

**Research Article**

## Beyond Margin: Social Exclusion of Dalits in Rural India

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### ABSTRACT

All societies in the world are stratified and Indian society is no exception to this. Like all societies, even Indian society has its own divisions with their lowly that is the scheduled castes (SCs) or dalits who are above 18 per cent of the total population. They have always remained below 'pollution line and poverty line' along with awful forms of untouchability against not an individual member of a group, but whole community of SC. They have been suffering from discrimination and facing exploitation even today from the upper-caste Hindus in socio-cultural, civic, economic and political spheres. So here, it becomes important to understand the social construction of the Indian society which is based on graded inequality, marginalisation and social exclusion. An ethnographic account is given to understand the social exclusion of SC in rural Maharashtra of India.

**Keywords:** Scheduled castes, Dalits, Rural, Maharashtra, Social spheres, Discrimination, Social exclusion

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### INTRODUCTION

All societies in the world are stratified and Indian society is no exception to this. Like all societies, even Indian society has its own divisions with their lowly that is the scheduled castes (SCs) or dalits who are above 18 per cent of the total population. They have always remained below 'pollution line and poverty line' along with awful forms of untouchability against not an individual member of a group, but whole community of SC. They have been suffering from discrimination

and facing exploitation even today from the upper-caste Hindus in socio-cultural, civic, economic and political spheres. So here, it becomes important to understand the social construction of the Indian society which is based on graded inequality, marginalisation and social exclusion. In this regard, there are theses to understand their marginalisation and social exclusion – inclusion in the Hindu society. The thesis of ‘divine plan’, as evident from the socio-historical accounts of Hindu social order, endorsed contextually in time and space where untouchables or SCs or dalits initially being integral part of the traditional Hindu society were placed at the lowest position or ‘marginal’ position. But they were put in the margins and thus excluded from the privileges and power found at the centre. Thus, marginalise means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group. Marginalisation of the SC community is apparent from the non-beneficiary outcome from constitutional provisions and non-participatory state action in bestowing equal share in socio-economic resources and power positions. Finally, this SCs are even thrown out of its conventional fold of caste and hence ‘social exclusion’ of them from the Hindu society.

This paper gives synoptic view of a larger study on discrimination, poverty and social exclusion of SCs in rural setting. It is an attempt to examine various aspects of the ‘caste-based exclusion’ in the form of denial of social, cultural, civil, political and economic rights of SCs by the non-SCs in rural areas of Maharashtra. The paper is descriptive and exploratory in design to explore the social exclusion of the SCs in rural Indian society. The study is based on both the primary and secondary sources of data collection.

### CONCEPT OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In the developed western societies, social exclusion has been considered as denial of equal opportunities by some group of persons to the other, resulting into inability of the latter group to participate in social, economic and political functioning of the society (Haan, 1997; see also European Foundation, 1994). Such denial of opportunities leads to social exclusion at the time of profound social change in a society (Silver, 1999: 541). Broadly, social exclusion is lack of recognition of basic rights, or where that recognition existed, lack of access to political and legal systems necessary to make those rights a reality (Hills *et al.*, 2002: 3). Adding to it, Madanipour *et al.* (1998: 21) say, ‘social exclusion as a multi-dimensional process of exclusion in decision making political processes, access to employment and material resources, cultural processes and a spatial manifestation in particular neighborhood’.

Further, Sen (2004) has used the socially qualifying terms like ‘unfavourable exclusion’ and ‘unfavourable inclusion’, ‘active and passive exclusion’, ‘constitutive relevance’ and ‘instrumental importance’. Atkinson (1998) has mentioned, ‘multiple

deprivation implies that social exclusion is about more than simple poverty, more about the absence of community or social interactions'. Similarly, Levitas (1996: 8) has suggested that the cause of social exclusion is rooted in the contemporary social and economic conditions which, according to him, 'tends to exclude some groups from the "cycle" of opportunities'. According to World Bank (2011: 3), 'social exclusion is therefore not about outcomes alone, but about the processes that lead to these outcomes'. 'Social exclusion is the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live' (European Foundation, 1994).

Needless to say that the SCs, throughout the country, have been discriminated and deprived of their full participation in various socio-economic activities and political decision-making processes due to their lowest place in the caste hierarchy.

#### **RESEARCHSETTINGAND THE DATA**

For the purpose of this paper, Maharashtra has been selected, because of the fact that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made major contributions in initiating social movement, particularly among the SCs in this state (Ambedkar, 1979). Second, Maharashtra has the historical background of awareness among the SCs that has led to their social assertion and the resultant inclusion in one or the other aspects of life in the society that exists there. Finally, Maharashtra happens to be one of the economically developed states where social discrimination, poverty and social exclusion of the SCs ought to be less, compared with that in the backward or less developed states in country.

The study has been carried out in the developing region of Marathwada in Maharashtra, with two stages for districts and villages located in both districts, further one village from each respective district was chosen for the study. The Maliwada village of Aurangabad district represents social structure of a developed village, and the Kond village of Osmanabad district remains representative of underdeveloped or developing villages. Being multiple caste villages, both have the Mahar, Mang and Chambhar as the major SCs, with sizable number of households. The census data is used to classify the SCs population in each village. After having deeper insights into the nature and characteristics of the SCs population, the selection of 100 (out of 185 SC households) from the Kond and 115 (out of 230 SC households) of population has been made for conducting ethnographic study. Ethnographic study is conducted for SCs persons across age, gender, religion, education level and illiterate, various traditional and secular occupation, income level, political awareness and so on. The ethnographic study enables to find out information about their specific characteristics like personal profile, socio-demographic composition, occupational and economic position and others, of their members in both the villages. It has also facilitated the ethnographer to collect

information about social discrimination faced by the SCs, leading to various nature and forms of social exclusions of them. This will help an ethnographer to write a detailed report of everyday life of the individuals or the communities under study through participant's views to be interpreted and presented. The ethnographic component is to incorporate issues of power, inequality, dominance, repression, hegemony and victimisation so as to include the groups which are marginalised and excluded in the society.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF THE SCHEDULED CASTES**

Here, an analysis of the data on social exclusion of the SCs from both the studied villages of Kond and Maliwada, respectively, is deliberated. In doing that, an explanation of data on social exclusion, both as a process and as an end product, is carried out.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION FROM COMMUNITY LIFE**

In brief, we shall examine here social exclusion of the SCs in the traditional and secular spheres of life in community life, religious, education, health, partial access, political spheres, economic spheres and others in both the villages is examined. However, since the independence, as various measures have been undertaken by the government under the overall guidance of the Indian Constitution, some laxity has taken place resulting into less social exclusion of the SCs in these spheres in the studied villages. This has been possible partly due to government's initiatives and partly due to dalit assertion and movement. Not only that, but a sizable number of respondents and their family members from both the villages have disassociated themselves from participating in the traditional aspects of community life and moved to new ones.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION FROM ECONOMIC SPHERE**

It is widely known that the large majority of the SCs live in rural areas and are largely poor. It is also a known fact that their poor economic condition is contributed by their being means less and depending on others' resources for their livelihood and sustenance. Their being means less means being excluded from possessing means of livelihood by themselves. As far as the adequate and respectful earning from the traditional occupation is concerned, we have seen that the Mahars, in both the Kond and Maliwada villages, have already left their traditional occupation of the Maharki and the Goanki. One respondent said, 'Mahars left *maharki* during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the call of Dr. Ambedkar and latter embraced buddhism, but it was taken up by the Mangs. They worked as village watchmen, guarded fields, dragged dead animals, became messengers, swept village streets, plastered houses and cowsheds, made cowdung cakes, sold

grass fuels and fire woods, etc. Mangs men also became kotwals of the village. The Mang women, like Mahar women, did domestic works like cleaning food grains, grinding chilli, etc. Like Mahars, they were also engaged in cattle grazing, agricultural activities and digging wells'. However, in continuing their traditional occupation, the Chambhars in the studied villages are deprived of or excluded from getting adequate wages and due respect from the villagers.

The Mahars, Mangs and Chambhars, both in Kond and Maliwada villages, lease-in land of the Marathas, Lingayats, Malis and so on, for 3–4 years on agreed terms and conditions. While putting their hard labour in making the leased-in land fertile and investing capitals in the form of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and so on, the lease agreement is broken out frequently and the same land is favourably leased-out to some non-SCs, excluding the 'lease-in right' of the SCs. Further, if SCs are taking initiative of running their petty businesses or self-employment, they are often discouraged by the non-SCs through their non-transactions. This means, their enterprises are not only boycotted but, by extension, they are excluded from earning their income independently. So far the discouragement or exclusion of the SCs in the public sector employment is concerned. The SCs in both the villages are largely excluded from their employment in these services. Even a few SCs, engaged both in public and private employment outside their villages, are often discouraged in and excluded from, in a way or the other, by the non-SCs in their own villages in their day-to-day interactions and social relations.

The government has made available common property resources like land, water bodies for irrigation, forest for conservation of environment, fuel and so on for the common purpose in every village. Ironically, it is found in both the studied villages that the common land has invariably been encroached upon by the influential non-SC households for the agricultural purpose, excluding the right of fulfilling even the minimum needs of the SCs. Thus, the SCs are excluded from their access to and the benefits to be derived from the various economic avenues available in the studied villages.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION FROM RELIGIOUS SPHERE**

It is widely known that the SCs throughout the country had not been allowed to enter the Hindu temples for worshipping and paying their obeisance to the deities. One Chambhar person said, 'The Chambhars are a minority and majority of the households in the village are the dominant Brahmin, Marwadi and Maratha who discriminate against them and they cannot even retaliate'. He has added by saying, 'if they ignore them and enter the temple, the upper castes creates problem for them'. Not only that, but they have neither been invited nor asked for monetary contributions for religious celebrations. However, in exceptional cases, a few SC leaders or influential persons are invited by the non-SCs on occasions of some

religious celebrations. But this may be taken as the one based on power and influence of as well as favour to be gained from the invitees.

The SCs have been invited for many ceremonies, for example, marriage, but not for offering their blessings to the bride and groom, except taking their meals separately and that too afterwards. As per saying, *goanvachayamaghun Maharwada* that is when all the villages dine, then Mahars are asked to dine. Similarly, in a few cases, the non-SCs take meals, especially arranged, on occasion of marriage ceremony organised by the SCs. This means that there is some degree of relaxation in social exclusion and thereby a little inclusion of the SCs on the occasion of marriage celebrations in the non-SCs families. So is the case with the Hindu festivals celebrated separately by both the SCs and non-SCs. It is, thus, clear that the earlier practised social exclusion of the SCs is still practised by the non-SCs, though with a little change, in the studied villages.

### **SPATIAL SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

In the case of Maharashtra, every village has separate Maharwadās, Mangwadās, Chambharwadās and so on which have generally been located in the south of the main village considered to be inauspicious direction. In the recent times, some efforts have been made by the government agencies to desegregate the residential location of the SCs and non-SCs in both the rural and urban areas by drafting and implementing a number of housing schemes. Efforts are made by the non-SCs in both the villages to exclude the SCs from their access even to the benefits of the housing schemes, whereas in a few cases, the SCs in these villages have some access at the mixed residential locations.

In spite of some changes occurred in villages, the Mali neighbours of Maliwada village, abuse, assault and fights with Puse and Chambhar families. A Mali neighbour of them says, 'either the Chambhar family will stay in the Mali colony or he will stay'. Mr. Puse complained to the police but he was afraid of its repercussions; so, he gave bribe of Rs. 200 to the police to prevent the case from getting worse.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION FROM SECULAR DOMAIN**

Every citizen of the country is supposed to have equal access to the benefits of functions of the institutions according to the Constitution of India. But the reality is other way round.

### **EDUCATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

It is needless to say that the ex-untouchables or SCs or dalits had struggled a lot to have entrance into the educational institutions (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2004). At present, millions of the SC children have achieved and are achieving education, including

higher and technical as well as professional education, throughout the country. However, the age-old discrimination of the non-SCs in general as well as their teachers and fellow students in particular in the educational institutions are opposed to receiving education by the SC children. This finally results into higher or even highest rate and percentage of their dropouts. As such, the cumulative discrimination ultimately leads to their exclusion from education, which has become the essential need of the present time.

A large majority of the school-going SC children in both the studied villages have faced discrimination from the non-SCs like Marathas, Lingayats and Malis. Such discrimination manifests in the form of their taunting, making discouraging remarks, humiliation and asking the SC parents to take their children off the school and put them into manual labour. Their such contribution is also evident for creating difficulties for the SC children in getting benefits of the government facilities like free books, school uniforms, stipends, midday meals and so on. Further, it is generally observed that the SC children from the economically better off families do not face any discrimination or are not excluded from their active participation in educational sphere.

The Marathas are jealous of Mangs getting education, as they think that after getting educated they might become big officers to whom they would have to salute. Similarly, another Mang respondent has stated, 'how much we can labour to educate our children, we cannot give them education because there is the basic struggle to get two squares of meals. In these conditions, there is no option but to send our children with their mother for daily wages'. As the work is irregular for them, the chance for their children getting work is rarer. So, they go to nearby villages for earning their livelihood along with their children. As the Chambhars are concerned, their children are completing school education and are going to colleges.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HEALTH SERVICES**

In the case of the studied villages, the primary health centre (PHC) is located in the Kond village, whereas for the Maliwada village, it is located in Daulatabad – a neighbouring village, but the Anganwadis are located in each of the two villages. Although the SCs have as a right, equal access to the health facilities, as and when needed, to be administered through these institutions, but they have been both discriminated and deprived of their benefits. More specifically, the doctors, nurses and health workers attend unwillingly to the illness of the SCs. They also very rarely visit the SC households or even their colony in the event of their sickness. Even the medicines and related accessories are hardly issued or given to them from stores of the PHC and Anganwadis, leaving them either to remain in sickness for longer time or approach the private medical practitioners for the exorbitant

payment. This simply means that a large majority of the SCs from both the villages remain excluded partially, if not fully, from the health services meant especially for the poor patients. A point may be mentioned that those SCs who are relatively better in economic position have somewhat more access to the health services, compared with other SCs in both the studied villages.

One respondent said, 'Although the PHC provides ante- and post-natal care and vaccination to children, but most of the patients are referred to the Government Hospital at Aurangabad. The poor Mahar patients do not have money for completing treatment and the doctors even in the Government Hospital do not care for the poor and helpless patients. In many cases, they die due to negligence in treatment'.

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT**

Under the three-tier system, the political power has been decentralised with the elected people's representatives. Under the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, the SCs have been given reservations at all the three levels. Apparently, it looks that the SCs of the studied villages are politically empowered but, in reality, their opinion in the decision-making is neither exceeded to nor recorded. In fact, the state of affairs of the panchayat in the Kond village is managed by the Lingayat vice president or upa-sarpanch, and the office of the Maharsarpanch has been made non-functional. Even in the Maliwada village, the first village panchayat sarpanch, a Mahar woman, not only got the village panchayat – as a political unit set-up there – but also saw it to become instrumental in the overall socio-economic development of the village. But she was discriminated and criticised for her being a Mahar woman sarpanch by the dominant castes. There was an incident where houses in the village had to be enumerated of which she was incharge. When she went around to mark the houses of the village, the village Patil was furious and said, 'what are the villagers doing when a Mahar woman is numbering their houses'. Though enumeration of all the houses in the village was under her supervision, the houses of her own family members were not enumerated as they belonged to the low caste. She was discriminated for being a Maharsarpanch. It is, thus, clear that the political empowerment of the SCs at the level of the local self-government is not only partial, but they are also excluded, if not fully then at least partially, from participating actively in the socio-economic development even of the poor and needy SCs. Now, the non-SCs in the Maliwada village favours Mahars for contesting elections and giving them any official position because they themselves are more subjugated than the Mahars.

A Mang says, 'The Gram Panchayat has all the power to decide about the needs of the SCs for their development. But it has not yet constructed toilets for the needy people. So, there should be survey of all the SC households'. Further, as Chambhars in Maliwada are negligible in the village demography, they are not

considered in any political process because they cannot create any political pressure. They say, 'neither there is any basic information available to them about the functioning of the Village Panchayat nor do they notice of its any monthly meetings. People approach them only for their vote. Otherwise, they do not give any weightage to them. They neither inform them about any scheme nor ask them to apply for its benefits. The Panchayat members give benefit to only those people who are vocal'.

In the recent years, the SCs in villages in general and in the studied ones in particular have started asserting not only for participating actively in the panchayat elections but also contesting on their own for various positions in panchayats in villages. This invariably results into antagonistic relationship between them and the non-SCs in villages (Beteille, 1965), including those studied.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnographic account is to incorporate issues of inequality, dominance, repression, power, hegemony and victimisation of groups which are marginalised and excluded in the society. Here, an ethnographer-detailed report of everyday life of the individuals or the communities under study through participant views is presented and interpreted below. In sum, it may be said that social exclusion of the SCs in both the Kond and Maliwada villages exists in almost every spheres of their life, although it varies in its forms and contents. It has also been found in varying degree in these spheres. For instance, the SCs have been most excluded from their participation, along with non-SCs, in the religious sphere, compared with their participation in economic activities where their exclusion is partial and that too temporary, but not permanent. Similarly, their exclusion from participation in other spheres of life has, at the individual level, been contextual, considering his/her caste being excluded from all possible contexts. Further, social exclusion of the SCs in the studied villages has been interrelated in which their poverty has been an outcome of discrimination practised against them, particularly in the economic sphere. So also, social discrimination has resulted into their deprivation or exclusion from their participation in various other spheres of life. Similarly, both discrimination and poverty together have caused their exclusion from participation in community life, religious sphere as well as their access to civic amenities and public facilities.

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