



The Dalit Diaspora: Caste Beyond India's Border

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Abstract

While the caste system is primarily associated within India, this paper aims to explore the complex issues that the Dalit diaspora faces and how caste-based discrimination affects their identities and way of life even outside national borders. The Indian diaspora has inadvertently spread caste-based discrimination globally. This is particularly true in nations like the US and the UK where there is a sizeable Indian community. Identities and hierarchies based on caste, are replicated and upheld both inside and outside of Indian diaspora through transnationalization of caste by endogamy and social exclusion. Little is known about the realities of the lives of Dalit diaspora groups because of a culture of secrecy and denial, the paper investigates the same through works of DR BR Ambedkar, Yashika Dutt, Brij V Lal and Narendra Jadhav. The paper talks about the history of Dalit diaspora and how caste is maintained in diaspora communities abroad.

keywords: caste discrimination, caste identity, endogamy, Dalit diaspora.

Keywords: Dalit Diaspora, Caste, primarily, history, history

Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remarked that wherever the Hindu will go he will take his Caste System with him. The Dalit diaspora is a community of individuals, and has remained invisible for a long time. Belonging to the lowest stratum of the Indian caste system, the community has long faced multifaceted experiences of historical marginalisation and discrimination not only in India but the diaspora experiences unique challenges even outside its borders. Indian Dalits were taken to different countries by colonial masters and few migrated as indentured labourers.

Approximately five million south asians were contracted as indentured labor (Kumar, 2004) ^[19]. Many lower caste South Indians traveling to other countries changed their names to shed the stigma of lower caste status, as documented by ship log discrepancies. Dalits may decide to hide their caste identification in order to prevent possible prejudice and discrimination in the countries where they have been adopted. Those who have migrated voluntarily and in more humane conditions, reproduced caste hierarchy abroad and maintained stronger alliance with the caste system. Caste has been identified as a factor for the honour killings in Britain.

The significance of spreading awareness about this issue on a worldwide scale is emphasised in (The Dalit Diaspora in

the US and the Struggle against Caste Discrimination: A Report, 2014). The core causes and effects of caste-based prejudice become difficult to resolve in the absence of greater awareness and comprehension.

Dalit Diaspora

The immigration of Dalits outside India started during the colonial period as indentured labour to work in the plantations which led to large scale migration to Britain, French and Dutch colonies to work in the plantation. The post colonial migration of Dalits were to the developed countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The gulf countries as professional skilled workers. Vivek Kumar in his essay 'Understanding Dalit Diaspora' divided the Dalit diaspora in two major streams that is the 'old' (indentured labourers who were taken by colonial powers) and the 'new' (semi-literate and professionally trained Dalits and students). This new stream of Dalit is politically conscious and asserts their Dalit identity. They have also influenced politically subdued 'old' dalit diaspora as well. Brij lal (1984) ^[15] points out that out of 60,965 Indians indentured labourers who migrated to Fiji between 1879 -1916, about 11,907 belonged to the lower menial caste like chamars, koris, pasis, etc. from 1870 to 1885 the Indians that migrated to the Caribbean under indentured

system, 41.5% belonged to lower caste. This migration illustrates the pathetic living conditions of Dalits in India yet even in the Caribbean they were referred to as chamars and oppressed by mainstream Indian society whether Hindu or Muslims.

One significant issue is transnationalization of caste by which identities and hierarchies based on caste, which are customarily identified with India, are replicated and upheld both inside and outside of the Indian diaspora. Caste is no longer limited by Geography, it travels with migrants and manifests in various forms within diaspora communities worldwide. One such example is, Meshram a Dalit woman, came to the United States, against her family's wishes, to earn a doctorate at a New England college. Thinking life would be better in this country, but she quickly encountered the same kind of discrimination she had experienced in India. She recalls how everyone went around asking each other's caste when she met other Indian students (Ray, 2019) ^[17]. Asking fellow students their caste establishes status and hierarchy within the community. Doing so often means that a Dalit or lower caste person will be isolated from upper caste peers.

There are three main problems that are faced by Dalit diaspora. Firstly Lack of Recognition and Legal Protection, "A 2018 survey of 1,200 individuals of South Asian descent in the United States found that 26 percent said they had experienced a physical assault because of their caste, while 59 percent reported caste-based derogatory jokes or remarks directed at them. More than half said they were afraid of being outed as Dalit. The survey is the only one of its kind ever done." (Ray, 2019) ^[17]. Despite the prohibition of caste based discrimination in international human rights law, Caste is not recognised by the laws of many countries as a protected characteristic against discrimination. Using the UK as an example of a promising measure that ultimately failed, The enterprise and regulatory reform act was enacted in April 2013. Section 97 of the act requires the government to introduce a statutory prohibition of caste discrimination into British equality act by making 'caste' an aspect of the protected characteristic of race, and emphasises the challenge of obtaining legal protections against caste discrimination. The Dalit diaspora is left susceptible to discrimination and prejudice in the absence of sufficient legal recourse. Secondly Social Exclusion and Prejudice, For the educated Dalits going abroad meant an opportunity of leaving behind and to live in a caste-free society but caste becomes routinised in everyday performances as a result Dalits overseas frequently experience discrimination and social exclusion within diaspora communities, showing how caste discrimination is still pervasive in India despite increasing urbanisation, as evidenced by the low representation of Dalits in top roles in the Indian diaspora media. Roohi (2017) ^[18] argues that "high -skilled workers rely on 'caste capital' to access upper caste formal and informal networks for educational and occupational opportunities. Tech recruitment agencies are often headed by upper caste members increasing chances of mobility for these workers. Britain, an older immigrant gateway, seems to have the strictest and most solidified caste system due to the large network of South Asians that arrived at the same time. Flashing caste becomes a symbol for the second generation diaspora. S. Kumar confirms how some people

are still living in India though they are in America "they permanently live in India (in terms of mindset), I have to say they practice casteism or untouchability in North America". This implies that prejudices based on caste continue to exist in social and professional contexts, impeding equal chances. And lastly Invisibility and Lack of Awareness, In popular discourse, caste prejudice within the diaspora is frequently unseen and goes unnoticed.

Caste identity is Dalit diaspora

The diaspora of Dalits navigates a complex relationship with caste identity. As they strive to avoid the shame and prejudice linked to caste, they also struggle with the ongoing impact it has on their lives and the necessity of claiming their identity according to their own terms. Dalits may decide to hide their caste identification in order to prevent possible prejudice and discrimination in the countries where they have been adopted. This may serve as a calculated survival tactic in settings where caste is not well recognised or understood. People may choose to be somewhat secretive in larger social contexts and only disclose their caste status to intimate friends or family members or other trusted circles. On the other hand, as a source of empowerment and unity, there is a growing movement among the diaspora to reclaim and proclaim Dalit identity. Yashica Dutt in her book, 'coming out as Dalit: a memoir' writes about her experience at Columbia University, USA where she recognised a parallel between "hiding my caste and the phenomenon of 'passing'-The distinctly African American practice of hiding one's (racial) identity and assuming a different (white) one to escape systemic discrimination. It struck me now that I couldn't be the only Dalit passing as upper caste....I had escaped the humiliation of being 'discovered' as Bhangi and now I was forever taking away their power to do so: by doing it myself. I was putting an end to my constant struggle of hiding behind my education or my career, escaping through my proficient English or my (not so dark) skin colour. In a way, I was turning my Dalitness into a gold medal of ancestral pride and suffering. I was going to proclaim openly and proudly that I was DALIT."

Factors like generational differences shape the Dalit identity formation. Compared to their first-generation peers, second- and third-generation Dalits living abroad may have distinct views on caste identity. In 'outcaste: A memoir' by Narendra Jhadav his daughter Apoorva writes an epilogue sharing her experience as a second generation Dalit diaspora at Walter Johnson High School in Maryland, "I came to know that I was Dalit when I was twelve years old or so. I didn't know what it meant and was confused. There was this teacher in sixth grade who recognised the last name I guess, and asked, 'are you the daughter of Dr Narendra Jadhav? The Dalit scholar? I was proud, but confused. Yeah my dad was famous, but what does Dalit have to do with it? Is that of any significance?'"

How Dalits choose to negotiate their identities might be influenced by the degree of caste awareness and comprehension in the host nation and finally personal experience that is a positive interaction might result in a more flexible and contextual view, whereas experiences of discrimination or prejudice can strengthen a feeling of Dalit identity.

The new Dalit intelligentsia are reclaiming their Dalit identity through narratives and presenting the experiences and viewpoints of Dalits while contesting prevailing caste narratives. They are also creating communities and setting up forums and groups to interact with other Dalits and promote their rights. The Dalit diaspora has created their own organisations for the development of different Dalit communities. Voice of Dalit International (VODI) is working in the UK to uplift

Dalits back in India. The Backward and Minorities Employees Federation has organised in the US, UK, and other countries to sensitise people about the conditions of Dalits in India. The Ambedkar Museum in the UK has become a new cultural symbol for Dalits Diaspora. The Dalit Diaspora in Vancouver organised an international Dalit Conference with the theme "Charting Dalit Agenda for the 21st Century". The Dalit diaspora may help create a more complex and knowledgeable global dialogue on caste by participating in activism and academic pursuits and create a global dialogue. The diaspora presents a special chance to educate people about caste and foster connections with other oppressed communities that experience comparable forms of discrimination.

Conclusion

The experiences of the Dalit diaspora highlight a sobering fact: caste-based prejudice still exists in large part outside of India. Dalits living overseas struggle with the lasting effects of their oppressed identity despite their distance from one another and their cultural assimilation. There are several ways that this discrimination shows up, ranging from covert bias and social exclusion to overt bigotry and hate crimes. Some people may decide to hide their caste history in an effort to avoid the stigma and integrate into new societies without having to carry the weight of their past. Others, on the other hand, challenge the silence and invisibility that frequently shroud their experiences by reclaiming their Dalit identity and finding strength in doing so.

In the end, pursuing equality and dignity calls for a multifaceted strategy. In order to demolish the systems that support this type of oppression, it is imperative to advocate for legal safeguards against caste-based discrimination, raise awareness of the transnational character of caste, and promote inclusivity both inside and outside of diaspora groups.

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