobi Harijans. We find untouchability among the untouchables in both the villages.
Harijans in both the villages are not discrimi­
nated against in the Schools and Hospitals. It is reveal­
ing to learn that in Jari, Harijan students are not pro­
perly taught and are engaged in cleaning the school and
giving private services like collecting grass for the
school teachers. The overwhelming majority of Harijans
in both the villages are discriminated against in
Village dramas.

In Kesharpur the Harijans think that the tasks
like scavanging and sweeping public roads, they perform,
are degrading. In Jari these works are done by a few
Pano Harijans occasionally. The question arises does
the untouchability of the Harijans arise from occupations
carrying pollution with them, or were they first untou­
chables and then afterwards they were assigned unclean
activities? In other words did their untouchability make
them subservient or did their subservience make them
untouchables.

Hadi Harijans in Kesharpur eat carrion out of
hunger. In Jari the Panos and Kandaras eat snails and
snakes from the river.

Politics is a great leveller of social distin­
ctions. It sets up new criteria of selecting leaders. It
weakens the traditional bases of social structure and
thus affords to the lower castes to achieve through
politics what they cannot through social instruments.
Politics is a major force working for modernisation. Invol­
vement in politics secularises caste, because caste then
becomes too narrow a group for all practical purposes and is forced to find a wider identity. The Harijans now have a second resource in addition to their labour that can be used in relations with higher castes—their votes.

Participation in elections in Jari is active while it is passive in Kesharpur. Kesharpur Harijans feel that their strength is quite insignificant in influencing the outcome of the elections. They have little bargaining power with the politicians. In Jari the Harijans who were not treated as persons in the eyes of law in the past, suddenly due to their right to vote acquired political importance. The numerical strength, organised character and bargaining power of the Harijans in Jari have been able to extract some economic benefits from the political parties.

The study reveals that the Harijans in both the villages are members of Congress Party. They vote for it. They have traditional loyalty to the Congress because of its role in the Freedom Movement, its near monopoly of power after independence and its use of money to get votes. In Jari the implementation of different welfare schemes during Congress rule has established Harijans' faith in Congress.

The study finds that small number, poverty and fear discourage the Kesharpur Harijans to contest elections. Numerical strength, better economic status and political consciousness encourage Jari Harijans to contest the elections for the Panchayat and Village Council. Democratic politics has increased the bargaining power of the Harijans in Jari but it has failed to do so in Kesharpur.
The study finds that in both the villages the Harijans bring their complaints to the Village Council. But in Jari complaint is also made to the Panchayat, the Police, the Court, the Revenue Officials and the Party functionaries. Harijans have no faith in the administration. They find that services are available only to those who can bribe the officials.

Harijans in both the villages resort to different forms of protest like public-meeting, picketing, hunger-strike, holding peaceful march to remove their socio-economic disabilities. The leadership for all these forms of protest comes from the social activists in Kesharpur. In Jari both external and internal leaders help them. The use of protest political techniques has helped to a considerable degree to remove disabilities in case of Jari, but it has failed in Kesharpur.

The Harijans in both the villages feel, lack of political will inhibits the implementation of the Protection of the Civil Rights Act. In Jari Harijans also feel that executive and police interference, politicisation of executives and the police, political interference in judicial process inhibit its implementation. The study finds that Harijans in both the villages are aware of the reservation policy of the government but they have not reached that economic and educational level where they can receive the benefits of reservation. The Harijans feel by providing separate housing and drinking water facility, government has been perpetuating their segregation instead of their integration. This reminds Harijans of their iden-
titles. Hence mixed housing complexes should be encouraged. The Harijans in both the villages are aware of the 20-Point economic programme and Integrated Rural Development Programme. As regards removal of untouchability these schemes often become counter-productive. These schemes grant loans to the Harijans for socially inferior occupations for which no caste Hindu will opt, no matter how acute their need for employment. A washerman is funded to open a laundry, a Pano is funded to prepare basket-goods. This implies Harijans are often compelled to stick to their traditional occupations and become neo-Harijans.

The political elite, power elite, and enlightened elite in Jari help Harijans in getting benefits from these schemes. But in Kesharpur, neither the power elite of the village nor the enlightened elite in the service sector are concerned about the poor economic conditions of the Harijans.

The conflict between the caste Hindus and the Harijans in both the villages centres around Harijans' withdrawal of drinking water from public wells and public tube-wells, unequal wage rate, high-caste monopoly over development funds and concept of purity and pollution. In Jari conflict arises when caste Hindus invite labourers from the neighbouring villages at a higher wage rate in preference to the Jari Harijans to work in their fields. The Harijans resent the taking up the construction of Harijan houses by caste Hindu contractors when government sanctions funds.
Conflict resolution takes place either through compromise or through violence.

Harijans find that poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, social disabilities are major obstacles to their development.

In case of protest against high caste discriminations Harijans are not employed as labourers, and are prevented from buying food and groceries from the shops. Further, caste Hindus withdraw lending facilities. In Jari atrocities like assault, murder, burning of houses occur.

On investigation it is found that a money-lender and former Gramani (Village leader) have done maximum harm to the Harijan Community in Kesharpur. But in Jari this has come from a former Sarpanch and a rich landlord.