

## Reflections On Castes and Dalits

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Caste system is unique to the Indian sub-continent. Perhaps it originated as a class system based on the functions of groups of persons in the society. In the early tribal society at the stage of hunter-food gatherers, a class/caste hierarchy had no place. Only with the advances in agriculture around the 6th millennium BC, there was a huge surplus production of food grains that promoted kingship, trade, organized religion with a priest class etc. This kind of development was common to all river valley civilizations - of Tigris & Euphrates, Nile, Indus, Yangtze etc. The priest class in India became the Brahmins, the ruling and warrior class became Kshatriyas, the traders Vaishyas and the labour Shudras. For reasons which are not clear a fifth class/caste 'Panchamas' also evolved in India for doing menial jobs—though later on they became agricultural labour—yet untouchables.

The differentiation of four Varnas in India was not rigid. Strictly speaking, there were only Brahmins and non-brahmins. Even Brahmins were not always of a pure breed - in the distant past, many had assumed the status cleverly by mastering the rituals and migrating to a different area.

As for Kshatriyas, there were too many small kingdoms and the chief of any caste could be elevated to Kshatriya caste by paying a fee to the clever Brahmin for a ritual which involved among other stages his entering a gold case (*Hiranya Garbha*). The Brahmins, will utter some abracadabra and the person will come out of the gold case as a Kshatriya with a genealogy for sixteen generations.

Similarly people from lower castes were upwardly mobile-literally. Migrate to a different area with some cash in your hand and claim any caste. For example in Tamilnadu many Valaiyars (fishermen) with money move to different areas, buy some cattle and claim to be Idaiyars (Yadavas).

Even today there are hundreds of subcastes based on their profession of the past or the present. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the 'caste' is rigid in India—though in the rest of the world the difference is only that of the class.

The authors of the \*book under review start with a Historic Background to the caste question with a simultaneous discussion on the Dalit situation. Here are some excerpts from the first chapter :

1. Though colonialism created urban industrial centres, created a proletariat, made land into a saleable transferable commodity in many regions, but all these serious economic changes failed to make any dent on the caste system mainly because these changes were brought into being from above without affecting the preexisting social balance of power.
2. The Nehruvian policy of industrialization certainly resulted in the creation of a working class and mass migration to the industrial centres like Madras, Mumbai and Calcutta; a process that had started in the colonial period, but was now accelerated. This process, too, certainly did not lead to the demise of the caste system. Ghettos of oppressed caste people came up in the industrial centres, leaving the caste structure largely untouched. In fact, the caste structure was exported to the 'modern temples'.

(In villages) in local situations the Backward Castes have become the immediate enemies of the SCs/STs who are pitted directly against not the Brahmins, but the brahminised intermediate classes. The important thing to note is that, though the Brahmins may not be playing a dominant role in village society (in fact most of them are now in the cities of India and of the advanced capitalist countries), Brahminism as an ideology is still going strong. Some of the factors have changed, but the viciousness of caste hierarchy is not seriously impaired. Bihar and Tamil Nadu are classic illustrations of this power structure, and conflicts are also galore in these two States. Andhra Pradesh's case is different mainly because of the strong presence of a Maoist movement. In parts of Bihar, the Maoists and their class enemies are themselves organized along caste lines.

3. Dalits engaged as safai karam-chairs (janitors) sweep public roads, clean public toilets and urinals in trains, tracks and railway platforms. They remove municipal and industrial waste and keep sewage lines in order. There is an estimate of at least a total of 22,327 deaths per year in the manholes of India. Sanitation workers also suffer various chronic diseases due to their exposure to toxic gases in the manholes and have a high mortality rate-most of them die much before they reach retirement age. Colin Gonsalves of the Human Rights Law Network calls this genocide.
4. **Dalits representation in higher education & media :**  
According to 1987 data, they constituted only 0.61 percent of Professors, 1.4 of associate professors and 3.16 percent of lecturers. Their representation in the mainstream media at any level is almost nil and casteism is well entrenched. They are well represented in the posts of peons and sweepers. Majority of universities have zero SC/ST Professors & Readers.
5. **Students** - seats reserved for SCs STs in IITs remain unfilled. Some students - among these who get admitted drop out. Suicides not uncommon. The threat posed by reservations seems to have unleashed a backlash in premier higher educational institutions.
6. There is no deterrent punishment for any violation of reservation positions.
7. "Dalit women are the Dalits among Dalits because they suffer three fold oppression on the basis of caste, classes and gender".
8. Dalits continue to be dispossessed, assaulted, murdered, their houses burnt, the women raped with impunity. Rather than protecting them and upholding the law in this respect the police also continue to be very much involved in crimes and atrocities against the Dalits.
9. India is unwilling to engage in a constructive dialogue internationally on caste based discrimination with the United Nations committee on the elimination of Racial discrimination. Dalits have been campaigning that caste based discrimination be treated as a form of racism -with this committee. Indian Government has maintained that caste is not race.

#### **CASTE CONFLICT IN TN**

The authors give details of various violent events of 1960s, 70s and 80s in the second chapter. The Keelven-mani incident of 1968 was perhaps the worst. 44 Dalits—mostly women and children were burnt alive—their fault—they demanded reasonable wages for agricultural labour.

The Dravidian movement under Periyar was unique to Tamil Nadu. It was essentially a struggle by the non-brahmins against Brahmins in the government jobs. The movement assumed different names at different times such as 'Self Respect Movement' 'Justice Party' 'Dravida Kazhagam'—later split into 'Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam' etc. As the authors rightly observe the DMK and ADMK (which split from it in 1960s) did not make any serious difference to the social and political movement of the Dalits.

**Panchami lands** : Almost all political parties have at one time or other promised to distribute the panchami lands to the Dalits, but so far no attempt has been made to even identify these lands. Guess is more than five lakh acres. Also land under the purview of Hindu Religious Endowment Department are mostly under illegal occupation by other castes. When Dalits make a demand they are brutally assaulted.

"Among the several atrocities against the Dalits, Kodyankulam incident of 1995 is somewhat different. A one thousand strong force attacked Kodyankulam in September 1995, and the force included not only rifle wielding police but also shadowy men wielding choppers and iron rods. No house or individual in the village was spared, all the household assets were looted or smashed, and at the end of the raid, which lasted five hours, they dumped the smashed property into the community well and poured in pesticides to make the water poisonous. Even women, children and old men were mercilessly attacked.

Kodyankulam is not a typical Dalit village. Thanks to a large number of Gulf migrants and their remittances it became a prosperous village. Educational levels are higher than in an ordinary Dalit village, and economically the people are relatively independent. The villagers are of the opinion that it was precisely this prosperity that angered the Thevars and the attack was planned as a lesson to all the Dalits. Kodyankulam was an island of self-reliance surrounded on all sides by Thevar villages. Till today the village remains a ghost of its earlier self.

Some Dalits tried conversion to Christianity or Islam. This did not help them much.

### **DALITS IN KERALA— A PARADOXICAL SITUATION**

After giving a skeletal History of Kerala the authors describe the Reform movements. The last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century was a period of intense social upheaval in Kerala. Shri Narayana Guru was the principal instrument in the upliftment of Ezhavas, the second most numerous Dalit community in Kerala.

Ayyankali's Association for the protection of the Poor was formed in the first decade of the 20th century.

Several epoch making struggles took place in Kerala during the three decades prior to independence: Prominent among them were the Moplah rebellion—peasant struggles during the 1930s and 40s, the Vaikam Satyagraha, Salt Satyagraha and Punnappavayalar.

1. The agrarian structure in all the three regions of Kerala was in no way a uniform one. There were different kinds of tenants besides a large number of agricultural labourers in rural areas. There were several layers of tenants with sub-tenants and the Malabar Act gave protection to all these layers while the

Travancore and Cochin Act made only the Kanamdars relatively independent of the landlords.

2. Kerala is often hailed as the State where land reforms have been implemented with success. This success story is attributed to the progressive policies of the government, which was off and on under the control of the Leftists. Nonetheless, land reforms in Kerala had a chequered history from 1957 to 1969. By this time, the communists had effectively inculcated the feeling that, once the land relations were radically changed, the myriad problems of social/caste oppressions would cease to exist. The approach is one of economic determinism, which did not have much to do with the ground reality conditioned by several centuries of caste oppression. In fact, even then it was only in 1974, after protracted agitations by the agricultural labourers themselves, that they secured some advantage in the form of fixed working hours and minimum wages with a pension scheme. Though a provident fund scheme was also mooted, it was never implemented.
3. Viewed chronologically, it is evident that the question of the traditional tillers of the soil, the landless Dalit agricultural labourers, always received only a back seat in the agenda of the reformists. The land reforms in Kerala were thus a failure as far as the tillers of the soil were concerned. A brief perusal of the various land reform measures is sufficient to show this.
4. In 1985, the Government had identified 17.5 lakh acres of land for redistribution, but out of this only 57,000 acres were actually distributed. In 1991, 1,68,428 acres were declared surplus out of which less than 40 percent was distributed. Thus the distribution of surplus land was more symbolic than real, and in this respect Kerala did not fare much better than the other states.
5. Agricultural labourers' money wages have gone up spectacularly, but this is more than offset by price inflation and drastic reduction in the number of days employed.

Even the CPM was not free from prejudice against Dalits. K R Gowriamma—an Ezhava, though a senior leader, was expelled from CPM to prevent her from becoming the Chief Minister at one point of time.

Dalit youths are flocking to Hindu rightist organizations like the RSS and BJP. The communist leadership had made it a policy that Dalits would be nominated for contesting elections only from the reserved constituencies.

So far pogroms, as they take place periodically in Tamil Nadu and Bihar are absent here.

Efforts are on to consolidate the Dalits in Kerala into a socio-political force, and thus pave the way for their liberation and empowerment: A Dalit AIKYA Samiti has been launched to unify the scores of subcastes of Hindu and Christian Dalits.

### **KARNATAKA SCENARIO**

The authors say that Karnataka History is problematic.

"Thus, historically, all around and in Karnataka several influences have been at play, and present-day Karnataka is the composite of these various cultures and civilizations. Likewise, various religions had their ascendancy and decline in Kannada-speaking areas. Buddhism, Jainism and the Vedic religions had their rise and fall here. The decline of the strength of these religions marked the rise of

the Bhakthi movement during the 12th and 13th centuries. The various dynasties and kingdoms flourishing in the different parts of Karnataka patronized one or the other of these religions or movements". Viewed in this background, the history of Karnataka is too rich and vibrant to be able to summarise it into the conventional pattern of 'eight-legged essays'.

The authors trace trends in religion Veerashaivism - Lingayats etc. Many important co-leaders of Veerashaivites were Dalits. Lingayats emerged as an upper caste cluster eliminating Dalits.

Discussing about the land reforms of 1960s and 1970s the authors observe :

"In effect, what the land reforms achieved was that sections of the oppressor caste tenants, that is mainly the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, could get ownership of land, making them into direct enemies of the landless, predominantly Dalit agricultural workers.

Dalits benefitted only marginally from land reform and other populist (like Housing) schemes of Devraj Urs during 1970s".

There is an interesting quote of Ambedkar :

'I learnt that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi... a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan." Karnataka is no exception to this general situation. There are 'upper' caste Christians and Dalit Christians, 'upper' caste Muslims and Dalit Muslims, 'upper' caste Jains and Dalit Jains, and caste discrimination is rampant among all these communities.

### **DALIT POLITICS**

In 1970s a statewide independent Dalit organization—'Dalit Writers and Artists Association' was formed. This conclave later led to the formation of a new organization in Karnataka politics, namely, the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS). The DSS was launched as a forum to educate, organize and lead the Dalits in their struggle against the oppressors and the social system as such. Prior to the formal launching of the DSS, already numerous units of Ambedkar Yuvak Mandal (Ambedkar Youth Front) existed in the State, and the DSS made fruitful efforts to bring them together under a single umbrella organization. Within a very short time DSS grew into a massive cadre-based organization with units in every village having a significant Dalit population. Within ten years of its launching, the DSS acquired a Statewise membership of above 12 lakhs. This was certainly no mean achievement for the oppressed.

### **DALIT STRUGGLES IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

The authors make an interesting observation : The period of Vijaya-nagar empire is hailed as a particularly glorious one. Basically, what can be called a feudal mode of production prevailed till the arrival of the British colonists in the early 17th century in this part of the country. Portuguese, French, Dutch—had their way—British prevailed. A factory was established in Masulipatnam in 1611.

The communist movement grew in AP with the Dalits and Adivasis as its main base of support whether it was the Telengana movement or the Srikakulam armed struggle, or in the case of the ongoing 'Naxalite' movement in large areas of the state these sections have played and continue to play a pivotal role in the form of mass support and cadre base.

Why the question of caste oppression was never considered an integral part of the structure or base of the exploitative system by the communists, and tackled accordingly, is a vitally important question. Even now, when this question is being powerfully posed, the communists (that is, the Naxalites in the context of Andhra) are trying to keep their Dalit and Adivasi base intact through only half-hearted patchwork solutions. This cannot be termed a breakthrough in any sense.

What is termed as caste wars have become routine over large parts of India. With all the militant progressivism of contemporary Andhra history the situation is no different here than in Tamilnadu or Bihar.

The authors have discussed about the social reform movements of the late 19th century of Veeresalingam Pantulu, a Brahmin and Gurajala Anpe Rao. They were essentially upper caste affairs and the Varna system was kept intact.

There is some discussion about the nationalist anti-British movement which started in 1907 when Bipin Chandra Pal came to Andhra to propagate the ideals of Swadeshi movement. Non-Brahmin movements by Peasant organizations, Nationalist movements and literature and Dalit movements and literature are discussed. Unfortunately Dalits were divided among the parties.

Telangana Armed struggle is discussed in some 15-16 pages. Though it was successful to a great extent, it could not be carried to its logical conclusion since the Communist Party withdrew its support on instructions from the Soviet Union.

While the chapter on Tamilnadu has taken 32 pages, Kerala 42 pages and Karnataka 35 pages, this chapter on Andhra takes more than 100 pages. That is to say that this chapter occupies as many pages as the other three chapters put together.

The reviewer finds that the authors dwell on too many issues common to the whole nation in this chapter—such as the formation of the Food Corporation of India, Agricultural Production Commission (both by the Central Government in Delhi) Green revolution, Globalisation and Liberalisation, Nature of the ongoing Fascination Process etc. Some worthwhile information has been provided on all these issues.

So far as Andhra Pradesh is concerned, the Emergence of Dalit women—their fight against arrack shops in rural areas and small towns was unique.

The ground reality was, and remains one, in which the credit extended by the institutional sector came nowhere near the actual credit needs of agriculture. In AP, farmers depend on private money lenders for almost 80 percent of their credit needs who charge Interests ranging from 60 to 120 percent.

There is an interesting observation about Media images: "The oppressed sections still do not have sufficient direct access to the media to voice their concerns. While the mass media can no longer ignore the voices of Dalits, Adivasis and women, their situation is by and large still described through professional 'upper' caste intellectuals. Some select representatives of these sections are occasionally allowed a space, but this is very minor and almost a token one".

But then, this is not unique to Andhra Pradesh. Such is the situation with respect to every other state in India.

## **CONCLUSION**

"Capitalism/imperialism by its very nature is invasive, authoritarian, centralized, hegemony seeking and destructive of peoples and environments. The social experiments to establish socialist/communist societies in the twentieth century are stories of failure. There is much to learn from these failures, because not everything that was attempted need be discarded. On the other hand, the individualism, innovativeness and dynamism associated with capitalist development are values worth retaining. Past culture and history of the downtrodden have their own emancipator potential. A search and dialogue along these lines is a must for the oppressed castes to find a way out of the present imbroglio".

To sum up, one could say that the authors have got into the crux of the problem when they observe : "The general identity of the nomenclatures Dalit, Adivasi and oppressed caste—certainly cannot be taken watertight. There are thousands of sub-castes and divisions in all these general blocks, and the contradictions and commonalities between these region—specific sub castes are a concrete reality in the society. Undoubtedly, subcaste contradictions act as serious stumbling blocks to broader units". The authors have presented many such known facts in a chronological order. That is the plus point. But one comes across some non sequencers though the information provided is useful. The authors seem to be anxious to share all their knowledge with the reader. This seems to affect the flow. Nevertheless this book could serve as a very useful document for persons who would like to do research on the caste question in South Indian States. □□□

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\*REFLECTIONS ON THE CASTE QUESTION  
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