

An Obscurity of Dalit Identity in Jammu and Kashmir: Analysing Historical Regional Specificities

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Abstract—*The paper revolves around three broad themes which have been delineated thematically: Firstly, the Historical specificities and regional variations coupled with historical context in relation to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) of the Jammu and Kashmir and secondly, the internal dynamics among the SC sub-castes and thirdly the reasons/factors for the obscure Dalit Identity in Jammu and Kashmir with special reference to the Scheduled caste.*

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Consciousness, Scheduled Caste, Historical Specificities, Jammu and Kashmir.

1. INTRODUCTION

History shows that whenever the downtrodden decided to name themselves it acted as a turning point in their struggle for liberation. The same with case of the oppressed people of India called “outcastes” or the “untouchables”. A new turn came in the identity of the oppressed when they began to name themselves as “Dalits”, and it happened in 1970s. The term was popularized by Dalit Panthers. The term Dalit found a ready acceptance among untouchable communities all over India. This was the first time that they had been able to choose their identity collectively, rather than be named by others. ‘Dalit’ is a word popularised by various movements against inequality and is not recognized by the state or constitution. The term Dalit is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘dal’ which means ‘burst’, ‘split’, ‘ground-down’, ‘broken to pieces’, ‘downtrodden’ or ‘oppressed’. Jotirao Phooley and B.R Ambedkar, two towering figures in Dalit history, were the first to appropriate the word, as a noun and an adjective, in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe the extreme oppression of untouchables. Dalits constitute about 16 percent of India’s population. For centuries they have been at the bottom of India’s social pyramid, denied even the most basic human rights, such as access to drinking water from public ponds and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, and freedom to choose an occupation (they were assigned one at birth). The transformation of the stigma of being an untouchable to the pride in being a Dalit is a story of

collective struggle for centuries. From untouchables to Dalit was to indicate the idea that the untouchables of India had themselves chosen a new identity, that is of Dalit, to indicate their lack of beliefs in being polluting and their conditions was the fault of caste system.

2. REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND THE LOCATION OF THE SCHEDULED CASTE

The State of Jammu and Kashmir is known for its cultural diversity and plurality based on religion, ethnicity and region. The population of the State, as per 2011 Census, is 1,25,48,926. Of this, the population of the Scheduled Castes is 9,24,991 of which 4,86,232 are male and 4,38,759 are the female. Accordingly, Scheduled Castes constitute 7.36 per cent population of the State. The SCs are overwhelmingly rural, as many as 82.6 per cent of them reside in rural areas. District wise distribution of the SC population shows that they have maximum concentration in Samba and Udhampur districts with a share of 28.82 and 24.95 per cent respectively, followed by Jammu (24.76 per cent) and Kathua district (22.94 per cent). The Kashmir region has a meager SC population. Four districts of Kashmir region have recorded SC population below 500. Of these, in each of Shoyopian and Kulgam districts the population of SCs is less than 100. This clearly indicates that the SC population is overwhelmingly concentrated in the Jammu region, especially in the districts that are bordering Punjab.

The Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir Scheduled Caste Order 1956 recognizes 13 castes as Scheduled Castes. Out of these thirteen, Megh is the most populous caste with a population of 3,00,980, constituting 39.1 per cent of the total SC population. They are followed by Chamar (ramdasi) with 1,87,277 population (24.3 per cent) and Doom (mahasha) with a population of 1,59,908 (20.8 per cent). These three Castes together constitute 84.2 per cent of the total SC population. Four SCs, namely Batwal, Barwala, Basith and Saryara with population ranging from 39,385 to 13,327 account for 12.9 per

cent; remaining six castes along with generic castes constitute the residual 2.9 per cent of the total SC population of the State. Among all the thirteen SCs, Watal is the smallest community having population below 200.

These regional variations, coupled with historical context and socio-economic factors, had significant influence on the Dalit Subjectivity or the Identity formation.

3. INTERNAL DYNAMICS

Of all the thirteen Scheduled castes, Megh, chamar and Doom are higher in number and relatively placed in better position than the rest of the castes. The remaining subcaste are Batwal, Barwala, Basith, Saryala, Chura, Dhyar, Gardi, Jolaha, Ratal, Watal are not so well placed among Scheduled castes. The traditional occupation of the Megh, chamar and Doooms were weaving, leather work, making articles out of Bamboos respectively. The other sub-castes were mostly engaged in sweeping, manual labour, drum-beares in religious ceremonies, removal of carcass, cobblers, scavenging etc. Some of the SCs like Megh and Chamar have occupied many middle and higher ranks in government Jobs and their higher class status further led animosity from other sub-castes. They feel that all the benefits of reservation were taken by one or the two sub-castes. In terms of status, like the upper and middle castes, almost every Dalit caste maintains a sort of socio- ritualistic distance from other castes, Particularly regarding marriages. The factor of caste endogamy is very much prevalent among the Scheduled castes too. They prefer to marry within their own subcaste. Besides this, various subcaste among the SCs in the state created an alternative religious space. For example, the Meghs have temples of Bhagat Kabir as well as kabir sabhas, Chamars have temple/sabhas on the name of Guru Ravidas whereas Mahashas have temples of Guru Naba Das as well as Mahasha sabhas. These sectoral sabhas have consolidated their caste mobilisation instead of creating a unified Dalit identity.

4. HISTORICAL SPECIFICITIES AND OBSCURITY OF DALIT IDENTITY

The unique historical specificity of J&k state which played an unconstructive role in the formation of an autonomous Dalit identity was the prolonged conflict between India and Pakistan owing to the disputed nature of the state. The popular rhetoric of Jammu versus Kashmir left very little space for the expressions of the Dalits for their caste issues and concerns. They were never politically organized to raise their voices against caste based marginalization. They were found to be in proximity with the mainstream conflict politics of Jammu. In other words they always used to identify themselves with the dominant conflict ridden political discourse of Jammu. In this context, it has been outrightly affirmed that ambiguity and fluidity are the popular hall marks of the Dalit (SCs) identity rather than solidity and cohesiveness. Besides this, there are many other distinctive and unique specificities in the state

which made Scheduled castes completely unique with rest of their counterparts. The unique historical context of Jammu and Kashmir has left its own specificities in the formation or construction of identities, particularly for Dalits:

Firstly, in a predominantly Muslim dominated State of Jammu and Kashmir, religion often played a crucial role in the formation of other identities as well. Since Hindus are minority in a religious polarized State, the dominant sections of the Hindu society, especially the upper castes, did not strictly practice the rigid social stratification for which Hindu society is known for. Fearful of conversions, they had shown tremendous flexibility towards caste based practices. For instance, Maharaja Hari Singh was the first one who granted to Dalits the access to temples and other public places and admission in government schools way back in 1931-32. This removal of legal restrictions on the Harijan entry in public places was probably the first in princely states of India. Similarly, 'untouchability' was abolished in the state legally long before Mahatma Gandhi took up the same. Similarly, many Hindu reformist organizations that were established in the State in early twentieth century attempted to infuse cohesion among the Hindus by undermining some of the social practices of segregation. This historical context has significant influence on the construction of Dalit identity. Hence, the 'duality' of Dalit Identity—as Hindu and as Dalit was always the question which is marking continuously.

Secondly, the stratification system that prevailed in Jammu region is somewhat different from that in other parts of India. In most parts of India, Brahmin community is considered highest in caste hierarchy and always performed high professions such as priests, teachers, courtiers, advisers, astronomers, etc. In addition to this, in Jammu and Kashmir, Brahmins also involved in the cultivation of land and they also tilled the land along with lower castes. Both of them had shown occasional unity in their animosity towards Rajputs to whom they had paid rents and tributes. There are many popular narratives to show the joining of highest and lowest castes while pursuing common causes and interests.

Thirdly, many household activities, such as weaving, cattle rearing, etc., were traditionally performed by professionals, who are in the middle level of Shudras and who are not considered as untouchables. Most of these communities are termed as Other Backward Communities (OBCs) in contemporary period. However, the presence of these OBCs (in J&K OBCs nomenclature has been changed to OSCs) much lower compare with other parts of India. Hence, many jobs that were traditionally performed by OBCs in other parts of India are performed by Dalits in Jammu and Kashmir (Rattal, mahasha, Wattals, Chura, Dhyar, Basith). For instance, main occupation of Megh community is weaving and agriculture. Hence, the strict untouchability that was prevailed in majority Hindu societies was somewhat diluted in Jammu and Kashmir. This specific sociological factor has greatly

influenced the identity formation of the Dalits and inter-community relations in contemporary period.

Fourthly, the religious character of the Jammu and Kashmir has significant influence on the construction of Dalit political consciousness. According to the Constitution Order (Scheduled Caste) 1950, any non Hindu could not be regarded as Scheduled Castes, though later on it extended to Sikh religion in 1956. The lower sections of the Muslims were not recognized as Scheduled Castes though they are also experiencing similar socio-economic discrimination and oppression. As a result, the population of Scheduled Castes is quite less in the State. In Kashmir region, the population of Scheduled Caste is very insignificant at 0.05 per cent. This is an important dimension that helps to comprehend particularly in the backdrop of power configurations where Kashmir centric politics determine the larger political discourse in the State. Consequently, it further impacted on the emergence of their political identity in the state.

Fifthly, the impact of Land Reforms in the state cannot be overlooked in their identity formation. The land reforms implemented in 1951 and 1971 transformed the social fabric of Jammu and Kashmir when substantial land was transferred to hitherto exploited and oppressed sections. The land reforms brought positive changes to the occupation of the SCs. It helped to make a shift in the occupation of Dalits from leather and other menial works to agriculture. Land reform programme was extensively successful in transferring land to the SCs. Therefore, one cannot evade the impact of the past liberal policies as well as the radical state interventions meant to elevate the status of weaker sections, particularly the SCs.

Sixthly, the ‘agency-subject’ relationship is most complex and intricate dimension in the creation of consciousness and a sense of identity. Many individuals and organizations do play important role in the construction of identity. For instance, the contributions of Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar are quite significant in the construction of Dalit Identity across India. However, the interplay of agency-subject is very much complex because the very nature of ‘agency’ determines the kind of subjects or identities it is creating. The State of Jammu and Kashmir is no exception to this. Three types of organizations influence Dalit consciousness in the State. The **first** category of organizations was established in the first of half of twentieth century to reform the Hindu community in order to stop conversions, which resulted in the eradication of untouchability and entry of the Dalits to temples and other sacred places. The organizations such as Dogra Sardar Sabha, Harijan Mandal, Harijan Sevak Sangh, etc. are somewhat successful in creating a sense of Hindu identity while reducing the highly stratified segregation. The **second** category of organizations consists of those established to work for the Dalit empowerment and welfare with a sense of Dalit consciousness. Many organizations such as All India Depressed Classes League (Jammu and Kashmir), Scheduled Castes Employees Federation, Dalit Sudhar Federation,

Backward and Minority Community Employees Federation, Scheduled Castes Welfare Association (Jammu), All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations J&K, All J&K SC/ST Lawyers Forum, etc. These all have articulated and mobilized Dalits from time to time on various causes. These organizations are attempting to create an overarching and unified Dalit Identity across the sub-castes. The **third** set of organizations is established by specific castes to work for the welfare of their respective individual castes. Few prominent among them are: J&K Batwal Council, J&K Dalit Sena, All India J&K Ravi Das Sabha, Megh Mandal, J&K Mahasha Sabha, etc. These have been formed to promote and strengthen the cause of their respective caste identity. For example, the Meghs have the temples of Bhagat Kabir, Mahashas of Goswami Guru Nabha Das and Chamars of Guru Ravi Das. All these caste based organization have weakened the overarching and unified Dalit identity due to their heterogenous and sometimes conflictual interests. In this context, one can say that the nature and operation of the ‘Dalit Agency’ in creating the ‘Dalit Consciousness’ (singular or plural) has played its own role and this distorted consciousness in turn is influencing their political orientations and participation. These all factors led to the fragile Dalit politics in the state which sometimes are showing a sense of cohesion and integration with the mainstream and sometimes a sign of fragmentation and disintegration.

To conclude, it is pertinent to mention on the basis of the above analysis that it is due to several structural features that account for the lack of contestation and assertion among the Scheduled caste. The prominent amidst these features was the lack of organized political leadership among the Scheduled castes. Further the result of radical economic and political reforms in the post independence, state intervention from time to time (affirmative actions), conflict-ridden nature of the state and its religious character etc has made Scheduled caste satisfied with their identity from above but failed to construct their identity from below which is the pre-requisite for their true empowerment. All these indicators undoubtedly turned out Scheduled caste as a unique and distinctive collection with rest of their counterparts in India.

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