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DALIT EMPOWERMENT, SUCCESS AND FAILURE: SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION WITH RELEVANT CASE STUDIES FROM ASSAM, INDIA

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Introduction

Oppression of Dalit and Dalit empowerment has always been a topic of research for sociologists of any time. Various discrimination that has been meted out towards the oppressed section has fascinated the social researchers to find out why and to what extent they are oppressed. The discriminative policies against the dalits by the caste Hindus caused segregation, division and isolation in Indian society. The dalits in Indian society are the oppressed or downtrodden sections which did not find a position in the Caste hierarchy in the traditional Hindu social order. From ancient time onwards they have been discriminated by those in the higher positions in the Hindu caste society.

Traditional Hindu society is a society which is a relatively strict social hierarchy. This hierarchy was based on stratification that marked individuals or groups of individuals as superior and inferior and pure or impure from other individuals or group of individuals. This further provided provisions for restrictions in aspects of social intercourse including food, marriage, worship etc. The system was totally hereditary in nature. It classified the Hindu society into four varnas-the Brahmanas occupied the topmost position in the hierarchical ladder, followed by the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras at the lowermost position. However, there existed another caste which do not fall in this hierarchical order- the untouchables or the dalits. The dalits lived in segregation and often faced persecution and discrimination. The untouchables lived in the periphery of society and performed the activities which were considered unpleasant, dirty and polluting. They were not only poor, but also so had to face segregation and restrictions. They were not allowed to enter in public places like worshipping in temples or drawing water from public

Wells. Even their shadows on the the higher caste was believed to pollute them. There was a time, when by any chance, any person from the caste Hindus came in in any physical or social contact within untouchable, then he or she where's the file and hence help to purify I himself or herself by then prevailed purifying methods like bathing in holy water of Ganga, or drinking 'shanti jal'(a form of holy water prepared by Brahmins).

The untouchables or the dalits were subject to to various oppressions and discrimination from times immemorial. According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, divided, disintegrated and isolated people causing confusion and chaos in the society. After restoration of democracy, dalits issues found importance in the government and various laws were enacted for the upliftment and empowerment of those downtrodden sections. Provisions were taken for basic laws such as-

- i) education act, which provides free education to dalit students in secondary level
- ii) legal aid act, which provides legal representation to the marginalised communities
- iii) local self government act, which mandated for several welfare policies carried out for the upliftment and promotion of dalit at the local level
- iv) scholarship rule, which provides 10% scholarship as reservation to dalit students
- v) bonded labour welfare act, social welfare act and many more for the upliftment of dalits.

Various upliftment and empowerment schemes in interest of the untouchables find importance in every five year plans of India which lays emphasis on education, health, sanitation, family planning, women empowerment etc. Thus, measures have been undertaken by the government to uplift and alleviate the conditions of the the downtrodden, but with little success. Though the government schemes have been successful to raise their economic and political status, yet their social status is yet to achieve recognition. The research is is basically a study on the success and failure of the various schemes and programmes that have been undertaken to empower and uplift the social economic and political conditions of the dalits of India, with relevant case studies from Assam.

Objectives

The main objectives of the paper include-

1. To reflect on the various schemes and programmes undertaken by the government for empowering the downtrodden.

2. To assess the success and failures of the dalit empowerment in social, political and economic aspects.
3. To observe the 'why' and 'how' concerns of dalit discrimination in the Assamese society with relevant case studies
4. To suggest remedy for upliftment and empowerment in the true sense of the term.

Discussion

In the traditional Indian social system, the dalits were the population who did not occupy a place in the Varna system, which was occupied on occupation. They were regarded as ritually impure as their tasks included leather work, butchering, removal of rubbish, clearance of wastes etc. They were segregated and prohibited in participating in all sorts of social activities, as was believed that their assimilation in those activities would pollute and cause impurity as such. They could not enter a temple or a school and required to stay outside the village. The dalit population is broadly distributed across Indian states and districts. The untouchables or the dalits are constitutionally known as the Scheduled Castes. Scheduled castes refers to the broken or scattered community of the Hindu caste system in India. According to the census 1991-2001, 6.9 % of the total population of Assam belongs to SCs. There are 16 sub-castes within the SCs of Assam. They are kaibarta, Baniya, Dhobi, Hira, Jhalo-malo, dholi, Bansphor, Bhuinmali, Jalkeot, Munchi, Patni, Namasudra, Lalbegi, Mahara, Bhangi and Sutradhar.

B. R. Ambedkar on Dalit emancipation

Before going to discuss on dalit empowerment it is necessary to know the realisation of dalit discrimination in the Indian society. When we talk about dalit discrimination and dalit empowerment we cannot escape the name of Dr BR Ambedkar, the chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution.

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was popularly known as Babasaheb. He was born in Mhow, MP near Indore on 14th April, 1891 in a Mahar family. Born to a Mahar family, Ambedkar faced all sorts of humiliation and discrimination meted by the caste Hindus. Amidst all those conflicts in his life Ambedkar played an important role in the upliftment of the downtrodden in India.

As a Dalit, Ambedkar himself had to face humiliation and discrimination in the society by the caste Hindus. When Ambedkar was at school, he had to squat on the floor while the other high caste students were seated at the bench. Bhimrao once rushed to drink water but the peon of the school (probably a high caste than Ambedkar) asked him to cup his palms together so that the peon would

pour water for him. Amidst such environment Ambedkar was the first in the Mahar community to pass the matriculation. He passed his BA in 1813 and M.A in 1915. He obtained his PhD degree from Columbia University in 1917 on 'National Dividend for India: A Historic and Analytical Study'. He came back to India with all the degrees viz. PhD, D. Sc, Bar-at-law, at the age of 32 from America, London and German Universities. He was appointed as the military secretary by the King of Baroda, but he was given no accommodation. He managed to stay in a Persian Dharamshala, but had to leave it for being an untouchable. He was compelled to resign from his service. He came to Bombay. To get rid of untouchability he liked to stay in Bombay but being a Dalit became a curse to his career. Disgusted, he left Bombay and became a stock-market broker. There too, his clients when they came to know that he was an untouchable by birth, did not patronise him. Then he left that and joined as a professor in Economics in the Sydenham College, Bombay in 1918. He had to suffer social ostracism even at the hands of the high caste professors who objected to his drinking water from the pot kept for professor. This concept of mystic pollution just by dint of one accidental birth in a low caste is the reason for the social rebellion that Ambedkar was to exhibit all through his life despite of his being a qualified and highly educated personality. He realised that all his qualifications are of no use as long as untouchability was the stumbling block.

In the struggle for the imagination of Mahars and their social rights, Ambedkar realised that Hinduism as a way of life cannot be the best way of life for the low caste people in India and he decided to denounce it. ultimately after years of search he decided to embrace Buddhism followed by lacs of Mahars embracing Buddhism on 14th October 1956.

During the period, when the struggle for freedom was a full swing, Ambedkar maintained that without social freedom and ideological freedom, political freedom was a void. That is, he laid emphasis on freedom of the people then the freedom of the country. On July 1924, Ambedkar established the Bashiskrit Hitkarini Sabha through which he aimed at lighting the fire of self help and self respect among the untouchables and thus, bringing all untouchables under one banner in 1927. Dr Ambedkar started Satyagraha movement at Mahad in Ratnagiri of Maharashtra to give right to untouchables to get water from the Chowdar Tank. In 1928, he demanded separate electorates with reserved seats in legislatures to the Simon commission saying that they must be treated as distinct minority, separate from the Hindu Community. In 1930, he started Satyagraha movement to provide entrance of untouchables in kalaram temple of Nashik. On 4th October 1939, Bombay Government passed the order for entry of untouchables in public sphere.

The early period of the Dr Ambedkar was social but he knew that for the fulfillment of the interests of the downtrodden the struggle at political level was so essential as at social level. In 1942, he established 'All India p Caste Association' getting the downtrodden to participate in national politics. In the

year 1946 he was elected from Bengal State Assembly to the Central Parliament. Afterwards, he was made the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. He maintains the constitution should be such that there may not be any loss to the untouchables but should be helpful in every type of the upliftment. All Indians, without any differences of big or small, should be provided equal opportunities. Moreover, there were special provisions regarding reservation of seats in every sphere of government jobs, education, scholarship etc. made as measures for the downtrodden. Thus, Ambedkar went on struggling and trying for allowing the depressed classes their rights.

Case Studies

Case 1

Meena Das was a mentally retarded girl. She has a long story behind being mentally retarded. Her mother was a Karvatya girl. She got impregnated with an Ahom boy, named Lekhan. When her (Meena's mother's) family approached Lekhan's family to accept her they did not agree to it. The reason was obviously the caste issue. Meena's mother's family approached doctor for abortion but it was too late. As time passed, one day a Meena was born. After her birth Meena's mother was married to another man of the same caste but Meena had to live with her maternal grandparents. They were very poor and survived by doing household chores for others as day labourers. When she grew young she accompanied her grandmother to work. Sometimes when her grandmother was not able to go for work Meena went alone. One day her grandmother realised that Meena was pregnant. She was then 13 years old. Her maternal uncle had beaten her so badly that she left home the same day. For many years she was seen nowhere. One day, she came back to her village. Everybody was shocked to see her in rags and untidily and mentally sick. Anyone would come to her and sexually assault her. In 2018, she was nowhere again but one day a to the shock of the villagers her dead body was found floating in a nearby river. Had Meena's mother been accepted by Lekhan's family this would not have been the case.

Case2

Sikha was a young Ahom girl, who studied in class 12 when she fell in love with an untouchable boy named Amit of nearby Karvatya village. When her elder brother came to know that his sister had an affair with Ami, he would not tolerate this. He began to quarrel with his sister every now and then and harmed her physically by pulling her hair and beating her. Situation crossed the point such that she eloped with the boy without completing her studies. Even today, she is not allowed to visit to her family and lives with her two children and her husband in that Karvatya village from where her husband dwelled. She got deprived of parents' love and affection at a tender age only because she had done the crime of loving a boy of lower caste.

Case3

Saraswati Devi, a Brahmin girl fell in love with Gagan Das, an untouchable. Fearing about the consequences of the love story, she eloped with the boy. The consequence was indeed very sorrowful. The girl's father not only declared that she was dead for the family but also that she would not have any right over their love and property thereafter. The death rituals were also performed at this regard. Being in love with an untouchable and dreaming a happy life with her beloved made her to compromise with her family. But, this points out that true love know no caste and religion. If every human being would love everyone and promote brotherhood, I believe there will be peace and harmony in every society.

Case 4

Dambarudhar Goswami, a Gossain by birth, hailing from Majulionce happened to come to the Gharmora Satra, situated at Khanamukh of Dhemaji district Assam. Goswami visited from house to house for donations for building and development of the Satra. In the process, he stepped into the house of a Karvatya family unknowingly. There he found his host very friendly and he was very much pleased by the behaviour towards him. His host also pleaded him to visit them often. After many visits and conversations the Gossain came to know that his host was a kavatya. After the incident the Gossain was not seen around for many months. Suddenly one day, one of my neighbours happened to encounter the Gossain. When asked about the reason of his not being seen around he narrated the incident and said that he had to perform some rituals to purify himself and the holy thread on him.

Case 5

Durgeshwar Bhuyan married Kamala Das, an untouchable. For this reason, the father exiled the newly-wed couple (otherwise the society would exile them for causing pollution in the community). The family had to pay a certain amount of money as fine and also had to perform certain rituals to enter into the community again. They had to drink the holy water so called ' Santiyoni Jal' to purify them.

Findings and conclusion

From the study, it was found that though various policies and programmes are undertaken by the government for the betterment of the untouchables from time to time yet there are so many instances that prove that these are only halfway successful. Even though the economic, educational and political conditions of those sections have met some equilibrium with the mainstream Caste Hindus, yet, gaining social equilibrium is still too far to achieve. These have proven at

times that class inequality is to a great extent prone to attaining equilibrium but caste inequality is not. Caste inequality jeopardises a person mentally and also socially. It is a stigma attached to a person until death. Government policies and programs can do nothing until and unless we the people are mentally and socially prepared to accept the Dalits or the untouchables just the way they are. We have to accept them as fellow beings with same flesh and blood then only can we find a humane society with peace and harmony to live in.

Operational definitions

Karvatya: an untouchable community of Assam which is recognised as a Schedule Caste in the constitution of India. They are a fishing community and popularly known as 'Doms' in local language.

Ahom: A community preferably a Kshatriya community, which ruled Assam for more than 600 years

Gossain: A high caste community equivalent to the Brahmins, who perform rituals in the Holy Satras.

Satra: Satra is a Hindu monastery, where Hindu rituals are preserved and practiced with high esteem.

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