

Social Status of Dalits and Women: In the Light of Manusmriti

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Abstract

In Indian society, the caste system has been prevalent since time immemorial. Historians opine that the invader Aryans were the predecessors of today's Brahmins. They had created Vedas, Shastras and Shrutis to formulate and control the social system. *Manusmriti* is another significant holy scripture which is revered with the utmost respect by the Hindus, especially the Brahmins. According to this scripture, Brahmins are the sacred creation on the earth. Therefore, they hold power over everything, whereas the Shudras or Dalits are the most negligible creation among human being. As an untouchable community Dalits have been excluded from all social functions. Women are another creation of God whom Manu described as the false, insignificant and useless beings. There are number of verses that are written in Manusmriti on dalits and women become a challenge to the power of the Indian constitution. Babasaheb Ambedkar as a messiah of the Shudras, fought for their rights and burnt Manusmriti on 25 December in 1927. The present research paper has highlighted the social position of the Shudras or Dalits and the Women in the light of *Manusmriti*. This paper has further spotlighted the contemporary caste issues through the perspective of Dalit literature.

Keywords: Manusmriti, Caste System, Brahmins, Dalits, Women, Dalit Literature, Indian Constitution.

Lalan is asked by everyone about Caste,

Lalan says how caste looks, never in his eyes did cast.

(Shah, What About Caste, 2019, P. 19)

Caste system in India is perhaps the largest social hierarchy on the earth. It has become a great challenge to the constitution which assures equal rights to all citizens of the nation irrespective of religion, caste, class, creed, colour and place of birth. Enjoying the basic rights on the real ground is not possible for numerous people even after so many years the constitution came into force. This is because of the social and religious laws mentioned in the Hindu scriptures. No matter what our constitution says, the upper caste Hindus follow the *Vedic* scriptures as supreme laws in their social life. The religious laws are written in those scriptures among which *Manusmriti* has been established

in the highest position. The adherents of the *Vedic* religion observe such social and religious laws with the utmost respect.

The Brahmins are descendants of the invader Aryans who came from in between the place of Europe and Asia in about 3400 BC. This warrior group easily defeated the indigenous tribes and conquered the entire Indian continent. They have inscribed multiple religious books like *Vedas* and *Manusmriti* to govern the society where they put themselves on the top-notch and they designated the aborigines as *Dasas* or *Shudra* category.

The term Dalit has been derived from Sanskrit, meaning 'crashed' or 'broken' and it used to represent the untouchables, tribal, landless labourers, poor and other people who are most backward on social, religious, economic and educational level. But in general, the terminology Dalit represents the lower caste Hindus who are deprived in various ways. In 1960 this word became popular with the emergence of Dalit literature in Marathi and other Indian vernacular languages. This subaltern literature was greatly influenced by African-American Black literature which emerged to free the Black people from the slavery of the white. The prime objective of Dalit movement is to free the untouchable Shudras from the slavery of the upper caste Hindus and to make a casteless society.

It is claimed that *Manusmriti* or *Manu-Samhita* was written by the creator *Manu* himself. The original name of this book was 'Manu's Theology'. At the end of each chapter, it is mentioned that this book was inscribed by *Vrigu*. But no where do they engrave the real name of the author and the time when exactly it was written. However, people are deceived by claiming that *Manusmriti* is written by *Manu* himself. It has been written in twelve chapters about everything as a tool for fulfilling the self-motive of the Brahmins. In fact, this book is nothing more than a huge hoax to deceive the native people. On caste system, Ambedkar says, "caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the customs of endogamy." (Ambedkar 2014, P. 8)

Manusmriti is an extremely divisive religious book. The main source of this division is the creation of different castes by dividing the people into Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras. Before *Manusmriti*, the *Purushasukta* hymn of *Rigveda* talks about the formation of caste system in society. This formation of caste hierarchy was based on the profession of the people. *Manu* in his *Manusmriti* has made this caste order more complexed and rigid. According to *Manu*, Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas are the pure castes and Shudras or *Ati-Shudras* are the impure castes. Ambedkar opines that "Manu vested in the social ideal of 'Chaturvarna' contained in *purushasukta* with a degree of divinity and infallibility, which did not have before." (Ambedkar writings and speeches vol. viii, 1990, p. 25). This book not only encourages people to create divisions, instead it instructs the adherents to follow such social stratification strictly. As a result, instead of cultivating love and

brotherhood, it spreads the seeds of hatred and envy in the human hearts. This is exactly why Manusmriti was burnt on December 25, 1927 at Mahad under the leadership of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

According to *Manusmriti* human being have been created from different body parts of *Brahma*. The Brahmins are created from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the Arms, Vaisyas from thighs and shudras from the feet of *Brahma*. He also arranged for them separate works for separate castes (*Manusmriti*, 1: 87). Brahma assigns the Brahmins to gain knowledge on scriptures and follow their priesthood, kshatriyas should fight as warrior to protect the nation, Vaisyas should adopt the profession of business, agriculture, animal husbandry etc. and the shudras should devote them to serve the three upper castes. (*Manusmriti*, 1: 88,89,90,91).

Ekameva tu śūdrasya prabhuḥ karma samādiśat |

Eteṣāmeva varṇānāṃ śuśrūṣāmanasūyayā ||

(Manusmriti 1:91)

It means the Lord has assigned a task for the Shudras to provide services to the above three castes without any condemnation. Thus, the Creator created the same species of human being from the different parts of His body and set them up to fixed professions that no one could change even if they wanted to. The duty of the king was to appoint all the castes in their respective duties and to punish the lower caste if they disobey the Brahmins. (*Manusmriti*, 8:418) The Brahmins take all the advantages of this slavery of the Shudras. *Manu* in his abominable scripture said the Shudras must serve and worship the Brahmins to attain Heaven. (*Manusmriti*, 10: 122-123)

The social status of Shudras was very bad during the reign of the Maratha Peshwas. Shudras had no right to enter into the city. Dogs and cattle could roam, but the Shudras did not have the right to enter the city. They could not even spit on the ground lest any Brahmin should touch it, so a pot was hung around their neck to spit. And a broom had been tied around their waist so that it could wipe their unclean footprints from the ground. When a Brahmin passed by, the Shudras had to lie on the ground to show him reverence. The Shudras were not allowed to walk on the road in the morning and afternoon when the shadows take long size, lest the impure shadow of the untouchables should fall on brahmins and they too become impure. They had to wear a black rope on the neck, horns on their heads or carry a broom around the armpit to mark their lower caste identity. They were not allowed to wear clean clothes or clothes which were not torn. They could not use umbrellas, jewellery, shoes, and even they were prohibited to speak in the common language of the city. They used to wear knee-length *Dhoti*, even the women were no exception to it. In Maharashtra during the reign of Peshwas, no one except Brahmins could recite the *Vedic mantras*, but if anyone dared to do so, his tongue would be cut out. If any lower caste hit any person from upper caste with his limb, the king was asked to amputate that limb without any mercy. These persecutions were carried out mainly

under the provisions of *Manu*. The main legislator of this injustice is a man called *Manu* whose influence is predominant in the Hindu society. All over India Brahmins were not given any punishment even if they killed any shudras.

The professions of the Shudras were cleaning, sweeping, scavenging, removing carcasses and other menial jobs which were considered as impure. The Shudras have been suffering from human identity from the time immemorial. They are more addressed by their caste or profession than their original name. The Shudras should design their name of which sound and meaning should be vulgar. These lower people are known by various names in various places such *Shudras, Namashudras, Paraiyas, Mahars, Chandals, Dalits, Untouchables, Antayaja, Harijan*, Scheduled Caste and so on.

When a Brahmin woman gave birth to a child in the sexual intercourse with a Shudra man, the child was called *Chandal*, a derogatory abusive term. Such an inter-caste product child was considered as impure (*Manusmriti*, 10:30). They usually made their living working in crematoriums. They were generally regarded as inferior and most detested community among human kinds. As an outcaste they lived outside of the village. Dogs and donkeys were their only assets. They had to wear the clothes of the dead, take food in broken vessels, wear ornaments made of iron. Manoranjan Byapari, a Chandal writer from West Bengal, writes, “the Shastras also ordain that the habitation of Chandals should be distant from the village. Burning of corpses and breeding of dogs or pigs would be his occupation. Not for any need, however dire, would he enter the city gate. Not allowed to build any permanent housing, he would be required to move from place to place. He would not be allowed to acquire education or keep any name that hinted at dignity. He would need to remain ever on the alert his polluting shadow would fall on any Brahmin’s body. For this offence, he could be condemned to death” (Byapari, 2018, P. 8-9).

In the book of *Manu*, women have been described as false, insignificant and useless being. Women are not given any form of freedom. Women have not been given the right to participate in any religious activities. They were not given the right to achieve knowledge or recite *Vedas*. Their only duty was to do housework and to serve their male members. According to *Manu*,

Svabhāva eṣa nārīṇāṃ narāṇāmiha dūṣaṇam |

Ato'rthāṇna pramādyanti pramadāsu vipaścitaḥ ||

(*Manusmriti*, 2:213)

Which means, it is the nature of women to pollute men in this world, so the religious priests and Pandits should always be cautious of women folk. In the childhood a female would be under the care of her father, after marriage, she would be under her husband and after the death of her husband, she would be under her son. Women will not be allowed to live independently. If a woman is separated from her father or husband or son, she will tarnish her patriarchal as well as the clan of her husband

(*Manusmriti*, 5:149). A wife should worship her husband like a God. She has no separate entity except her husband (*Manusmriti*, 5: 154). Women should always be subjugated through sexual enjoyment. Even if the daughter is not in marriage age, her father can arrange her marriage. According to *Manu*, although wives are protected by their husband, they commit adultery against their husband (*Manusmriti*, 9: 15). *Manu* describes those women have natural instinct to sleep more, to be angry, greedy, jealous, crooked, to decorate them with jewellery and to seduce men to have sexual intercourse (*Manusmriti*, 9:17). They cannot recover themselves from impurity as they are ignorant about religious scripture/mantras (*Manusmriti*, 9:18). They have no property rights. If a wife is always obedient to her husband throughout her life then only she enters into heaven.

The condition of the Dalit women is more deplorable. They are double oppressed—as Shudras and as women. So, they are suffering on the three levels—caste, class and gender. The upper caste women are exploited in the house; on the other hand, lower caste women become the victim inside and outside of the house. Although shudras are considered as impure, the upper three castes never hesitate to sexually exploit the Dalit women. Often beautiful Dalit young girls are appointed into different temples in the name of *Davdasi* by Brahmin priests to enjoy the sexual flavour. The Indian so-called feminists hardly criticize such inhuman practices. Most of Marxists are from upper castes background and they too are influenced by the caste system. Bama, a woman Dalit writer, frustrated with caste oppression, questions in her novel *Sangati*, “Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle especially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have also to bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!” (Bama 2005, P. 121-22).

In the post-independent modern India, the rigidity of the caste system is not visible but its wave is still comprehended today in different forms. Many Brahmins could not accept the constitution as the soul of the country as it has been written by Babasaheb Ambedkar, an untouchable from Maharashtra. Article-17 of Indian constitution has declared practising untouchability is a punishable offence and article-15 also assures the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of religion, caste and sex. But its implementation on the ground is rarely noticeable. Today when the whole world is busy with science and technology, the Hindu organizations like *RSS*, *Hindu Mashaba*, *Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha*, *Arya Samaj*, *Bajrang Dal* etc. are actively engaged to nurture the principles of *Manu* in India. The caste hatred of upper caste Hindus toward Dalits/Shudras is still prevalent in Indian society. There are numerous examples like Chuni Kotal, Rohit Vemula, Payal Tadvi who were compelled to die being victimized of caste discrimination. Almost every day we come across the news of atrocities on Dalits like rape, murder, violence, land related issues in newspapers. The children of upper caste do not eat Mid-day meal prepared by Dalit cook in govt. schools. The Wire online news portal on July 11, 2019 covered that Sakshi Mishra, daughter of an upper caste BJP MLA was threatened to kill after marrying a Dalit man. Three Dalit boys in Maharashtra were severely beaten, paraded

naked for swimming in a well (NDTV June 14, 2018). A Dalit boy of 13 years old was beaten by four upper-caste men for wearing Mojdi, a type of ethnic leather shoes in Gujarat (The Statesman, Sep 11, 2020). Such news are daily events because of the torture of the upper castes who call themselves Hindu-Rakshak (saviours of Hindus). These radical and extremist Hindu gangs do not consider Muslims as human being as they do not come in the Hindu caste hierarchy and they treat them worse than the Shudras ignoring the laws of the nation.

There are number of dalit writers like Sharankumar Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Laxman Gaikwad, Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala and so on who record their personal experience of caste discrimination in their writings. Dalits are now grabbing their space in education, job and administrative levels with their effort but they cannot come out from their caste tag. In this context Dalit writer Narendra Jadav in his book *Outcaste: A Memoir*, asks, "Why? Why can't they accept me for what I am? For the millionth time I asked myself why they couldn't judge me on where I stand? Why did they always have to judge me on the basis of my origin?" (Jadav 2003, P.207).

But it is a matter of great discontent that the Brahmin social reformers and the political leaders of India have not awakened any conscience for such inhuman practices. According to the constitution of India, Manusmriti should be banned, but neither the ruling political party nor the intellectuals interfere in this matter. As a result, the book is widely circulated and translated into various Indian languages. Especially to the Brahmins this book is the part and parcel of their life. They translate or edit this book in an attempt to make the discriminatory, violent, hateful religious laws realistic in a variety of interpretations. With the afford of this book Brahmins are still holding the top position in society and subdue other castes. In this circumstance, a question arises how the constitution of India would combat with caste discrimination which takes its root from sacred religious scriptures of the Hindus.

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