

CHAPTER - II

RELIGION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN INDIA

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Scheduled Castes in India are the most oppressed and the worst sufferers throughout the ages. Mahatmas, kings and social reformers have come and gone but Scheduled Castes have remained half-naked, hungry, ignorant and cheated. The Hindu religion has condemned these people as 'untouchables' 'unapproachables' and 'unseables'. Having been deprived of all the opportunities in the socio-economic, educational and political field the depressed classes have suffered silently in the tyrannical hands of caste-Hindus to whom caste and religion are more important than human beings.

The Hindu religion and its laws have waged the most oppressive and inhuman war on untouchables. Caste system is mainly responsible for the social disharmony among different sections of people. Caste in India has shaken the very base of the Indian social system. The roots of exploitation are found in the caste system

itself. The caste is a closed unit, which keeps people under "prohibition", "fear" and "separation". Dr.B.R.Ambedkar the staunchest critic of Hinduism described the Hindu caste system thus :

"The literature of Hinduism is full of caste-geneologies in which an attempt is made to give a noble origin to upper castes. This anti-social spirit is not confined to caste alone, it has gone deeper and has poisoned the mutual relations."1

The Brahmins manipulated in the ancient days and assigned to themselves the work of writing religious texts and created such a social system in which their (the Brahmins') position, honour and glory were raised. The religious texts like 'Manusmriti' described Brahmins as "Gods on earth" or 'Bhudevas'. Hindu religion has made Brahmins so prominent and superior that no one could question their authority. The ultimate aim of the religious texts was to keep the Brahmins as rulers over all Varnas and keep other Varnas or non-Brahmins as lowly and underprivileged classes.

Manu, the ancient law giver, wrote in his 'Manusmriti' that the creator has created four Varnas for the prosperity of the world. God created four different Varnas from different parts of his body viz., Brahmin from his mouth, Kshatriya from his arms, Vaishya from his thighs and Shudra from the feet.²

Manu's creation of four Varnas is illogical, unscientific, unconvincing and irrational, which divides society into water-tight compartments and infuses the idea of high and low, superior and inferior among the people. The code of Manu says :

"The king shall never execute a Brahmin though convicted of possible crimes but may banish him with all his property secured and his body unhurt. No greater crime is known on the earth."³

The purpose of writing this religious text was to keep non-Brahmins or especially Shudras as a slave caste or ruled class. South India has witnessed non-Brahmin movements in order to overthrow the Brahmins and share social status, educational attainment and political power. Lelah Dushkin⁴ Gail Omvdt⁵ are the

authors who have written about the non-Brahmin movement in South India.

The social system based on religion in ancient times was undemocratic, and it never allowed lower castes to mix and mingle with upper castes. Many artificial prohibitions were imposed on the Shudras. The crude laws framed by the vested interests kept the Shudras in fear and despicable positions. For instance the Manusmriti says :

"If Shudra mentions the name and class of twice-born with contumely, an hot iron nail of ten fingers be thrust into his mouth... The King shall pour hot oil in the mouth and ears of Shudra if he disrespects the Brahmin and arrogantly behaves with him."6

The chief aim of the Brahmin law givers was not only to reduce the social status of Shudras but also to degrade their economic position. The Brahmins knew that if Shudras are reduced to low economic position they cannot protest or resist and the Brahmins could rule the Shudras for centuries to come. Thus the right to own property was debarred to Shudras in the Hindu

or Brahminical scriptures. The mere sight of possession of wealth by Shudras injured a Brahmin.⁷ Shudras lived as 'Hewers of wood and drawers of water' who lived under the mercy and sympathy of Brahmins.

The Shudras were exempted from taxes for rendering certain services to the Brahmins in two circumstances:

- a) those Shudras who washed the feet of Brahmins;
- b) those Shudras who were deaf and dumb and were suffering from diseases.⁸

The Chaturvarna system based on occupation did not give any opportunity for lower castes to choose the work which would give them honour, prestige and status. Those who undertook the filthy jobs were not allowed to get education, they were debarred from mixing with other higher Varnas. Thus the lower Varnas were deprived of all the opportunities deliberately and were reduced to the weakest position.



Dr.Ambedkar refers to the problem as follows :

"On account of the Chaturvarna they(untouchables) could receive no education. They could't think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly and not knowing the way of escape and not having means to escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude their inescapable fate."9

The caste system has not only killed the unity among the lower castes but it has also deculturised the lower castes. The caste Hindus knew that if the culture of the lower castes is destroyed, ultimately they will fall into rigid superstitions and bad customs, and ultimately the lower castes cannot compete with the forward castes and this would secure the positions of upper castes and maintain their rule in the society and there would be no threat to their happy living. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar further writes :

"Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of higher castes."10

The lower castes, being in the fold of Hinduism, always feel that they are the slaves of caste Hindus.

There is a struggle between privileged and under-privileged castes, and in such a process the privileged castes avail of all the opportunities and hence the caste-struggle between lower and higher castes in future is inevitable. Since the ancient law-givers have deliberately put 'prohibitions' on each caste, there is no integration and a feeling of amity among Indians. Dr.Ambedkar says in this context :

"Caste has killed public spirit, caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. Virtue has become caste ridden and morality has become caste bound."11

Every Hindu is fanatical about his caste; he is ready to do anything for the preservation of his caste. Hindus hate each other's caste and each caste claims that it is superior to the other. Each member claims caste-kinship as the following words of Dr.Ambedkar make clear :

"My caste man good or bad
My caste man right or wrong"12

Brahmins throughout the history have cared only for their 'material happy life', and 'ruling interest' in the name of religion. Brahmins were mainly responsible for building the ancient Indian social and religious system. In this context J.R.Kamble writes :

"They (Brahmins) paid no attention to the social ills. They had no sympathy for the oppressed and depressed classes. They promoted no movement to strengthen the hands of brotherhood by spreading true knowledge. Under this system the fate of the downtrodden was sealed. For their social, religious privileges and occupations, training, education right from the birth to death the poor souls suffered at the hands of caste Hindus more particularly under Brahmins."¹³

The discriminatory and prohibitory laws separated lower castes from the main stream of the ancient social, political and economic system. But reforms and agitations were carried out by the depressed classes from time to time against the established Hindu order, laws and the Brahmins. Kabir Das, Basaveshwara and other religious saints tried to reform the Indian unjust society.

Dr. Ambedkar was the first person to criticise Hinduism vehemently, and publicly burnt the 'Manusmriti' as a mark of rejection of Hindu social values. But no Hindu philosopher or patriot of Hinduism could question when Dr. Ambedkar burnt the Manusmriti on 25th December 1929, at Poona, because all knew that Manusmriti was the work of a biased or prejudiced man who tried to oppress the Shudras with religious sanction.

It is interesting to note the activities of Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker in this context. He raised a storm in South India and thundered against the Brahminical laws which had destroyed the lives of untouchables. Periyar educated the deprived masses and organised people to fight against the evils of Hinduism and regain self-respect by denouncing it. Naicker declared once :

"God is nothing but the inventions of barbarians, Veda is filled with conspiracy, Purana is a bundle of bluffs."14

Ramaswamy Naicker's extreme idea of waging wars on Hindu Gods and Brahmins was backed by rationality, as well as love and affection for the depressed classes. Periyar was a rational thinker, social scientist and prophet of the oppressed groups. Periyar turned his life into a 'Mission', but his extreme ideas were misunderstood by the people. He led many agitations, the latest was on January 7, 1972, when a big procession was conducted under the auspices of the "Superstition Eradication Conference" at Salem, in which the effigy of Rama was "beaten with shoes all along the way. Posters satirised the ludicrous stories of the birth of the Hindu Gods."¹⁵ The purpose of Ramaswamy Naicker was not to insult the Hindu Gods and Brahmins, but his movement aimed at demonstrating to the public how illogical, unscientific Hindu Brahminical laws which have devastated the culture of the deprived castes were. V.R.Krishnaswamy writes :

"Periyar wanted to bull-doze, dynamite and blast off the reactionary and racial order."¹⁶

The teachings of the Brahminical Hindu scriptures are against humanity, fraternity, equality and justice. They preach hatred, contempt and jealousy, so that each caste hates the other, and divides Hindu society into heterogenous groups. Though the Varnashrma system of ancient India apparently was based on 'Division of work', Shudras were never allowed to choose the job which would give them honour, wealth and status in the society. And the duty of the Shudra was to serve the upper three Varnas or classes without grudging.¹⁷ The caste Hindus have never bothered to reform the social, economic and cultural position of the downtrodden people. They have mostly bothered about their power, prestige and superiority over the lower classes. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar writes :

"A caste is ever ready to take advantage of the helplessness of man. Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reforms and for killing all reforms."¹⁸

The Brahmins throughout history have claimed that they were superior to all other castes and they were born to

rule. But the question is, how did the Brahmins use 'religion' to crush the non-Brahmins? Brahmins inflicted religious 'fears' on the non-Brahmins which have deculturised and kept the non-Brahmins in dark and a dismal state. The Brahminical literature has imposed many fearful laws.

"If a Brahmin dies of food given by a Shudra he will be re-born as a village pig."¹⁹

The Shudra was also prohibited from milking the cow.²⁰ Many discriminatory laws prevailed in ancient India. The nature of punishment differed from one community to another, for similar offences, and Shudras were the worst victims of such laws. Shudras were also prohibited from wearing sacred thread, studying Vedas, and kindling sacred fire (right to sacrifice).²¹ The three factors responsible for the degrading position of Scheduled Castes in India are : (a)Hindu religion, (b) Brahminical oppressive laws and (c) Brahmins. They have created an artificial division among Indians and claimed to themselves the status of a 'superior' class and remained as 'ruling class' since the ages.

Dr. Ambedkar describes the caste systems thus :

"Caste in India is means of artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy."²²

The idea of untouchability and pollution keeps Scheduled Castes to the lowest position and virtually there is no cultural development among the untouchables.

Dr. A. M. Rajasekhariah writes :

"Untouchability was a disability of a religious nature, and not just or solely a social aberration. Religion was fully impressed to support and justify this practice."²³

Dr. Ambedkar was cautious about the caste system and its bad repercussions on the untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar in his Memorandum submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission on 29th May 1928, on behalf of the 'Bahiskrit Hitakarani Sabha' (Depressed Class Association) of Bombay mentioned thus :

"Many people in the world have fallen low by force of circumstances. But having fallen, they are free to rise. The Depressed classes, on the other hand, form a solitary case of a people who have remained fallen because their rise is opposed to the religious notions of the majority of their country men."²⁴

The Shudras were forced to eat beef and hence were supposed to be 'polluted', and this made them 'Untouchables'. Even to-day in Southern parts of India Scheduled Castes are forced to wear clothes below the waistline. Chamars are beaten when they are dressed like Rajaputs. The marriage processions of Scheduled Castes are prohibited in Madras. The untouchables have to use respectful language and a low tone while speaking to their high caste man. Mateer writes :

"The Pulayan dare not say "I" but "adiyan" 'your slave'. His house is called 'Madam' (dung heap) hut. His children he speaks as 'monkeys' or 'calves' and when speaking he must place the hand over his mouth lest the breath go forth and pollute the person he is addressing."25

Dr.J.H. Hutten the authority on caste problem writes thus :

"If 'the Pulluyan wish to address a Brahmin, he must stand far off and 'cry loud'"26

The caste Hindus are so worried about purity that if by chance they touch the untouchable, the first

thing they would do is to bathe, to recite prayers and change their sacred thread which would purify. Have the concepts like 'impurity' 'purity' 'touchability' 'untouchability' 'sacred thread' 'twice born' got any rationality or scientific basis? These concepts are nothing but the illegitimate creations of the Brahmins and caste Hindus to oppress and suppress the low castes. The Hindu Brahminical laws are the greatest enemies of Scheduled castes in particular and non-Brahmins in general, which have destroyed the socio-economic and cultural life of the lower castes. The Hindu religion makes Brahmin a very powerful and 'Divine authority' to rule. Manu Smriti says :

"A Brahmin may kill Sudra and his action is equivalent merely to the killing of a cat, a mongoose, a blue jay, a stray dog, a lizard, an owl, or a crow."²⁷

In every society, the class which has marched ahead in education, politics and other fields, guides the unorganised, ignorant and illiterate masses. The responsibility of such 'ruling-elite' is more important than the ruled class, because the class which is put

into an advantageous position avails of all the opportunities and maintains its rule over other masses. But this is reversed in the case of Indian intellectual Brahmins. Brahmins in India who claim to be wise and superior to all other castes, exploited the non-Brahmin ignorant masses. The Brahmins or any intellectual class should use their position or powers to reform or develop the society, but the intellectual class in India deliberately did not reform the society because they had the fear that if the lower classes became aware of their positions and rights, they would pose a threat to the ruling classes and hence the 'ruling elite' deliberately kept the Shudras under continuous poverty and subjugation. The intellectuals have become tyrannical toward the lower castes and have waged inhuman wars on the cultural, economic and the educational life of the oppressed classes. Thus the 'ruling elite' in the history of India have been hypocritical and oppressive in nature. Dr. Ambedkar writes :

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"It is true that intellect by itself is no virtue. It is only a means that depends upon ends which an intellectual person pursues. An intellectual can be a good man but he can easily be a rogue."28

The Scheduled Castes suffered a lot in the Hindu social system, and very little attention has been paid to the social ills by the ancient kings and reformers. But in the medieval period the Bhakti movement tried to bring about reformation in the Hindu society. The religious saints waged a war against caste system and untouchability. The prominent name that figures in Karnataka history is that of Basaveswara, who in the 12th century tried to break the caste system and untouchability. His work towards emancipation of untouchables is marvellous and commendable.

In the 20th Century two important personalities who have struggled a lot to emancipate the Scheduled Castes are Dr.B.R.Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhiji. Dr.Ambedkar being himself an untouchable turned his life into a mission and strove hard to liberate the downtrodden masses from the tyrannical Hindu system. On the contrary Gandhiji a caste Hindu, who never underwent the humiliations, insults, and sufferings unlike Dr.Ambedkar, worked partially to liberate the Scheduled Castes socially. Gandhi's work regarding

abolition of untouchability is based upon a contradiction, because Gandhiji used to say that 'untouchability' is a sin or blackspot on Hinduism and he wanted to wipe it out. Yet on the other hand he defended Hinduism, and the Chaturvarna system as scientific. Gandhiji's attitude towards the untouchables was no doubt sympathetic but his love towards these people was that of a nurse, whereas the attitude and love of Dr. Ambedkar towards untouchables was that of mother to the child and was real. By dint of his constant efforts and continuous struggle against the Congress and the Britishers, Dr. Ambedkar constitutionally and legally recognised the Scheduled Castes as 'weaker sections' and 'oppressed classes'. In order to compensate for the injustice done to these people, Dr. Ambedkar incorporated various provisions in the Constitution of India and made it possible for the Scheduled Castes/Tribes to grow as a strong people claiming equality with caste Hindus.

Right from the dawn of the Indian civilization upto 1947, the Scheduled Castes lived the life of serfs

and slaves. These people were not given any opportunity. As a result they were reduced to the 'ruled class'. But the independence has brought new light or life to the Scheduled Castes. When Dr.Ambedkar was appointed as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, the Scheduled Castes/Tribes got real independence, because the neglected social, economic and political justice and all the liberties came to be guaranteed in the Constitution by Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, the saviour of the untouchable masses. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar was the first elite among Scheduled Castes whose calibre and scholarship cannot be compared with that of any man in the country. Dr.A.M.Rajasekhariah *writes :

"Dr.B.R.Ambedkar was a brilliant academician, a popular attorney, an erudite scholar, a great legal luminary, a powerful writer, a great constitutional 'pundit', emancipator and champion of rights and liberties of the dumb, downtrodden and oppressed people from whose very rank he sprang."29

Dr.Ambedkar knew that the Hindu society, religion and caste Hindus have done great injustice to the Scheduled

Castes/Scheduled Tribes. In order to uplift the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes socially, economically, politically and culturally, he strongly felt the need for 'special treatment' or 'protection' to these people. And these 'special provisions', 'constitutional protections' or 'reservations' have enabled the Scheduled Castes/Tribes to avail of the educational and employment opportunities and there-by the 'reservation system' has created a 'new class' or 'elite class' among the SC/ST's. Those SC/ST's who have been benefitted by these reservations have emerged as 'competing elites' or 'new class' among the SC/ST's. The following constitutional provisions are directly responsible for the emergence of 'elite class' among SC/ST's.

The constitutional provisions for the weaker sections i.e., SC/ST's are called by different names in different contexts. They are "special provisions", "preferential treatment", "concessions", "privileges" etc. Scholars have used the term like "protective discrimination".³⁰ Marc Galanter calls them

"compensatory discrimination programmes",³¹ "legal or constitutional guarantees" etc.

- 1) Article 46 proclaims the promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections. The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.
- 2) Article 330 - Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes/Tribes in the House of people (Lok Sabha).
- 3) Article 332(1) - Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes/Tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of the state.
- 4) Article 335 - claims of Scheduled Castes/Tribes to service and posts. The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes shall be taken into consideration consistent with the maintenance of efficiency of administration in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State.

The above mentioned provisions or safeguards have helped to create a new class or generation among the weaker sections or SC/ST's who by virtue of these facilities are making progress in the field of education, employment and politics. The 'new elite' class of SC/ST's is a ray of hope for the oppressed classes whose sacrifice and work are very important in the upliftment of their brethren who have not still been able to come out of centuries of oppression, poverty and backwardness.

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