

Psychological Influence of Buddhism on Dalits

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Dalits due to their caste system and the consequent conditions, physical, social, economic, geographical and situational and contextual have suffered psychologically as well, are oppressed. Though, there are sociological and economical researches and literature now, also have much to write about them. But, psychologically, still they are marginalized.

There are very few researches on Dalits in psychology and whatever one finds they do not as such talk about their psychological conditions but compare them and mostly proved them that they lack cognitive abilities. The Dalits who migrate to the cities and find white collar jobs even they are not free from the basic premise of caste system and its underlying prejudices, although its direct impact upon them may be less harsh than upon their rural counterparts (Webster, 2002).

Even Dr. Ambedkar's writings were more on historical, philosophical and textual influence and impact on human kind. In one essay he wrote about social conditioning and how it affects habits of thinking, acting and feeling, valuing, approving and disapproving, but he then applied it to caste Hindus and not to Dalits, (Webster, 2002). Though, he has made some references to the psychological conditions of the Dalits, mentioning such things as constant fear and insecurity, mutual rivalry and jealousy, and an inferiority complex which he considered to be result of their isolation, discrimination and the unfriendliness of the social environment. It is these segregated contexts, which have created a feeling of helplessness which are responsible for the inferiority complex which cost him the power of self-assertion.

Even Heinrich (1937) found that there is a deep seated unsocial behavior pattern among oppressed people which may be rooted in the

oppressive conditions of living that have shaped their development, based on his experience of working with prospective and new Dalit converts to Christianity in Punjab. Further, he was of the view that the craving for self-expression and superiority is such a basic biological urge, a major craving, as necessary in the struggle for existence as is the sex urge and the urge for self-preservation. When blocked its natural result is a manifestation of the emotion of rage and anger.

Open expressions of these emotions are not acceptable and rather it is difficult for the person himself. According to Heinrich since the direct expression of anger and resentment towards powerful oppressor invites fierce retaliation, the safer and more common responses, which he called concealment reaction either of lying, intense selfishness, or establishing pseudo-superiority by lowering and disparaging rivals or apparent superiors.

Only those who had begun to emerge from their oppression expressed their resentment, their striving for superiority could be diverted into socially useful channels 'which is one of the steps in producing cure' Heinrich argued that these reactions to oppression, rooted in conditional depression, spread like a contagion among the oppressed, so that they and those who work with them become increasingly depressed psychologically.

The psychological findings, whatever little available, on studies of oppressed and marginalized groups in other societies showed that they exhibit low self-esteem, confusion about their identity, self-hate, a perception of the world as a hostile place, hypertension, neuroticism and low intellectual development. Such traits, therefore, appear to be not uniquely Dalit traits, but traits more universally manifested by similarly situated peoples, while scores on intelligence tests are indicators not of innate inferiority but of cultural deprivation (Senger, Singh and Srivastava, 1985).

Findings from anthropological and sociological studies focusing on social conditioning, confirmed Heinrich's central findings i.e., rural Dalit children learn at a very early age the way their parents are treated that they are polluted and inferior people. This has made them not only

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submissive and deferential but also very angry. At the same time rural Dalits have been conditioned to feel both secure and dependent in their client-patron relationship. (Webster, 2002)

The same social forces are at work in the cities but there seems to be less submission and more indirect or direct reactions to the kinds of social conditioning to which Dalits are subjected (Webster, 2002).

Another approach to understand “the Dalit psyche” has been longitudinal emphasizing personal development over time. One of the most common forms of this type of study is the reflective autobiography (Webster, 2002).

Most of the autobiographies focus is on the problem of untouchability, oppressive context, struggle for basic needs education etc. Dalit poets and story tellers, as well as autobiographers have much to share about the psychological consequences of the many forms of oppression from which Dalits suffer. Infact, their writings have opened up this sensitive, private and often silent world to public scrutiny in a way that was perhaps not possible before with their autobiographies. They do convey a story of marginality, deprivation, and the oppressive context, which definitely have an effect on the psyche of an individual although, it is difficult to generalize about the Dalit psyche on the basis of individual life stories but they do communicate the contextual and situational conditions of Dalits which are oppressive socially, economically and geographically. They do indicate the psychological state of an individual living in those marginalized conditions. Whatever one experiences and the way one experiences plays an important role in defining oneself. The larger context, socio-cultural other than familial definitely plays an important role in the development of an individual psyche.

Also, it is not that all the Dalit's are same psychologically. As there are some villages in India which largely has dominance of upper caste, and there are few which is largely dominated by Dalits and to experience marginality and oppression are low as compared to the one where they are in minority or marginality. The oppression they face are also not the same for all and even some are better protected from it in their home and neighborhood environments than are others. Thus, the psychological impact will vary (Webster, 2002).

So, for Dalits, caste system as such have always been negative in every way, socially, culturally, physically, economically and psychologically as well. With these effects, who would want to accept it? Even in Dr. Ambedkar's view, the best remedy for the psychological consequences of caste oppression was to annihilate caste itself and thus get rid of the oppression. But, again this is not a choice; the caste one belongs to is by birth and in one's birth nobody has a choice.

Since that was a time taking process, he advocated religious conversion, According to him, this would confront Hindu society with its own sickness and need for healing. Even more importantly another religion of the right kind would also give his own people a counter-culture in which they would experience liberty, equality, justice and fraternity rather than just caste hierarchy. This is exactly, he found in Buddhism, a rational religion. It was after reading all the other religions available that he finally embraced Buddhism.

It was the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar that many Dalits embraced Buddhism.

But there has to be something in Buddhism that attracted Dr. Ambedkar and his followers so deeply. Ambedkar did not convert to Buddhism merely because he found it socially useful. He had studied Buddhism and other religions as well and did believe that it was Buddhism, the most rational and humane religious tradition, the best for all human beings, untouchables and touchable, alike. He considered humanism and rationalism of Buddhism. This also have a healing touch on the Dalits who were experiencing psychological consequences of oppression. As, Buddhism is more than religion, it is a philosophy of life. It talks of equality, compassion and understanding. It believes in humanism than in any caste, colour or class. It is because of its humanism and rationality that it has a profound influence on Dalits of India.

Embracing Buddhism, the Dalits have adopted a new and meaningful approach to life which respects humanity. This healing process advocated by Ambedkar and attempted by a variety of Dalit religious groups moves from the outside inward. It starts by seeking to alter the ethos of the individual Dalit's nurturing environment towards

the psychological wounds and sears inflicted upon his or her person by oppression. The ethos of the nurturing environment is altered primarily by the introduction of a new religious ideology (e.g., egalitarian bhakti, 'engaged' Buddhism, Dalit theology) and its incorporation into the rites, rituals, customs and practices of the religious community (Webster, 2002). There are several examples which shows the 'depth experience' of Dalits which comes from Buddhism in a more than superficial way, example for some in the way of asceticism. As Khare describes it, asceticism is 'an individual based concept' it is devoted to a spiritual conditioning and lifestyle (i.e., through tapasya, yoga and tyaga) of the moral "individual" (as correspondingly reflected in "autonomy" of atman) through a morality ordered cosmos, (Khare, 1984). The goal of this process of 'spiritual individuation' is to gain 'freedom from dependence on the will of others' (Khare, 1984). In this process the individual starts with inner healing and development as self and then moves towards community development and more healing.

Thus, Buddhism as a religion has a profound healing effect on people, including Dalits. Due to the caste system, they are the ones who were at the receiving end of the negatives of caste system. Also, other than healing it has a liberating effect on them. As by embracing it, they are liberated from the caste system; Buddhism does not believe and practice caste system, and of their suffering and oppression which was a byproduct of caste system under Hindu religion for them.

Since they have left one religion, Hinduism, they are not empty, there is no vacuum, and they have Buddhism as the new religion, their original religion as Dr. Ambedkar has referred.

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