

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Week-10

Lecture-48

Introduction to Sociology of Dalits II

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing the discussion of the essay written by Paramjit S.Judge. It is an introduction to a compilation of essays that appeared in sociological bulletin and the previous class, we were talking about how Dalit Sociology has emerged as a unique field though there was no specific focus on Dalits in the initial decades of Indian Sociology and what we are seeing is a new era from the 1990s facilitated by both political as well as scholarly factors or factors associated with the transformation of Indian society in which Dalit Sociology emerges as an important subfield.

According to the census of India 2011, the percentage of the population of the scheduled caste is 16.2.

It is a huge population which is unevenly distributed in India. By their sheer size, the SC's are capable of influencing the policy decisions of the Indian government if they are united. However, this is not the case. They are divided among various castes, and there is also a hierarchy among various Dalit castes.

These hierarchies are local and are characterised by claims and counterclaims of superiority. Caste hierarchies among Dalits is one of the major reasons for their failure to get organised for better articulations of interest. Some of the castes have been more mobile than others, and as a result, they have benefited from state policies, including the reservation policy. So, this is again an important reality. The Dalits who constitute say around 16.2 percentage, they are not a homogenous group. There are also a lot of debates about whether they replicate the hierarchy the Brahmins espouse or if the hierarchy

among the Dalits is different. There are very interesting theoretical discussions on that.

Historically, various forms of disability imposed upon Dalits, which were prevalent even during the colonial period, have disappeared in the public sphere. However, certain observations are necessary to understand the magnitude of the problem. If you look into a series of civil and religious disabilities and privileges, as Ghurye mentioned, quite a lot of them have disappeared. For example, the right to visit the temple, the right to walk through the main roads, restrictions on food, etc. A host of such discriminatory practices have been, to a large extent, successfully eliminated, but that is not a complete story.

The foremost among them was the untouchability. The essence of untouchability lies in the fact that even the human body has been endowed with certain characteristics that can pollute others by touch. An untouchable person's body is permanently and irrevocably polluted, and he or she assumes this pollution is caused by birth and that nothing in this world can change that pollution. So, a person is born into an untouchable caste, and the person will live, and the person will die as an untouchable body. So, the body becomes a seat for spreading this untouchability.

We also have instances where the shadow of a footprint of an untouchable could pollute the upper caste people. Accepting food from members of such caste was far beyond imagination. We have discussed that. Besides the touch, other forms of disabilities were also imposed on them. For example, women belonging to some caste, the Nadars of Tamil Nadu were not even allowed to cover their breasts.

Similarly, growing moustache, having longer names with proper suffixes were prohibited. These are all familiar stories, I am not repeating. Religious disabilities include a prohibition against entering the temples to meditate and recite sacred hymns, etc. Rules of caste endogamy were also very strict, and under certain circumstances, the provision of hypergamy and hypogamy existed to a limited extent. So, hypergamy is a scenario where lower and upper caste men can marry lower caste women, and hypogamy is the reverse, where a lower caste man can marry an upper caste woman.

But these were exceptions. The post-independence period was characterised by the state

intervention in the caste system through various methods, for the possibility of casteless society. The Untouchability Offence Act of 1955 and, later on, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 protected the untouchable in particular. However, the story of independent India is not without hiccups and the withering away of the caste has not occurred. It is a familiar story despite these legal provisions, the situation continues.

It would be presumptuous to say that nothing has changed. There is reasonable evidence to argue that untouchability, discrimination and atrocities against Dalits have waned, but there is well-recorded evidence of atrocities on them, too. The recent scholarship shows that despite various legal provisions, the underprivileged conditions of Dalits continue due to various forms of exclusion they are facing. For example, some studies have known that the labour market has a tremendous bias against untouchable caste. Sukhaeo Thorat's study, Thorat and Newman, Thorat and Attewell. In other words, discrimination against Dalits has entered the modern capitalist market, which is expected to be egalitarian.

This is again a very important argument. On the one hand, it talks about the tenacity of the caste system to reshape itself to be adaptable to changing situations. On the other hand, it also shows the hollowness of certain economic assumptions that a market economy or a neoliberal economy is blind to social factors like caste, religion, gender and other things. Because in typical neoliberal logic, such social factors are assumed to be irrelevant. And what matters is the logical business or logical calculations of economics.

The studies have shown that even in the economic realm, At the heights of neoliberal economic policies, caste remains an important one; caste functions as various forms of networks, as resources and as a host of others. There are very fascinating studies on that. However, it is important to note that the social exclusion of Dalits in India is not confined to the labour market. It rather tends to cover the entire gamut of their existence.

The conflict, struggle, and movement section looks into the Dalit movement, Dalit struggle and other things. An unequal system of power and privileges creates conflict and tension, individual and collective, local and regional, on many occasions when the

efficacy and legitimacy of the system are questioned. Over a while, various castes among Dalits have come into conflict with the upper caste on different issues. Bringing the issue of conflict and struggle is venturing into the public sphere of power relations, that is, politics. So, if you look into the history of the Dalit movement or Dalit struggle, almost every region of India has witnessed that for the past several decades, if not centuries.

So, each of these attempts was, in fact, an articulation of a power struggle. They all claim to have rightful access and rights over certain excluded oppositions and spheres. Caste struggles and emancipatory movements of the Dalit caste have a long history traced back to the colonial period. The British rule in India, despite the rulers' dominant imperial interest, brought western modernity in the form of rationality. Modernity manifested through the organisation of administrative and judicial system, rationalisation of land revenues.

Though in some parts of India with disastrous results, the establishment of effective transport systems through waterways, roadways and railways. On top of all, the introduction of modern education provided avenues for non-traditional occupations. Linking jobs with education was one of the major transformations that occurred with British rule's onset. New forces of production, particularly in the cities, gave rise to new conditions of social interaction. So, this particular paragraph encapsulates the major transformations brought in by the British.

It is not only the infrastructural changes and technological changes; it also brought in new ideologies, new forms of rationalisation, and new forms of institutions that fundamentally changed our social system. These changes contributed to the emergence of powerful social reform movements in cities such as Calcutta, Bombay, etc. Most of the movements redefined some of the prevailing social institutional practices, such as child marriage, widowhood, sati and so on, socially well. The focus on untouchability and the caste system turned quite late, but caste issues began to haunt the reformers towards the end of the 19th century. These are all familiar stories, so I am not going to in detail.

The movement waged by social reformers had limited appeal in actualising the goal of

the end of untouchability and human treatment and the inhuman treatment of the untouchables. A small class of intellectuals belonging to Dalit class emerged in the 20th century which fought the caste system by various means. It is interesting to note that the understanding of strategies to overcome untouchability and caste-based discrimination combined religious and social issues by adopting the social movement approach. So, that is how these larger transformations happened. Three notable cases of movements and conflicts could be mentioned here, the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, the Mahars of maharashtra, the Ad- Dharmis of Punjab.

All these cases signify the combination of religious dimension and the political mobilisation approach. So, all these movements, as Professor Judge explained, combined both a political mobilisation, which is based on a secular platform and also that of a religious dimension. The post-independence period was marked by powerful intervention of the state towards ending the caste system or rendering its ineffectiveness through various policies and enactment. The development process initiated by the nascent sovereign state ushered in new kinds of conflict. We find numerous incidents of conflict between Dalits and the upper caste on issues of land, wages and power.

And if you look into the reasons why there was violence, or there was a conflict between Dalits and the upper caste, you will be able to see a lot of instances that concern conflict around land, wage and power and a host of other things. For example, one of the triggering factors of the Dalit revolt or conflict between Dalits and the upper caste was the refusal of the Dalits to perform traditional occupations or traditional obligations in a village. So, that was opposed by the upper caste, and they were violently involved. So, various issues associated with land, wages and power in various forms were the central reasons. We have combined two processes to create a new character of caste conflicts in postcolonial India.

First, the developmental process, despite being proclaimed to be a mixed economy with a socialist path, was essentially capitalist development with certain protection from the state. Second, the democratic processes engaged collectivities for making claim for the share of the resources and power. This is an interesting dilemma because liberal

secularism, a liberal democracy, wants people to form a majority and then this majority rules.

It wants you to appeal to others and then form a collectivity. That is how a public sphere is supposed to help you in mobilising a group of people in your support. But in India or in many other countries, what happens existing forms of mobilisation in the form of caste provided a readymade platform for mobilisation. So, caste was used as a very useful criteria of mobilisation, religion was used and this collective claim, collective clamoring for these resources became the hallmark of India's democratic processes. Following these processes, Dalit politics made a paradigmatic shift after the emergence of BSP under the leadership of Kanshi Ram towards the last decade of 20th century.

It also changed the nature of conflict between Dalits and the upper caste. The most salient element of the new formation was the engagement with the formal political process and working out a set of alliances with other political parties if required to capture formal power. So, it was not only an oppositional or agitational dialogue or relation with the state, but rather Dalits, especially under the aegis of Kanshi Ram and BSP, wanted to formally participate and then capture political power. They engage in certain social engineering, especially Mayawati's experience, which is seen as a social engineering where the Dalits were able to have alliances with other groups and then formally capture political power. Various changes in the social and economic life of the people in India had created intelligentsia and middle class among Dalits, changing the nature of discourses of Dalit liberation.

Since the BSP was aimed at garnering votes for Dalits, the emphasis on Dalithood and identity came to be as a political articulation, as we mentioned earlier. What we have at present is a mixture of all conflicts occurring between the Dalits and the upper caste. In rural hinterlands, there are feudal bases of conflicts in which the land-owning caste exercises their traditional power to commit atrocities, and there are a series of cases in Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and in a host of other places, the caste conflicts still continue in the old mode. Conflicts are emerging in response to the violence against Dalit women at

many places and villages. Despite the legal safeguards for the protection of Dalits from various wrongdoings against them, there is a general apathy among the police and bureaucracy due to their non-Dalit caste background.

This is also a very important reflection of how the Indian police system, Indian judiciary, and Indian bureaucracy are heavily tilted against Dalits because they are mostly by people of the upper caste. Examining the changes in the context of Dalits. Two important dimensions change among Dalits after independence that require extensive probing, namely the pattern and direction of change. Both dimensions take cognizance of certain serious theoretical concerns. Sociologists agree that all social formations are dynamic, the only difference is the pace of change.

It takes long time for values and norms, cultures and customary practices to change. The arrival of capitalism signifies the domination of class relations, but the caste system seems to persist along with class formation, the same point that we discussed. There are interesting works which argue how caste remain a very salient and very powerful instrument even in a neoliberal economy. There are arguments about how they help in opportunity hoarding.

They help in creating an exclusive set of entrepreneurs, thereby blocking off others from entering into competition. There are many interesting, insightful studies into this particular aspect. In sociological literature, change concerning caste and Dalits has been described, examined and analyzed in three modes. First of all, changes have been understood as a result of the dynamism of society in which emerging forces tend to influence various aspects of social structure. The underlying logic of such an explanation is that no society is static, and forces of development affect all parts of society.

Therefore, sociologists have widely accepted industrialisation, urbanisation, education, technology and communication as major forces of change. The second mode puts a greater degree of emphasis on the role of the state in bringing social change. Such a change is called a change from above, which is state-initiated change. In those cases

where an attempt has been made by well-meaning rich or high-profile leaders to intervene in the existing state of affairs or to modify or change, the term change from above is also used as a signifier. The third mode is an attempt of the people concerning the change, the existing conditions.

In the case of Dalits, it would imply different strategies employed by them to improve their condition. It is known as the change from below. So, they are talking about change from below, change from above and the larger structural changes, due to industrialisation, urbanisation and other things. All three modes are interconnected and, at the same time, could be distinguished in terms of their operations. For example, the state intervention enabled certain Dalits to get education which acted as a catalyst for their change.

The developmental process opened myriads of job opportunities in the labour market. However, we know that there are imperfections in the actual operations of the labour market, and to correct its deviations, there is a need for state intervention. It talks about how the state remains relevant even in the light of market interventions. And when we speak of development forces bringing change in Indian society, the first thing that comes to our mind is the emergence of a new division of labour, which has broken down the old system by creating new occupations. There is no correspondence between caste and occupation as it had traditionally existed.

However, it does not imply that the Dalit caste has now been competing on an equal footing with the upper caste. Various studies referred to the earlier have shown Dalits face discrimination in the labour market. So, the argument is that industrialisation and new opportunities have brought in new and different labour jobs, but again they are not egalitarian in their character. There is a huge discrepancy in terms of who gets to access what jobs.

So, there are the studies by Thorat and Newman. There is a reasonable basis to argue that in the urban area of India, untouchability has drastically reduced, whereas rural India is still undergoing transition. The low level of urbanisation in India is one of the major

factors in reinforcing caste inequalities in villages where people have been living as communities for centuries. It seems that the role of post-colonial state has remained crucial in ameliorating the conditions of Dalits. The state's role in post-colonial India entailed multiple trajectories of strategies to end the caste system and untouchability. This section is to critically look at the role of the caste.

The domain assumption of all the three, all the actions of the state could be stated like this. The problems of the Dalits are not simply economic, but it covers all aspects of their lives due to which there is a need for comprehensive intervention to improve their conditions. There are four trajectories along which the strategies were worked out. One is to initiate the developmental programs aimed exclusively at improving the economic conditions of Dalits. That is to have, say, a special educational package, a special economic package, maybe a special land reform package, which is a target-specific approach.

Second, to end all practices that point towards untouchability. So, that is why the Shadoocast and Shadooth type atrocities act was passed and a series of other initiatives were brought into the picture.

The third was to provide for reservation in education institutions and public sector jobs to build cultural capital among them. Again, there is much debate about whether the reservation should be continued or discontinued, whether the reservation is against the notion of merit, and all these questions. However, the fundamental argument is that reservation is a means of ensuring adequate representation of different sections of different sought-after jobs.

It is not a poverty alleviation mechanism. Rather, it is a mechanism to ameliorate the historical injustice that produces over-representation of upper caste and underrepresentation of lower caste in privileged position. So, that is the fundamental obligation of reservation, the objective of reservation and the reservation is seen as a means for the depressed classes to create a middle class and a cultural capital among them. The fourth trajectory was political empowerment. But it was to be temporary and to

be renewed after every ten years. Reservations in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha were meant to be discontinued, but it never happened.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments about local self-governance in which the Dalit participation and reservation are also implemented. Endorsements to the Indian constitution are a grim reminder of the fact that empowerment is an equally important aspect of improving the conditions of Dalits. Has state intervention contributed to a more egalitarian and inclusive society? There has been a decline in the practice of untouchability in public places. For example, we rarely hear a denial of entry to a Dalit in a restaurant or hotel. Untouchability has progressively disappeared in economic transactions and travel.

We hardly find cases where a person is denied the right to travel by virtue of his caste. Urban centres remain more or less guided by the logic of capitalism, which is the circulation of commodities, whereas villages still exist as commodities despite penetrations of capital. Most of the Dalits living in villages are poor wage earners and suffer economic exclusion. That is the story of rural India. However, there is evidence of social exclusion which emerges from their caste status, including untouchability. State intervention has been successful in public spheres, whereas private spheres are marked by the autonomy of individual choice, where Dalits are excluded from various forms of interactions.

The private sphere is considered to be a person's sphere of autonomy. So, the state has many very serious limitations to intervene in that. Moving on to examining the efforts of the Dalits to improve their conditions or end caste stigma, we can broadly identify three strategies they adopted. The first strategy revolved around the issues of religion which seems important for the people who had been denied the privilege to worship. The story of Ramayana, in which Lord Rama beheads a meditating Shudra in forms, was a great source of solace in the face of poverty and wretched conditions of life.

In this regard, any hope of religious identity created strong currents of action among them, which was evident from the conversion to Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. So,

quite a lot of these depressed classes converted to other religions in mass especially during the colonial period and even during pre-colonial period. Sikhism benefited greatly from that, Islam benefited greatly from that. So, religion was seen by many lower caste people as a medium to escape the strict caste structures. The second effort on the part of Dalits could be called Sanskritisation, which is changing one's way of life and adopting the upper caste lifestyle. One interesting aspect of Sanskritisation is that there is no threats to religion. Srinivas, who propounded the concept and theory, argues that historically, a considerable number of castes have successfully gained Kshatriya status. He provides the historical evidence of Shudra becoming kings and then claiming to be Kshatriya. So, this is again what we have discussed. Sanskritisation is seen as an attempt by the lower caste people to claim an upper caste position, and throughout a couple of generations, if political and economic resources back it, it is often achieved. The third strategy is political mobilisation or social movement, which seems to be proving more efficient than any other efforts of the Dalits to fulfil essential conditions for their mobilisation.

Among these conditions, one important was the numerical strength within the region, a certain degree of economic mobility, attainment of education and the movement out of dependence on the local dominant caste. These are all strategies or factors that determine the political independence and political resourcefulness of a particular caste. Especially the last one, the movement out of the dependence on the local dominant caste. The large-scale migration from rural areas to urban areas. The large-scale migration from jobs that require you to depend on your landowner for your job to urban centres where you can sell your labour to anybody has been a major factor.

The paradigmatic shifts in the strategy of Dalits were brought by Kanshi Ram, who organised the BSP. It was promised upon the fact that instead of claiming the unity of mankind, it is politically important to stress the differences within society. Kanshi Ram worked on the caste differences and attacked the upper caste, particularly the Brahmins, in his political rhetoric, which he used as an effective tool for political propaganda. So, again, as we see, we need to remember that strategy seems to have reached a full circle.

Now what we see is the rise of Hindu nationalism, the rise of Hindu identity politics in which caste differences are played down very significantly.

And many people say it is a backlash to OBC and scheduled caste mobilisation. The trajectory of the effort of the Dalits to improve their conditions does not show any clear-cut direction and single methodology. It has happened due to great degree of heterogeneity which has come to the surface for many reasons. There is a class formation within the caste and a caste differentiation among the Dalits. The BSP symbolises the unity of all marginalised and oppressed caste communities but in practice it has turned out to be party of the Chamar caste.

As a result the politics of caste could be seen at the best in the form of the BSP. Something which was in vogue earlier but remained hidden under the metaphor of equality and secularism in electoral politics. The historical contribution of BSP under Kanshi Ram is that it brought out the functionality of caste identity in Indian politics. However, there was a necessary condition for such success namely the pride in one's caste and Kanshi Ram provided this with his powerful rhetoric against Brahmins. However, these developments also indicate towards the emergence of exclusive identity and politics.

Something that we discuss that any such identitarian politics tends to become exclusivist and then begin to treat others the way these people are treated. Despite the promising changes, it cannot be argued that all castes in all regions of India have reached the stage of breaking cultural barriers, for it requires certain essential changes in the conditions of life, which is not happening at the moment for all. So, as long as the general economic conditions of the Dalits do not improve, the chances of inclusion are minimal. It should also be reminded that despite all efforts, strategy of social inclusion is inseparably linked with the integration and consensus. In this regard, the state and social movement approach would not bring about inclusion at the level of interpersonal interaction as caste is not simply a social structural principle, but it is also a state of mind.

So, he is talking about how a large scale understanding, large scale transformation in the ideas of people, in the subjectivities of people in their positions are required because it is not only about the structural features but also about the subjective dimensions of caste. So, this is the summary of this essay by Paramjit Judge, and this has provided a very broad overview of Dalit politics, its possibilities, its limitations again, as I told you, this essay was written when the Dalit movement and, especially that of BSP was at its powerful peak. But now, in the very recent time, we see a turnaround; we see a decline of Dalit politics, and it is consumed, or it is brought under the larger purview of a Hindu mobilisation. It does not mean that Dalit politics seems to exist or it has lost relevance, but what is important is to see how they unfold in the coming decades. So, we will wind up the class today. Thank you.