

Social Justice in India and Contribution of Various People in the Upliftment of Dalits

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Abstract

Dalit community is regarded as a group of people who have been victims of exploitation and traditionally considered as untouchables and socially considered an inferior class. They have had physical labour as a means of livelihood and from religious point of view all the principles and beliefs were laid down to humiliate and exploit them. Several Dalits have got converted to Christianity, Buddhism and other religions as a consequence of caste system and depicts exploitation and injustice. The main concern from a modern perspective is towards social justice that demands social reform and improvement in the condition of the depressed class to be able to lead a respectable life. Social disparity was prevalent in India since ancient times. Hence, to attain social justice was not easy. "Varna system", was entrenched in the Indian society. There was distribution of labour. A "Shudra" changed his/ her path if he/ she came in the way of a "Brahmin". The entry of, "Shudras", in the temples was prohibited. This social system established by the "Brahmins" had spread all across the Indian society like cancer. It was impossible to imagine about social justice in such a situation. Social justice is based on equal distribution of means, resources, materials, services, facilities, benefits, opportunities, power, duties and responsibilities and social equality at large. Social inequality prevailed in India since ancient times and this prevented social justice. The caste system in the Indian society deprived the "Shudras" of social, economical and political rights. Mahatma Gautam Buddha, Gurunanak, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Sant Kabir, Ravidas, Mahatma Jyotibaphule, Mahatma Gandhi are some of the prominent names known to promote social justice. One of the prominent personalities who devoted his entire life for the upliftment of the socially deprived and whose name is written in golden letters is, "Baba Saheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar". He is also known as the, "Messiah" of Dalits and untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar considered the struggle for the cause of Dalits more important than the struggle for independence. Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed that the ultimate solution to this problem lied in complete eradication of the caste system and giving adequate participation to Dalits in governance. As an architect of the Constitution of India, Dr. Ambedkar introduced a system of reservations for the members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes.

Keywords: Fundamental Rights, Varna System, Untachability, Hitkarini Sabha, Dalit Existance.

In order to explore the existence of Dalits in Indian history and philosophy, one needs to understand the circumstances that lead to the genesis of the concept of slavery. The condition of depressed class since ancient times was worst than animals in India as they were completely deprived of the basic rights and facilities in the social system.¹

"Varna", is the term for the four broad castes into which traditional Hindu society is divided: the Brahmins who were priests, teachers, preachers; the Kshatriyas who were kings, governors, warriors, soldiers; the "Vaishyas" who were cattle herders, agriculturists, artisans, businessmen, merchants; the Shudras who were labourers and service providers and performed functions of serving the other three varna. This quadruple division

is the ancient division of society into principal castes. The much finer caste system in India based on occupation emerged in the medieval period.² However the fundamental concept of discrimination remained the same. Dalits were exploited and convinced that in the eyes of God, they were born as Dalits due to their bad karma. Dalit status was associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as, leatherwork, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and human waste. Dalits worked as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. These activities were considered to be polluting to the individuals and this pollution was considered contagious. Hence, Dalits were physically segregated from the society and were required to stay outside villages. They could not enter a temple or

a school, they were not allowed to draw water out of the community well, they could not come in the way of upper caste people and other castes took elaborate precautions to prevent incidental contact with Dalits as it was believed that merely touching them would lead to loss of sanctity; hence known as untouchables. Unlike the other three upper castes, Shudras were completely deprived of their fundamental rights. India was ruled by numerous rulers but no regime could wipe out this social evil.

Many social reformers emerged from time to time and influenced the society with their preachings and efforts in the direction of overall social upliftment.

Gautam Buddha was born around 566 B.C. in the small kingdom of Kapilavastu. He attained enlightenment at a very young age. He delivered his first sermons in Sarnath. Gautam Buddha believed in the philosophy of Karma and encouraged everyone to have compassion for each other. Guru Nanak was born in 1469 in Punjab. Guru Nanak spread the message of unity amongst people of different religions. In "Khalsa Panth", all individuals are considered equals. There are no caste based divisions. He gave the slogan that God is one and all the individuals are one i.e. united and have originated from the same creator. This message was important for the redemption of Dalits.

Sant Kabir was born in 16th century. He did not emphasize on the principles of a particular religion. He spoke bitter truth. He was completely against blind faith. He wanted to convey the message that all human beings are equal. Sadguru Kabir asked the people to renounce caste and empty pride. All humans originate from the same creator sharing the same flesh and blood. Humanity is the true caste and one who attains consciousness, attains true knowledge.³

Raja Ram Mohan Roy instead of the caste system believed only in single united society and worked for the cause. Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade formed the "Prarthana Samaj" in 1867, advocated the marriage of the widows, worked for the education of Dalits and upliftment of the lower class.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda are amongst the prominent social reformers who raised their voice to provide social justice to Dalits and the weaker section. They emphasized on the need to educate Dalits. Swami Dayanand Saraswati established the, "Aarya Samaj", in 1875 and emphasized on building up a society free of caste system. He was against untouchability.

Social reformists always tried to convey the message that the fundamental teachings of all religions were based on principles of love, compassion, equality, justice, truth, kindness.

The medieval India witnessed unrestrained atrocities on Dalits. The feudalistic system led to the brutal exploitation and harassment of the lower class by the upper class and this system in the society was being nurtured. Saints and social reformers like Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas made constant efforts and condemned the immoral deeds and the atrocities of the upper caste on

the lower caste. Saint Ravidas through his strong personality and his deeds could awaken consciousness amongst the weaker section and help them overcome their complexes. He opposed the atrocities, exploitation, insult and abuse of Dalits and also proved the insignificance and absurdity of all the bad customs and also called as baseless the concept of the lower class being untouchable by birth. He made Dalits stand on the surface of equality and awakened them towards equal rights to worship God.⁴

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is known to promote social justice. He made a lot of effort towards the upliftment of the untouchables and initiated a number of movements for their development. He gave the slogan that for all the human beings there is one religion, one caste and one God. He made a lot of effort to provide social justice to the weaker section.

Mahatma Gandhi is one such name in the Indian history that can never be forgotten. Gandhi ji made great efforts to attain the key elements required for social justice, namely, freedom, equality and brotherhood and to an extent also achieved success in his efforts. Mahatma Gandhi led the Indian freedom movement against the Britishers to attain independence from a political perspective but as far as social and economical independence are concerned, these were limited to the pages of the constitution. The situation as regards equality and brotherhood remained almost the same.

Gandhiji proclaimed that without prohibiting untouchability independence has got no meaning. Untouchability is a hollow concept and is in no way related to the intellectual or moral development of the people. Gandhi ji addressed the untouchables as, "Harijans", and had a lot of affection for them. He used to stay amidst them and used to eat and drink with them. He even wished that if he were to take birth again, he would like to be reborn as an untouchable so that he could be a part of the pain, distress, agony, sufferings, hardships and insults suffered by them and could liberate himself and others from this pitiable condition. In order to prevent untouchability he emphasized on the need of entry of Harijans into the temples. He believed that there could be no better solution than this in order to generate the feeling of self respect in untouchables and changing the perceptions of the upper castes. He advised the Hindus to adopt Harijan children and give them due place in their families and nourish and nurture them like their own kids. Gandhiji preached Harijans not to eat flesh, not to drink alcohol, not to gamble and stay away from criminal and immoral practices and addictions, and not to accept the leftovers of others.⁵

In the efforts made in the direction of social justice one name is written in golden letters in the Indian history. He was devoted to the cause of providing social justice to the Dalits and untouchables. The name of that great soul is Baba Saheb Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar who was known as

the Messiah of Dalits and untouchables. He devoted his entire life to provide social justice to Dalits and untouchables in the society. Dr. Ambedkar himself faced a lot many inhuman situations in life. Hence he made a strong resolve that he would eradicate this failure of the society and fight for the humanitarian rights for Dalits and untouchables. He devoted his entire life for the cause.

Since the ancient times, Dalits were deprived of all kinds of social, religious and political rights. They were kept as slaves of the upper classes. But after centuries, now, social, religious and political awareness and awakening has taken place and the credit goes to Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. The modern age education has brought revolutionary changes.

After India attained independence, Dalits also got the constitutional rights to live. Hence they want to use their constitutional rights for the progress and upliftment of Dalit community.

To liberate Dalits from traditional slavery was the prime objective of Dr. Ambedkar's life, philosophy, and work, something he would never hide. Hence Dr. Ambedkar considered the liberation of Dalits more important than the struggle for independence. He said that if ever his interests clashed with the interests of Dalits, he would give priority to the interests of Dalits.⁶

Social rights can only be promoted if dignity of all the human beings is accepted in social life. Nobody should be considered superior or inferior based on gender, colour, caste, religion, region etc. Everyone should receive equal opportunities for education and progress and all human beings together should be able to avail the means and resources related to literature, art, culture, technology etc.

Dr. Ambedkar emphasized on creating social, economical and political awareness amongst the depressed class as they will not be able to defend their rights due to lack of awareness.

Dr. Ambedkar came from a humble background and had to struggle for his livelihood. Despite the struggle, he gave more importance to his goal of eradicating the adversities and injustice that prevailed in the society. As Dalits were the most distressed; to liberate them from their sufferings became his prime objective.

Dr. Ambedkar on 27th January 1919, presented a memorandum before, "Southbaron committee". In this memorandum he raised the issue of giving Dalits adequate representation proportionate to their population in the people's representative form of government. In 1919, Dr. Ambedkar also came in contact with Naresh Shah Chattrapati Maharaj. On 13th January 1920, he launched a fortnightly Maratha magazine called, "Moolnayak". On 21st March 1920, Dr. Ambedkar presided over a gathering at a place called Bhangaoon in Kolhapur. While addressing the gathering, Kolhapur Naresh Shah Chattrapati Maharaj said that in Dr. Ambedkar, they have got a saviour who will liberate them.

In 1924, Dr. Ambedkar formed an organization named, "Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha". The various objectives of the organization included promoting education and culture amongst Dalits community, providing hostels, running libraries etc. The organization took up the responsibility to liberate the untouchables of their pitiable condition. Dr. Ambedkar paved way for the upliftment of the social status of Dalits. He spread the message that self help is the best form of help. It is this belief that can encourage the untouchables and Dalits follow the path of progress. In this way the formation of, "Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha" marked the beginning of an era of self support and self respect.

As architect of the constitution of India, Dr. Ambedkar introduced the system of reservation for the depressed class and a respectable way of addressing them as, "Scheduled Castes", "Scheduled Tribes" and "Other backward classes".

Baba Saheb Ambedkar understood the importance of education, hence laid down the foundation of, "People's Education", that aided in the foundation of Siddhartha College in Mumbai on 20th June 1946 and Milind College in Aurangabad in August 1951. Various education institutes were formed in Maharashtra from time to time. In order to create awareness in the society Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar did put in efforts in every sphere and in every possible manner. Whether the efforts were to put an end to the, "Vatandar pratha" or solving problems of labourers related to factories and industry. He attacked the caste system from all sides despite facing stiff resistance. On 15th April, 1948, under the civil marriage act, he married Dr. Sharda Kabir that happened to be an intercaste marriage, thus setting an example. On 14th October, 1956, in Nagpur, Dr. Ambedkar devoted himself to Buddhism that resulted in deep unrest amongst conservatives; but Dr. Ambedkar's decision was not aimed at going against the basic sentiments of Hindu religion.⁷

On 6th December, 1956, the "Messiah" of Dalits attained salvation but the movement started by him to uplift the depressed class continues, as he remains the source of inspiration for all those associated with the movement. History will always remember them.

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