

## (Re)Looking at “Dalit” Conceptualization

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**Abstract:** *In the post-colonial India, the ex-untouchables and the other marginalized castes of Indian social order has re-created their identity in the form of ‘Dalits’. This discourse of Dalits is not only present in the form of action-movements but also in the academic discourse of literary movements. The present paper will, thereby, try to look into the conceptualization of ‘Dalit’ within the Dalit discourse and would try to locate the theoretical underpinnings. In this quest of unraveling the problematic of Dalit conceptualization, the paper will delve into the theoretical approaches of specifically Ambedkar and will compare it with the standpoint of Harijan discourse as propounded by Gandhi. The present paper will also try to look into the various Dalit literatures and the conceptualization of Dalit there in, to critically analyze it.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Caste, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Dalit Discourse, Scheduled Castes, Exclusion, Untouchables, Low Caste.

### ***Introduction***

Cultural, political and social situations have always been changed through history by changing ideals and visions. In India, historically the people living on the margins, so coined as untouchable castes have metamorphosed now, through various stages of socio-political changes over the last century, re-created their identity as Dalits. Such metamorphosis can be regarded as profound in contemporary Indian society because it has multi-layered implication for all. However, re-created identity of Dalits must need to be situated in context of the inclination towards homogenization in the contemporary era where the term “global” that is in vogue propels towards unification and conceptualization in theoretical discourses.

The untouchable castes of all variety were seen to have clubbed their identity under the term and concept Dalit progressively since the end of British colonialism in India. India being a heterogeneous society is stratified into various layers both horizontally and vertically with geographical variation. In Berreman’s words, ‘an urbanite might reveal quite a different view of caste-even of village caste-to fellow urbanites than to a village

acquaintance or in response to an inquiry about village life emanating from one known to be associated with the village milieu. Similarly, an untouchable informant amongst other untouchables-especially among his caste fellows-could be expected to give quite different reports about caste ranking than those given to a high-status outsider and his high-caste interpreter. To claim high social worth in such circumstances would seem to the informant to be ridiculous, if not dangerous. This does not mean that the claim is not harbored and that it is not expressed in safe company and acted upon when opportunity permits. Prudence can easily be mistaken for adherence to a dominant view. If so, it contributes to apparent consensus, but not to accuracy’ (Berreman 1962). Yet it assumed that the uniqueness of Indian society lies in the way of life where Caste is a stratification-parameter due to which scholars of every kind over the ages have been attracted towards studying and analyzing it. Here the term caste is being used synonymously with *jati* and *varna*, though needless to say, in theoretical discourses each has its own specific meaning and area of understanding.

For the present paper, caste may be defined as a hierarchical division of society with ascribed status believing in endogamous relationship following rules of commensality and with a fixed occupation among the Hindus of India. The word ‘caste’ is a European formulation connoting the *jati* reality of India that homogenizes it in a uniform way for the whole Indian subcontinent. However, *jati* is the localized hierarchical system that varies from region to region. In a particular region often all the *jatis* are not seen to be present. *Jati* and caste system is different from Varna system which was a relatively open, pan-Indian system that allowed relatively more social mobility in terms of occupation and status based on individual achievement.

### ***Situating historically***

B.R. Ambedkar, who also belonged to the untouchable caste Mahar, became a successor to the anti-caste movement tradition whose history can be traced from 200-100 BCE. Purusha Sukta of *Rig Veda* is considered to be the text from where the practice of caste system has originated. One thousand years after its emergence, Buddhism created a rupture in the caste system by bringing numerous people into its fold irrespective of their caste affiliation. Despite of everything caste system has undergone, it has evolved and developed. History of Indian subcontinent has preserved its anti-caste conflicts and movements like the mid-twelfth century Veerashaivas movement by Basava of South India, the Bhakti movements (starting from fourteenth century) by Saints like Ravidas, Chokhamela,

Kabir, Janabai, Tukaram, Chaitainya and so on who also became famous poets of the anti-caste tradition. Jyotiba Phule, the precursor to Ambedkar and his Satyashodhak Samaj became a major voice for anti-caste movement in western province of India. There exist many such examples like

Pandita Ramabai, perhaps India's first feminist, a Marathi Brahmin who rejected Hinduism and converted to Christianity (and challenged that, too); Swami Achutanand Harihar, who led the Adi Hindu movement, started the Bharatiya Achhut Mahasabha (Parliament of Indian Untouchables), and edited Achhut, the first Dalit journal; Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru, who shook up the old order in Malabar and Travancore; and the iconoclast Iyothee Thass and his Sakya Buddhists, who ridiculed Brahmin supremacy in the Tamil world. Among Ambedkar's contemporaries in the anticaste tradition were E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, known as "Periyar" in the Madras Presidency; Jogendranath Mandal of Bengal; and Babu Mangoo Ram, who founded the Adi Dharm movement in the Punjab that rejected both Sikhism and Hinduism." (<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/essay/doctor-and-saint>).

B. R. Ambedkar first used the term Dalit in around 1928 in his newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*. However, the term though gained prominence only after 1970s in Maharashtra, under Dalit Panthers movement, and can be termed to be the period of the beginning and resumption of Dalit Literature. Nevertheless, the history of Dalit usage requires further scrutiny so as to understand the socio-economic dynamics and politics behind it. The coinage of the very term Dalit and subsequent mobilization around it has a distinctive socio-political background though very unlike the meaning of the term as indexed by Dalit. Distinctiveness of the term Dalit lies in its engendering new political and ethical sensibilities as well as raising the identity question that challenged the existing history, politics and culture. The term Dalit that metamorphosed after 1970, gained predominance in the social milieu, had a broader definition. The Dalit Panthers included the Scheduled Tribes, neo-Budhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion under the trope of Dalit (Omvedt 2010:72). The earlier definitions of Dalit were given in terms of caste that tried to encapsulate all the downtrodden people like the ex-untouchables, Shudras and Ati-shudras and often was found to be synonymous to Scheduled castes.

One must note here that all such formulations of the term Dalit and its subsequent emergence as a political concept drew heavily from the historical writings from the pre-colonial times. Anti-caste movement was very much present from a very early era in a broad-based form of Bhakti movements throughout India, but such sentiments gained prominence with the vision of Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), who though in contemporary term will be clubbed under OBC category, founded Satyashodhak Samaj in 1875. Phule, tried to create an alternative history for the shudras (non-brahman) and atishudras (dalits) on a theoretical level. He argued that atishudras were more oppressed than the shudras and they have been reduced to the bottom of the social hierarchy because of their vigorous fight and opposition to Brahman domination. Furthermore, as per Phule shudras and atishudras symbolized the category of exploited and oppressed ones and thereby he drew comparison of them with the Blacks and native Indians of America. In this regard Omvedt writes that "Phule's broadsides are, in fact, an expression of a theory not simply religious domination and conquest but of exploitation" (Omvedt 2010: 19).

Greatness of Phule and his theorization can be seen in his insight and analytical ability to see the interwoven-ness of economic exploitation and cultural dominance that piggybacked on state power and ideology. Phule, thus, was the founding figure of not only anti-caste movement of Maharashtra but was also a pleader for farmers, women and other exploited categories. Dalit Literature draws heavily from Phule and his writings but he never talked about any exclusive category as Dalit. On a grass-root level, similar anti-caste movement can be seen in various corners throughout India, where some were the movements of untouchables but basically all were social reform movements in the form of anti-caste movement<sup>1</sup>.

In the pre-colonial period another prominent figure who raised the issue of untouchability was M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948). In 1920, Gandhi first made a strong statement regarding untouchability. Gandhi said, 'Swaraj is as unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity' (Zelliot 2001: 153). Though Gandhi called untouchability an evil however he could not overcome the garb of Varnashrama Dharma. He believed untouchability as a perversion of true Hinduism. Prior to him, B.G. Tilak also condemned untouchability while he wrote, 'It is a sin against God to say that a person is untouchable, who is not so to God Himself...Hinduism absorbed the Shudras, can it not absorb the untouchables?' (Zelliot 2001: 154). But for the first time in history of Indian caste system, untouchables or Ati-shudras or Pancham were given an identity and was named by Gandhi who called them Harijans, or Children

of God, that marked a significant shift in the social construction of caste status among Indians, and became a precursor to a new era where the terminology encapsulated the imagination of a large section of population. Zelliott notes:

Although Gandhi was not the first to cry out against untouchability, he was the most prominent caste Hindu to proclaim that it was harmful to Hinduism, to make its removal a personal responsibility of the caste Hindu, to keep it before the public eye with passionate oratory and vivid imagery, and to found an organization for service to Untouchables (Zelliott 2010: 155).

B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) did not find Gandhi's condemnation of untouchability radical enough, and rejected his views as it was based on the Varna concept. In fact, Ambedkar found Gandhi's ideology paternalistic thus, in long run would operate against the untouchables. Gandhi sought to reform Indian caste system under the overarching traditional trope by means of which he assumed discrimination and distinction would diminish among the common people that would be ultimately beneficial for the integration of the country giving a strong foundation to the nationhood. So, caste reforms were a means to an end for Gandhi in his nation building dream. On the other hand, Ambedkar's programs were directed towards the foundational issue of caste-based marginality, therefore, they all intended for mainstreaming untouchables within Indian. He argued that as caste is more a way of life, rather an ideology that governs the ethos of people in society, for which it is impossible to extricate one's existence from its strings of control, so unless one goes beyond the caste authority of Hindus, it is not possible to upgrade oneself in society. He therefore, proposed to counter Hinduism by reviving Buddhism, another religious philosophy of the soil that has egalitarian outlook. Unlike Gandhi who popularized the exclusivist label of Harijan among the elite Hindus, Ambedkar avoided such labeling, perhaps for his upright and inclusive attitude for all in their own terms, avoided the nomenclature Dalit. His sparse use of the word Dalit reflects that for him, it was more a process through which certain caste groups got dominated and exploited. Even though popular Dalit term, as a political terminology, in last four decades draws its source and origin from the philosophical overtones of Ambedkar, but one must not ignore that as a coinage or in its conceptualization, Ambedkar directly had little to contribute. One can speculate that the framework with which Ambedkar wanted to eradicate untouchability was by throwing away with the structure and the

practices within so that one can completely absolve oneself from such identity. Whereas, the discourses, using Dalit as its key benchmark concept, in fact want to use it as an identity-label to rally around, use it as a group-closure mechanism that will ensure institutionalized socio-political exclusivity to operate as a pressure group, and provide an elevated sense in-group security that can mobilized as interest group.

Even after independence of India, caste and untouchability remained a site of politics, discussions, arguments and research, but it was only after 1970, a separate discourse on Dalits in the name of Dalit Studies emerged. Ambedkar’s views about untouchables as a political minority was extrapolated and was given a strong and radical voice in Dalit Studies, where claim was made that any authentic claim for the Dalits has to come from within, programs should be taken by the Dalits, and ought to be solely of the Dalits (Zelliot 2010; Omvedt 2010; Illiah 2009). Most of the Dalit scholars, writers and academicians were vocal about Dalits and a separate discourse exclusively for them. It was claimed that only a Dalit can give the true picture of the conditions of Dalits and no one else. It rejected most of the non-Dalit or upper caste Hindu ideologies, standpoints and theorization regarding caste and untouchables. Dalit Studies was being theorized to gain a space in mainstream academics, research and policy formulation, so that the socio-political space need not be shared by non-Dalit figures (Illiah 2009) who were vocal about caste system and its atrocious practices. Towards this end, Dalit studies firstly rejected Gandhian ideology and philosophy, and as a counter view-point forwarded Phule and Ambedkar’s arguments. Through numerous studies, stories, testimonies, poems, essays, theatre, etc. scholars of Dalit Studies have been trying to articulate the pain, consciousness, crisis and aspirations of the Dalits. Dalit Studies argued that reform movement of Mahars in Maharashtra was an alternative movement that contrasted to the Arya Samaj in Punjab, Brahmo Samaj in Bengal, Prarthana Samaj in Bombay by looking beyond the fold of Hinduism or pale of caste. They premised their claim not only on social justice but of complete social reform preceding justice, more in line with transformation and restructuring. Dalit studies have rejected the religion Hinduism as if it is no religion at all for Dalits as they do not have a space within to belong in.

### ***Situating in Contemporary Society***

Dalit Studies have tried to universalize the term and concept Dalit by taking instances mostly from Maharashtra, and some from Andra Pradesh and Karnataka, and most recently from Uttar Pradesh. They have taken Mahars

from Maharashtra, Malas from Andhra, Holeyars from Karnataka and Chamars from UP. Though the movement of Chamars can be seen as early as 1940s but their political mobilization happened in early 1980s with Kashiram and later with Mayawati, the first Dalit Chief Minister of UP from Bahujan Samaj Party. But the political mobilization of UP has a very different route and there exist an acute political motive which changed from time to time.

The term Dalit is both esoteric and exoteric in nature. “Dalit” is the widely used post-colonial term for the former untouchables and Avarna or Pancham of so called “Hindu religion” belonging to the Indian society. The term Dalit does not have a uniform definition. Various people, academicians, theoreticians have understood and defined it in different ways. Mainly who are non-Dalit writers and intellectuals have found its origin in Sanskrit where it originated from the term ‘Dal’ which means broken, crushed, scattered, downtrodden etc. Sabyasaachi in an article writes:

Perhaps we need to look at the etymology of the term ‘dalit’ for an answer ... that the root word dal in dalit has been borrowed into Sanskrit from Hebrew. It has two components ‘dal’ and ‘anti’. Dal in Hebrew has been used in two senses: it refers either to physical weakness or to a lowly, insignificant position in society. When ‘dal’ is used in combination with another Hebrew root-word ‘anti’ it describes an economic relationship. As clearly indicated by Harvey L Perkins, “Dal is derived from a verbal root which recognises that poverty is a process of being emptied, becoming unequal, being impoverished, dried up, made thin...so there is social frailty (and those suffering from it) are easily crushed and have not the means to recover”. Omprakash Valmiki pointed out that ‘the meaning of the term has a more inclusive meaning’ (‘Dalit Literature in the Eyes of Dalits’). Thus a prostitute is as much a dalit as is the spouse of an upper caste patriarch who is ill-treated, as are the victims of ethnocide and communalism irrespective of whether they are Hindus, Christians, Muslims or Sikhs. Nandita Bajaj’s paper discusses the emergence of a nascent dalit woman’s alliance which transcends

re-gional boundaries, a consciousness shared with similar intensity against an exploitation they face alone (Sabyasaachi 2014: 1658-1660).

But for Dalits it has qualitatively a different connotation but still it varies within the discourse of Dalit Studies. Though by most of the scholars, the social condition of untouchables are being universalized all over India equally but since it is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, it is very important to see whether the concept or the term Dalit which has come to the fore mostly in last three decades, as seen in social science/mainstream discourse, encapsulates the problem of caste/*jati* based deprivations of the untouchables in India today!

The term Dalit is basically used to understand the ex-Untouchables of India. Scholars, activists, theoreticians understand it in one way and the general mass understands it in some other way. Still who are Dalits and who are not is a blurred and contradictory field. By Dalit, the general mass of India basically understands those who are Scheduled Castes but activists, theorists and academician understand it in a different way.

Ambedkar was more astute when he talked of untouchability. He seldom used the term “Dalit”. Dalit connotation is more political rather than social to gain power. Conceptualizing Dalit is very difficult but in the discourse of Dalit, it has been conceptualized differently by respective Dalit Scholars, Dalit activists and other people vocal about Dalit as a Discourse. Hardtmann in her book conceptualizes Dalit as:

Scholars and activists use the term ‘Dalit’ in more ways than one: according to the criteria of either social status or economic position. A common usage among scholars, activists as well as the public is to mean the so-called untouchables, or those who are officially defined in 1935 when backward groups were listed on a schedule to get access to reserved seats. The most common usage among today’s scholars and activists seems to be to include all caste groups that were traditionally regarded as ‘untouchables’, although not all of them are now among the official list of ‘SCs’. Sometimes ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (STs) and even ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBCs) are included. The other definition in which an economic criterion is used includes the economically disadvantaged, regardless of caste category. This has been among common usage among Marxists scholars. More recently Dalit

activists have come to include other categories outside of India in their definition, like Burakumin in Japan, to mention just one. In this study 'Dalit' will be used as an emic concept, referring to people who use it self-ascribingly (Hardtmann 2011: ix).

Michael observes:

the term Dalit is not merely a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or 'Untouchability', it reveals a sense of a unified class, of a movement toward equality ... the word 'Dalit' particularly emphasizes the dehumanizing 'caste oppression' that makes them outcastes and Untouchables (a degradation not shared by the tribals or soshits), within the context of the Hindu caste system with its religio-social organizing principle of 'purity and pollution. (Michael 2007: 33,108-109).

The discourse on Dalit argues that Dalit politics pose challenge towards Brahmanic hegemony but by stressing that they are practically excluding those categories who are exploited, discriminated and marginalized within their own caste communities and furthermore Dalit as a discourse is unable to encapsulate the problem putting forward by the situation where non-Brahmans are the exploiters, even the Elite-Dalit groups who are further creating a distinction between non-elite-Dalits.

Moreover, by conceptualizing the category Dalit, it is also turning a blind eye towards the multiple jati realities where there are many lower and untouchable castes that are continuously getting marginalized and exploited. Dalit studies are taking only caste as their criteria for analysis but class and religion equally plays an important role in the contemporary era. West Bengal is an example of this where the socio-economic and cultural environment is very different from that of the rest of India. Dalit groups in many parts of the country shows that there exist a very rigid hierarchy among Dalit castes just like in case of Brahmans but which is relatively claimed to be absent in case of West Bengal. It is argued that the reason behind the lack of rigidity of hierarchy within a caste group in West Bengal may be due to the reason that here the society is more multi-religious and multi-ethnic. So, the mixing of various religion, ethnicity and class is more out here, hence less rigidity. Dalit literature per se is also limited here compared to the Dalit literature of other parts like that of south India and Maharashtra.

It is difficult and controversial to universalize Dalits. Caste issue has not featured significantly here in case of West Bengal, though Dalits - as the term goes, constitute a huge part of the population. Just like the way caste and the issue of Dalit feature in political discourse in few of the states it is not featured here in West Bengal but that does not mean that caste is non-existent here. It is quite prevalent but mainly in domestic sphere and spheres of marriage and has been kept relatively absent from public discourse more forcefully. It is also due to the hegemony exercised by Bengali intellectuals whose ideologies are that caste is something traditional, backward and hence not modern. It is a pre-modern institution. Also, it is claimed that the people here are more mobilized in terms of class which also happened because of left movement out here but small number of caste movements took place in the name of Namashudra movement of 1950s which was not quite a success. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his case study on Namashudras showed that movements among the lower castes like Namashudra of West Bengal aimed at upward cultural mobility for material and political advancement. Namashudras were during the pre-colonial period refuted their low ritual status and socio-economic and political alienation, but during the contemporary period they are being vocal about the fact that they are the most excluded category. The case of Namashudras who are historically exploited caste group and who are not only facing persistent social humiliation but also economic exploitation is being excluded in Dalit Studies as a theoretical discourse. In recent times we see that the Namashudras of this region are being articulated into the cult named Matua for an alternative spiritual and religious identity. But despite of having a Guru for the cult this ex-untouchable caste community is unable to get a separate identity through the cult in the name of Matua.

The case of West Bengal in terms of anti-caste politics is very grim. The caste associations are visibly absent in case of West Bengal. Backward castes are profoundly present but are not productively motivated to extract out of their miserable condition and establish themselves as political subject Dalit. This is the difference between the case of West Bengal and other states like Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar where Dalits as political subjects are visibly present and plays a crucial role. Pressure groups are, though, arising in West Bengal from low castes and backward communities like Rajbansis of North Bengal. There is substantial presence of caste question in West Bengal but are unable to articulate the present-day Dalit political question. There are separatist tendencies like that of Kamtapuri movement demanding separate state for their community's development from exclusion. Here the situation gets coloured and enveloped by the

false consciousness that class position of a person is much more than the case position which is specifically put forward by Bengali *bhadralok* discourse. The vast mass of ex-untouchable and low castes are present in rural as well as urban setting of West Bengal and are receiving political leadership from mass parties and organizations. The distribution of land by left government that is during the “barga” programme, it is claimed that much of the land is given to the so called dalits but rather these lands are actually passing into the hands of rich and prosperous peasants in West Bengal in the form of sale or lease. The development activities are not much helping at the grass root levels where the poor low caste people reside rather the development programmes are helping the affluent class people where elite-dalits are also present. Examples can be drawn from Birbhum and Midnapore districts specifically. Due to the domination of status achieved by education and service industry, a huge category of middle class is created here which includes people from all caste groups. This middle class is not only present in urban set up but also in rural setting. Due to this high visibility of middle class who gives much importance to education, the state is promoting their status and neglecting those at the bottom. These downtrodden poor and low caste people are ignored from most of the theoretical discourses since their condition is understood more in terms of class, education and power rather than caste. But data shows that the downtrodden, marginalized and poor people of urban and rural areas are mostly belong to the low and ex-untouchable castes.

### ***Conceptualization of the Dalit: A Critique***

Both this essentialist and instrumentalist interpretations with the urge to form a separate and alternative identity has led Dalit Studies attempting to homogenize all low caste and untouchable groups under the concept of Dalit, where they are encapsulating their life-experiences as one by talking that their socio-economic and religious conditions are as same. However, as we see in case of West Bengal, if we look at the marginalization of Dalits then we cannot understand it only by taking caste as a parameter because class, religion and ethnicity are equally important variable to be factored in for understanding their existential reality. The Scheduled Castes of Bengal do not have a prominent and separate political identity like those of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh and due to various factors the scenario of West Bengal is different but still poverty, marginalization and exploitation of lower castes due to the merging of caste and class cannot be denied but it is not effectively grappled by Dalit Studies because of lack of visibility of low castes here. On the surface level class

consciousness outweighs caste consciousness here in West Bengal which explains the failure of separate Scheduled Caste movement here but that does not mean caste-based exploitation and marginalization is absent. Examples can be drawn from various studies like that of Shekhar Bandyopadhyay's study on Namashudras, Ranabir Sammadar's work on Scheduled Castes of 24 Parganas and many more. These invisible agitations, problems and marginalization of low castes are not made visible by the discourse of Dalit Studies and hence as a result in terms of conceptualization of Dalits, the discourse is excluding these categories where not only caste but also education, politics and class are merging together to create segments and categories like elite-Dalits, middle class, affluent peasants and leaders who are marginalizing the poor low caste people.

Further, one must engage with what Robert Deliege argues:

the world-view of today's untouchables has undoubtedly been influenced by the democratic changes in Indian society. What is less clear, however, is whether untouchables were closer to Hindu orthodoxy and referred to religious concepts to legitimize their inferior position in the past, as Weber has argued. Untouchable myths of origin, the antiquity of which is well established, can be taken as a good illustration of the way untouchables view - and viewed - themselves and their place in society. The myth of origin widely held by untouchables throughout India claims that untouchables were originally respectable people whose present condition is the result of a misunderstanding, rather than of some inherent defect. The myth thus contests the position of untouchables within the caste system, though not the system itself, whose ideological foundations it continues to uphold. This ambiguity is typical of the position of untouchables within Indian society more generally (Deliege 1993: 533-549).

Argument of Berreman in this regard is found to hold ground where he states that:

One of the best-known findings-now a truism in the field of social stratification is that people are stratified, ranked, or socially valued on different dimensions or even different scales, simultaneously and situationally. Failure to recognize this is one of the rocks upon which studies of stratification have repeatedly foundered. It is one of several which imperils the course of those studying caste ranking in India.

I would, however, warn of a greater methodological sin: minimizing conflicts by not asking the relevant questions. One can... avoid the problem of multiple hierarchies by limiting himself to one hierarchy, or one aspect of a hierarchy, explicitly defined. One can also avoid the problem... by simply asking informants to rank the caste names; that is, by failing to confront the problem of the bases for the ranking. When asked to rank caste names, informants will do so, as the evidence testifies. They even do so with a high degree of agreement. What they have done, however, is a matter for speculation, especially since we do not know precisely how they were asked... Low caste informants, for example, might have ranked the castes in secular terms (economic standing, political influence), while high caste informants ranked them in ritual terms... Or, as a result of different interpretations of the question posed, one individual might have ranked the castes on the basis of ritual purity, another on wealth, another on style of life, another on education, etc. In view of status summation, rankings according to these different criteria would be likely to result in congruent hierarchies, giving the appearance of a single hierarchy. Wallace (1963: 27-29, 31ff) has made a major point of the fact that similar behavior can result from diverse motives, cognitions, and basic assumption.

Unless we can demonstrate the referents of a hierarchy, it is risky to claim that it represents a single, all-inclusive, or even paramount system of rank. As Aberle has noted (1959: 125) "Neither in the present nor the past can the ritual ranking of castes be understood without reference to the political and economic systems in which they are embedded." Neither can that ranking be understood apart from the values which underlie it or the interaction which expresses it (Berreman 1965: 123-125, 127).

The conceptualization of Dalit is unable to take into account the multiple *jati*-based realities and deprivations: Michael in his book says:

...it is well known that there is an intellectual critique and challenge to the very term 'Dalit' especially from the post-modernist and post structuralist scholars. Some intellectuals and activists are of the view that the term "Dalit" is hostile to the ex-Untouchables of today and this term has no ontological abilities and hermeneutic capacities of its own to help the ex-Untouchables in their total emancipation.

Thus, the category Dalit faces violent rejection both from the Dalits and from the non-Dalits (Michael 2007: 14-15).

There is a certain need for this theoretical construct of Dalit. Few scholars argue that there is a definite political necessity to hold on to this notion since constructs like Anarya, Shudra etc. have become out of date history. Akio Tanabe has rightly observed Raheja's notion of 'shifting positionality', where positionality and interrelationships shift between the principles of centrality, hierarchy and mutuality according to context and viewpoints, is useful in doing away with the scheme of presenting an overarching principle as in the Dumontian (hierarchy) or neo-Hocartian (centrality) positions [Raheja 1988]. However, her notion tends to fall to post-modernist relativism where everything is reduced to context and viewpoints, and lacks sensitivity to the actual politico-social structure in history in which these principles were embedded or the interrelationships between the three principles which should be coherent enough to make social reproduction possible (Tanabe 2006: 789).

One of the major theoretical fallacy can be observed in Dalit Studies is that by only taking into account of inducing exclusion of other lower and untouchable caste as the parameter to understand Indian society and inequality and discrimination is at best partial in nature. During the early years of Independence, it was assumed that caste system and the disabilities embedded in it will be abolished in the independent India, but rather caste has acquired a new form, and it has also changed to a great extent as a system of social relations. Tanabe rightly puts it that "...the ontology of caste, that is sacrificial principle, takes a particular form and meaning in contemporary context and how it is (not) connected to the moral basis of society" (Tanabe 2002). Caste system and its rigidity or flexibility is not uniform in different parts of India and as a result it has not created uniform status. This heterogeneity is not properly grasped by the scholars of Dalit Studies and as a result they are excluding few realities where class and religion has penetrated into caste system. The contemporary India and the system of stratification, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion is not solely based on caste but it is furthermore affected by occupation, modes of life, migration, power, education, ownership or non-ownership of power, control over land, bargaining power, competition and moreover caste-class nexus. We cannot understand the situation of exclusion without taking these factors into account. It is not only the status achieved by one's birth that is deciding the extent of exclusion which the Dalit Studies are claiming. The reality varies from place to place and time to time. Caste is not today what

it was during colonial times rather caste has re-constituted itself and emerged in a new form.

Also, in Dalit Studies the question of representation can be raised if one has to make it open and transparent. Does one's status as Dalit automatically make their claim valid or justified, and one's status as non-Dalit make their claim and point of views unjustified, invalid and elitist in nature as the discourse of Dalit Studies claims sometimes directly and indirectly? The so-called all-encompassing nature of Dalit Studies is excluding the voices and positions of non-Dalits. Due to this homogenization of various ex-untouchable *jatis* into the category Dalits, the discourse is unable to grapple with the reality which is not one but many. Reality is continuously constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. In this multifaceted reality we cannot root our conceptualization in one parameter. The discourse Dalit has based its parameter on only one that is caste which is an essential characteristic of Hinduism. The other factors are not given enough importance. A situation which was a reality 100 years ago might not be a reality now. Though it is undoubtedly true that caste has put forward varieties of social disabilities and social stigma but in this contemporary world and Indian society we cannot rule out the critical presence of class and religion and various new categories created by new age institutions. These plural and diverse forms which are reason enough for exclusions are neglected by the conceptualization of Dalits which is further inducing exclusion of those categories whose boundaries are blurred.

### ***Conclusion***

Former untouchable as a broader category has been transfigured into the coinage "Dalit". But this homogenization of the untouchables of India under one platform "Dalit" poses serious theoretical fallacy and as a result proliferate exclusion. Thus, conceptualization of the term "Dalit" which has come to existence in the last three decades, as seen in social science discourse, does not encapsulate the *jati*-based deprivation of the contemporary world as it can be seen in case of West Bengal. Dalit Studies in a way that by conceptualizing the term "Dalit" for the sake of homogenization and antagonization of the historically, socially and economically exploited class, it is in fact turning a blind eye towards the multi-faceted *jati*-realities. As a result, the existing conditions of many untouchable castes are being ignored due to the conceptualization of a uniform term Dalit for all untouchables of India. In this contemporary period Dalit emerged as a new political and ethical subject which challenged existing

accounts of history, politics and culture. Hence there exists a dichotomy in the way Dalit as a discourse is taking its shape as the so-called all-encompassing nature of Dalit Studies, nonetheless, excludes many downtrodden *jatis* as well as the voices and positions of non-Dalits. It is very important for Dalit theoretical discourse to take various methodologies in order to understand the reality of the present times. It has to engage critically in various theoretical discourses and on the field research to grasp the reality because reality is not one but any dependent on time and region. Dalit as a concept the theoretical discourse is still in the making and it will strengthen its position as it tries to understand not just the field and practices in everyday world but also the state of mind.

### **Note**

1. There were caste associations present in the form of low caste associations across India for the upliftment of so-called untouchables from the end of nineteenth century but became more prominent and common in early twentieth century. Caste associations and caste federations are not only restricted to low castes but are also found among the caste categories higher up in hierarchy. The activities involved are mostly in the form of social reform. Like for example Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement founded in 1875 and also Adi Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh. There were ‘Adi’ movements which were the first major attempts among the untouchables to break with Hinduism. The Adi Dravida movement in the south, Ad Dharm in Punjab, Adi Andhra and Namashudra movements are some such movements which were going on at this point of time and created the ground for pan-Indian Dalit movement (Hardtmann 2009; Shah 2004).

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