



CASTE IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA: HISTORY AND MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

People have migrated across the world through various periods. The motivation for migration has sometimes been voluntary sometime forced. The Indian diaspora is numerically very large. However it is not a homogenous category. The issue of caste is relevant in the Indian diapsora. Indians abroad follow strict caste rules especially during marriages. The discrimination faced by the lower caste Hindus in India has surfaced in the new found land. Migration has only ameliorated their economic status but socially they still face discrimination. Associations and Organisations have been found by the lower caste Hindus to give voice to the discrimination faced by them abroad as well as to champion the cause of the Dalits in India. This activism has led to a global movement and caste is now recognised as a serious human rights issue. This paper discusses the history of discrimination faced as well the movement launched to fight against it.

KEYWORDS : *Indian Diaspora, Caste, Discrimination.*

INTRODUCTION

The movement of people across places is a phenomenon with a long history going back as far as the beginning of mankind. The reasons for their movement have varied, depending on the prevailing conditions and requirements. Migration as a spatial dimension of human activity entails crossing borders of some kind. In the post Westphalian era, migration is often understood as the flow of people within and across the borders of a nation state. Borders are markers of identity, be it symbolic, political or cultural. In the context of the nation state, identities are largely defined as membership of a political community, i.e. a nation. Citizenship is a status conferred upon human beings as belonging to particular nation states. Borders play a constitutive role in defining subjectivities and terms, such as citizen, home, abroad, emigrant, immigrant, homeless, refugee, borderless, diasporas, etc. What then is a Diaspora? The term Diaspora has a Greek origin. In literal translation the term means *Dia*, i.e. to disperse and *Speiro*, i.e. to sow. The term first appeared in the Greek translation of the “*Book of Deuteronomy*” in the Old Testament, to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland of Palestine.¹ Gabriel Sheffer in “*Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*”, published in 2003, states that Diasporism and Diaspora are not recent phenomena but have their roots in antiquity. Sheffer opines that the Koreans, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Palestinians, Jews, Africans, Armenians, Kurds, Greeks etc that have been living outside their own countries of origin on a permanent basis, but maintaining links with their homelands, are all part of the Diaspora.²

As of January 2015, Indian Diaspora numbers 284,55,026.³ The maximum number of Indians are recorded in UK and USA (both NRI and PIO included)⁴. Scholars have delved deep into the socio-cultural, economic and political motives of migration as well as tracing the entire process of their assimilation and integration. However, Indian diaspora has been treated as a monolithic homogenous category in most studies. Deeper insights show that Indian diaspora has presented a picture of a very diverse and separated community. Region, religion, language, class and caste have displayed their

presence in the new host societies. Among these the caste system plays an important part in regulating their social conduct.

CASTE AND THE INDIAN DIASPORA:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar plays a significant role in the depressed classes⁵ movement as well as the later discourses on emancipation, his work and relevance cuts across several aspects, thus not limiting to the emancipation of the depressed classes alone. Dr Ambedkar's contribution to political, economic thought are equally relevant. Womens rights, issues of development, foreign affairs, agriculture are just a few of the multifaceted examples of Dr B.R. Ambedkars contribution to India as a whole and the oppressed in particular.

The phenomenon of migration was considered an important tool of emancipation by Dr Ambedkar. Through his speeches and writings, he often reiterated the idea of movement to newer and far off regions. Narrating his own experience Dr Ambedkar states that "My five years of stay in Europe and America ... had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable whenever he went in India was a problem to himself and others"⁶

Migration of the depressed classes especially during the colonial rule was mostly as indenture labourers. Dr Vivek Kumar in his article *Understanding the Dalit Diaspora* categorizes the migratory process as the old diaspora i.e indentured labourers and the other semi skilled and professional *dalits* who mostly migrated to London and U.S as industrial workers, professional, technicians, students etc.⁷ Vivek Kumar gives statistical data of lower caste migrants. "Indian indentured labourers who migrated to Fiji, number 60,965 between 1879 and 1916 out of which 11,907 belonged to low menial castes like *Chamars, Koris, Pasis* etc. Similarly between 1876 and 1885 those Indians who migrated to Trinidad, of them 18 percent were Brahmins and other high caste, 8.5 percent artisan caste, 32 percent agricultural castes and 41.5 percent were low castes".⁸ The stigma of pollution associated with the crossing of the seas was not a barrier for the lower castes, who were anyways considered polluted and did not have opportunities for living a dignified life in India, chose to migrate.

Caste system is so deep rooted in the psyche of the Indian society that it has travelled across seas with them. The discrimination and derogation to which the *dalits* were subjected to in India, did not completely leave them alone abroad. Dr Vivek Kumar in his article *Understanding the Dalit Diaspora*, gives references of discrimination practiced by the Indian diaspora.⁹ Interviews conducted by Mc Dermott with the South Indian Christian *dalits* in New York and concluded that "caste is a diaspora problem now, and will only become more so in the coming years".¹⁰

The matrimonial advertisements give a peep into the operation of caste. The regional, language and caste associations play a vital role in arranging marriages. Many people return to South Asia to marry in their own caste. Parar Bagawar of the Suman Bureau, a matrimonial agency in Britain, says "People are still mentioning the issue of caste and bringing it up when it comes to marriage and generally... people don't want to marry into a lower caste...only 25 per cent of marriages take place across caste barriers".¹¹ It just does not stop at the advertisements. In 2005, the New Internationalist blog interviewed several British Indians (lower caste) who detailed incidents of prejudice and discrimination.¹² Naresh Puri narrates in his interview, the life experience of one Indian in UK, "I met (a girl) started falling in love ...I'm quite educated. I had good a job, worked for banks. They (girls parents) would only oppose us because they thought they were of a higher creed or caste than myself... They are willing to throw her away just because they think the person she loves is lower than them...eventually they just brainwashed her and ruined our marriage".¹³ A similar discrimination was experienced by an Indian who arrived in Britain and stayed with a family who were of a higher caste than him. They were initially helpful but a few months later when they discovered his lower caste, everything changed. It was a complete rejection.¹⁴ "I don't feel hurt by the racial discrimination. It's the caste system, which makes me feel absolutely disgusted reacts Naresh Puri in his interview. People of the same stock, people from the same continent, people with the same problems, they practice the caste discrimination and they make you feel subhuman"¹⁵ Further Mr. Puri says Caste system has a strong influence on the daily life of the Indians in Britain, it is the determining factor in marriages, where they

pray, whom they interact with and whether they have any respect among the peers. Despite this most are unwillingly to openly discuss this issue.¹⁶ Davinder Prasad a UK immigrant recalls how caste initially did not seem like a problem but with the number of Indians increasing, caste identities sharpened¹⁷. Caste based temples have begun to be built in Britain. Members of each caste attending their very own temple. Guru Ravidas Gurdawara in Bedford is one such Sikh temple which caters for former Untouchables known as Ravidasis.¹⁸

Interestingly these caste expressions have not been limited to only private affairs but seem to have surfaced even in the public space. When a person from the lower caste attempted to contest for the post of councilor in the UK, the upper caste members made all attempts to ensure his failure, which then later forced him to contest from a ward where there were no Indians and he succeeded from there.¹⁹

It is a common belief that education is the solution for eliminating social evils from our society, but this belief also contradicts itself. The Indian Diaspora is comparatively much more educated and aware as compared to their counterparts living in India; still they believe and follow the rigid rules and regulations of the 'caste system'. Migration has elevated the economic status of the lower castes, however whether they are socially emancipated remains a question.

'DALIT DIASPORA' AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT:

Experiences in the diaspora, and a commitment to elevate their status has compelled these immigrants to establish associations and advocate locally and globally against caste discrimination. First of these diasporic associations was formed by immigrants to the United Kingdom who belonged to the depressed classes. The "Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee" of Great Britain was founded in 1969.²⁰ The 1970s saw the launching of several Ambedkarite associations.

The 70s was a landmark decade as far as the depressed classes movement is concerned. The dalit panther and literary movements were dominant in India. In the diaspora too, the first association in the US, Volunteers in the Service of India's Oppressed and Neglected (VISION), was founded in the 1970s in New York City. In England, Mr. T. Hirekar began to work along similar lines, and Buddhist groups began to be formed.²¹ In 1985, the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organizations, U.K. (FABO UK) was founded to coordinate the activities of the associations within the U.K. and began raising awareness of the conditions facing the depressed classes in India at the national and international levels. Gradually, a world-wide depressed classes movement began to take shape which raised its voice against the caste based injustices faced in India and globally. Diasporic groups began to frame caste inequality as a human rights issue.

The efforts of the diaspora continue to highlight the caste question at every crucial stage. While they have succeeded in getting caste recognized as a discriminatory practice on the various global platforms, they continue their efforts at their own community level as well. To assert their identity, they have begun organising talks, discussion and processions on 14 April to commemorate the birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.²² All this is not just a display of their respect to the leader, but it also a method through which today the community wishes to come out in the open and assert their identity. It is no longer living in fear of facing alienation from the caste hindus among the diaspora. They have become a force to reckon with and have begun to even bring pressure on the Indian government. For example, in UK they have played a crucial role in pressurizing the Indian government to acquire the house in which Dr Ambedkar lived in London. Similarly large number of associations and *buddha viharas* have been established around the world which have successfully engaged with the governments in the host nations, one example could be seen in the unveiling of statues of Dr Ambedkar at important places. A significant achievements came about in April, 2013, when the UK government passed a landmark legislation to ban caste discrimination in the country under the Equality Act, to protect U.K.'s community from caste discrimination.²³

In the digital age, the otherwise separated and alienated *dalits* spread across the various continents now can connect with each other. Websites like Dalit Solidarity Network etc. have provided the space for giving a voice to the different issues and challenges faced by the depressed classes. All this

activism is crucial for increasing the global visibility of discrimination and for courting the attention of international human rights organizations.²⁴ These efforts at various levels have led to the internationalization of the issue of Caste. Caste atrocities hitherto unknown outside India began to be discussed alongside racial discrimination

Thus the 'dalit diaspora' has begun to make its presence visible using different methods. From protests against Indian leaders to organizing marches against the atrocities, they have played a crucial role in organizing a social movement for equality and justice. The outcomes of this social movement has culminated with the UN recognizing the issue of caste as a major obstacle in securing human rights for all. Following the ideals of justice, equality and fraternity laid down by leaders like Phule, Ambedkar, Guru Ravidas, the dalit diaspora is participating in bringing about a change in India society and thus aiding in creating a nation which will be free of the vices of inequality and injustice.

END NOTES:

¹ Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.9.

² Ibid. , p. 1.

³ Population of Overseas Indians , *Annual Report 2014-15*, www.mea.gov.in

⁴ Ibid., USA 1272846 (NRI) and 3183063(PIO); UK 325000 (NRI), 1500000 (PIO)

⁵ The terms depressed classes, dalits , backward castes are used to refer to those groups which were considered as untouchables and who are now classified as scheduled castes in the Indian Constitution

⁶ Nanak Chand Rath, *Reminiscences and Remembrances of Dr B.R. Ambedkar* , New Delhi, Falcon Books, 1995, p.12

⁷ Vivek Kumar, Understanding Dalit Diaspora, *EPW*, Jan 3, 2004, pp.114-116

⁸ Ibid, p.114

⁹ Ibid, p.114

¹⁰ Rachel Fell Mc Dermott, From Hindusim to Christianity, from India to New York: Bondage and Exodus Experiences in the lives of Indian Dalit Christians in Diaspora, in Knut A Jacobsen and Selva J Raj *South Asian Christian Diaspora: Invisible Diasporas in Europe and North America*, Surrey England, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008, p.246

¹¹ Nikki van der Gaag, 'Blatant rather than latent, caste is still alive – and kicking – in the West', *The New Internationalist the world unspun*, <https://newint.org/features/2005/07/01/casteout>

¹² Rachel Fell Mc Dermott, op.cit, p.246

¹³ Naresh Puri, The Caste Divide, 05 July, 2004, BBC RADIO 4, <https://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-puri050704.htm>

¹⁴ Nikki van der Gaag, op.cit

¹⁵ Naresh Puri, op.cit

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Nikki van der Gaag, op.cit.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Purvi Mehta , Recasting Caste: Histories of Dalit Transnationalism and the Internationalization of Caste Discrimination ,A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Anthropology and History) in the University of Michigan, 2013, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/102442/purvim_1.pdf?sequence=1 , pp.70-80

²¹ Gail Omvedt, The U.N., racism and caste – I, *The Hindu –online edition*, Monday April 9, 2001, <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2001/04/09/stories/05092524.htm>.

²² Ambedkar International Mission Celebrated Dr Ambedkar Jayanti in New York (USA), *Velivada*, <http://velivada.com/2017/04/28/ambedkar-international-mission-celebrated-dr-ambedkar-jayanti-new-york-usa/>

²³Palash Ghosh ,Indian Caste System Imported To Britain? Dalits Say Yes, Upper Caste Hindus Say No, *IBtimes*, 07/12/13 ,<http://www.ibtimes.com/indian-caste-system-imported-britain-dalits-say-yes-upper-caste-hindus-say-no-1343069>

²⁴ Purvi Mehta, op.cit