



EMANCIPATION OF DALIT GENERATIONS FROM RURAL TO URBAN: ANALYSING NARENDRA JADHAV'S UNTOUCHABLES

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Abstract: Dalits have been facing discrimination and oppression at the hands of the upper-caste since centuries in both rural and urban spaces. However, in rural spaces it is even more rampant and aggressive as compared to in the urban spaces. With the development and expansion of modern cities in India in the early 1900s, the cities provided space for many Dalit families to put behind their identities as merely Dalits and acquire the respect that every human deserves. This paper attempts to read Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, a biographical account of his father's life to understand and explore caste discrimination and its transformation across generations in both rural and urban settings.

Keywords- biography, caste, Dalit, discrimination, emancipation, rural, urban

1. INTRODUCTION

Caste discrimination has been prevalent in India since many centuries. Hindu religious ideology divides its practitioners into four 'varnas' namely 'Brahmins', 'Kshatriyas', 'Vaishyas' and 'Shudras' and assigns them certain roles for the proper functioning of society. Brahmins were expected to deal with knowledge and education, Kshatriyas with fighting and protecting the people, Vaishyas were supposed to earn for the society and perform trade whereas Shudras were expected to clean the society. Originally all varnas were created equal, however, this varna system soon turned out to be hierarchical and obstructed transgression of one member of a varna to another.

This paper will analyse Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, a biographical account of his father's life to understand and explore caste discrimination and its transformation across generations seeing it in both rural and urban settings. Jadhav is a renowned economist of India and his "Untouchables" showcases caste discrimination from 1920 onwards, shifting from villages to cities. This book highlights the hopes and desires of Dalits while truly showing their emancipation. It tries to address the question of a change in the position of Dalits in Indian society across time and space, keeping in mind their economic status.

Jadhav's protagonist is his own father named Damu (Damodar). Jadhav begins this biography in his father's youth and takes us back to 1920s. Jadhav's family is a Dalit family originally from Ozar, a village in Maharashtra. They are Mahars, a sub-category among Dalits. Jadhav describes that "Traditionally, the Mahar's duty in the village, as classified by the British administrative manual, was that of an "inferior village servant" (6). Their duties mainly consisted of "carrying death notices and messages to other villages, bringing fuel to the cremation ground, mending the village walls, summoning landowners to pay land revenue in the *chavadi* (village hall), escorting those conveying the government treasury, sweeping the village roads, serving government officials, tracking thieves, and removing the carcasses of cattle from the village" (Jadhav 6).

2. DISCRIMINATION IN VILLAGES

The narrative unwraps with an incident where Jadhav depicts the atrocities forced on his father by society. Damu who had lived in Mumbai for years has to come back to his village for 3 months to fulfil his 'Yeskar' duties. Each Dalit family in his village took these duties in rotations for 3 months. During Damu's turn, the dead body of a girl was found in the village well. As a Yeskar he had to look after the body until a high official came to check the body. Damu, without eating or drinking sits at the well for an entire night and the next day, while all the upper caste people went to their home. When he asked to at least inform his family that he'll not come to the house for the night he was not allowed to and was asked to remain there only. Later the same day Damu was asked to go inside the well and bring the dead-body out. But he refused to do so. This refusal was taken as a challenge to the authority of high-caste people and so he was beaten up severely by the 'Fauzdar'. Similarly, later in the work, we see when Damu went from house to house in order to collect food called 'Baluta' they would give out the food from as far as they could making sure they don't touch him or his belongings. He, like others of his caste, was treated inhumanly with contempt, disgust and derogation.

As we go along the narrative, Jadhav describes many practices that took place in villages to discriminate. Dalits were not allowed to enter temples. They were also not allowed to sit inside tea stalls. They were not allowed to collect or drink water from the same place as that of upper castes. Moreover, they had to walk bare feet in order to give upper-caste people respect like gods in temples.

3. CITY AS A SPACE FOR EMANCIPATION

Damu was not a man who'd give in for such oppression. He was aware of the fact that he's been suppressed by a system created by man. He was aware of his rights. He always questioned the system and said to his wife, "We must have self-respect. We must have dignity..... How can I take to begging from door to door? Baluta is our right, they proudly claim! My foot! Have you seen how they throw the food? I don't want rights as a dog. I want my human rights" (Jadhav 33). The true marker of his awakening is that when he denies doing his so-called duties and decides to leave his village to move to Bombay of colonial India. The village that he leaves behind in the 1920s was full of discrimination. It is to be noted that the exposure to these forward ideas, he gets while in Mumbai. He lived in Mumbai for years even before his marriage (1926), and it is here he gets this courage to assert his identity and ask for justice. There, Master Tau, an educated Dalit man, exposed him to Dr B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar believed in "Educate, Unite and Agitate" (Jadhav 37). Damu's awakening is motivated by Ambedkar's ideology. Thus, the spirit of liberation roots from the city. This spirit of transgression is next to impossible in a village because there, the system doesn't allow him to think of himself as an individual.

His and his wife's movement to Mumbai is a movement "towards freedom" which is also the inspiration for the second Chapter of the book. Mumbai is the place that has contributed to forming a conscience in Damu. Here, his family was not curbed by their status as a Dalit. Damu, like in the village was not forced to work as a Mahar, he could choose any job that suits him. He gets a job in the Railways, though not so well-paying job but one with dignity. Damu was aware of the fact that he was uneducated and therefore couldn't be promoted to a higher level but he was content that he was living a respectful life. Similarly, one of the minor characters, Najuka compares her experience of entering a tea shop in Mumbai and says that in the village, they would not have been allowed to enter the tea shop let alone stay there and have tea. While in Mumbai, she finds that nobody objected to their sitting there. Thus, Mumbai even in the early 30s was a much liberal space than a village.

People who came to cities had created a new identity for themselves where they are not discriminated. It is also to be noted that people in cities did not care much if their neighbour was a Dalit. Cities are a melting pot where such rigid boundaries are not possible.

In Jadhav's village, Dalits had no right to education. But in a city space, it becomes possible. Tau Master is a Dalit character who is educated even before independence. The novel says that Dalits who served British government were made to learn basic reading and writing and their families were also supposed to be educated and this is how Ambedkar was exposed to education as his father worked for the British government. Both Damu and his wife Sonu work hard to educate their children in the best possible way despite their financial limitations because they knew education is the only way to emancipation. They could think of fulfilling their aspirations only because of the space they live in. In cities, discrimination is not starkly based on caste but on class and the way for upward mobility is education, which was denied to Dalits in villages.

However, it is not like that they did not face discrimination in Mumbai at all. Jadhav tells us while he was young, during the times of festivals, children use to go around to houses for getting 'prasad' but while in some households, the children of high castes only were allowed to go inside the house, he and his siblings could go only till the gate and had to receive the prasad with their hands outstretched. Also, when Jadhav wanted to marry a high caste girl, her parents, particularly girl's mother opposed, because of his caste. She, although admits that Jadhav being highly educated is too good as a Dalit, she gives in to the stereotypes that are associated with Dalit families that wives are beaten up by their husbands. Thus, though cities had a comparatively liberal attitude towards caste difference, nevertheless discrimination existed even years after Damu and Sonu had come to Mumbai.

Discrimination against Dalits is still prevalent in India even after the constitutional prohibition of untouchability in 1950. Jadhav says, "Over the years...the caste system has taken on sophisticated dimensions; it has become subtler, though no less pernicious" (Kirkus Reviews). Jadhav sometimes feels hopelessness, as he says in one of his other works, "the caste system is so deeply ingrained that change can, at best, be cosmetic. The caste system was disposed of by God and not by mortals. It has such a powerful sanction behind it that no laws, no reform movements, and no revolutions will ever change it completely" (Outcaste: A Memoir 24).

Yet, in cities, such harsh discrimination was not there. With Education and hard work, Dalits were able to achieve a position equal to that of high caste people. And with such social standing, they were actually respected. Jadhav in his epilogue narrates the incident of his entry into the Vithoba temple. Dalits were denied entry into this temple, in fact in any temple. Therefore, for Jadhav to be welcomed as a chairman into this temple becomes very important. He says, "I was after all an Untouchable- I belonged to a caste that was denied entry into the temple. Even the shadow of an untouchable was not supposed to fall on any temple. And that day, there I was being escorted with honor into the Temple of Vithoba- the ultimate seat of Hindu temporal power" (Jadhav 287).

Thus, Jadhav's narrative shows a world of hope, where even after such prolonged discrimination in both rural and urban spaces there is a chance of standing equal. However, in villages, the scenario did not change much. It did not matter in a village if a Dalit has become resourceful in a city. For people in the village, he was still a Dalit and would still be treated in the same manner according to his caste position. They still had to walk barefoot. Jadhav says, "Dalits were still treated as untouchables in the villages even when the city dwellers had started accepting them" (252). "The age-old humiliation and scorn for their Dalit status, however, would come alive when they visited their villages. As they entered, the local teashop owner would shout sarcastically, "Get the silver cups out... the sahebs from Mumbai are here!" and particularly unclean. Broken cups used for poor Dalits would be brought out for them" (Jadhav 253).

4. POSITION OF DALITS IN PRESENT TIMES

Though the discrimination across generations and across spaces has become subtle, the same has not vanished. In the present scenario also this persists. A survey done by "India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12 covering 42,152 households across the country had shown that 27% of the Indian population claims openly to practice untouchability (30% of rural and 20% of urban households)". (Oxfamindia)

Discrimination becomes conspicuous when a Dalit goes for renting accommodation or tries to borrow money on interest. Discrimination is also common in the employment sector. The mind-set in cities is such that Dalits should only be hired for lowly jobs, otherwise, they would challenge the status of high caste people. Arundhati Roy calls this "power's fear of powerlessness" (*The Times of India*). They usually face unacceptance in the private sector and therefore they rely on services of the public sector, where because of government policies they do have some safeguards.

However, in the cities at least, untouchables now, have become aware. Also, the government, to some extent has given them socio-political safeguards which have strengthened their position in society, like the right to education, living etc. which has helped them to get emancipated. Now, they can raise their voice. The entire genre of Dalit literature is a fine example of this. Not only this, now, people of lower castes though discriminated, but are not considered as derogated. In fact, people of lower castes themselves now proudly proclaim their identity, like in Punjab, local Dalits like Chamaar proudly get painted "Chamaar Boy" or "Poot Chamaaran De" on their bikes and cars. They are not ashamed of it.

In one of his interview, Jadhav tells that he's accused by many people of reaching such a high position because he's a Dalit. Thus being a Dalit itself becomes a privilege now. However, it is sorrowful that people do not see the hard work and struggle behind these successful untouchables. Also, since untouchables have gained political awareness, politicians now use their votes as vote banks which highlights the fact that they are extremely powerful as they constitute a major population of voters. In fact, in politics, many parties are formed with the aim of emancipating and furthering Dalits like the Bahujan Samaj Party. These parties are able to balance the parties of upper castes in fact sometimes are more powerful.

Despite positive signs in the urban atmosphere, the discrimination is still prevalent in rural areas and is more pronounced and violent because there Dalits can easily be identified unlike in urban spaces where it is difficult to identify them. Owing to the rigid mindset even in the present era, the attitude in villages has not changed much. Till date Dalit and upper-caste people don't eat together, children of upper-caste do not sit with them in schools. Dalits are barred from entering police stations, health workers decline to attend to Dalits, and many Dalit villages are still deprived of water sources. Recently, numerous cases too, have come up where we see fierce attacks on Dalits. One of them was in Sunpedh, a village in Faridabad near Delhi where upper caste Rajputs allegedly set fire to the home of a Dalit family (*Firstpost*).

On the present scenario, Jadhav in an interview says, "Dalits don't have to walk around with an earthen pot around their necks and a broom around their waist to sweep away their own shadow... But discrimination does exist. Only, it is far more subtle and sophisticated and therefore far more dangerous" (*The Times of India*). Emancipated Dalits like Jadhav confesses that even after reaching great heights he's not accepted in the society entirely.

Jadhav also sees cast discrimination from another perspective and redefines it as a form of human rights violation. "Jadhav employs the discourse of human rights [...] Jadhav's notion of caste is a global category (as opposed to caste as a form of custom linked to Hinduism in India) and caste discrimination is a violation of human rights in the dominion of international law" (Satyanarayana 304). Jadhav hopes that "50 years from now, globalisation will have succeeded in breaking down the caste barriers and burying the 3,000-year-old history of inequity" (*The Times of India*).

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, we can conclude that caste discrimination in India is an ongoing process. It has not vanished from our society despite the spread of education and constitutional backing. In order to prosper, our society needs a systemic change, wherein efforts from both upper castes and lower castes are needed. The rigid mindset of upper castes need to be shaken, they have to change their attitude towards the lower caste people. Lower caste people also need to shake off inferiority complex and rise up for their human rights and dignity. Works like Jadhav's are important for achieving this goal as it brings forth the plight, the anger of untouchables to the surface which now people of upper castes can read in their own language and understand and act accordingly. This work is also an inspiration for the entire community of Dalits as Damu did not conform to society's rules and opposed all kinds of subjugation. He fought for his freedom and believed everyone can be equal, if they try, they can build their own destinies. If each Dalit fights the atrocities and educates their children to move beyond their Dalit identity, India surely will progress in a true sense. Low caste people should learn from him. They should not be solely dependent on society or the system, but they should act, and if need be, change the system. It is high time we should all act and make India a better place to live in.

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