

Research Article

Caste- Based Exclusion: A Case Study of Maredubaka Village in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Caste- based discrimination is a predominant feature of social exclusion in the Indian society. The unwritten caste rules operates rigidly especially against dalits in most of the villages, which manifest untouchability in different forms. This paper is an analytical study conducted in Maredubaka village of Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh to examine the situation of Dalits, the causative factors of social exclusion practiced, highlights how the backward castes collaborated with the upper caste group in denying services to Dalits of this village.

KEYWORDS: Structural Inequality, Caste Dynamics, Dalits and Exclusion

INTRODUCTION

Village studies in India unravel the distinct socio-cultural and economic aspects of different communities in rural areas. Doing ethnography about a village enriches us on the religious, political, economic and socio-psychological aspects of rural communities, furthermore, it will reveal certain aspects like the mechanisms of a social organization of a rural community. In contemporary times, research on village studies informs about the process of economic and social change over a period of time. At this juncture, it is important to understand the aspects like the unwritten caste rules, hierarchy which determine social distance among the caste groups have remained constant or taken new forms. The notions of 'Jajmani system', 'village as a self sustaining unit' has been highly contested on several grounds by the scholars, especially the continuation of social systems with regard to caste structure, Dhananjaykeer (1954) nothing but a den of ignorance and sink of localism.

More recently, the emphasis in village studies has often been on re-studying the same village many years later

to document the sometimes unanticipated effects of modernization. Many recent village studies emphasize the forces of movement and migration to the urban areas. The present focus is on the mode of social and economic aspects of interaction, various forms of discrimination among certain social groups within a village and the levels of social cohesiveness, aspects leading to disintegration.

Village studies across different societies can be seen as contributing to the history of peasant studies especially in anthropology. Peasant studies takes its point of departure from Eric Wolf's (1966) definitions of the village as a "closed corporate peasant community," and his subsequent studies of the main ecological types of peasant societies across the world (1966). His later work on the marginal peoples of the peasant world extended his analysis into new realms. Another major influence on peasant studies was the works of Robert Redfield on the "little community" (1967). Indian sociologists and anthropologists have made contributions in unraveling the hidden aspects of rural communities, notably,

Dumont (1986) M.N. Srinivas (1985); Dube (1955); Beals (1963); Hartman 1989); Sahay (2001); Narayanan Nair (2003); and McKim Marriot (1986). These studies have contributed especially understanding agrarian structures, socio-economic and political aspects of rural communities.

In a typical sense, a village is a residential and agricultural community, where the agricultural fields immediately surround them. This village will have its own residential pattern, however, the most important and governing principle of social life in the village is the caste factor. The residential pattern is based on the grouping of households on caste, social mobility, economic transactions, religious rites; political power rests with certain caste communities. Srinivas (1985) says that the caste living in a village or in any other local area is interdependent economically and otherwise. Ideally, each caste enjoys a monopoly of an occupation, and this monopoly both unites as well as divides the people enjoying the monopoly.

The study was conducted during 2009–2010, to understand the socio-economic indicators of exclusion. The aim of the study is to understand the levels and forms of exclusion and the situation of the dalit community in this region.

MAREDUBAKA VILLAGE

No one knows the origin of the village named 'Maredubaka', however; it is reported that it is more than 100 years old. It is situated 8 kms north to Rajam town; the village can be reached by a private auto rickshaw. It is approximately 125 kms to Srikakulam district headquarters. It is a multi caste village with upper castes, backward castes, scheduled caste and scheduled tribes population.

The streets are divided on the basis of caste composition. Most of the upper caste 'Telaga' houses are in three streets, while backward caste groups are in adjacent streets, whereas the scheduled caste population live in a separate place called the 'SC colony'. The scheduled Tribe Konda Dora live in the main village, but, the Gadaba, (the most vulnerable group) live 3 kms aloofaway from the main village, called 'Gadaba peta'.

The residents of Maredubaka village depend on Rajam town for marketing facilities, both for buying their

agricultural necessities and for selling their agricultural produce. Owing to increased paddy cultivation and higher production per acre in the recent times, Maredubaka shows signs of some prosperity, while certain sections of the population, however, are still considered poor.

The village has 435 households with a population of 1810 people. There are 927 men and 883 women. The SC colony has 67 households with a population of 345 people with 179 men and 166 women. The scheduled tribe population is 107 with 52 males and 55 females. The rest is of upper caste Telaga and backward caste population. The village has 140 children in the age group of 0-6 years with 80 boys and 60 girls. The total literates are 1210, with 627 men and 583 women.

INFRASTRUCTURAL FACILITIES

The entire village is electrified, has good water facilities, with an upper primary school and a separate school for SC children upto third class. It has an Anganwadi centre, a primary health centre. One Panchayat office, the streets are well maintained. There are two bore wells, two open wells, and 14 hand pumps. One fair price shop. All most all houses are owned by the villagers, a few 30 houses are rented, who have not yet received the patta from the government.

SOCIAL COMPOSITION

Selection of Maredubaka village is based on its multi caste composition with two scheduled tribes presence in this village are : Brahmin, Telaga, Vysya, Sri Vaishnava, Sri Sayana (Segidi), Golla, Chakali, Mangali Dudekula (minority muslim), Mala (Scheduled Caste) Konda Dora (Scheduled Tribe) Gadaba (Primitive Tribe).

Regarding the cultural background of the different castes, except the Brahmin, all the upper caste Telaga, are peasants along with the backward castes, while Dhobi and Barber castes are service castes, few scheduled caste families are peasants, who also take up agricultural labour. Konda Dora and Gadaba tribe do not hold land, they depend on agricultural labour. All caste groups in the village are patrilineal in reckoning their kinship bonds within the village. Members of a caste are found to be related to each other in one way or another when lineal and affinal.

CASTE HIERARCHY AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Caste hierarchy was not determined; however, it was hypothetical and historically oriented. The stratification of castes into hierarchical groups is present both at the conceptual and at the interactional level. In this village, the different caste groups perceive themselves in the following pattern:

Brahmin

Telaga

Vysya

Sri Vaishnava

Sri Sayana (Segidi)

Golla,

Chakali

Mangali

Dudekula (minority muslim),

Mala (scheduled caste)

Konda Dora (scheduled tribe)

Gadaba (most vulnerable tribe) (Katri sub-group)

With regard to these hierarchal positions, there is some disagreement over the order and positions, some backward castes claim to be little higher in the rank. This aspect can be understood in terms of considering being equal with other upper caste status. Apart from the economic status, the Brahmin caste is still considered as the highest and supreme in the caste hierarchy due to its priestly ceremonial occupation.

This village represents the typical Indian –agrarian structure, as most of the groups are engaged in agricultural output. The numerically dominant caste Telaga followed by the Segidi, own most of the cultivable land in this area. Some pockets of land are cultivated by the backward caste groups, and the Mala community is now practicing agriculture. In terms of occupational mobility, few members from the backward caste and mala community, have become first generation learners and currently doing government jobs.

ROLE OF THE DOMINANT CASTE

Telaga (upper caste) is the dominant caste in this village. They are numerically highest with 190 households, compared with the other caste groups. They are the landlords, holding most of the cultivable land. Besides the numerically large, land holdings land, they also had the political positions (Sarpanch position) for a very long term, except few times, when the village panchayat was reserved for the scheduled caste group. At present the Sarpanch belongs to the Telaga caste group. Subramanyam (1997) describes how the power structure operates in a Mandur village of Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh,, especially the dominant caste holds the political position, along with land holding. The process of controlling and maintaining the resources rests in the hands of the dominant caste group in the village.

COMMENSALISM: - RULES OF ENDOGAMY

Each caste group maintains its identity, either by occupation or land holding. There are little commensal relations, depending on the mutual benefits. Most of the backward caste group members are allowed into the upper caste Telaga houses, however, Mala community members seldom enter into backward and Telaga houses, due to their traditional perception of lower status ascribed to them.

There are no inter caste marriages, as every caste group strictly follows endogamy. Though endogamy strengthens kinship bonds, but it is an unseen agency in perpetuating caste identity and imagined boundaries. It is even practiced at the tribal level, Konda Dora do not have commensal and marital relations with Gadaba tribe in this village. Konda Dora perceives Gadaba as inferior to them. There is some mixed response on how they perceive Dalits in this village.

SITUATION OF THE DALIT COMMUNITY

Madanipour et al. (1998) defines social exclusion as multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources and integration into common cultural process. When combined, they create acute forms of exclusion that find a spatial manifestation in particular neighbourhoods.

Taking the above concise definition on social exclusion, it is noticed that, caste- based discrimination, which is manifested in excluding dalits, particularly in decision making, political process and denial of service caste groups to enter into their households is noticed in this village.

Explicitly there is no exclusion (both physical and social) practiced by the dominant castes, rather the exclusionary practices are at the perceptual level. It is reported that the backward caste groups like Segidi, Chakali, and Mangali do not have much exclusion physically, and culturally, but, the scheduled caste group suffered from the exclusionary practices long time ago. The Mala group live separately (SC colony). There is no visible untouchability, physical or verbal abuse, however, it can be concluded that at the perceptual level, the upper and backward castes treat this community as inferior to them. Tribes also have inferior status in the eyes of upper and backward caste groups. Some upper caste and backward community families use the services of Mala and Scheduled tribes' in their agricultural operations.

LAND HOLDING, LAND DISTRIBUTION AND ECONOMY

The village economy is based completely on agricultural production. The total cultivable land is approximately 1000 acres, the wet agricultural land is 450 acres, and 550 acres of dry land. Within this cultivable land, 400 acres is used to raise the paddy crop, while 120 acres is used for horticulture. They raise mixed crops, like millets and other pulses.

India has been and an agrarian society with strong traditional sentiments and modes of agriculture. It could not be possible to implement in a totally transformative form, the land structure and its ownership on an Idealistic socialism.

Like any other typical rural agricultural village, Maredubaka reflects the same picture as the land holding range between 5 acres to and 2 acres with most of the villagers, while the scheduled caste population has one acre of D patta land given by the government. Few upper caste (Telaga) families hold land of 10 acres and above. The land is distributed in equally among the upper, backward, and lower castes, two scheduled tribe (Konda Dora) families own two acres of land. Gadaba do not own any agricultural land.

There is a good economic relationship between the caste groups, as most of the backward and scheduled caste population has taken the upper caste population agricultural land for lease, they also have some understanding in sharing the crop.

The patron– client relationship is existing in this village. Most of the upper caste and backward caste population still maintain the relationship especially with the service castes like washermen and barbers. They offer a yearly package (like rice and pulses) in exchange of their services. It is a continuation of the classical form of Jajmani system, however, not in its pure form, perpetuates the structural inequalities among the caste groups.

There are 21 self -help groups, with 245 members. 883 women are currently members of these self-help groups. These self-help groups are divided according with scheduled caste groups and two with scheduled tribe population, whereas the rest belong to the backward and upper caste population.

Political organization: The village is politically controlled by the panchayat system. The sarpanch is the head of the village council. For many years the Telaga community had the privilege of occupying this panchayat position due to its numerical strength in the village. In recent times, when the village was reserved for the scheduled caste group, a Mala member held the position for two terms, at present , the Telaga caste member is holding the sarpanch position. This village does not have any traditional political system to look after the disputes or any issue pertaining to the village. It is under the purview of a common civil law.

In terms of decision making for any developmental activities, all the representatives of each caste group are given importance in the formulation phase. There are incidents reported that, the lower castes are left out or ignored in the decision making process. The village has supporters of the dominant political parties of Andhra Pradesh state.

RELIGION

There is rit ual unity in this village. Irrespective of caste background, all the villagers celebrate the Grama Devata Pandaga during the summer season.

The Gadaba (most vulnerable tribe) maintains a

distinctive socio-ritual pattern. They do not have any interdependence with the other caste groups in this village. Gadaba have their own diety and nature worship, which is different from the rest of the village. Gadaba also practice herbal medicine, for curing certain diseases, which has a certain religious base.

While Konda Dora follow the village goddess festival and share most of the village ritual and ceremonies especially the Grama Devata Pandaga;. Gadaba have their own way of celebrations, praying to an ancestral tree in their neighbourhood. They do not mix with Konda Dora tribe for any sort of affiliation. Though, Hinduism is the main religion for all the communities in this village, some dalit families have embraced Christianity.

CONTEXTUAL AND SITUATIONAL EXCLUSION

There was an interesting episode. The history of the episode is also the theme of the paper. In 1994, prior to that, there were no alarming reports, on the atrocities on Dalits and the caste- related problems. In 1994 during the month of May, the time of the village ritual, when all the people had an opportunity to come together; all the communities have to play their respective roles. As expected there was a natural competition to enter into the temple on the basis of priority, and it is common that the caste -dominated priorities , the village head and the sarpanch, had to face a situation, which is unpleasant to both the parties, as the other party being Dalit, it was an issue of entering into the temple .

There was an altercation among people of all castes in their effort to get into the temple. Suddenly, one dalit member shouted that his personal dignity was not respected and also suffered verbal abuse. While the whole incident did not take a long time, to become a sensitive issue;. the constitutional safeguard for SC/ST atrocity protection right was the immediate choice for the victim in this incident. In this village, some of the educated dalit members were aware of the legal position and rights. They wanted to appeal to the Court of Law for Justice.

A case of SC/ST atrocity was registered at the Rajam Police station against the village Sarpanch. The police tried to examine the issue, in an amicable way, informally in the interest of peace and mutual coexistence of all the communities in a civil society.

Given this issue, some of the dalit community members opposed this move, while others wanted to take action against the sarpanch, as there is already a division of the dalit community in this village. The consensus among dalits was not to push this matter. As a result, that issue has come to an end, without any serious legal repercussion. At that point of time some dalit community members felt that the SC/ST atrocity case has been registered or invoked as a weapon to teach a lesson to the other community members. An atmosphere of fear and threat was felt by the caste hindus and they felt helpless before the potential consequences from the legalities involved with the SC/ ST atrocity case.

This issue has precipitated not just the fear of the possible SC case, but a split in the castes in the village, especially in dispensing the caste services to the dalits in particular. With this incident it accentuated the already existing caste divisions in the village.

The caste hierarchy, however, hypothetical and historically oriented, the service caste communities like the Dhobis and Barber have their own caste status and superiority, have started exercising their power, very invisibly and suddenly by refusing their services to dalits. Before this incident, barbers used to attend to a few dalit families, not in their SC colony, but in the vicinity of their colony. It is not clear, whether they were dictated by the upper caste community not to render their services after that incident. Wilson (1998) describes this phenomenon as ‘social dislocation’ where the dalit community is socially isolated (alienated) though it is even in the same village. The caste prejudice operates not giving enough scope for social bonding, thus demarcating an artificial division among the communities.

The exclusion is felt very visibly here, where the backward service castes especially, have become empowered by not offering their services. A new dynamics of caste discrimination in the form of not offering services to the dalits has strengthened. The socio- cultural dynamics of caste hatred have been strengthened with this issue. The Dhobis and barbers explained that they are not against the dalits, no discrimination felt, however, they are full with work and have no time to attend more clients. If dalits by themselves come to us, we will give our services to them. The concept of purity/pollution is in operation for the denial of services to the dalits. It is interesting

phenomena, that service castes do not 'say' 'any thing, rather they practice discrimination in a different form, having their own logic. It is being practiced till now.

The incident has positive impact on the dalits as they break loose the age old practice of not questioning the upper and backward communities, it has given them a new consciousness, in terms of asserting their rights and human dignity. Since then, dalits have triumphed in shaking the very basis of the supremacy of the upper caste. Though, the non dalits took it as a deterrent in avoiding dalits in social interaction, which was never in full scale, was not at all bothered by the dalits, now they are secured because of the affirmative action.

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Owing to persistent efforts of central and state governments, the access to livelihoods among the rural poor has improved considerably. Most of the landless poor now have some opportunity to earn for their sustenance, especially from the NREGS. The low subsidized provisions facility, old pensions, and health care facilities have transformed the rural scenario to some extent.

In order to empower the dalit community, a separate school exclusively for dalit children was established in the village. The dalit children have the benefit to get education upto 3rd standard, after that they can continue in the, government upper primary school in the village. Owing to increased job opportunities in the district headquarters, some of them have migrated in search of jobs.

The two tribal groups Konda Dora and the vulnerable Gadaba tribe are at contrasting levels of development, some of the Konda Dora men and women are educated, while the Gadaba group is completely illiterate, there is a primary school upto 3rd standard operating in Gadabapeta, the impact is yet to come.

In terms of land holding, some Konda Dora families own few acres of cultivable land, but Gadaba do not have any agricultural land; they still depend on forest produce and take up agricultural labour.

Status of Women: Women in this village take active part in many activities. There are self help groups operating in this village. However, though there is no frequent interaction between upper caste women and the dalit

women, they mix when any occasion arises. There is significant improvement in the girl child enrolment in the primary school. Most of the upper caste women, especially Telaga community families, do not engage their women in agricultural operations; whereas the backward castes, dalit and tribal women actively contribute in their economic pursuits. In terms of political participation, the role of women is not seen due to the patriarchal structure.

CONCLUSION

There are many studies on rural aspects across cultures by sociologists and anthropologists, most of the studies are centered on the economy, social organization, kin networks, power structure, and village as a self sustaining unit. Until recently, the focus was on the situation of weaker sections and deprived communities in the village structure, further village studies are also being taken up to ascertain the levels and forms of discrimination and the process of social exclusion practiced by the dominant caste groups in a given village.

The directive principles of the state and central government to empower and promote welfare of the excluded communities, and the need for knowing the causative factors facilitating the exclusionary practices, have become a priority.

The purpose of doing an ethnographic study on the village, while delineating the socio-economic indicators for social exclusion, was an attempt to record the experiences of the dalit community, and their situation in the social fabric of village organization.

The economic situation and education levels among backward caste communities and the dalit group have made some improvement; however, caste prejudice by the upper castes towards dalits is still prevailing at the perceptual level. The exclusionary practices, especially the attitude of service castes is still rigid in offering services to dalits. Perhaps, this is due to maintaining superiority and social distance among themselves. Lacunae have been identified in the plans and schemes of central and state governments regarding social welfare and social affirmative actions. The bougiese sentiment is still very strong and powerful, the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer.

Caste- Based Exclusion: A Case Study of Maredubaka Village in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh

To wipe out these indifferences, social inequalities and negative stereotypes among the caste groups, especially towards dalits, strict anti -discriminatory laws are not enough to eradicate these practices; we need an approach to educate all the castes, especially the principles of egalitarianism, the essence of humanity, human dignity and human rights. For the coming generations, the educational component with regard to value education should guide the principles of quality and purpose of life. Even for the illiterate, the teachings and lives of social reformers should be inculcated to reorient their attitudes and perception towards other caste groups. In order to promote empowerment, towards dalits and deprived groups, the negative forces and self interests should be checked among the hegemonic groups, otherwise democracy and equality will only become utopian.

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