

## DALITS: A STUDY OF ODISHA

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### ABSTRACT

*Dalit, the word deals the certain communities of Indian social system which has developed by the social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and promoted by Bharat Ratna Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Kanshiram. The recognized 93 Scheduled Caste communities of Odisha are known as Dalit in Odishan social system. But, in fact, the untouchables among the Scheduled Castes are the Dalits. Though, they constitute 16.12% of total population in Odisha but socially untouchables and economically poor in the lowest point of social system. After 70 years of independence of India, their social, political, economic status has not been changed as expected. The examination and analysis of present status of Dalits will be made through empirical study. The outcome of this study will draw a clear picture of the position of Dalits in Odisha and it will motivate government and non-government agencies to take initiative to promote Dalits.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Odisha, Scheduled Caste, Shudra, Untouchable

**Introduction:** Indian Caste system is characterized by social stratification and social hierarchy. Each caste is endogamous and has a hereditary occupational specialization. The Caste enjoys a definite status and position in the stratification hierarchic system. So far as the ritual status is concerned, the Brahmana occupies the highest position in the caste hierarchy and the so called untouchables are in the lowest run traditionally. The varna order with the twice-born categories, such as the Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and the Sudra, as once-born recognized untouchables as Avarna/Asavarna in the traditional sense. The erstwhile untouchables were regarded as asprushya, impure, polluted, antyaja, panchama, hinajati, chandala, mlechha etc. and were referred to as depressed classes, backward classes, exterior castes, Harijans, outcastes etc.

**Context:** The last two hundred years have seen the emergence of a new identity among the 200 million people who have been considered *Outcaste* or *Untouchables*. Today they call themselves *Dalit*. The term *Dalit* has been derived from the Sanskrit root *Dall* which means to crack, open and split.<sup>1</sup> The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called outcastes, untouchables, pariahs, panchamas, atisudra, avarna, antyaja and namasudra. The present usage of the term *Dalit* goes back to 19<sup>th</sup> century when

Jothirao Phule, the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society.<sup>2</sup> The Dalits numbered about sixty million out of three hundred million Hindus. That is to say, very nearly twenty percent of Hindustan is untouchables.<sup>3</sup> M.K. Gandhi coined the word *Harijan*, translated roughly as *Children of God*, to identify the former untouchables. The terms *Scheduled Castes* and *Scheduled tribes* (SC/ST) are the official terms used in Indian Government document to identify former Untouchables and tribes. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that *Dalit* was used interchangeably with the official term *Scheduled Caste*, called the term Unconstitutional and asked state government to end its use. After the order, the Chhatisgarh government ended the official use of the word *Dalit*.<sup>4</sup> The more general term *Adivasi* derives from the Sanskrit words *adi* meaning prima, original, first has a verb root meaning to sit, settle or stay rendering *Adivasi* as Indigenous people in India. People who identify themselves as Dalit may also identify as Adivasi, but the distinction is analogous to that of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes in which there is some intersection but the two are distinct social identities.

An important feature of the population of Odisha is its component of the weaker sections comprising the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes. The consisting of 62 tribes account for 22.15 % and the later comprising 93 castes make up for 16.12% of the total population. The scheduled tribes are concentrated in order of density in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Keonjhar and Phulbani. The scheduled castes are widely distributed in all the districts of the state, but are found in greater number in Phulbani district followed by the district of Balasore and Cuttack. Among the states of India, Odisha has the largest percentage of Scheduled Tribes next only to four others, namely Nagaland, Meghalay, Manipur and Tripura. The incidence of the scheduled tribe and scheduled caste population in Odisha constituting 38.25% of the

state population is much higher than the country's average of 23.5%. Odishan society is a tribal based society. Major per cent peoples in Odisha are SC/ST composed social life with their own identity. Though, it is a tribal based society still then it is not free from Hindu Caste ridden Society. About 87% of Odisha's population lives in villages. The districts of Kandhamal, Mayurbhanj and Kalahandi are mostly rural having a rural population of about 94% in average. Only about 13% of the people live in towns and cities. The 1991 census enlists 124 urban units including 102 statutory census towns, i.e. they have either a municipality or an NAC each. Of these there are only 8 cities with a population of one lakh and above. Dalits situation in villages are much degraded one. In every aspects of Dalits life they are depressed and suppressed. Violence against women was high in Odisha. The National Crime Records Bureau Reported 6,249 cases of violence against women, including 799 rape cases, 547 abduction cases, 334 dowry deaths and 1671 cases of cruelty by husband and relatives, among others in Odisha during 2005. According to the Government of Odisha, 2550 cases were registered relating to dowry and non-dowry torture in 2015. Women were killed on the charges of being witches. Most of these crimes were done against Dalit women. The National Crime Records Bureau reported 86 cases of child abuse in Odisha during 2005 including 9 murder cases, 28 rape cases and 16 kidnapping cases, among other. The Dalits, who constituted 16.53 % of the states' total population, were neglected lot. About 52.30% of the Dalits lived below the poverty line. The National Crime Records Bureau reported 1439 cases of crimes against the Dalits in Odisha. Their houses were burnt and they were denied access to public places and services such as community tube-well and temples. Dalit women were often subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. On 19<sup>th</sup> September 2005, a group of Dalit women belonging to the barber community were reportedly dragged out of their houses and paraded naked on the streets by upper caste Khandayat community in Bhubanapati village in Puri district. The women had been punished as their husbands refused to wash the feet of a bridegroom and other members of the barati during an upper-caste marriage held in July 2005. In Kendrapara district, Dalit women applying for the job of cooks in schools under the mid-day meal scheme were allegedly turned away by the school authorities for the fear that upper caste students might not take the food cooked by Dalits. This was in contrary for the government directive for recruitment of women preferably from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes about 1,420 primary schools in the district. Since early times Varnasramadharma has been the most deep rooted and outstanding feature of the Odishan Hindu Society. In fact, this has been the corner stone in the magnificent edifice of the Hindu social structure since time immemorial.<sup>5</sup> The earliest mention of the four-fold classification is made the purusasukta of the Rig-Veda, where the four Varnas are said to emanate from the sacrifice of the primeval Being.<sup>6</sup> They are named Brahmana, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudra. These four orders of society are said to have originated from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet respectively of the creator. In fact, it was the religious and metaphysical source of the status of four Varna's, which had evolved on the principles of division of labour in the Vedic society. The last division of the society was that of the Shudras. They were enjoined in the Hindu law books to serve the three higher castes for their livelihood. Their status was extremely low and they did not even enjoy the freedom of movement. They were forbidden to recite the Vedas.<sup>7</sup> We are not aware of the categories of people included in the Shudra Caste. Since our records are generally silent on the service to the higher castes, came to be known as Shudras. The *Dalit* indicates the broken or untouchable or outcastes people of the lowest of four ladder society in India but particularly it signifies to the SC peoples of all communities. In Odisha, there are 93 community comes under SC group to whom the term *Dalit* has been applicable on the basis of their social status. Major Dalit communities in Odisha are Pano, Dewar, Dhoba, Ganda, Kandara and Bauri. The Dalits number is 60,82,063 from all communities of Scheduled castes in Odisha comprises 30,73,278 male and 30,08,785 female according to census report of India 2001.<sup>8</sup> Dalits represent a community of 170 million in India, constituting 17% of the population. One out of every six Indians is Dalit, yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human and dignity promised to all citizens of India. In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit Status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leatherwork, butchering, removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste. Dalits of Odisha work as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Occupation of the Dalits have been categorised similar to that of respondents, that is, low, medium and high and in addition, two more categories very low and lowest have been created.<sup>9</sup> In Odisha, Dalits are divided into two groups like touchable and non-touchable. The non-touchable of these two categories include jobs which have mentioned above. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. For example, they could not enter a temple or a school and were required to stay outside the village. Elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other castes. Discrimination against Dalits still

exists in rural areas in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. Dalits are the lowest members of Hindu caste system in Odisha. They undertake occupation that the rest of Odishan society found filthy and embarrassing and also receive ill-treatment from the members of the higher castes, particularly from Brahmins. In rural areas of Odishan society, it is seen that the Brahmins would have to bathe if a Dalit shadow fell on them, would not eat food prepared by Dalits and would not drink from the same wells as Dalits. News was published in the “The Times of India” on April, 18<sup>th</sup> 2011 as follows....Kendrapada: An Idol of Hanuman was washed by some upper caste people in Kendrapada’s Kanipada village after it was touched by some Dalits. During the Hanuman Jayanti celebrations on Thursday, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2011, Dalits came to worship the deity. Some of them touched the idol while offering Puja. A victim named Prasant Mallick, aged about 26, a Dalit of village Kanipada protested and said that the upper caste people abused and threatened not to touch the deity again. In Kanipada, upper caste persons don’t allow the Dalit people to enter the Hanuman temple, said Ashok Mallick, a Dalit leader and the president of the district Dalit Manch. Four years back of this incident, some Dalits were not allowed to enter the Jagannath temple in Kereragada in Kendrapada district by the temple authority for which Dalits filed a case against the temple authority before the High Court.<sup>10</sup> Even in educational institution, discriminations are happening till the date. News is published in the *Times of India* on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2011 that the Dalit children at a school in Jagatsinghpur district do not know where they went wrong with their studies because teachers refused to check their notebook. *Ameachhuta (we are considered untouchables), the teachers refuse to touch our books and our home work is never corrected*, said Bijaya Mallick, a student of class IV at the school at Keutapada in Balikuda Block. If we even touch our teachers by mistake, they scold us for polluting them.<sup>11</sup> Generally, the Dalits live together in a separate ward which is usually located at the outskirts of the main hamlet or village where upper caste men live. The stigma of untouchability which is attached to them deprives them of using water from the same source used by higher caste groups in the villages. The influential and established higher caste group never allows the Dalits to take water from the existing tube-well and wells in the villages. Thus they face a lot of problems in getting drinking water. They are scared to use wells and tube-wells as sometimes it brings about confrontation with other persons of upper castes. They use from the tanks and Nala (small River) which adversely affects their health. Sometimes they take bath in the water lagged in the paddy land. Somehow they manage during the rainy season. But in summer when the ponds and Nalas dry off, they face difficulties.<sup>12</sup> The former *untouchables* are referred to by the India Government and other authorities as Scheduled Castes (SCs), as the groups concerned were cited in certain Schedules attached to the Indian Constitution. These groups increasingly refer to themselves as *Dalits*, a word meaning broken, crushed, oppressed but which they are now imbuing with a new meaning of resistance to a system which places them at the very bottom of society. Dalits or those discriminated against by work and descent as the UN put it are also found in Nepal.

In rural India Dalits have been murdered for proposing to marry somebody further up the social ladder, barred from temples, forced into bonded labour and made to carry human waste from the homes of high caste Hindus. In this cities, where it is easier to hinge one’s name and mind slip into the crowd. Dalits say economic exclusion is now the biggest issue. Dalit maintains their life by wage-earning, excepting a few household, who depends on cultivation and agricultural labour. Major portion of their annual income comes from agricultural labour. Almost all households derive income by adopting agricultural labour as main or subsidiary occupation. Thus it is appropriate to consider agricultural labour as their main occupation. Besides, wage-earning and cultivation, they also earn through other activities, like drum-beating, small business in nearby weekly markets, rickshaw pulling and engaging themselves in trading animals like cow, buffalo, bullock, etc. Some of them also collect raw hides and supply them to tanners through middlemen.<sup>13</sup> The majority from the Shudra castes, as marginal or small farmers or artisans labouring in the Jajmani-balutedari (Client-patron) system, is variously exploited and is poor. A minority of them, as big farmers and middle farmers, were well off. Some of them were vested with the traditional powers of village administrators. During the post-independence period the imperatives of electoral politics provided the motive forces for the consolidation of the middle castes. In Odisha, all the castes under this generic Shudra caste-group were not well off economically and equal socially. Many of them, the artisan and service castes, were as poor as Dalits and lay at various rungs in the caste hierarchy. However, they could be bracketed together socially in caste terms and economically as farmers as most of them had land. The caste divisions between them were really imperceptible in hierarchical terms.

Trafficking is rampant in Odisha. A study conducted by the Bhubaneswar-based Institute of Socio-economic Development in collaboration with United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) revealed that the holy place of Puri remained the main destination of victims of trafficking with 43.83%, followed by

capital city, Bhubaneswar with 30%. Most of the trafficked women are belongs to Dalits. All the Dalit castes are not economically equal. Only adult male members are the earning members whereas adult female perform the domestic work of the family.<sup>14</sup>

**Conclusion:** This debacle embodied a larger debate relating to class vs. Caste and the concomitant question of how to wage class struggle and also how to annihilate castes. In so far as the working class in Odisha collectively come from the Dalit and Shudra castes, it is important that they come together to become a class. In the same manner, the question of annihilation of castes is intimately linked to the coming together of the Dalits and lower-run Shudra castes against the upper caste hegemony in every sphere of power.

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