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A caste group located on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in India: Dalits in the past and present

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Abstract

This paper discusses the situation of Dalit communities in India in the past and present, highlighting their problems and challenges against the backdrop of the caste system. It examines specific features of the caste system as presented by scholars within and outside India and discusses the concept of untouchability. It also considers Dalit movements and their role in awakening Dalit consciousness and driving political mobilisation through national and regional political parties to gain access to power. It focuses on constitutional provisions to safeguard their rights and interests, as well as on government-led affirmative action that provides opportunities to improve their educational and employment status. It relies solely on a literature review as the methodological approach and uses an explanatory research design. It concludes that the caste system cannot be eradicated from Indian society, and hence social (caste) hierarchy will continue to exist in one form or another along with the related phenomena –caste-based discrimination and social inequality.

Keywords: *Social hierarchy, Varna, Jati, Caste, Dalit, Untouchability.*

1 Introduction

This review paper aims to discuss the relationship between social (caste) hierarchy and the plight of Dalits to understand the roots of untouchability. It examines the situation of Dalits in the past and in India today, in general and in Tamil Nadu in particular. It presents their key problems and deals with the role of Dalit movements in awakening their consciousness to accelerate their political mobilisation. It dwells on constitutional provisions aimed at safeguarding their rights and interests, besides providing opportunities through affirmative action to promote their educational and employment status.

While preparing the paper, an exploratory research design[1] was applied. The topic is confined to Dalit issues with reference to Tamil Nadu as a case in point for the discussion. This is mainly due to the researcher's choice, as he has adequate knowledge of the caste system in his native state, Tamil Nadu. The systematic review of relevant literature, an important methodological approach, was undertaken to collect the required information to support and facilitate the discussions in the paper. In addition, the historical method was used to facilitate the discussion of the background of social (caste) hierarchy under the *varna* System and the caste system in later Indian society, and its

[1] An exploratory research design is used in this paper to identify, explore and describe the existing social phenomena (caste system and its related factors) in Indian society.

resultant phenomenon, viz. untouchability. In addition, the comparative method was used to compare the situation of Dalits in the past and in the present. However, the paper limits its scope to discussing the social (caste) hierarchy, problems Dalits face, their political mobilisation by Dalit movements, and their education and employment situation in contemporary India.

2 Conceptual overview

Social hierarchy in India takes the form of a caste hierarchy based on one's birth and social status. Various castes are hierarchically ranked in accordance with their social status, and the Dalits have been placed on the lowest rung as they have been considered polluted and treated as untouchables. The social hierarchy in ancient India was based on the *varna* System, understood as a form of social division.

Wietmarschen (2021) observed that people are often embedded in hierarchically ordered social relationships. Likewise, Blader & Chen (2014) stated that people are positioned in the social hierarchy based on factors such as socioeconomic status, power, dominance, prestige, influence, and leadership. Thus, a social hierarchy ranks individuals or groups primarily by economic factors (wealth), political access (power), and prestige (social status). Similarly, Magee & Galinsky (2008) indicated that status and power are distinct bases of social hierarchies. Mazur (1985) noted that individuals' positions within social hierarchies consistently shape the extent of their social influence and access to group resources. For Lake (2009), a social hierarchy is a form of social differentiation or social stratification associated with differences in authority over others.

Social hierarchies in any society are conventionally believed to provide functional benefits, sustaining social order and promoting coordination and collective action. Similarly, Redhead & Power (2022) observed that social hierarchies may have emerged as a near-universal form of social organisation to provide functional benefits in coordination and collective action. Mintzberg (1979) stated that as groups and organisations grow, their work becomes more complex, and they tend to formalise their hierarchies. Dubreuil (2010) noted that social hierarchies vary across cultures.

Primarily, India is a hierarchical society. Sorokin (1962) observed that the social structure of India has been based on hierarchically superposed divisions, i.e., upper and lower layers on the social ladder. People in India were differentiated by the unequal distribution of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, and customs and rules. Morton Klass (1993) pointed out that social hierarchy and occupational ranking in India determined the distribution of resources unequally among various caste groups. Thus, it is evident that the social hierarchy has led to the caste system, which eventually resulted in unequal access to resources and opportunities.

Unlike other world societies, the Vedic society[2] of India was based on a hierarchically ordered *varna* system, and later replaced by the caste system. Therefore, this paper may serve as a source for social scientists in other countries, including Europe, to understand the typical social hierarchy in Indian society and its impact on Dalits. Hence, it is important to discuss the concepts of *varna* and *caste*, which form the foundation of Indian society's social hierarchy and structure.

Varna, a Sanskrit word, literally means 'colour' and its contextual meaning is 'at-

[2] According to the World History Encyclopaedia, Vedic society spanned c. 1500 BCE - c.500 BCE.

tributes' (Dwivedi, 2018). The *Purushasukta*, a hymn of the Rigveda (10. 90. 13),[3] discloses that the universe was created from different parts of the body of *Purusha*[4] when his body was offered as the primordial sacrifice. The four *varnas* emanated from the sacrifice of *Purusha*: the priestly division (*Brahmins*) from his mouth, the warrior division (*Kshatriyas*) from his arms, the peasant division (*Vaishyas*) from his thighs, and the serving division (*Shudras*) from his feet. The *Brahmins* were declared to be superior because they were created from his mouth. Hence, their major duty was to study and teach the Vedas. The *Kshatriyas* were created from his arms, and their major duty was to protect people. The *Vaishyas* were created from his stomach, and their major duty was to cultivate. The *Shudras* were created from his feet and, therefore, serve all three *varnas*. With respect to this hierarchical order, Ghurye (1969) observed that there is no direct interpretation found in the hymns of the Rigveda. But he ascribed that the order in which the four *varnas* were placed probably indicates the social status of that point in time.

Apart from the fourfold classification of the varna system, yet another *varna*, viz. *Panchamas* (meaning 'fifth' in Sanskrit), was identified. They existed outside this system but were placed on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. They were otherwise known as depressed-caste people or outcastes or untouchables, commonly known as 'Dalits' (Ayyar & Khandare, 2013). 'Caste', an English word, is equivalent to the Sanskrit word, *Jati*, which comes from the root word, *Jan*, which means 'to beget' or 'to produce'. Jati is the social stratum in which one is born. In other words, one is fixed in this stratum based on one's birth. This means of placing Hindus on different rungs of the social hierarchy has remained a divisive factor since the Vedic period. It can be traced back to Manu (*Manusmriti*, 10. 44), who claims that different *jatis* emerged from the intermixture of the four *varnas*. On the other hand, caste derives from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning 'race, lineage, tribe or breed'. Like *jati*, Sarma (2022) observed, castes seem to have originated from intermarriages among the four *varnas*.

The Hindu social structure in the form of caste hierarchy breeds inequality and nurtures the caste system along with an attendant practice, namely, untouchability. Thorat and Joshi (2020) estimated that contemporary India has about 3,000 castes. Definitions and explanations of the caste system by scholars within and outside India clearly identify specific features such as homogeneity, hierarchy, endogamy, heredity, and traditional occupation. Blunt (1931) pointed out that it refers to endogamous units, and membership is based on birth alone. One's position in the social hierarchy is invariably decided by his birth. While analysing the caste system in India, Bailey (1933) identified three characteristic features of this system: rigidity, purity–pollution, and ranking. The social hierarchy is maintained through the belief in and practice of purity (ritual cleanliness) and pollution, upholding the claim of superiority by the higher-caste groups over the lower-caste groups. Particularly, endogamy, heredity, and traditional occupation are important features of the caste system, according to scholars such as Srinivas (1962), Gough (1969), Marriott (1969), Mayer (1973), and Betellie (1965). Ghurye (1969)'s presentation of the features of the caste system includes almost all the features pointed out by these scholars. According to him, features such as one's occupation and social status are decided by one's birth into a caste;

[3] According to the World History Encyclopaedia, the Rigveda is the oldest Indian text, most likely written between c.1500 and 1100 BCE. It is one of the four Vedas (Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda), which are the ancient and sacred scriptures of the Hindus.

[4] According to the Rigveda, Purusha is the primaeval being from whose body the universe was created.

marriage is decided by the norms of caste endogamy; social intercourse is decided by caste position in the social (caste) hierarchy; and food is differentiated by its preparation with water or ghee.

3 Untouchability

The term 'untouchability' probably came into vogue during the colonial period mainly to legitimise discriminatory practices against the Dalits in India. Galanter (1969, p. 139) observed that: "....The English term 'untouchability' is of relatively recent coinage; its first appearance in print was in 1909..." Further, he wrote: "A ... somewhat narrower sense of the term would include all instances in which a person was stigmatised as unclean or polluting or inferior because of his origin or membership in a particular group – i.e., where he is subjected to invidious treatment because of difference in religion or membership of a lower or different caste". While referring to the concept of untouchability, Shah (2007) pointed out that the notion of 'purity and pollution' has played a crucial role in separating one caste from another, and in arranging them in a hierarchy, which forms the basic structure of Indian society and enforces discriminative practices against people born into particular castes.

The concept of purity–pollution associated with the caste system is explained by Dube (1956) and Dumont (1958). Here, purity refers to ritual purity, whereas pollution means uncleanliness. In other words, the dichotomy of purity and pollution reflects the belief that the rituals of higher castes are purer than those of lower castes. In relation to this, Shaw (2007, p. 356) wrote: "The Hindu civilization is sometimes called a civilization of purity and pollution, and the Hindu psyche is believed to be pathologically obsessed with them". For instance, depressed-caste people (Dalits), who were treated as untouchables because they were considered polluted, have been denied the right of mixing with Caste-Hindus.[5] If they did so, or even if their shadows happened to fall on the Caste-Hindus, the latter were deemed to have been polluted. To get rid of this pollution, the latter had to perform a series of cleansing rituals. Though this act of ablution is only in vogue mostly among orthodox *Brahmins*, untouchability continues to exist.

The Constitution of India identified several untouchable castes and included them in a schedule known as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs). According to the 75th Round National Sample Survey of India (2017–2018), Dalits made up about 17 per cent of India's population. It is surprising to see the further prevalence of caste discrimination and untouchability amongst the several unequal subdivisions of Dalits. For instance, Pandian's (2013) paper on the inner reservation of *Arunthathiyars* (cobblers) confirmed this. It has been observed in Tamil Nadu State that the *Arunthathiyars* are considered to have a lower status than all other SCs and hence, in rural areas of the state, even today they are not allowed to live in the quarters occupied by other SC groups. This is in a way an example of untouchability even among the untouchables.

4 Dalits

In the late 1880s, the term 'Dalit' was used by Jyotirao Phule, an anti-caste social reformer in India. The root word of Dalit is *dalita* (a Sanskrit word), meaning 'broken,

[5] The term 'Caste-Hindus' refers to Hindus belonging to various castes placed in the caste hierarchy, except the segregated and oppressed caste people known as Dalits.

scattered, or oppressed'. Later, this word was adopted into Hindi and Marathi, where it came to mean 'downtrodden' or 'oppressed'. It is used to refer to the marginalised communities historically labelled as 'untouchables' in India. B.R. Ambedkar called them 'Dalits', whereas M. K. Gandhi called them 'Harijans', meaning 'Children of God'. Although their aims regarding overcoming untouchability were the same, their strategies to eradicate it differed. Gandhi wanted to abolish it while retaining the *varna* system and the caste system, but Ambedkar sought to eliminate the caste system entirely, which he saw as the root of untouchability.

During the period of colonial rule in India, the proportion of the 'Depressed Classes' ranged from 13 to 15 per cent according to the Census of India, 1931 and 1941, but this had risen to 16.6 per cent by the time of the Census of India 2011. All over India, including Tamil Nadu, members of these classes are the most backward economically, educationally and socially. Most of them are illiterate and landless agricultural workers, and a sizable proportion of them are bonded workers. Concerning jobs other than agricultural work, Iversen (2011) states that they are typically engaged in menial and odd jobs such as cremating dead bodies, removing and skinning dead cattle, and manual scavenging. These are considered defiling jobs and believed to pollute other caste groups physically and ritually. Therefore, they are forced to live on the outskirts of villages, whereas other Caste-Hindus settled in different quarters of villages according to their positions in the caste hierarchy. In support of this claim, Mines (2009) has pointed out that Dalits were not allowed to live within the quarters of Caste-Hindus due to the risk of pollution. This spatial segregation in rural areas continues in most states in India, including Tamil Nadu, but it is rarely found in urban areas.

The problem of the oppression of the Dalits by the Caste-Hindus was acute in pre–independence India. They were deprived of basic human rights and a decent living. Because they were denied the right to education, their unemployment rate was very high, as Sooryamoorthy (2008) points out. Moreover, they were denied access to basic amenities such as drinking water, housing, clothing, health, education, and the like, as well as access to public places such as roads, temples, markets, hotels, clubs, crematoriums, etc. Even after Independence, the Dalits in India were unable to exercise many of their civil rights and were subjected to continued discrimination and atrocities at the hands of Caste-Hindus. At one point, this led to conversions in several states of India to other faiths such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

For instance, the conversion of *Mahars* (a major Dalit community in Maharashtra State, India) to Buddhism was part of a major socio-religious movement led by Ambedkar in 1956 in protest against the oppressive caste-system and its inherent discrimination. Gail Omvedt (2003) stated that after Ambedkar's mass conversion ceremony in Nagpur, Maharashtra State, on October 14, 1956, nearly half a million *Mahars* embraced Buddhism and began following this faith as a path to social emancipation from the stigma of untouchability. Similarly, in the 1980s, the conversion of Dalits to Islam took place in certain parts of Tamil Nadu mainly to escape caste-based oppression. For example, in 1981, a mass religious conversion of the Dalits to Islam took place in a village in the Tirunelveli District of Southern Tamil Nadu due to repeated atrocities done to them by Caste-Hindus. Mathew (1982) disclosed that this conversion was mainly due to the prevalence of caste discrimination and economic marginalisation rooted deeply in the hierarchical structure of the caste system. In 2022, forty individuals from eight Dalit families in a village in Southern Tamil Nadu embraced Islam due to their stressful living conditions caused by the upper–caste Hindus (Sreedevi, 2022).

Similar incidents have taken place in different parts of India for similar reasons. Thus, conversion has become a stratagem through which the Dalits seek a paradigm shift from ascribed identity to achieved identity. However, despite their change of faith, they are still labelled 'Dalit Muslims' and 'Dalit Christians'.

All over India, the conversion of Dalits to other faiths has removed the social stigma of untouchability appreciably and reduced caste–based discrimination considerably. Unlike with Islam, Christianity in India has not done away with untouchability with respect to Dalit converts. This stigma remains prevalent in church-related activities. Such individuals still experience caste–based discrimination within the church, including segregated burial grounds, separate funeral carts, and exclusion from church leadership positions. For instance, a study by Aruldoss (1992) found that untouchability exists in different forms, mainly in Roman Catholic Churches in Tamil Nadu. Further, *The News Minute Staff* (2025) reported on caste–based discrimination among converts. Thus, it is evident that the caste system remains a powerful social institution that cuts across faiths and sustains untouchability and caste discrimination.

5 The plight of the Dalits: past and present

In colonial India, the Dalits were subjected to a series of disadvantages relating to the social, economic, educational, religious and political spheres. Ghurye (1969)'s observations on the characteristic features of the caste system show the plight of Dalits in colonial and post-colonial India. From his observations, it is clear that restrictions were imposed on various aspects of their lives, as presented in the following section.

5.1 Denial of social intercourse

One of the serious disadvantages of the Dalits in India was the restriction on social intercourse. All over India, they had to keep themselves away from the Caste-Hindus to avoid their pollution. In pre-Independence times, this problem was rampant, particularly in Kerala State in South India. Thurston (1975) stated that, in this state, the perception of pollution prevailed in two forms: 'untouchability' and 'inapproachability' or 'unseeability'. The first involved Dalits avoiding touching upper-caste Hindus, and the second involved keeping themselves at a distance from them. The practice of 'unseeability' was also in vogue at the same time. But these practices are no longer observed. As regards Tamil Nadu and other states, after the introduction of the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955, this stigma slowly disappeared to outward appearances but left some bitterness amongst upper-caste Hindus.

5.2 Denial of civil rights

Since the untouchables in colonial India were treated as subhuman and considered unworthy of any rights and privileges, they faced a series of civil disadvantages. For instance, they were not allowed to enter temples and other sacred places in the quarters of Caste-Hindus. They were denied access to education and basic amenities in those quarters. Hence, according to Thorat (2002), the isolation and exclusion of untouchables were unique features of India's social hierarchy. Further, over centuries, many Dalit women and girls in India, especially agricultural workers, have been subjected to different forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation by the Caste-Hindu landowners.

Since the Dalits were denied the right to education, they remained dependent workers living at the mercy of upper-caste landowners who exploited their labour for a meagre wage. In many parts of India, they faced threats and harassment when they raised their voices against the discrepancy between their work and their wages. For instance, on December 25, 1968, a shocking incident happened in a village on the east coast of Tamil Nadu. In this village, a group of 44 Dalits consisting of five male and sixteen female agricultural workers, and 23 children were burnt alive while sleeping in their huts during nighttime. The upper-caste landowners of the village conspired to perpetrate this mass killing by making use of their henchmen because the Dalit agricultural workers had demanded a minimum wage for their work (Nithila, 2014).

In rural India, the Dalits were denied equal opportunities and protection. For example, in Tamil Nadu, due to their plan to participate in public elections, they were threatened and beaten by the Caste-Hindus. Sometimes the Caste-Hindus snatched away their voting rights by force. While contesting official positions in local governments, they have been intimidated by the Caste-Hindus, who have used physical violence to encourage them to withdraw their nominations. For instance, in September 1996, a village in southern Tamil Nadu was reserved for SC candidates to contest the panchayat election. After facing a series of problems, including death threats, two Dalit candidates were elected to the positions of president and vice-president in December 1996 despite the election boycott by the Caste-Hindus. Since the president was prevented by the Caste-Hindus from entering the panchayat office and subjected to death threats, he appealed to the Government of Tamil Nadu State and obtained armed security to enable him to execute his official work. After some months, while travelling in a bus with four aides, the president and vice-president were hacked to death along with their aides by a group of Caste-Hindus. This gruesome murder sparked alarming communal violence in and around the village (Ranjani, 2023). Caste discrimination against the Dalits was also noted even at the time of the devastation caused by the tsunami along the Indian coast of Tamil Nadu in 2004. For instance, in different phases of tsunami recovery, Dalits were denied provisions and relief materials (Gill, 2006). Moreover, untouchability was still being practised then, mostly in the southernmost areas of Tamil Nadu severely affected by tsunami (Karunanithi, 2005).

5.3 Denial of religious rights

In some parts of India, Dalits have organised protests to secure their right to enter temples. Importantly, Ambedkar led a protest outside the *Kalaram* temple in Nasik city, Maharashtra State, on 2 March 1930, demanding that Dalits be allowed to enter the temple (Malik, 2022). In rural India, the Dalits are typically denied the right to enter temples situated in the quarters of Caste-Hindus. For instance, in a village in Northern Tamil Nadu, one section of the Caste-Hindus continued to prevent the Dalits from entering a common village temple because the former believed that their entry would not only defile the deity but also pollute the entire premises. Consequently, under a court order, the temple was sealed at one point and later reopened for worship by both communities (The Hindu, April 18, 2025). But the uncompromising Caste-Hindus opposed the temple entry of Dalits, besides making derogatory slurs against them. Immediately, the police contingent brought the situation under control by dispersing the rival groups. However, this inter-caste tension will remain unchanged as long as the Caste-Hindus continue to discriminate against the Dalits.

5.4 Denial of occupational mobility

NITI Aayog's[6] 2023 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) showed that, in India, 27.4 per cent of Dalits were multidimensionally poor, compared with 11.28 per cent of the overall population. However, in Tamil Nadu, their poverty rate was 30.5 per cent in 2011, compared with the State's overall rate of 19.7 per cent. A key factor contributing to their poverty is their occupational structure. Since time immemorial, caste groups' occupations have been fixed hereditarily and hierarchically. This occupational hierarchy became a rule for all caste groups, with jobs assigned according to their position in the caste hierarchy. People's caste identities were made public mostly through hereditary occupations passed down from generation to generation. Within this order, the Dalits were clustered in the least-well-paid, degrading occupations such as sweeping, scavenging and the like. Until the mid–twentieth century, higher-caste groups maintained their occupational supremacy and did not allow other caste groups to follow their occupations. Venkateswarlu (1990) found that when the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, a South Indian State, tried to change their traditional occupation, they were subjected to oral and physical punishment. Similarly, Dalit workers were excluded from house construction activities because of their perceived pollution (Thorat, 2009). But after the introduction of the Reservation Policy in 1950, Dalits' occupational mobility began to increase through education.

5.5 Caste–based endogamy

Endogamy, an essential feature of the caste system, continues to be a norm amongst the Hindus. In the past, mostly in villages, those who married outside their caste groups were excommunicated along with their families. However, the 2011 census reports that 5.8 per cent of the marriages in India were inter-caste marriages. Most of the inter-caste 'love marriages' between the Dalits and members of other caste groups, especially in Tamil Nadu, have resulted in inter-caste conflict and sometimes fatalities, leading to loss of property and human life on both sides. According to the 2021 report *Crime in India* published by the National Crime Records Bureau, the highest number of murders due to romantic relationships happened in the Indian States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Gujarat (Crime in India, 2021).

In Tamil Nadu state, Dalit men often face threats for marrying women from other caste groups. In support of this claim, Shaji and Kumaran (2012) describe a serious incident in a village in northern Tamil Nadu. According to police, a teenage Caste-Hindu girl eloped with a Dalit boy and got married clandestinely in a temple. Since the Caste-Hindus in the village warned the couple that they should separate, the former approached a local senior police officer for protection. Despite his intervention, many Caste-Hindus collectively warned the boy's parents to send the girl back to her home. However, the girl refused to leave her husband and made it clear that she wanted to live with him. In anticipation of alarming violence between the two caste groups, about 300 police personnel were deployed to the tension-prone part of the village. Being unable to control the dreadfully violent mob of Caste-Hindus, the latter looted valuable things from several Dalits' homes before setting fire to more than 140 homes.

[6] NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) is India's premier policy think tank and a non-constitutional body, established on January 1, 2015, to replace the Planning Commission.

6 Legal measures and affirmative action

6.1 Legal measures

After Independence, the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability through laws. In particular, the Untouchability (Offences) Act[7] has appreciably reduced the discrimination and atrocities Dalits suffer. According to this Constitution, 'the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, place and birth or any of them'. Thorat (2002, p. 572) noted that, along with the constitutional provisions, the Government of India has initiated several protective and developmental measures, as follows.

In the 'protective sphere' untouchability was legally abolished and its practice in any form forbidden by the Anti-Untouchability Act of 1955. Nearly two decades later, in 1976, the 1955 Act was reviewed in order to make it more stringent and effective, and the 'Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955' (PCR Act) was enacted. In 1989, the government enacted yet another Act, namely the Scheduled Castes/Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, in order to prevent atrocities against members of the SC/ST. The need for this additional act was felt because under the circumstances, PCR 1955 and the normal provisions of the Indian Penal Code had been found to be inadequate to provide safeguards to SC/ST against several crimes.

These legal measures, along with affirmative action facilitated by modern democratic values, may mitigate the impact of the caste system on people's lives and ameliorate untouchability in rural India.

6.2 Affirmative action: Reservation Policy

Presently, Dalit politics largely focuses on affirmative action to obtain benefits in education, employment, and electoral representation granted by the Constitution of India. An important example of such affirmative action taken by the Government of India for the SCs is the 'Reservation Policy'.[8] This policy applies to education and employment. Until India's independence in 1947, Dalits were denied access to education and therefore could not enter the employment market, remaining mostly labourers in the agricultural sector. After the introduction of the Reservation Policy in 1950, they gained access to educational institutions.

The literacy rate of SCs has been lower than India's overall literacy rate. In 1961, SC literacy was 10.27 per cent, compared with India's total literacy (28.31 per cent). After 50 years, by 2011, SC literacy increased to 66.07 per cent, compared with India's total literacy rate (72.98 per cent). The following table (Table 1) presents the details.

Among the SC population, men's literacy rate was higher than women's. The former rose from 66.6 per cent in 2001 to 75.2 per cent in 2011, while the latter rose from about 42 per cent in 2001 to 56.5 per cent in 2011 (Census Report, 2011). This is shown in the following Table (Table 2).

However, with respect to the total population of India, there was a decline in the gender gap from 24.8 per cent in 1991 to 21.6 per cent in 2001, and to 16.2 per cent in

[7] The Untouchability (Offences) Act, which prescribes punishments for the practice of untouchability and abolishes this practice, came into force on 1 June 1955.

[8] India's Reservation Policy, an affirmative action policy, provides representation to marginalised communities, primarily Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education, government jobs, and the legislature. Accordingly, the percentage–based quotas are as follows: Scheduled Castes (15 per cent), Scheduled Tribes (7.5 per cent), Other Backwards Classes (27 per cent), a 10 per cent quota for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), and provisions for ex-servicemen and people with disabilities.

Table 1 Literacy Rate of Scheduled Castes and Total Literacy Rate of India

Year	Literacy Rate (%)	
	SCs	All India
1961	10.27	28.31
2011	66.07	72.98

Source. Census of India 1961 & 2011

Table 2 Literacy Rate of Scheduled Castes by Sex (%)

Year	Men	Women
2001	66.6	42.0
2011	75.2	56.5

Source. Census of India 2001 & 2011

2011, and a similar trend is found concerning the population of SCs, i.e., a decline in the gender gap from 26.2 per cent in 1991, to 24.7 per cent in 2001, to 18.7 per cent in 2011 (Acharya & Sahoo, 2019). Notably, the gender gap in SC communities was relatively higher than the total population of India. This is shown in the following Table (Table 3).

Table 3 Gender Gap Ratio in India

Year	Gender Gap Ratio (%)	
	SCs	All India
1991	26.2	24.8
2001	24.7	21.6
2011	18.7	16.2

Source. Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes 2011, Census of India 2011.

The literacy rate of SCs in Tamil Nadu State was 73.26 per cent in 2011, as compared to the overall state literacy rate of 80.09 per cent (Census Report of India, 2011). Of the total literacy rate of SCs in the State, men's was 75.6 per cent, and women's 58.7 per cent. These proportions are significantly higher than the all-India average of 73 per cent for men and 52.1 per cent for women.

The Reservation Policy has enabled Dalit students to access higher education. Nevertheless, their enrolment rate in higher education is relatively lower than that of their non-Dalit counterparts. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2019, reported that the overall enrolment ratio of students (18–23 years) in higher education was 26.3 per cent, of which boys comprised 26.3 per cent and girls comprised 26.4 per cent. However, in the same age group, the enrolment ratio of Dalit students in higher education is 23 per cent, of whom 22.7 per cent were boys and 23.3 per cent were girls.

The Reservation Policy continues to help several thousand Dalit men and women graduates secure positions in the public sector. Moreover, an increasing number of qualified young Dalit men and women are securing key positions in government departments, as well as positions in the Indian Administrative Service and Indian Police

Service. The families of employed Dalit men and women have become financially stable enough to educate their children, with the aim of helping secure employment by availing the benefits of the Reservation Policy. Particularly educated youngsters from these families will carry forward the agenda of promoting Dalit identity and rights across India.

As regards the Dalit labour force, the data in the following table (Table 4) show that there was an increasing trend in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Worker Population Ratio (WPR) from 2020–2021 to 2022–2023 and a decreasing trend in their Unemployment Rate (UR) during the same period.

Table 4 Employment Rate of Scheduled Castes (%)

2020-21			2021-2022			2022-2023		
LFPR	WPR	UR	LFPR	WPR	UR	LFPR	WPR	UR
49.3	44.9	2.7	49.2	48	2.4	51.6	50.7	1.8

Source. Government of India: Ministry of Labour and Employment (*Lok Sabha Question 86, July 29, 2024*).

This development in their employment is mainly due to the extension of the Reservation Policy since 1950. Moreover, the proportion of Dalits in central government services increased from 16.63 per cent in 2004 to 17.55 per cent in 2014 (Annual Report, 2016–17 & Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Government of India). However, it is also reported that over one-third of the Dalits from various divisions live in poverty, and a sizeable proportion of them in rural areas still depend on land owned by Caste-Hindus for their livelihood.

7 Continuance of untouchability and suppression

Despite improvements in their educational and employment status and the consequent improvement in their socio-economic condition, untouchability continues in one form or another in several villages in India, including rural Tamil Nadu. In support of this claim, Thorat and Joshi (2020, pp. 37–38) have stated: "Although the practice of untouchability has been constitutionally banned since the passage of the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, it continues in certain forms not only in private social interactions, but also in the public sector." This may be because many of them are engaged in garbage collection and disposal, as well as cleaning public places and dry latrines. Thorat (2002, p. 578), in attempting to answer why caste discrimination and untouchability remain prevalent in India, pointed out that high-caste people still believe in the concept of 'purity and pollution' associated with the caste system.

Even at the present time, the Dalits are not only deprived of some fundamental rights but also suppressed and exploited by members of upper-caste groups. Moreover, the practice of keeping separate tumblers for Caste–Hindus and Dalits in tea stalls is still in vogue in some states, particularly Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. For instance, a 2012 study (Evidence, 2012) on the 'two tumbler system' in tea shops in a southern district of Tamil Nadu disclosed that tea was served to Dalits and Caste-Hindus in separate tumblers. In some villages, the Dalits were asked to wash their tumblers after drinking tea. In other villages, Caste Hindus were allowed to sit on benches in the tea shops, whereas Dalits had to stand outside. Moreover, the quality of tea served to the Caste-Hindus is better than that served to Dalits.

As regards the present situation of the Dalits in India, the *Crime in India* report (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022) shows that they continue to be vulnerable to caste-based suppression and atrocities. The rate of crime against the Dalits rose from 25.3 per cent in 2021 to 28.6 per cent in 2022. Caste-Hindus have committed different sorts of crimes against the Dalits for different reasons. In contemporary times, it is observed that the development of Dalits in socio-economic spheres has posed a challenge to the Caste-Hindus all over India. Therefore, conflict between the two rival communities has become an inescapable phenomenon. For instance, caste-related conflicts in southern districts of Tamil Nadu frequently occur between Dalits and the Thevars, who are keen on retaining their hegemony (Manikumar, 2024).

8 Dalit movements and political mobilisation

Ambedkar played an important role in awakening the Dalit consciousness and laid a solid foundation for the Dalit movement. He launched a major anti-untouchability movement in Maharashtra in the 1920s to fight social stigma. Afterwards, he led the *Mahad Satyagraha*[9] in 1927 to secure the right to drink water from a lake in Mahad city, Maharashtra State, India. He then organised the second *Satyagraha* in March 1930 to secure the entry of Dalits into *Kalaram* temple in Nashik city of Maharashtra (Dhankhar, 2022). Likewise, he led a 'Neo-Life Movement' (Neo-Buddhist Movement), during which he and his followers converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur, Maharashtra.

For the Dalits, Ambedkar chose conversion to Buddhism for two reasons: Firstly, he believed that the concept of untouchability was deeply rooted in Hinduism. Hence, Hindus could not give up this practice. Second, he believed the most effective path to social justice for the Dalits was to break away from the Hindu fold and embrace Buddhism, based on the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. He considered Buddhism a faith compatible with Indian culture, and hence he believed that this conversion movement would emancipate the Dalits and help eliminate untouchability. After him, the Dalit Movement seemed to focus more on mainstream politics than on caste discrimination and untouchability.

Since the main demands of the Dalit representatives were ignored by upper-caste politicians, they started organising separate political parties to voice their demands. For instance, in 1984, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP–Majority People's Party) was organised by Kanshi Ram in Uttar Pradesh, a North Indian State. The term *Bahujan* literally means 'community in the majority', and includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, along with religious minorities. Its main objective was to achieve social justice and equality through economic emancipation and social transformation of the *Bahujan*. Kumar (2002) observed that the BSP, under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, brought the most significant change in the psyche of Dalits by providing them with an identity, vision, ideology, and political strategy, and emerged as a significant player in the game of power politics. Later, in 2001, Kumari Mayawati became his successor and began working to raise Dalit consciousness by politically mobilising the Bahujan.

Its electoral successes, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, were groundbreaking and revealed a paradigm shift in power dynamics. Its ability to form electoral alliances and secure support from diverse communities was crucial to its rise to prominence. De-

[9] Satyagraha means a policy of passive political resistance.

spite confronting challenges, it remained firm in its commitment to social justice and equality and declined to give them up for short-term benefit. However, it was not very effective in awakening social consciousness among the marginalised groups across India to fight for social justice and equality. Importantly, the onset of the Dalit (Rights) Movement in India tried to shake up the socio-cultural hegemony of upper castes. Nevertheless, it often seemed reduced to voicing Dalits' grievances rather than campaigning proactively for greater social change.

Dalit politics in contemporary India has evolved with the rise of various independent Dalit political parties. This political power is necessary for mobilising the Dalits to strive for social justice, equal rights and affirmative action. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK, meaning Liberation Panthers' Party) has given Dalits a vehicle to bring their issues to a wider political platform. Importantly, recently, its leader, Thirumavalavan, has raised his voice, seeking power in government (The Hindu, 2024). The party has allied with parties at the state and national levels to gain political advantage. Ambedkar's ideology also continues to inspire and guide Dalit political leaders to fight untouchability, caste discrimination, and economic disparity, build a collective Dalit identity, and advocate their rights. However, the weakness of Dalit politics is that it often revolves around caste-based identity mobilisation.

Now, the key question is: Are Dalits ready to move beyond their internal divisions and unite as a single community to strengthen and accelerate their movement to counter the problems posed by the Cast-Hindus? In reality, various Dalit divisions pursue caste-based mobilisation to organise politically for benefits in proportion to their numerical strength. For instance, Karthigeyan et al. (2012) observed that, in Tamil Nadu, *Puthiya Tamilagam* (New Tamil Society), a regional political party, called on *Pallars* (a Scheduled Caste) to organise themselves within the party to gain recognition as *Devendra Kula Vellalars*[10] and obtain various benefits. Afterwards, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* was mainly organised by the *Paraiyars*.[11] Nevertheless, this kind of caste-based political mobilisation across different Dalit divisions will not help them achieve their goals. Therefore, they should not be part of caste-based movements but rather part of a mass-based Dalit movement to consolidate their votes into a bloc and break up the caste-based politics dominated by members of the upper castes.

9 The future of the Dalits

Dalits' growing awareness of their rights and equality, and their enduring protests for justice through political activism, have led to notable improvements in their socio-economic status. Their protests, which target all sorts of discrimination, are supported by human rights organisations and NGOs. The next generation of Dalit leaders may introduce fresh perspectives and strategies to extend the scope and reach of Dalit politics. For them, Ambedkar's ideas continue to serve as guiding principles to strengthen their political mobilisation. His call to 'educate, organise and struggle' has an unrelenting impact, especially on the minds of young Dalits. His emphasis on education, self-reliance, and social justice guides Dalit movements across all states in South India and a few states in North India, particularly Maharashtra. However, a frequently

[10] According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Devendrakula Vellalar is a collective name for seven divisions of Dalits.

[11] The term Paraiyar comes from the Tamil word for drum, parai, reflecting their traditional role as drum makers and players in auspicious as well as in inauspicious occasions.

asked question is whether independent Dalit politics in India has a future in creating positive change by empowering Dalits economically, socially, and politically. The answer may be yes if they organise themselves under the banner of one political party that cuts across internal divisions and sub-caste rivalries. Therefore, the strength of Dalit politics lies in their integration and collective participation in their movements.

Nevertheless, the prevailing caste system continues to counter the Dalits' attempts to move towards power to surpass the Caste-Hindus. It seems that the Caste-Hindus prefer not to leave their caste fold to mix with the Dalits to practice commensality and connubiality in an unconditional way. Even though the caste system is undergoing changes in contemporary India, its deep roots perpetuate its existence and wield power in all areas of life. This is possible because changes occur in its function, but seldom in its structure. In other words, by relaxing certain norms, it undergoes change by assuming new functions without altering its structure. Thus, it adapts itself to changing situations because of its resilient nature. This 'flexibility' sustains its roots firmly in Indian soil while keeping its structure unaltered. If it remained a rigid social institution and resisted change, it would tend to become unstable and disappear altogether. Therefore, changes in the caste system are keeping pace with the social changes ushered in by modernity and the advancement of science and technology. If it continues to prevail in Indian society in the years to come, some of its oppressive features will also continue to restrict the development of the Dalits.

After independence, one important development in the caste system was the formation of several hundred caste associations across India. They are, Srinivas (1966) noted, very much concerned with the improvement of the socio-economic standing of the respective castes. Therefore, caste associations serve as an adaptive mechanism of the caste system and sustain it. Karunanithi (2001) observed that the political mobilisation of different caste groups in Tamil Nadu State largely stems from the formation of their caste associations. Consequently, over time, several caste-based political parties have emerged, mostly at the regional level. This shows the phenomenon of the regeneration or reincarnation of the age-old caste system from time to time, as it wields power in all walks of life. Consequently, caste discrimination, social injustice and untouchability continue to exist in India in one form or another.

10 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the situation of Dalit communities in past as well as at present, their menial and 'polluting' tasks, and the stigma of untouchability against the backdrop of the caste system in India. It discusses Dalit movements and their role in awakening Dalit consciousness and driving political mobilisation through national and regional political parties to gain power. It focuses on constitutional provisions intended to safeguard their rights and interests, as well as affirmative action that provides opportunities to improve their educational and employment status. Based on these discussions, it may be concluded that it is rather difficult to root out the caste system from Indian society. Hence, social (caste) hierarchy will continue to exist in one form or another with its resultant factors- caste discrimination and social inequality- in the years to come.

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