

Language and the Formation of Self-Identity: The Case of Dalits in India

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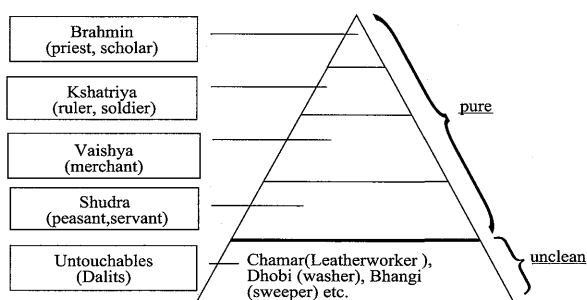
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Born as a Hindu in India, one's social status and role in society are determined by the caste into which one is born. Dalits ('the poor' or 'oppressed'), formerly called 'Untouchables', are considered inherently unclean according to the Hindu ideology of 'unclean and pure theory'. Placed outside the Hindu caste system, they have long suffered, therefore, from poverty and exploitation. For poor Dalits, poverty has remained a more urgent difficulty than searching for their identity. Nevertheless, since the 1980's, educated middle class Dalits have emerged with the assistance of a positive discrimination policy. They have spurred the search for their own identity through social and political movements. However, this recent increased interest in Dalits identity does not mean that it has not been discussed until recently. In fact, a variety of terms have been applied to describe Dalits' identity throughout India's history. This paper tries to explain how different terms were formed from different perspectives to describe Dalits' identity and what these terms meant for the Dalits' formation of self-identity. The terms explained in the paper are: 'Untouchables', 'Harijan (children of God)', 'Scheduled Castes', 'Neo-Buddhists' and 'Dalits'.

I. SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION OF HINDU SOCIETY

The Law Manu, one of the codes of India refers to classification of Hindu society. According to the law, the society consists of four caste communities, namely, Brahmin (priest and scholar),

Kshatriya (ruler and soldier), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudra (peasant and servant), and each caste has its own role to play to maintain the Indian society as a whole, just as each part of the body has its role in the functioning of the body. Thus, born as a Hindu in India, one's social personality and role in society are determined by the caste into which one is born. The



Law Manu also refers to another community called *achut* who subscribe to the Hindu ideology of ‘unclean and pure theory’ (Sha, 2001). People believed they would be polluted by direct physical contact with them, or even by sight, hearing or proximity. Hence, they were treated as ‘Untouchables’ (the English name for *achut*). They were considered to be either the lower section of Shudras or outside the caste system. For example, Chamar who engage in leatherwork are thought to be unclean because they skin animals’ hides. Hence, they belong to Untouchables. Placed outside the Hindu caste system, Untouchables have long suffered from poverty and exploitation. For poor Untouchables, poverty has remained a more urgent difficulty than searching for their identity. Recently Untouchables are often called Dalits, meaning ‘the poor’ or ‘oppressed’. In this paper, I will also use the term Dalits to argue ex-Untouchables; however, the term Untouchables will also be applied, if it is considered to be appropriate in terms of the historical context.

II. DIFFERENT TERMS USED BY DIFFERENT AGENCIES

Since the 1980’s, educated middle class Dalits have emerged with the assistance of a positive discrimination policy. They have spurred the search for their own identity through social, political and cultural movements. However, this recent increased interest does not mean that the Dalits identity has not been discussed until recently. In fact, a variety of terms have been applied to describe Dalits’ identity throughout India’s history. Thus, I will explain how different terms were formed from different perspectives to describe Dalits’ identity. The terms explained in this paper are the following: ‘Untouchables’, ‘Harijan (children of God)’, ‘Scheduled Castes’, ‘Neo-Buddhists’ and ‘Dalits’.

‘Untouchables’

As mentioned above, the term ‘Untouchables’ is derived from the ‘unclean and pure theory’ in the Hindu ideology. The term functioned to maintain the caste system based on the theory. The Indian constitution abandoned the use of the term for the purpose of protecting Untouchables’ human rights, but the ideology remained in people’s consciousness and in practice ex-Untouchables suffered discrimination.

‘Harijan’

The term ‘Harijan’ was introduced by Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India’s independence, to change the manner in which people look at Untouchables and to unite India as one. Here, Untouchables were regarded as ‘children of God’. This way, Gandhi tried to protect Untouchables from exploitation and discrimination by upper caste communities. The term functioned to maintain the Untouchables’ identity of being Hindus without the stigma of being ‘Untouchables’. Therefore, the term Harijan was accepted and used among Untouchables themselves. To them, the term was considered to be a revolutionary term that implies the possibility of change of their position in the society. However, some Untouchables rejected the term because they thought it would make them a part of the Hindu society dominated by upper caste communities, thereby faceless and identity-less.

'Scheduled Castes (SC)'

The term 'Scheduled Castes (SC)' was introduced as the legally constituted term used for administrative purposes since the British colonization. Untouchables, who were regarded as victims of social injustice and exploitation, were scheduled by the government and became the beneficiaries of the positive discrimination policy. The British government used this term to protect Untouchables from exploitation. However, that was not the only purpose. The British government had its own purpose on their side. By supporting Untouchables, the British government intended to avoid anti-government movements against British and rule colonial India effectively.

The government of India successively implemented the positive discrimination policy after gaining independence and used the term for similar purposes. The government protected Untouchables from social injustice and exploitation, while simultaneously some upper caste politicians utilised the term to get support from the masses. The term SC is regarded as an artificial construction by the government; in reality, Untouchables subjectively identified themselves as SCs because it is a key term for them to receive government support. Recently, even non-SC categorised Dalits attempt to demote their social status and identify themselves as SCs to receive the benefit of government support. Thus, SC is more or less used for political purposes, and it becomes a significant issue when it comes to the matter of positive discrimination policy.

'Neo-Buddhists'

The term 'Neo-Buddhists' indicates Untouchables who have converted to Buddhism. Conversion was initiated by Dr. Ambedkar, the political leader of Untouchables, to protect them from discrimination based on the 'unclean and pure theory' of Hinduism by placing them outside the Hindu hierarchy. One Neo-Buddhist says, *'I have now become equal with high-caste Hindus. I am equal with all. I am not low born or inferior with the acceptance of Buddhism my untouchability has been erased'* (Gokhale, 1990). However, some Neo-Buddhists remain as Hindus in their consciousness. They keep Hindu god statues at home and continue worshipping them.

Some Untouchables (e.g. Harijan leader) argue against conversion, apparently conscious of the professed Neo-Buddhist sentiments, claiming that *'You are Hindus. Your ancestors were Hindus. You should understand this clearly that even by converting to some other religion, you will remain a Hindu'* (Shah, 1975). Other Untouchables reject the use of the term even more radically. *'What's wrong with our staying Hindus and continuing our struggle for equality? We must keep our social movement alive, and together with caste-Hindus, fight for our human rights'* (Gokhale, 1990).

These remarks show the explicit difference between those Untouchables who call themselves 'Neo-Buddhist' and those who call themselves 'Harijan'. While the former try to recreate their identity by placing them outside the Hindu hierarchy, the latter try to do so by fighting for their human rights as Hindus.

'Dalits'

The term 'Dalit' means 'the poor' or 'oppressed' in one of the Indian languages, Marathi. It was first used by Dr. Ambedkar, and became prevalent among

Neo-Buddhist activists, the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. The term has been consciously used to indicate a radical distancing from arbitrarily constituted terms like SC. An important difference is that it was proposed by Dalits to identify themselves from their own perspective, and not by others. The term is used by Dalits to protest against an inherent denial of unclean-ness and a justified caste hierarchy (Zelliot, 1978).

The term is accepted as a revolutionary term by some Untouchables, particularly by rational activists working for the Dalits' equal rights, for it implies the capability of recovering their historical past. However the term is decried by some Untouchables, such as those who have become socially upwardly mobile. To them, the term is 'socially regressive and negative'. Some Neo-Buddhists also reject the term and believe that use of the word encourages caste-ism and classism (Mutatkar, 1988).

All the terms explained in this paper can be classified into several groups. Some terms were created by non-Dalits; others were created by Dalits themselves (Non-Dalit: Harijan and SCs; Dalit: Neo-Buddhist and Dalit). Some terms portray Dalits as a group to be protected from exploitation; others portray Dalits as revolutionaries (Objects: Harijan and SCs; Revolutionaries: Dalit). Some indicate Hindus whereas others indicate another religious group (Hindu: Harijan; Other: Neo-Buddhist). Each of these terms reflects how the creator of the term perceives the Dalits' identity. Consequently, it is impossible to use a single term to explain a 'Dalit'. Altogether, these terms portray a comprehensive picture of Dalits in India, expressing the multiple identities of Dalits. However, one common point among these terms must be emphasised: the reason for introducing the term. Each is intended to recreate the Dalits' traditional identity of 'Untouchables'.

What draws attention here is that Dalit cleverly select the term which suits the identity they would like to be identified with by others. They even accepted the arbitrarily selected terms, an identity designated by others, to express their certain position in the society in a socio-economic and ideological context when needed.

Finally, I'd like to conclude with some remarks on what language means in the formation of self-identity among Dalits. As mentioned above, all the terms explained in the paper reflect how the creator of the term perceives the Dalits' identity. In other words, creators have endowed the term with their own world view. In this context, language is not merely a means to convey an abstract image but reflects the values of the speaker, and therefore holds influential power in itself. In the case of the term 'Untouchable', the reflected perception of the originator was so influential that there emerged a series of trials to create a new term to modify the image of the Dalits' identity. These new terms reflected the Dalits or their supporters' perceptions and the term was especially important in Dalits' political and social movements where they must use their own language to indicate a radical distancing from arbitrarily constituted terms and assert what they believe is their identity.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to clarify how different terms were formed from different perspectives to describe Dalits' identity and what these terms meant for the Dalits' formation of self-identity. In the first section of the paper, I explained the social classification of Hindu society and concluded that one's social personality and role in India are determined according to the caste into which one is born. In the second section, I analysed how different terms were formed from different perspectives to

describe Dalits' identity. The terms explained in the paper were: 'Untouchables', 'Harijan (children of God)', 'Scheduled Castes', 'Neo-Buddhists' and 'Dalits'. I concluded that each of these terms reflects how the creator of the term perceives the Dalits' identity and hence, represents different identities of Dalits. I also explained that, altogether, they portray a comprehensive picture of Dalits, expressing the multiple identities of Dalits. Although there are differences in these terms with respect to whose perception is reflected, they had something in common: the reason for introducing the term. Each term is intended to recreate the Dalits' traditional identity of 'Untouchables'. I continued that Dalits cleverly selected the term which suits the identity they would like to be identified with by others. Politically Dalits have accepted the arbitrarily selected terms, an identity designated by others, to express their position in the society in a socio-economic and ideological context when needed.

This paper focuses on clarifying what sort of perceptions were reflected in the terms and what these terms have meant for the Dalits' formation of self-identity. Thus, my interest was focused on notional matters rather than actual ones. Some literature points out that the discrimination against Dalits is observed at work, at school, in the community, etc. Hence, questions such as 'Have Dalits ceased to be "Untouchables" in reality?' must be examined further in future research.

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