

**POLITICS
OF THE
DEPRESSED
CLASSES**

TRILOK NATH

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DEPUTY PUBLICATIONS

Preface

An attempt to study the Depressed Classes is a challenging task. They constitute, according to conservative estimates, about 15 per cent of total population of India but the quantity of literature devoted to the various aspects connected with these people is amazingly negligible. A few studies, authored mostly by foreigners have been attempted on this segment of society but only some of them go into the depth of the problem; rest is almost callow. Their poverty or lowly position does not fully explain scholastic apathy. There are groups whose economic weakness resembles that of Depressed Classes, for instance : the Negroes in the United States or the Eta of Japan. Their problems attract the attention of thinking people of their respective countries. So there must be some other explanation for the queer silence of Indian intelligentsia on the Depressed Classes. In the early days one could have perhaps attributed it to the religious injunction banning Hindus to feel concerned with the Depressed Classes even in thought. And, after all caste Hindus dominate Indian intellectual sphere. Consequently thinking persons like intellectuals, journalists, writers and scholars—have one area of national agreement, whether by design or through custom, not to take cognizance of the Depressed Classes in their exercises. This in turn helps to perpetuate the disabilities attached to the Depressed Classes.

This indifference or besitation on the part of the intelligentsia is in line with the traditional behaviour. A person born in the Depressed Classes had to remain untouchable and die as such. He could not have his untouchability removed or his caste changed during his lifetime. He could not move up to the caste Hindu and enjoy certain vital privileges merely by virtue of his incidence of birth. There was no freedom of movement in society. Even the process of approximation to the upper castes' code of conduct which M.N. Srinivas has

described as Sanskritization could not help the Depressed Classes to cross the barrier of untouchability. Depressed Classes all over India have tried to change their way, their marriage practices and their caste names but to no effect. Everywhere the locally dominant castes opposed their mobility aspirations and used physical violence as well as economic boycott to prevent them from Sanskritizing their style of life. Untouchability was made a legal offence by Parliament in 1955, nevertheless it cannot be said that it does not persist.

Untouchability remains because in this area the correlation between caste status and economic power operates at its best; the Depressed Classes constitute not only a socio-cultural group but often an economic class too. They are the lowest stratum of society, the landless labourers in the fields, the unskilled workers in the town. They do many kinds of menial work; indeed whatever work is mean or degrading is done by them. An overwhelming majority of the illiterates are from their ranks and almost cent per cent of bonded labourers are their kith and kin. A number of social studies have revealed that their women make up a large number of the prostitutes. From a careful examination of information it has also been established that 90 per cent of those who die of starvation and attendant diseases belong to the Depressed Classes. Their untouchability and poverty support each other; their untouchable status accentuates their economic exploitation and their deplorable economic conditions strengthen their polluting social status.

Notwithstanding these factors, the Depressed Classes are an emergent group and are beginning to assert their rights as equal citizens of the Indian Republic. They may not have yet succeeded in making their way into upper levels of society but they are no longer a meek, submissive class. Under the impact of new social forces they are challenging the system which has long denied them the most elementary of human rights and had created hindrances in their upward mobility. Their actions may not have yet created a crisis but the principles underlying their struggle are of world-wide importance, for they are a part of the immense upsurge of the have-nots all over the world.

Although their economic dependence on the caste Hindus continues to limit their ability to influence social progress, it is perceptible that more and more of them are taking to politics as a means of their liberation. They have made it difficult for the ruling classes to govern India without taking into account their problems and aspirations. What began as a simple humanitarian problem towards the end of last century has already assumed the dimensions of a complex socio-economic-political challenge. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the present Indian political trends without having a look at the problems of the Depressed Classes. And this change, in a large part, is a result of the political policies developed during the colonial period under the British.

It is the purpose of this dissertation to throw some light on the socio-political conditions which necessitated evolution of policies which made Depressed Classes' participation in politics a reality; however pale. It describes the efforts made during the colonial period and the steps taken officially to enable them to politically participate and their efforts to help themselves. It shows how the existence of this large body of the underprivileged complicated the politico-constitutional issues in India and set ticklish problems for the nation builders. In order to facilitate a more thorough study a short but vital period in the history of the Depressed Classes has been chosen as the period of the present study. It was during this period (1927-37) that the Depressed Classes got considerable leeway to voice their grievances, since the political settlement of various Indian problems was on the anvil. First the Indian Statutory Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir John Simon visited India; then came a series of Round Table Conferences in London; then the making of the Poona Pact; then arrival in India of the Indian Franchise Committee with Lord Lothian at its head; and finally the Depressed Classes' experience of contesting elections, for the first time, through their own political parties to enter the legislative bodies. Indeed, the progress made by the Depressed Classes during 1927-37 is one of the important developments of the modern India.

But, an all-India account of caste politics such as this might seem to be going against the current trend. Most recent studies on caste politics have concentrated either on a single caste or castes in a particular region. By focussing on smaller units these studies have brought an important dimension into the subject namely, that the traditional framework of reference, the all pervasive four fold varna system, setting universal norm of behaviour and evoking a homogeneous response from Indian masses, is not adequate. The micro studies of a single caste or castes in a particular region have revealed the particularism of individual castes and have stressed the diversity and regional nature of their political development. If one reads a number of these studies, one is inclined to believe that the Depressed Classes are made up of so many untouchable castes that there is no hope of producing a useful work on the Depressed Classes in India as a whole. Does this then mean that any attempt to deal with the larger themes of the Depressed Classes' politics is doomed to failure. Verily, it cannot be so.

It has been admitted even by those who are engaged in research on micro level that an all-India level of Depressed Classes' politics exists and was important. As a matter of fact it is admitted by all that even the complete narration of all the untouchable castes' political activities would not, in sum, constitute a correct narration of the Depressed Classes politics in India. There was an all-India aspect of the Depressed Classes politics with increasingly distinct functions and roles. There were all-India Depressed Classes organisations to deal with matters which were all-India in scope and not just an amalgam of regional interests. There were leaders—Ambedkar and Rajah for example—who though not unconcerned with regional issues of their respective regions were chiefly all-India politicians. There was, then, an all-India aspect of Depressed Classes politics which needs to be studied.

The present study, then, concentrates on the all-India aspect of the Depressed Classes politics without aiming to be a comprehensive history of Depressed Classes in India or of Indian political developments between 1927-37. Nor does it

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Depressed Classes : The Concept

The description of the people with whom this dissertation deals has always been a matter of controversy.¹ To begin with, there is no generic name of common acceptance that actually describes this large group of people. They have been known by a legion of terms at different times or by different terms at the same time by different people. In the Puranas they were called, *Asprusyas*, *Avarnas*, *Chandals*, *Svapachas*, *Antyajas*, *Jambawans*, *Varishals*, *Antyawasi*, *Antya*, *Bhangi*, etc.² and in

1. Depressed classes are the sum total of the untouchable castes of India. I have chosen it for the title of my dissertation because of its acceptability to majority of the concerned people during the period of my study. Notwithstanding, all other terms and specific names of untouchable castes will be used in this dissertation according to time, period and group usages.
2. The expressions *Antyaja*, *Antyawasi* and *Bahiya* were used by Ambedkar in his book *The Untouchables*, for developing his thesis that the untouchables were the broken men of the Aryan society. On the other hand the *Mitakshara* of *Yajnavalkya* divides the *Antyajas* into two groups. In the first category are what are called higher *Antyajas*. In the second category come seven castes which are mentioned as *Chandala*, *Svapacha*, *Kshatta*, *Soot*, *Vaidetik*, *Mugadha* and *Ayogaya*. However, being concerned primarily with the expressions originated in modern times, we do not discuss Puranic names in detail.

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recent past and even today they are variously called Depressed, Oppressed, Suppressed, Repressed, Submerged, Unregenerate, Unprivileged, Untouchables, Low-caste, *Pariah*, *Panchama*, Out-caste, Out-caste Hindus, *Ati-sudras*, Exterior castes, Excluded castes, Neglected sections of Hindus, Victims of don't touchism, Protestant Hindus, Non-confirmist or Non-caste Hindus, *Adi-Drivadas*, *Adi-Hindus*, Oppressed Hindus, Harijans and Scheduled Castes etc.

The expressions 'suppressed', 'oppressed', 'repressed' and 'submerged' were used as substitutes for the word 'Depressed' by different people but the 'Depressed' continued to be acceptable to a majority and even to those people who preferred such other terms.³ In fact these expressions were meant to invoke sympathy rather than convey any precise meaning. As against this, the term 'unregenerate' was coined by Sir Mannubhai Mehta to maintain that they were not depressed or oppressed or suppressed or repressed; but they were 'unregenerate classes'.⁴ This term was opposed by others at the very time it was suggested because it sought to conceal the sufferings of the untouchables which was a direct result of their oppression by the caste Hindus. In opposition to this Commissioner Arther Blowers suggested the terms 'unprivileged'. "For certainly" he said, "they have not the privilege that would seem to be common right of humanity."⁵ However, none of these gained much currency.

'Untouchables' as a name generically applied to persons in the lowest classes of Hindu society is relatively of recent origin. It first appeared in print in 1909.⁶ The word is a literal translation of the Hindi word '*Achhut*'. *The Webster*

3. The Hindi word for the Depressed Classes 'Dalit' which was first used by Swami Shardhananda is more popular than the English expression.

4. *Asiatic Review*, January 1933, p. 59.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

6. Mark Galanter, "The Abolition of Disabilities : Untouchability and Law", in J. Michael Mahar, ed., *The Untouchables in Contemporary India* (Tueson, 1972), p. 243.

Dictionary vividly describes the 'Untouchables' "as a member of a large hereditary group in India having in traditional Hindu belief and quality of defiling by contact the person, food or drink of a member of a higher castes and formerly being strictly segregated and restricted to menial work."⁷ From its very inception the term has been hated as it amounted to a degrading appellation for the people concerned. Notwithstanding, the use of the term has sometimes been advocated for psychological and political reason; for instance B.S. Murthy while recording his opinion on the merit of various expressions observed, "Perhaps the best of these is untouchable as it will remind him of his fallen state by a constant sting."⁸ Similarly, Ambedkar used the term in the titles of his various books to highlight the degrading position of the people and to arouse sympathies for their political rights. His highness the Gaekwad of Baroda, who took deep interest in the matter also advocated the terms for its clarity.⁹ To him the words 'Depressed Classes' which had just begun to appear and the 'lower castes' were not satisfactory as they were too elastic. However, the word has now disappeared from ordinary parlance following widespread education and the constitutional provisions.

Swami Vivekananda who was greatly concerned with the uplift of these people also faced the difficulty of giving a common name to the different untouchable castes. In the beginning he preferred the term suppressed in comparison to the 'depressed' but soon shifted to the 'victim of don't touchism'.¹⁰ This funny but a very appropriate characterization was a concomitant of an equally witty term 'the kitchen religion' which Swamiji employed to describe the "unreformed Hinduism". Indeed, the expression indicates Vivekananda's approach to the problem of untouchability and spells out the measures which he preferred for its removal.

7. *Webster Third New International Dictionary*, vol. 3, 1966, p. 2513.

8. B.S. Murthy, *Depressed and Oppressed* (New Delhi, 1955), p. 167.

9. His Highness the Gaekwad of Baroda, "Depressed Classes of India", *Indian Review*, December 1909, reproduced in R.S. Vatsa, *The Depressed Classes of India* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 1.

10. Nirmal Kumar Bose, "Who are the Backward Classes?", *Man in India*, vol. 34, no. 2, April 1954, p. 98.

The appellation 'outcaste', 'outcaste Hindus', 'Ati-sudras', 'excluded castes', neglected sections of Hindu society and exterior castes were coined to explain the definite relations of the untouchables with the caste Hindus. As it was well known that the Hinduism admitted of only four Varnas and castes thereof, it became quite a problem for theoreticians to fit in the untouchable castes in the scheme of varna system. It was through these expressions that the system was sought to be theorized. The view that the label 'outcaste' correctly interpreted means that he is one who is outside the caste system and therefore not a member of the Hindu society. This prompted them to suffix 'Hindus' to 'outcaste' so that it could be said that though not covered by the varna system yet they were governed by the Hindu social arrangement.

The term 'exterior caste' was invented by C.S. Mullan, Census Superintendent for Assam in 1931. He felt the necessity of a word different from the outcaste for the untouchables because the outcaste (with an e), attracted to its connotation the implications of the quite differently derived outcast (with no e), which stood for those who had been cast out from the Hindu society for some breach of caste rule. The 'outcaste' and 'outcast' were in some cases synonymous but the derogatory implications of obliquity attaching to the latter term unjustly coloured the former. To rescue 'outcaste' from the taint inherent in 'outcast' Mullan invented the word 'Exterior' which connotes exclusion but not extrusion. Explaining the meaning of the 'Exterior Caste', he observed "caste recognised definitely as Hindu castes whose water is not acceptable and who, in addition, are so deficient as castes in education, wealth and influence or, for some reason connected with their traditional occupations, are so looked down upon that there seems little hope of their being allowed by Hindu society to acquire any further social privileges within at any rate—the next decade."¹¹

However, he did not completely rule out the possibility of these castes raising themselves to a higher level but then he

11. India, *Census of India 1931*, vol. 1, part I, p. 495.

would call them as he called others, 'the interior castes'. But his suggestions did not catch public-imagination.

The 'Pariah' is derived from Tamil paraiyar plural of paraiyan meaning hereditary drummer; but, in common usages refers to a low caste of Southern India below the shudra rank.¹² It is a contemptuous word used in generic sense to denote low status stigmatised groups. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "1. A member of a very extensive low caste in Southern India, especially numerous at Madras, where its members supply most of the domestics in European service. 2 Hence extended to a member of any low Hindu caste, and by Europeans even applied to one of no caste, an outcaste. 3. Fig. Any person (or animal) of a degraded or despised class, a 'social outcaste'."¹³ In course of time it acquired so much pejorative connotation that it began to convey the "opposite of all that is holy and respectable."¹⁴ Moreover, when the first association of the untouchables was formed in 1892, the suggestion to designate it as 'Paraiya Mahajana Sabha' was chosen. The same association in 1917 presented an address to Lord Chemsford and B.S. Montagu in Madras praying :

The very name by which these people refer to us breathe contempt. We would therefore, request government to help us in our efforts to attain social elevation by issuing orders that hereafter in all government communications, we should be designated as Adi-Dravidas or the Original Dravidas. Thus bringing us into line with the non-Brahman Hindus who are spoken of as Dravidians.¹⁵

¹². The word 'Pariah' occurs for the first time in a poem of Mangudi Kilar, a poet of second century A.D. It is not found either in any earlier Tamil literature or in any ancient inscription. Towards the close of nineteenth century Gopal Krishna Gokhale often used the expression to describe the general state of Indian people a 'Pariahs of the Empire'.

¹³. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1961, vol. VII, p. 477.

¹⁴. M.C. Rajah, *The Oppressed Hindus* (Madras, n.d.), p. 30.

¹⁵. *Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, 1921-22*, vol. 4, p. 2051.

Thereafter, M.C. Rajah, the first untouchable in India to have been nominated to a legislative council, moved a resolution in January 1922 in the Madras Legislative Council proposing deletion of word 'Paraya' from the government record and its substitution by the 'Adi-Dravida' in Tamil. The motion found willing support from the non-Brahmans and was carried.¹⁶ Impressed by the force of argument the Central Government also rose to occasion and issued the following Army Instruction (India) dated 30 April 1925 :

The Government of India has decided that the term 'Pariahs' (Depressed Classes) should no longer be used in official correspondence and the word 'Adi-Dravida' will be substituted for it.¹⁷

The 'Adi-Dravida' emphasized the then current belief that the South Indians belonged to the Dravidian race as distinguished from the Aryan race of the Northern India and the Adi-Dravidians were the original inhabitants of South India. The term 'Adi-Hindus' is a Hindi counter part of the Tamilian 'Adi-Dravidas' and conveys a similar feeling in North India as the Adi-Dravidas does in the Southern India.¹⁸ Incidentally, it may be mentioned that before the coinage of the term 'Adi-Dravida' the untouchables in their eagerness to get ride of the abusive epithet 'Pariah' agreed to be called 'Panchmas'. It was at the instance of caste Hindu reformers that the 'Panchmas' was temporarily accepted almost all over India but as sense of self-respect grew among the untouchable caste, as they came to realize the similar implication of the word 'Panchmas' i.e. man of the fifth class or caste which in view of Hindu four castes.

16. *Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, 1921-22*, vol. 4, pp. 2047-52.

17. *The Indian Review*, June 1925, p. 480.

18. The concept of the Depressed Classes being the Adi (original) this or that seemed to be in vogue in the 1920's. There were Adi-Dravidas (Madras) Adi-Andhras (Andhra) Adi-Karnataka (Karnataka) Adi-Hindu (U.P.) Adi-Dharmis (Punjab). In fact the whole 'Adi' myth was inspired by the scholarly theories about the Harappan civilization, based on the excavation discovery of Harappa by Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archeology in India in 1921.

meant 'outcastes' the word lost favour with the untouchables. Similarly the 'Ati-sudras' which makes it plain that they were below the fourth and lowest varna the sudra and hence deserving least attention though provisionally found acceptability in vacuum was ultimately disfavoured and fell into disuse.

Ambedkar, who rose to be the supreme leader of the untouchables, too, was not satisfied with the existing terms including the term 'Depressed Classes' describing untouchable castes. From the very early period of his political career he was looking for a word which could project the untouchables as a militant, fighting force against caste Hindus. Eventually, as a delegate of the untouchables at the Second Round Table Conference he suggested that his people should be called from amongst the 'Protestant Hindus', 'Non conformist Hindus' or 'non-caste Hindus'.¹⁹ Again, in his note submitted to the Indian Franchise Committee in 1932, Ambedkar demanded replacement of the current usages 'Depressed Classes' by the Exterior castes or Excluded castes.²⁰ Likewise, the term 'Oppressed Hindus' coined by Rajah was intended to emphasize the 'oppression' of untouchable castes by the caste Hindus. In order to highlight the sufferings of his people Rajah used the 'oppressed classes' as the caption of his book. But all these terms being in English were incomprehensible to the mass of illiterate people. Moreover, they never crossed the boundary of the academic world.

The term 'Harijans' for the untouchable classes was popularised by Gandhiji. For many years Gandhiji himself used 'untouchables', 'Panchmas', 'Antayaja' (the last born) and 'Bhangi'.²¹ But in early 1930s Gandhiji began to publicize the 'Harijan' meaning 'Children of God' as part of propaganda

19. India, Round Table Conference (second session), *Federal Structure and Minority Committee Proceedings*, vol. III, Appendix VII.

20. India, *Indian Franchise Committee Report, 1932*, vol. I, p. 219.

21. Though the term 'Bhangi' refers to a low-caste of north India engaged in scavenging, Gandhiji used it figuratively to mean all the untouchable classes.

against untouchability.²² In justification of adopting the term Gandhiji explained that the other expressions were abusive in content and were not liked by his 'untouchable correspondents'. On his invitation some 'untouchables' (names not given) suggested the 'Harijan' on the strength of its having been used by Narsinha Mehta, the first known poet of Kathiawar Gujarat, native place of Gandhiji. The word appealed to him as a nice substitute and he began to ponder over it. He wrote, "all the religions of world describe God pre-eminently as the friend of the friendless, Help of the helpless and Protector of the weak. The rest of the world apart, in India who can be more friendless, helpless or weaker than the forty million or more Hindus of India who are classified as untouchables?"²³ If therefore, Gandhiji thought any body of people could be fitly described as man of God, they were surely these helpless, friendless 'untouchables'. Thereafter in his writings he always used Harijans as the name signifying 'untouchables'.

Gandhiji was prompted to coin the new term in the hope that adoption of a nice sounding euphemism would have a bit of propaganda in itself.²⁴ Moreover, through his weekly the '*Harijan*' and his Harijan Sewak Sangh Gandhiji did his best to popularise the term and evidently it soon passed into common usage among his caste Hindu followers. It became a political slogan for Congress and a tool in the hands of the caste Hindus to prove their concern for the cause of untouchables.²⁵ They liked it for it served their political purpose without opposing their social hierarchy. In Gandhiji's own life time the term also came to express condescension. In the process, it has become like other designations, a term of abuse connoting inferiority and the dependence of the untouchable castes. Thus, whatever the intentions of Gandhiji might have been, the term causes much irritation among the

22. Gandhiji's symbolic language comprises a study in itself. A glance at the origin of one of his key terms 'Harijan' may offer a good example of his use of words.

23. *Harijan*, 11 February 1933.

24. Lelah Duskin, "Scheduled Castes Politics", in *Mahar*, n. 6, p. 215.

25. M.H. Ingle, "The Untouchables", *Seminar*, May 1977, p. 27.