
Understanding the Position of Dalits in Gujarat

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Abstract

Over the decades, upper caste Hindus have tried to suppress the lower castes which has led to caste discrimination. They practise inclusion and exclusion on regular basis depending upon the need of the upper caste. These practices are ubiquitous due to the presence of the caste system. The caste system legitimizes the superiority of upper caste and inferiority of the lower castes. Upper castes have been using their privilege due to their superiority since time immemorial to make sure the lower castes stay in their historically assigned position. This paper examines the state of Dalits in the Indian society, particularly in the state of Gujarat and seeks to understand the historical development of caste discrimination in Gujarat.

Keywords- *Dalits, Caste Discrimination, Community, Caste Prestige, Marriage Restrictions*

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Introduction

The prevalence of Caste hierarchy is a ubiquitous feature of the Indian society. It has been so toxic that it managed to penetrate religions like Christianity and Islam which do not adhere to these notions of hierarchy in their community. The Indian caste system consists of four *varnas* - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras. Historically, Dalits have occupied a space outside of this *varna* system. They have been exploited throughout history to make sure they remain in their historically designated space. But in recent times when communal clashes have increased the upper caste Hindus have tried to make sure the Dalits are brought into their fold to increase their size in the society. This has been done to make sure the Dalits fight with the upper caste Hindus during communal clashes against other religious minorities like the Muslim community or the Christian community. This paper aims at looking at the position of Dalit community in the societal structure and how this position changes with the onset of communal clashes in the state of Gujarat. This study will help in gaining a deeper understanding of the position of Dalits in society. It will also help in understanding how they are manipulated, used and ill-treated during the time of need for the Upper-castes. This study is a qualitative case study based on a review of existing literature and studies on the position of Dalits in society for the state of Gujarat. This study is based completely on secondary data available about the issue. Newspaper articles, research articles and books will be referred to, in order to present the argument.

Caste Discrimination is a form of discrimination that is rooted in the Hindu culture. Hinduism follows the caste system which is a form of hierarchy based on the notion of purity. Caste based discrimination occurs when people, individual or communities are treated in an unfair manner due to the caste they belong to. This can range from untouchability to atrocities. Discrimination based on caste and religion can have many forms. This article focuses on communal violence. Communal Violence is a clash between different ethnic groups or communal lines. This form of violence can range from feeling of hatred for the other group to riots or terrorism. For the purpose of this paper, communal violence in the form of riots will be examined.

Dalits are the untouchables in the Hindu culture. Hinduism consists of the four fold Varna system. Dalits are considered to be outside of this system and are considered to be inhuman and impure. They are excluded from the traditional Hindu society. They are expected to perform all the manual labour and serve the upper castes. This is a form of social exclusion practised by the upper castes. Social Exclusion is defined as the process of excluding or the state of being excluded (Cambridge Dictionary). The structural features of the society has led to the process of social exclusion. It occurs regardless of the wishes of the excluded (Learner.in, 2017). For the purpose of this study, Dalit exclusion will be studied in the state of Gujarat.

Literature Review

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The Hindu Social order is an ancient form of lifestyle which is ridden with staunch hierarchy. The hierarchy of Hindu society consists of four major social groups or castes arranged in the order of purity. The Brahmins form the topmost layer of this order whereas the Shudras are at the bottom. The four castes within the Hindu community are (in the order hierarchy)- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Dalits are not considered within the caste system. They are treated and considered as outcastes. Hindu Social Order allocates multiple rights and privileged status to Varnas located higher up in the hierarchy and denies the same to those who are lower in the hierarchy or to those who are out of the Varna scheme (Kumar, 2014). In the article Inequality In India: Caste and Hindu Social Order, Vivek Kumar, talks about how inequality is the product of caste structure in India. He goes on to claim that it is because of this caste system, privileges have been divided among different sections of the society. This distribution did not leave Dalits with anything as they were seen as impure beings who belonged outside the social order. The upper castes enjoy dominating and powerful positions whereas Dalits are left in the bottom. The paper explains about their struggle with social exclusion.

Caste system is a rigid system in the Indian society. Social institutions have changed in the country but caste system has not changed in modern India (Karade, 2015). The essay Caste Discrimination: An Introduction by Jagan Karade has examined the caste system in India. The author divides the essay into three important topics with respect to the caste system in India. He explains the history of this social evil, the constitutional remedies offered and finally cites various examples of the modern form of casteism. Even in the twenty first century, the social and political relationships in India with others are continuously being governed by unsound and illogical notions and traditions of purity, pollution, inferiority and superiority (Karade, 2015).

In the article Caste-based Discrimination in Indian Society By Smriti Bhosale, the author recognizes caste based discrimination as a hidden apartheid of segregation and modern day slavery. The author goes on to claim that India's caste system is the world's longest surviving social hierarchy. People born in India are assigned to the caste their families belong to and the social status is also determined by this. This will very rarely be transcended. The article goes on to talk about the various laws put in force to make sure caste discrimination is controlled. These laws do exist but there is a lack of will on the part of law enforcement officers to action owing to caste prejudice (Bhosale,2015). The article also explains various forms of casteism like the sense of caste prestige, marriage restrictions, political issues, the effect of improvement in transport and technology on casteism, restricted occupations, debt bondage, slavery, socio-economic disparities, gender discrimination, access to education and land and much more. These forms of caste-based discrimination have promoted inequality and disharmony within the society.

Inclusion and Exclusion: A process in the caste system of Gujerat (1957) is an research article written by David Pocock on the functioning of the caste system in a village located in Gujarat. The author

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has discussed the various rituals practised by the people living in the Kaira district. The paper has been written with respect to the position of Patidar caste in the society. The author claims that the process of inclusion and exclusion is a feature of any hierarchy. In this paper hierarchy has been concerned only where it is associated with sociology and is prevalent in the society. It was found that any group or caste tends to associate itself with the higher one and is excluded by it and it excludes the lower and is included by the same (Pocock, 1957).

Casteism has always existed in India. But over a period of time, the practices of discrimination have changed. In the state of Gujarat these modes of discrimination have witnessed a change rather than working towards the eradication of these practices. In the article, Modern Casteism In Gujarat State by M.H Makwana and Pradip Prajapati it has been stated that the construction of caste is based on socio-economic, political conditions as well as pride and vanity of groups. Gujarat has always been considered one of the most progressive and developed state. But with the advent of capitalism, caste based discrimination also witnessed a rise in the state. After the capitalism wave, casteism in upper castes has become stronger, they tend to help their caste members but leave out the depressed classes. Dalits and shudras have a sense of being excluded and tend to convert their religion by moving towards Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. But this shift does not help them in getting rid of the caste system as caste has penetrated into these religions as well. Most of the Dalits and Muslims in Gujarat fall into the category of poor social groups because they are mostly engaged in unorganized sector. The authors have analysed the employment, education and consumption patterns of the depressed classes. They have concluded that it is "important to study the psychology of the upper class people regarding their belief of daily life and standard of living" in order to understand the roots of the discrimination still prevalent in the modern society.

Caste based riots have not been uncommon in India. These majorly take place in rural areas over land and wages dispute. In such instances the notions of caste and class play a major role. Social Mobility and Caste Violence by Pradip Kumar Bose, explains how the increase of the social mobility of lower castes have caused caste violence in the state of Gujarat. Taking literacy, education and employment as indicators of social mobility, and scheduled caste concentration in a particular area as a factor inducing hostility, the paper shows how it is precisely those sections of the scheduled castes who are relatively better educated, more mobile and have some access to jobs that have been most seriously affected by the present caste riots; similarly, the areas thus affected also show a relative concentration of the scheduled castes (Bose,1981). Hence, caste violence in Gujarat is rooted in the caste prejudices held by the upper castes and the increase of the social mobility by the scheduled castes.

In Second Phase in Caste War, the author Achyut Yagnik explains the shift in the attitude of lower castes after the reservation policy was passed. Dalits were always at the receiving end of the torture

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perpetuated by the upper castes. They felt that converting to a different religion might solve their misery. But instead it became difficult for them to find jobs due to loss of caste. They faced social exclusion by the upper castes. Their mute trust in the caste Hindus and a belief that they would be left alone in their habitual misery was replaced with a pervasive sense of mistrust, insecurity, hatred (Yaknik, 1981).

In the article *Damning the Dalit for the Bania-Brahmin Crimes*, the author talks about the societal norms of how a particular caste behaves or is expected to behave. Anand Tetumbde, the author also explains the sanskritization of Dalit identity to make sure they are brought into the Hindu fold in order keep them from converting to other religions. But this notion is brought to an end when the Dalits are blamed for the crimes that are committed by the Brahmins during the Godhra riots. The argument put forth was that Brahmins are not capable of committing atrocities because they are "cultured" whereas the Dalits and other minorities are capable to doing it as they are "uncultured and barbaric".

Research has been conducted on the position of Dalits in society but there is a lacuna as sufficient research has not been conducted on how Dalits are placed in the society during a communal violence. They are lured in with the expectation of elevation of social status but at the end they are the ones being tortured the most. Research can be conducted to see how the Dalit community is used by the Upper-castes during communal violence (riots).

Discussion

Gujarat a state in the western region of India has always been a hotbed for violence and agitations be it communal or related to caste. The citizens of this region have witnessed and participated in a range of agitations against a different religion or a lower caste community. This article aims at looking at the position of Dalits during communal violence. The paper is divided in two parts- first, it gives a history about the position of Dalit in society and then it digs deeper by locating their position before and after communal violence. Post-independence, Article 17 of the Indian Constitution made sure that untouchability- the 'Indian Apartheid' would be abolished. The Government of India passed the Untouchability Act in 1955 to abolish caste based discrimination in the country. In the ideal world, the system would have been abolished but in India, a country where caste system is deeply ingrained within the society, it was not eradicated. Even today, untouchability is practiced in various pockets of the country. For gaining a better understanding of the practice of untouchability in the state of Gujarat a study was conducted by the Navsarjan Trust, a Gujarat based organization founded by a Dalit Human rights activist Martin Macwan. In the year 2010, the organization undertook a study which was titled 'Understanding Untouchability'. This study covered 1569 villages from Gujarat which included 98,000 respondents. The study recorded 98 different forms of discrimination that was practised against the Dalits. These included restricted temple entry, abuse, denial of the mid-day meal scheme, discrimination in public facilities and much more (Davenport, Armstrong. 2010).

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The practice of untouchability reinforces the notion of the caste system in the society reminding each section of their position within the society. The recent increase in the mobility of the lower castes has led to the disturbances in the caste based occupational system (Bose, 1985). This has been viewed as a disruption by the upper castes and has hence led to the resentment of the lower castes and in some cases even violence against the lower castes, especially the Dalits. Atrocities against the Dalit have been an extremely serious issue in the state of Gujarat. In 2016, men had been flogged for skinning a cow. Prior to this incident, a farmer was killed who tried to cultivate a common grazing land. Such atrocities keep taking place with almost no response from the government. Committees are set up to look into the matter but no outcome or report is generated from the same (The Hindu, 2017). It is almost as if the government is turning a blind eye against these incidents. This form of ignorance by the government has led to crimes being committed against the Dalits with impunity. Gujarat has a mere 2.33 per cent of India's Dalit population, but when it comes to atrocities, it ranks in the top half of the country (The Hindu, 2017). According to the data compiled by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, the states of Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan have reported the highest rates of crimes against the Scheduled Caste in the year 2015 (Sharma, 2016). Uttar Pradesh has reported the maximum number of cases against caste-based atrocities. But, Gujarat has the highest rate of atrocities against Dalits in 2015 i.e. 163.3% (Sharma, 2016). There has been a sudden increase in the crime rate against Dalits in Gujarat from 27.70% in 2014 to 163.3% in 2015. The rise in these atrocities could have been associated with the motive of the upper castes to remind the Dalits of their position in the caste hierarchy. The increase in the social mobility in the Indian society has led to many people belonging to the scheduled castes to improve their economic condition. This rise will provide them with an opportunity to get better jobs and in the process leave the jobs they were required to perform as a result of their caste which included manual scavenging, managing dead bodies. This mobility will cause a disruption in the traditional job specifications of the lower castes and in the process will leave no one to perform the jobs which were traditionally performed by the lower castes and are considered impure by the upper castes.

The atrocities are directed majorly towards the Dalits majorly to remind them of their status in the caste-based social structure of our society and to make sure that they remain there. The upper castes want to suppress their mobility and development and hence, commit such inhuman crimes. They want to make sure that they live a life of indignity, humiliation, and exclusion from the society (Namala, 2016). The upper castes want to make sure that these people continue to perform the menial work that they have been historically been performing as it is essential for the functioning of the society. They want to cut their access to a good education and various other developmental opportunities.

Traditionally the role of caste was to provide the citizens with labels, as to determine what section of the society they belong to. This label helped in deciding the occupation of particular strata of the

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society. People belonging to the lower strata were deemed to perform menial tasks and jobs which were considered to be polluting in nature by the upper castes. The discrimination based on caste system is still prevalent in India. This paper aims at looking at the reasons of caste discrimination only for the state of Gujarat.

In Gujarat, citizens of both urban and rural areas either are victims of the caste based discrimination or are the perpetrator of the same. In 90 per cent of the villages, entry into temples, houses and shops of high castes is not permitted. In 64 per cent of the villages there are separate sources of water supply and in 47 per cent of the villages untouchability prevails even in panchayat meeting (Desai, 1976). Even in urban regions like Ahmadabad and Gandhinagar, people believe that the efficiency of jobs has decreased due to the reservation policy (Bose, 1985). This notion is perpetuated due to the prevalence of the caste ideology. People from upper classes tend to occupy the position of the employer in the market. These people have the idea that people from lower caste do not possess the necessary competence, work discipline or background to perform skilled labour (Bose, 1985). This shows the deeply rooted prejudices that the upper castes have against the lower castes and hence, try to impair their mobility by fixating on these notions. These notions are still popular among the citizens of Gujarat.

The prevalent notion of the embedded caste system is one of the major reasons why Gujarat witnessed high rates of agitation against the reservation policy. The upper castes were enraged by this because they felt that this would disrupt the traditional caste system which enlists job to every caste. Since the lower castes were required to perform demeaning jobs in this system, the disruption would cause the upper castes to perform the jobs for themselves. They were hence, not in favour of the reservation policy. As a sign of protest, the upper castes started boycotting the lower castes and did not offer them work on their fields. Instead, they brought in Adivasi to do their work (Yagnik, 1981). This upward mobility of the scheduled caste created resentment between the upper and lower castes. The Hindu scheduled caste started migrating to urban regions in search of jobs since in rural areas, there was a widespread boycott. Some even resorted to convert into Buddhism to get rid of their castes. People did not convert to Islam or Christianity. This was because of the social stigma associated with the Islamic community and the prevalent violence against the Christian community. Even after the conversion, it was difficult for them to find jobs as they no longer belonged to any caste. Since, Indian society is based highly on the caste system; it became difficult to place the caste-less people into any work profile. Hence, they could find any appropriate jobs due to the loss of their caste as a result of their conversion in a different religion.

Despite these differences among the upper castes and the lower castes, the former has always been able to lure the latter into the Hindu fold against the Muslims. During the Gujarat riots of 2002, Dalits and tribes were blamed for the mass carnage that was caused around the cities. Heinous acts like rape of teenage girls, harming women with trishuls, shoving the kids into bakery ovens and many more ruthless

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acts were committed. All of these were associated with the Dalits and the tribal communities who were brought into the Hindutva fold against the Muslims. Such an allegation was made due to the societal interpretation of how a particular caste group behaves. Members of the Brahmin class cannot cut open bodies and commit various other brutalities on women and children since they are- “cultured” (Anand Teltumbde). But the Dalits and tribals can perform such acts because they are perceived as “uncultured” (Anand Teltumbde). There are certain stereotypes associated with the castes and their behaviours. Brahmins are the upper castes and hence, are associated with purity and the upholder of the Hindu culture and hence, will not be seen as committing such heinous acts. Whereas the lower castes are seen as impure and polluted, they are believed to have no values or culture. Hence, they are seen as easy targets for putting the blame on.

Dalits were swayed towards the Hindutva cause during the Gujarat riots by the Bharitya Janta Party. The Dalits were welcomed by the organization by offering them a nationalized sanskritized Hindu identity (Anand Teltumbde). This was a sense of upliftment for the Dalits because they have been oppressed by the upper castes for a long time. It helped them solve their existential problem as they were always in conflict with the upper castes. They believed that the new born relation with the upper caste would help them gain material wealth and an elevated status in the society. It would also help them gain a lot more respectful jobs in the society. The Sangh Parivar and the Rashtriya Swayamseval Sangh (RSS) have always rooted for the ‘Hindutva’ ideology and have envisioned a nation based on Hindu principles. They did successfully bring in the Dalits and the tribals into their Hindutva fold sensing their political importance (Anand Teltumbde). The irony of the situation was that the RSS never considered them equal. RSS spoke out against the practise of untouchability but never went against the caste system. Their promotion for the ‘Hindutva’ ideology shows their support for the caste system. The ‘Hindutva’ ideology is based on carving out a Hindu nation and a Hindu nation will have a caste system embedded into it as it one of the main tenants of the Hindu religion. Hence, the upper castes have skilfully manipulated and used the lower castes to their benefits during communal violence.

Even today atrocities are being committed towards Dalits. The entire idea of bringing the Dalits into the Hindu fold failed and the caste division is being reinforced onto the society. Even though atrocities are not being committed every day, discrimination does take place. In rural Gujarat, SC community is not even paid according to the minimum wage act. Instead of Rs.176 per day, they are being paid a meagre amount of Rs.50 to Rs.60 per day (Venkat, 2016). This is because of these agricultural labourers are from the Dalit community. Discrimination is also practised in schools, where the Dalit students are segregated. They are made to sit separately and were also made to clean urinals and toilets (Venkat, 2016). Such tasks were not allotted to students belonging to other castes. Equal opportunities are also not provided to all the students. The lack of education forces them to go back to their caste-defined

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jobs like manual scavenging and disposing dead animals and humans. Across various villages in the state of Gujarat, Dalits are not allowed to enter the temples. They are not even allowed to participate in the Garba Dance during Navratri celebration. There are generally separate garba grounds for the Dalit community (Sharma, 2016).

The issue of caste-based discrimination is not a problem just among the upper and the lower castes. Even, within the lower castes, discrimination on the basis of caste is being practised. Dalits belonging to the lowest strata of the society are being discriminated against and exploited by the upper castes as well as the Dalits who are considered to higher up than them in the hierarchy. According to a study conducted by Navsarjan and the Robert F Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights in 2010, it has been found that 99 different forms of discrimination is being practised by the Dalits belonging to slightly higher strata against the Dalits to the lowest section, within the same sub-society. Various forms of discrimination include prohibition of marriage between different sub-castes, the lowest caste members are forced to work with the dead bodies, separate burial grounds. The lower sub-caste Dalits are expected to collect the clothes discarded at burial and then are expected to wear them as their own clothing (Bhattacharya, 2016). This exhibits the lack of unity amongst the Dalit community itself. It shows how the cycle of caste discrimination continues within the lowest section of the society as well.

These discrimination and atrocities against the Dalits show the inherent ideology of the upper caste Hindus in the region. It is a flaw in the societal structure itself which has led to the perpetuation of this heinous practise. Historically, the upper castes have ruled the state and to suddenly have a practise like reservation which aims to give equal opportunity to the lower castes is a severe blow to the system that has been followed for years by the people. This blow causes unrest amongst the communities and starts an endless feud between the two. The upper caste uses any opportunity to show the Dalits their perceived place in the society. For this they go to the extent of public lynching, rape and murder.

Conclusion

Caste based discrimination have increased in the past years. As mentioned earlier, the crime rate against Dalits in Gujarat has escalated by 163.3%. This rate shows the inherent hatred or the urge for the upper castes to make sure the lower castes stay in their assigned status. Even though there is a frightening increase in the crime rate, the conviction rate does seem to take a major hike. The conviction rate for the crime committed against Dalit remains among the lowest in the country, that is, a mere 5% (an average for the past decade) (Babu, 2016). This shows that the discrimination is not only prevalent in the society but it is also present in the law and order. The conviction rates for these crimes show that most of the criminals go untouched because the investigation is either not carried out or not carried out efficiently. According to an RTI filed by an NGO called Navsarjan Trust to procure the information about the conviction of these crimes, 8,884 cases of atrocity were registered in the state between 2006 and September 2013 (The Times

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of India, 2014). The NGO claimed that the state government has not followed the provisions enshrined in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 nor has it made reviews of cases registered in order to improve conviction rate (The Times of India, 2014). The criminals find their courage in the slackness of the police officials doing their job properly. Since, no proper action is taken by the concerned authorities; these criminals feel powerful and do not feel the need to be terrified of the established order.

It is not enough to say that Gujarat has a history of caste violence. Action needs to be taken. The atrocities that take place go against human rights. India will be celebrating its 72nd year of Independence this year and yet there are sections of the society who do not have this independence. Dalits have been oppressed throughout history and this oppression and discrimination still persists. Under the leadership of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, it was made sure that Dalits received their due, but in recent times, those dreams are far from being a reality. Even after such a long journey after independence, India has not been able to annihilate the caste system; instead it is being perpetuated in the wildest manner.

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