

CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND MARGINALISATION OF DALITS IN TAMIL NADU: A QUALITATIVE OBSERVATION OF PREVAILING DISCRIMINATION IN PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Despite the dawn of the new millennium, the practice of untouchability, albeit rendered illegal and criminal, still remains rooted in the psyche and real lives of Indians in Indian society. Although it has changed the forms in which it appeared in the past, its intensity and virulence might have looked less obvious on the surface; when we scratch the surface, we find that they have taken new forms, new dimensions, and new subtleties. This paper explores the changing forms of caste-based discrimination as it obtains in the public sphere in rural India. This paper that while obvious versions of untouchability have disappeared, the borders in the psyche of individuals in India still are marked by caste-based divisions which manifest themselves in micro-level transactions and social interactions. Using a mixed-method model involving both qualitative and quantitative methods such as structured interviews, Focus Group Discussion, observation and case studies, this paper seeks to establish that the legal effects of untouchability have only erased it from the obvious domains and obvious forms in which it appeared in the public sphere. But beneath the surface, social evil still continues to thrive.

Introduction

Dalits in Tamil Nadu is not a monothic category. It consists many subcastes, the prominent among them being Arundhathuyar, Pallar and Parayar. They constitute roughly 20% of the total population of Tamil Nadu state of South India, slightly higher than the national average of 17%. Within the category of 'Dalits', there are differences of occupations, culture, marriage forms and customs. However, in terms of historical experiences of subjugation and discriminations, there are more commonalities than differences. Hence this study does not allow itself to be detained by a discussion on the intra-category differences and contestations in as much as it aspires to list out forms of discrimination and marginalization faced by a group of castes which are now being referred to as Dalits.

Exercise of this sort is of utmost importance as it tells us of the politics of naming and names. More still, it also highlights the aspirations and anguishes of the community thus being named.

Methodology and Sampling

Objectives of the Proposed Study

Primary Objective

To get empirical evidence of the different forms of marginalisation and discrimination faced by Dalits in the Public Sphere of Rural Tamil Nadu.

Secondary Objective

To capture the nature and forms of marginalization and discrimination in public domains where dalits and non-dalits have to engage in social transactions. (Public Sphere)

Focus of the Study

It is proposed that we probe into nature and forms of marginalization in rural Tamil Nadu as it obtains in the spheres covered by IP Desai's study on caste-based discrimination in Gujarat and also add a few more spheres. Desai's study was confined to 24 spheres. The main consideration was "that the behaviour selected should be such as would concern the everyday life of the untouchables in the village community. The pinch of caste-based discrimination is felt the most in everyday life. Also they touch various systems such as the belief system, the occupational system, the *jajmani* system, the educational system, and the public system." The spheres for observation are divided into private and public. The later is governed by public law. Though strictly speaking the legal system is also supposed to regulate large part of so called private sphere, implementation of law in certain private spheres is difficult and ticklish. Though Desai treated "market" as private sphere, it is not confined to an

individual and hence cannot be strictly classified as private. To the two spheres identified by I.P.Deasi we add another sphere viz. common sphere. Thus, for the analytical purposes, we have divided the life world of Dalits into three spheres.

1. **Private spheres** – involving family and interpersonal transactions at the intra-caste and inter-caste and private levels
2. **Public sphere** refers to institutional contexts particularly state institutions and institutions owned by private parties such as cinema theatre, shop, hotels as well as the street, roads, field.
3. **Common sphere** includes those contexts governed by common traditions such as temples festivals, market situations, political gathering including Panchayat meetings, marriage ceremonies other public ceremonies, consumption contexts of traditional services such as barber shops etc.

These analytical categories hold great significance in bringing out certain dynamics and transformations concerning the practice of caste-based discrimination. One can also trace certain uniform tendencies within the bounds of these spheres.

Selection and Sampling

The present study arises out of our research work on Poverty and Marginalisation done during the period 2009-2015. In keeping with the focus of the study (which is Tamil Nadu state as a whole) the researcher first divided the state of Tamil Nadu was divided into North, South, and West Tamil Nadu, this manner of dividing the state matched to a large extent with that of Administrative divisions adhered to by the state government of Tamil Nadu.

After determining how many villages a community development block gets in this way, the selection of villages from each block would again depend on the highest, lowest, and average Dalit population percentage of the Panchayat villages, in relation to the block. In this manner three villages were selected for the study each from one region.

Table 4 Sampled Villages from Different Regions

WESTERN REGION	NORTHERN REGION	SOUTHERN REGION
Coimbatore - Viraliyur	Pudukkottai Annavasal	Virudunagar-Vellur

Finally the selected villages fitted in to the following patterns, possessing the characteristics as detailed below:

Research Tools and Techniques

The proclaimed purpose of the study is not only to empirically study the prevalence of the practice of caste-based discrimination and marginalisation but also to record in Dalits' own voice, the inner meanings and psychological interiority of Dalits having to lead the life of subjugated people, with a longest history of discrimination practised against them.

The study therefore aspires to make a striking departure from the quantitatively inclined studies of the practice of caste-based discrimination and marginalisation. This it wishes to accomplish by entering into the psychic interiority of Dalits as they experience a sense of disorganization of self if subject to humiliations and rejection, as they construct a moral and emotional universe for themselves to inhabit despite all the odds staked against them by the society, as they evolve creative strategies and build life skills and capacities on their own in themselves to cope with the soul-destroying world they reside in.

The Research Techniques used are

- Direct observation
- Group Interview
- Group Discussions
- Focused Group Discussions
- Biographical method
- PRA techniques
- Participant observation

As mentioned above, all these techniques are applied as the researcher spends a week in the field, although no strict order of which tool to apply first and last has been adhered to.

The investigator prepares a village report on the basis of the data collected from the people in a highly descriptive manner without reducing the experience into statistics, and recording even the minutest of the feelings and experiences narrated by Dalits. The finest details of the symbolic universe that surround Dalits will be elaborated as they give valid clues to the life circumstances of Dalits.

Throughout the exercise, the researcher does not act judgmentally, as he / she is a simply medium through which Dalits speak their experiences.

The reports numbering 3 thus collected were collected together to arrive at description given in the following pages.

This manner of doing research that privileges Dalits feelings, perceptions aspiration, and anguish is very crucial, in reversing the existing knowledge production

processes. The present epistemological scenario has never reserved sufficient space for the wisdom and dreams of the marginalized and broken people. They were dismissed as 'lesser knowledges' while the knowledge of the elite; educated, metropolitan, non-Dalits were privileged as eligible public wisdom.

What Dalit art, literature and cultural performances attempts to do in a large scale, this study tries to do in a small but significant way viz. privileging Dalit way of experiencing the world and social reality on equal footing with other hitherto privileged communities and tuning the attention of the agents of civil society to them.

Limitations

In its drive to get the Dalits' perspective as much as possible, this study has acquired a Dalit-centric character both by choice and by default. By choice: as the researcher and the investigators who helped the researchers stayed in Dalit colonies, viewing the social transactions through Dalits' eyes throughout. By choice, also because the access to Dalit colonies were made possible with the help of Dalit activists and Dalit individuals that meant Dalits in the villages identified with the investigators as much as non-Dalits distanced themselves from them. By default: as non-Dalits hardly felt drawn into participating in this study for they regarded the study as something that focused on the problems faced by Dalits.

Therefore this study has presented the rural life in the selected cases largely from Dalits point of view, whose validity and authenticity were not cross-checked with that of non-Dalits in large number of cases, though attempts were made in all the cases.

Findings and Analysis

The general picture emerging from this study show that there is negligible amount of prevalence of caste based discrimination as it evident from the table below. But if we include the not-so-clear category which is characterised as transition zones, then the percentage goes up to 37. It is an alarming number in a State priding itself on being one of the most developed state in the country, besides having been witness to the radical social movements against Brahminism. Very curiously it is north Tamil Nadu, the prevalence is very high (43%), followed by west Tamil Nadu (27%). South Tamil Nadu presents an image that it is going through the transition. The recurrence of caste clashes between Dalits and Non-Dalits too can be attributed to this transitory nature, as more and more dalits are becoming politically assertive and challenging the caste-based discriminations.

Caste-Based Discrimination in Public Sphere

It is in the various situations obtaining in the public sphere, that Dalits have made heavy in roads, and the practice of Caste-based discrimination is on the wane, though not fully and uniformly across Tamil Nadu. This is also due to the fact that tradition has not succeeded in completely encroaching upon this sphere. The success of Dalit movements at various stages in the history of Tamil Nadu is telling and impressive in gaining a reasonable share in the public sphere. Armed with state sponsored laws, legislations and schemes, Dalits have, to a considerable extent, resisted the sway of casteism upon public sphere. This is in a context where 98% Dalits do not know much about the availability of legal protection for Dalits.

Water source

- In most of the cases Dalits are not permitted to use the same water sources freely. If lesser degree of discrimination is reported in this sphere it is because Dalits have got a separate water source in their respective colonies.
- Dalit cannot wash their vessels when using non-Dalit water source. Dalit women are badly humiliated if the washed water happens to spill on non-Dalit pots.
- Non-Dalits adopt many strategies to discourage Dalits from coming to Non-Dalit water source, by humiliating them for petty deeds or by changing the water supply time to keep Dalits guessing.
- If Non-Dalits water supply is damaged or disrupted, they use Dalit water source rightfully with authority.
- In those cases where common source of water or if the water source is located in Non-Dalit areas, during inter-caste rivalry between Dalits and Non-Dalits the water source will be immediately closed for Dalits. Such an act reciprocated by Dalits if the water source is located near Dalit area is resented violently or does not affect Non-Dalits much, as Non-Dalits have domestic water source in the form of tap connection or well.

Entry into the PDS/any Other Shops

- In all the villages except one PDS shops are located far away from Dalit colonies preventing Dalits from using them freely and easily.
- The best of the items served in the PDS shops go to non Dalits as the shops are managed mostly by non Dalits on the one hand and they are the first one to

get to know the availability of the provisions as the shops are proximate to/located in non Dalit areas.

- Non-Dalits are exempted from standing in the queue whereas Dalits can never hope to get that luxury. In most of the cases Dalits themselves give way to non-Dalits to purchase their ration.
- Dalits confess if they force non-Dalits to wait in queue when Dalits are also in the same queue, non Dalits will take offence and humiliate then when they go for loan or collecting wage or when seeking work in the fields
- Dalits often get under weighed old stock items
- Non-Dalit PDS employees often make false entries in their ration cards even for the items not purchased by Dalits and give them away to non Dalits.
- Before going to PDS Shops Dalits have to ensure that non Dalit buyers are not standing around so that they do not have to cross their ways.
- In most of the cases non-Dalits can enter the PDS shops quite freely whereas Dalits could never.
- While Dalits are served only on certain days in a month non-Dalits are served throughout the month. It is told by Dalits that there is a deliberate attempt to keep the days on which Dalits will be served around the last part of the month during which Dalits would not have much money to purchase. This will help the non Dalits to take away the items meant for Dalit buyers
- There are few villages where it has become an unwritten rule to keep each day of the week to serve each caste with Dalits getting their own day in a week that invariably happens after all the non Dalits are served the best of the items
- There are instances of separate queues available for Dalits and non Dalits or in those villages where Dalits and non Dalits have to stand in the same queue non Dalits stand away from the queue as if to avoid being touched by Dalits

Village Shops

- There are few villages where Dalits have to remove their chappals when going to non-Dalit shops or remove the chapel and keep them away before entering the shops.
- In several cases the things sold in the shops such as vegetables and grains are not allowed to be touched by Dalits when they go for purchase fearing doing so would pollute the things and non Dalits might refuse

to purchase them later. In contrast non Dalits can touch them

- Shops are not talkshops for Dalits whereas it is for Non-Dalits.

Tea Shops/Hotels

- There are many villages where the transformation in the sphere of tea shop has not happened in a far reaching manner. Still there are instances of two-glass system being practiced. Though there is blatantly discriminatory way of serving Dalits in the village teashops, in many villages it happens in covert manner. The instances of Dalits having to drink tea in coconut shell is diminishing, thing have not changed for the better for Dalits as the coconut shell has only been replaced by disposable cups, or silver glasses or aluminum glasses or glassware to maintain the difference between Dalits and non Dalits. In all these cases barring few rare exceptions Dalits have to wash their glasses used by them.
- Dalits cannot sit on par with non-Dalits in numerous village teashops. They have to sit on the floor while non-Dalits are seated on the benches. In some cases Dalits have to remove chapels before entering the shop
- From two glass system to two-bench system. If Non-Dalits are sitting inside the tea/hotel shops, Dalits come out to sit on the bench.
- Silver glass for non-Dalits, glassware for Dalits, though for few resisting youth silver glass is used.
- Though same glass is used, Dalits have to collect their tea only after Non-Dalits is served. That too only from the left side of the shops & drink it from the left side only.
- Dalits teashops owned and run by dalits are never visited by Non-Dalits, one Dalit closed shop for lack of patronage.
- Arundhathiyars have separate glass; they prefer to collect parcel tea. If they go they have to sit outside the shop.

Post Office

- The post-man never comes to this village neither to deliver the letters, not to issue money order. Dalits suffer a lot.
- In all the cases except two post offices in located in Non-Dalit area. Dalits are served outside the office.
- Post office is in postman's house located in Non-Dalit area, so Dalits do not go that side much.

- Functions in Non-Dalit house so Dalits hesitate to go. Money order is delayed.
- The only post office found in Dalit area is due to the fact that Non-Dalits strongly opposed to a Dalit post-master (women) entering the post-office located in Non-Dalit area, therefore the post-office was finally shifted to Dalit area.
- While all are supposed to transact business through the window Non-Dalit enter the office while Dalits can't.
- Dalit post-man, so Non-Dalits talks authoritatively with him. He can't enter Non-Dalit house.
- Dalit postman still, Dalit can't enter, as office is located in Non-Dalit area.

Panchayat Office

The fact that the Panchayat office is located in non-Dalit locality in all the villages except one, which is an all-Dalit villages, means it remains out of reach for Dalits to lay moral claim upon it. Even in those few rare cases where Dalits do enjoy limited privileges, they come more as concessions to Dalits than as what is rightfully available to them.

This is further compounded by the fact that in many villages, not only the Panchayat office is located far away from Dalit colonies, but also the Dalit colonies remain outside the field of vision of Panchayat. As much as Panchayat remains a non-Dalit substance entity for Dalits, the village itself is a non-Dalit property for non-Dalits as they treat Dalits presence at best as peripheral and at worst an appendage. It is the perceptual constitution of Panchayat Dalits that often stand outside. This becomes sadly complete as Dalits occupy the fringes of the villages geographically.

The situation is worse in the Dalit minority villages, where Dalits get the best of Panchayat initiated and implemented schemes the last if ever they get them, and get the worst, first. This is against the backdrop that suggests that the overall situation is better in Tamil Nadu than in other States.

Village Roads

The most excruciating experience of being Dalit in this village like any other village in India, is the way caste system render Dalits to be self aware and self conscious individuals both during wakeful times or otherwise, but, mind it, for the worse. Their self-awareness is more about their 'lesser mortal' character to the extent of treating them as natural outcomes of being Dalits. Nowhere do these

become more manifest than in the controlled body language that Dalits have to adhere to and the self-consciousness with which they have to tread the sociographical space. We could observe the limited range of physical postures within which Dalits have to operate in the presence of a non-Dalits. Dalits are not supposed to make eye contact with upper caste members, point fingers at them, wave their hands around, speak loud, laugh in guffaws, stand with their back straight, walk at a leisurely pace, stand at a close distance etc. This is observed even more sincerely by the elder generation of Dalits whereas younger generation of Dalits possesses hidden resistance to it. They acknowledge that they could not show their open defiance against these restraints. They hint at those sporadic moments of resistance often ending in clashes between Dalits and non-Dalits.

Village Schools

Just like any other state sponsored institutions schools remains largely a non-Dalit institution in villages in terms of control and moral claim laid upon them. Although we could observe a gradual abandoning of village schools by non-Dalits as they prefer to send their children to English medium school not normally to be found in the villages, but only in the nearby town and cities. While the non-Dalit children are fewer in number in comparison to Dalit children at the primary school level, the participation of non-Dalit children overtakes that of Dalit children as the level of school moves up from primary to middle to High school. However the presence of high school in the select villages is negligible.

Conclusion

If one were to evolve an assessment of Dalit social movements in the pre-independent and post-independent history of Tamil Nadu lasting for the last twelve decades one could very well say, that their focus had been more on achieving equality in the public sphere. They have impressive track record in this respect, as their energies were spent on a sustained manner in this direction, and one could see organised efforts made in this regard.

By and large, the contemporary Dalit politics as it rallies mostly around the public sphere can be characterized as Dalits' attempt to create an authentic 'public' sphere and non-Dalits resistance to keep it as an exclusivist 'communal' sphere.

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