P R E F A C E

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 bamboo stick 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 invadors 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-Indian land 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".

The study uses the historical as well as the empirical method.

A study of the contemporary Indian science shows that 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 take 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.
The Harijans in Kesharpur village constitute 12 per cent of the population. Two Harijan Communities live here, such as: the Hadies and the Dhobies. Dhobies constitute 20 per cent of the Harijan population. The Dhobies do not accept food and water from the Hadies. The Harijans in Kesharpur remain in abysmal poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. They are denied a living wage in the village and they remain semi-starved. Overwhelming majority of Harijans are landless agricultural labourers. Wages for agricultural labour remains low. The Harijans still depend on their traditional occupation. The caste Hindu employers do not touch them while making payment. Majority of the Harijans make loans to meet their consumption needs. The Hadi Harijans do not get loan from the village common-fund. They pay exerbitant rates of interest to the money-lenders. They bring their drinking water from the tube-well of their own street. An overwhelming majority of Harijans are prohibited drinking water from the public wells and public tube-wells in caste Hindu streets. The tea shop-keeper does not give drinks and snacks to the Harijans in the cups used by caste Hindus. The Harijans do not get the services of the barber, the washerman, the cowherdsman and the priest in the village. They are not allowed to inter-dine with caste Hindus. They are not allowed to enter temples. Caste Hindus do not marry Harijans. Their participation in elections is passive. Their small number, poverty and fear
discourage them to contest elections. They vote for the Congress Party. Their awareness regarding the law and government programmes comes through the voluntary organisation "The Friends of the Trees and Living Beings". There are no Harijan elites in the village.

In Jari village, the Harijans constitute more than 50 per cent of the population. Harijan Communities like the Gokha, the Kandara, the Pano, the Dhobi live in this village. Harijans remain in abject poverty and illiteracy. They are denied a living wage and they remain semi-starved. An overwhelming majority of the Harijans are agricultural labourers. The female Harijans are paid much less than the Harijan male labourers. The Harijans pull rickshaws, trolleys and do small business being financed by banks under different government welfare schemes. A few depend on their traditional occupations. Harijans are discriminated against in their share in share-cropping and in case of money lending. Majority are prohibited to draw drinking water from the village public wells and tube-wells. They donot get the services of the barber, washerman, cowherdsman, and the priest. They are not allowed to worship in village temples. They are discriminated in the tea-shops and grocery shops. Harijans donot enjoy equal status in village community feasts, and the caste Hindus donot marry them. The Harijans participation in politics is active. They contest village elections and panchayat elections. They
attend political meetings. They vote for Congress because they get some economic benefits. The party has helped the Harijans to get benefits from the welfare schemes of the government.

The numerical strength, better economic opportunities, urban contact, better communication, better exposure to mass-media, help of external leadership having an all Orissa base, the presence of the Harijan elites in the village, greater economic benefits due to better awareness of governmental programmes, participation in political process through general elections have helped the 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 external leaders, absence of Harijan elites in the village, very low political participation have discouraged the Harijans in Kesharpur to resort to protest political action against their socio-economic disabilities.

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