

## **Tracing the roots of dalit diaspora: A study of sociological literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper is intended to explore the nature, origins and forms of adjustment of the Dalit diaspora in sociological literature. The ancient human migrations, the medieval resettlements of warring groups and the modern globalization are the different phases of human quest for the creation of new civilization and also their need for progress and development. Such human movements have generated the concept of diaspora which means human settlements away from their original home land. Today, human mobility has become an integral part of the global economy. For centuries Indians have been emigrating to different parts of the world, India has the second largest Diaspora next only to Chinese. Now a day it is so widespread that the sun never sets on the Indian Diaspora. Similarly Dalits of India form an important part of the global Indian diaspora. Although the story of Indian diaspora is being told and retold many times by several scholars all over the world, but very few have emphasised on the Dalit diaspora and its various aspects such as emigration, settlement and perpetuation of culture in the diaspora etc. Here an attempt is made to understand the presence of Dalits in different parts of the world by exploring the available sociological literature. The paper tries to highlight some important aspects of Dalit diaspora from India in the sociological literature with special reference to Punjabi Dalits diaspora.

**Key Words :** Dalit diaspora, Tracing the roots

### **INTRODUCTION**

The life and history of Dalit Diaspora is an unimaginable metaphor. If we look at the world culture, one thing we can notice is the Indian Diaspora that constitutes an important and unique force in some reverences. The migration of Dalits to outside world started during the colonial period as a result of the large-scale migration to British, French and Dutch colonies as indentured labourer to work in the plantations. The post-colonial migration of Dalits were directed towards the developed countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as professionals and later to the Gulf and South East Asian countries as skilled or semiskilled labourers.

**How to cite this Article:** Bahadur, Bali (2017). Tracing the roots of dalit diaspora: A study of sociological literature. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 4 (9 & 10) : 383-392.

Today, Dalits in the diaspora form an important part of the Global Indian diaspora. They came into limelight only recently as a result of the globalisation and revolution in transportation and communication technology which has culminated in 'mobilisations' that is in the form of seminars or conferences, exhibitions or cultural melodramas and above all through films and medias by the Dalit International Foundation and other international human rights bodies. The Dalits had suffered and resist changes in the diasporic culture despite oppressions over period of time in various countries. However, at present it is observed that the Dalits Diaspora has become resilient and in a position to support their counterparts in India the land of their forefathers.

### **Epistemology of the Term Dalits :**

Before detail discussion on dalit Diaspora, let us first define the term Dalit. The concept 'Dalit' often mingled with the concept of 'Caste' in the Indian context, as it is said any aspect of discussion on Dalits has led to begin with India's hidden apartheid called 'caste system', which has originated from thousand years back. The word *caste* is derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' which literally means 'breed or lineage'. The Sanskrit word applied to the groupings is *Varna* or in English called 'colour'. Srinivas (1962) defines this system as a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution, and purity, and generally maximum commensality occurs within the caste'.

The origin of caste system is widely accepted from the divine theory, which states that the four castes namely *Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaisyas*, and the *Sudras*, came from four different organs of the Hindu figure *Brahma* such as from mouth, arms, thighs, and feet respectively. At the top of the hierarchy are the *Brahmans*, who are mostly the descendants of the priests and wise men of the society. Following the *Brahman* castes are the *Kshatriyas*, who are soldiers or warriors. The third caste consists of the *Vaisyas* who are artisans by their nature, and the lowest caste is the *Sudras* who basically are farmers and peasants by their occupation. Beneath the above four main castes is the scheduled castes called by other names as 'Dalit' - the untouchables - who does not have any caste. Mahatma Gandhi named those groups as '*harijan*' which means 'the people of God'. The notions of purity and pollution are critical for defining and understanding caste hierarchy. According to these concepts, Brahmins hold the highest rank and Shudras the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The Varna System represents a social stratification which includes four varnas namely- *Brahmans*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Shudras*. The *Shudras* were allocated the lowest rank of social ladder and their responsibilities included service of the three Varnas. The superior castes tried to maintain their ceremonial purity.

Dumont (1980) holds the notion of purity and pollution interlinked with the caste system and untouchability. The hierarchy of caste is decided according to the degree of purity and pollution. It plays a very crucial role in maintaining the required distance between different castes. But the pollution distance varies from caste to caste and from place to place.

Dalit, the very term is derived from the Sanskrit root '*dal*', which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed (Massey, 1997). The

word first used by British, then by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his Marathi Speech, 'The Untouchables' published in 1948. Later the Dalit Panthers revived the term in their 1973 Manifesto extending its definition to include '...schedule tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (Webster, 1999). With the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement, the term Dalit came to have connotations far beyond the simple dictionary definition given above. Generally they are the poor and downtrodden, they were traditionally placed at the bottom of Hindu caste hierarchy. Initially the term Dalits include those termed in the administrative parlance as scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and other backward classes. However in day to day uses in the political discourse the term is so far mainly confined to scheduled caste. They are the caste identified by the president of India under article 341 and put under the scheduled. Before this they were known as *Sudra*, *Ati- Shudra* or *Chandals* (Shah, 2001). In India, there large number of Dalits who are still living under inhuman conditions, Even in the twenty first century majority of Dalits are poor, deprived of basic needs, and socially backward. Many do not have access to a sufficient amount of food, healthcare, housing or clothing. Though traditional occupations are gradually dissolving, Dalits generally continue to be concentrated in occupations that render little social status or possibility for social mobility.

#### **Etymological Meaning of 'Diaspora' :**

The etymological meaning of 'diaspora' is made up of the fragments from the Greek words, '*dia*', means through, and '*speiro*', means scatter. The word was specifically used to indicate the experience of the Jews exile to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's conquest over Jerusalem in 587 BCE. For Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians diaspora signifies a collective trauma where one dreams of home while living in exile (Cohen, 1997). For Tololyan (1991) the editor of the journal *Diaspora* a journal of transnational studies this concept includes the entire '...semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugees, guest workers, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community'. In a critique of such far-reaching definitions, Safran (1991) has attempted a kind of 'ideal type' representation of diaspora. According to him the concept diaspora refers to the expatriate minority communities, dispersed from an original "centre" to at least two "peripheral" places. They maintain a memory or myth about their original homeland; they believe they are not, and perhaps cannot, be fully accepted by their host country; and they see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return and a place to maintain or restore'. The collective identities of these diaspora communities are defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland.

Until the late 1960s, there were extensive studies on three classical or traditional Diasporas *viz.*, Jewish, Armenian and Greek, of which the ideal case was the first. For the last four decades, many dispersed communities, those once known as minorities, ethnic groups, migrants, exiles, etc., have now been renamed as 'diasporas' either by intellectual and political leaders, or by scholars and academicians. Today intellectuals and activists from various disciplines are increasingly using the term 'diaspora' to describe such categories as '...immigrants, guest workers, ethnic and racial minorities, refugees, expatriates and travellers' (Vertovec, 1997). As Marienstrass (1998) points out, the concept of diaspora used today

increasingly to describe any community, which in one way or other has ‘a history of migration’. The concept has also been regarded as useful in describing the geographical displacement and/or deterritorialisation of identities, cultures and social relations in the contemporary world (Gilroy, 1991; Hall, 1993). For Tololyan (1991) the diaspora community now serves as the exemplary communities of the transnational moment, where the diaspora culture goes beyond and challenges the national boundaries’. This new diaspora discourse has replaced the former interest in immigration and assimilation to an interest in transnational networks. Thus the concept of diaspora used today as the processes of transnationalism, as well as the salience of pre-migration social networks, cultures and capital, in a wide range of communities which experience a feeling of displacement (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991; Tololyan, 1991).

### **Indian Dalit Diaspora in Sociological Literature :**

The caste system is unlike any human contagious disease has spread among the Indians whenever and wherever they have moved out of their land of origin; as it is rightly points out by Jawaharlal Nehru “Wherever Indians go they take a piece of India with them”. The caste division of India between lower and upper caste not only restricted within India but also become the sojourners to the Indian diaspora. For instance, as Brij Lal (1984) points out, out of 60,965 Indian indentured labourers who migrated to Fiji between 1879 and 1916 about 11,907 or 26.2 per cent belonged to low menial castes like *chamars*, *koris*, *pasis*, etc. Brereton’s (1974) study which is focuses on Indian indentured labour in Trinidad, observes that, it is not only the lower castes that migrated to Trinidad but also the *Brahmins* too join this labour process. Among the Hindus those who migrated to Trinidad during the period 1876 and 1885 are includes: 18 per cent *Brahmin* and other high castes groups; artisan castes 8.5 per cent; agricultural castes 32 per cent; low castes 41.5 per cent. The occupational background of the indentured Dalits includes such as palanquin-bearer, drum beater, landless labourer, sweeper, washer, beggar, hawker, shoemaker, tanner, porter or day labourer and house servant (Gosine and Narine, 1999).

Sandhu (1969) elaborates the presence of south Indian Dalits belonging to *cherumans*, *parayans*, *pallans* and other depressed castes as indentured labourers in Malaysia. According to him, ‘of the people of the subcontinent the south Indian peasant, particularly the untouchables or low caste Madrasi, was considered the most satisfactory type of labourer’. Jain’s (1984) study shows the Indian indentured migration to Malaysia where he mentioned about the migration of untouchable castes. It is observed that, from 1870 to 1885 the Indians who migrated to Caribbean under indentured system, majority of them *i.e.*, 41.5 per cent were belonged to the lower castes, especially from the state of Calcutta (Gosine and Narine, 1999). This migration was clearly illustrates the pathetic conditions of Dalits of India. These emigrants were economically, culturally, and socially oppressed within ‘mainstream’ Indian society, whether Hindu or Muslim, for centuries.

Dalits who migrated to the Caribbean include individuals from groups such as *pariahs* and *pallars* from south India; *doms*, *dosadhs*, *lohars* (blacksmiths) and *chamars* (tanners) from Uttar Pradesh and north India; and *nooniahs*, *santals*, and *kahars* from Bihar. In the Caribbean, they are referred to as Chamars or ‘low caste’. In the first two decades of indentured labour emigration, tribal people, *dhangars* or ‘hill coolies’, from the Chhota Nagpur

area of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa comprised a significant proportion of those emigrating. During the 1840s and 1850s, two-fifths to one-half of the emigrants were dhangars, people with a distinct culture. Bonded labourers were recruited from other 'tribal' and semi-aboriginal groups in south and north India (Seenarine, 1996).

Further he noted that apart from these groups, there were also poor, landless and lower castes from Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were recruited. However, competition from French, Dutch and other colonists pushed British recruiting operations further into the 'interior' of colonial India. Poor, landless Dalits from rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal began started recruiting as indentured labourers in large numbers (Seenarine, 1996).

Smith (1959) focuses on the Indian indentured labourers in Guyana. He found that, between the period 1865 and 1917, the indentured migrants in Guyana constitute: 31.1 per cent were low caste; 30.1 per cent were agricultural castes; 16.4 per cent were Muslims and Christians; 13.6 per cent were high castes; and 8.7 per cent were artisans. Gosine and Narine (1999) however observed that the percentages of Dalits might be much higher as many emigrants discarded lower caste origins for intermediate and higher caste ones for various reasons. For one, they wanted to escape continued caste oppression and start a new life in Guyana and 'non-polluted' Hindus.

Seenarine (1996) in his study 'Gender and Caste in Colonial Guyana' points out that '...from 1872, when a ranking of emigrants was included in colonial annual reports, the low caste groups was the single largest group of emigrants from Calcutta'. The colonisers exploited these groups during their indentured ship and even after. As Wood notes that, from 1870 to 1885, 41.5 per cent of emigrants were from the low castes. Similarly, a dispatch from the government of India in 1877, noted that the source of recruitment was '...chiefly the labourers, dependent for their support upon the cultivating classes' (cf. Jha, 1974).

In spite of cultural differences, the bonded labourers who emigrated from South Asia were similar in some ways as well. They were overwhelmingly from the lower castes, male, poor, uneducated, rural and drawn from culturally diverse areas of the subcontinent. Recognition of their cultural diversity is important, because it meant that, at first, they did not share a common knowledge, language, history, culture or philosophy. Despite similarities as bonded emigrant labourers, the group as a whole was very diverse (Seenarine 1996).

Dalit migration to United States is a recent phenomenon especially after the 1965 Immigration Act. The Dalits those who migrated to United States for a greener pasture carried with them the same stigma, which they had in back home. But after mixing up with the 'East Indians' in United States especially the migrants from the Caribbean and other countries, the Dalits got a better chance to move upward in the social mobility.

As Rao (2000) observes, in America, Indians of low caste backgrounds have the same opportunities to flourish financially as other people living in the United States do, 'because of the mixed migration'. Therefore, since the dominant oppressive caste culture does not prevail in America, they are no longer subjected to caste bondage or persecution. The migration of East Indians to America, Canada, and other parts of North America not only offers chances that were merely dreams to Dalits back in home, but also helps to establish a lost asset in the Indian community possessing the skills to compete more effectively in society. The case of second-generation dalits can be pointed out here (Gosine and Narine, 1999).

Kumar (2004) has juxtaposed the 'Indian diaspora' both new and old into the case of Dalits. He has divided the Dalit Diaspora into two streams called old and new diaspora. The old diaspora was formed, according to him, as a result of indentured migration to various British colonies, and the new diaspora formed as a result of the voluntary migration to developed countries of Europe and America.

Brown's (1989) study focuses on the life of the Indian indentured labourers in Fiji for the cultivation of sugar and cotton during the colonial period. This study stated that Indian that came to Fiji from 1879 to 1903 were from Bihar and north India. The study noted that there were about 50 castes could be identified among the 350000 Indians. There were no any caste organization could be found but in the local level politics was managed by the cultural groups which were dominated by the people of higher caste. The study also shows that caste system was existing among the Indians in Fiji also. They used to practice endogamy for marriages *Brahmins*, *Chamars*, and *Thakur* had the highest rate of endogamy at 70 per cent, 60 per cent, 56 per cent, respectively.

In the same study the writer mention the study of Gillion (1962) that has given caste wise data of Indians entering Fiji it shows that among the Indians in Fiji 16 per cent were higher caste 31 per cent were agricultural castes, 6 per cent were artisans, 31 per cent were lower castes, 14 per cent were Muslims. We can see the proportion of Dalits to the proportion of other castes was higher they are the pioneers who entered in the migration process from India. Brown also discussed the migration of Sikhs who entered in Fiji between 1920 to 1936. They were only 3 per cent engaged with the agriculture.

### **Punjabi Dalit Diaspora in Sociological Literature :**

As it was mentioned above the present paper tries to trace the origin of Dalit diaspora from India in the sociological literature with special reference to Punjabi Dalits diaspora. The analysis of Punjabi diaspora is important because Punjab is the state where the proportion of Dalit population is higher as compare to the other states of India. It has been continuously witnessing emigration for the last eighty years. A large numbers of studies have discussed the cause and consequences of Dalit emigration from Punjab e.g. Helweg (1979) reported that the rapid expansion of canal irrigation in the late 19th century in western Punjab raised incomes, allowing households to meet the threshold expenses for free passage. Second, their location on the east west trade route and the recruitment of professionals by the Europeans to train the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh further exposed them to western culture. He also mentioned that the village Jandiali shows that while most of the *Jat* (higher caste) emigrated to the England about 100 *Chamars* out of the total 400 houses of village with other specialist castes had emigrated to the Middle East countries to improve their social status. He also noted that the first emigrant of this village was a *Chamar* "Ganda Singh" who had been a sweeper in the in the Indian railway and started a trend of emigration from village. This study also shows that how remittance from abroad improved the status of *Chamars* and other emigrants.

Kessinger (1974) in his study of Vilayatpur feels that the enhancement of status of emigrants especially lower castes due to the purchase of the *pucca* houses and the purchase of additional land holding are the main factors for the emigration. Kissinger's detailed

ethnographic account of one village (Vilayatpur) shows the many channels through which this rural development was brought in the area especially Jalandhar Doab region. The migration (especially of young men) reduced the pressure to sub-divide the land in smaller and smaller plots. And remittances not only helped investments in the land but also to acquire more land. He mentioned the migration of Dalits to the other countries during the half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and found that 2 per cent of the Chamars and 1 per cent Julaha born in Vilyatpura were living abroad in 1898. In 1910 1 per cent of Chamars and 3 per cent of Julahas of the village were living abroad. Interestingly in 1922 only *Julahas* showed any trend 9 per cent of them were living abroad, whereas no one from among the Chamars had gone out of the country. Another important caste among the Dalits of the village was *Churas*. There was no tendency among them to migrate.

Studies by McLeod (1986) and Judge (1994, 2000, and 2002) focused on people moving abroad from Punjab to the different developed nations. McLeod (1986) has given caste wise data of Punjabis entering New Zealand. According to this data, out of 212 Punjabi entering between 1912 and 1921, 133 were *Jats* and 24 were *Chamars*. Among the *Chamars* 22 belonged to the doaba region whereas other two were from Majha. Surprisingly not even a single *Julaha* is to be found among the Punjabis in New Zealand.

Judge (2002) in his study he highlighted the international migration of Dalits from Punjab with special reference to *Chamars* or *Ad-dharmis*. He also gave reasons how Dalits of Punjabi with economic disabilities could manage to emigrate. It is explained by the fact that they formed majority in doaba region of Punjab. He highlights the role of increased value of leather with the British annexation in Punjab that helped them arrange money for emigration. They hoped to enhance their social status from this process. Another reason that he quoted from the study of Briggs (1920) in the early 20th century economic changes were taking place among the *Chamars* due to the increase in the value of farm products that lead to the substitution of cash grain as wage it assisted their upward mobility by facilitating emigration. The third reason that he gave is perhaps some landowners took them along with them. Probably the *Jat* land owners became the source of information for them regarding unlimited opportunity available aboard. He further gave the reference of Midland where he saw that Dalits of Punjab who emigrated to England particularly *Valmikis / Mazhbies* and the *Ad-dharmis* are economically active as the *Jats* and other non dalits are.

According to Juergensmeyer (1982), the *Ad-dharmis* accounted for 10 per cent of the total emigrants to England. They were the single caste of dalits who were present in the England. Helweg (1979) further argues that the remittances were 'responsible for a large increase in yields. Money enabled local residents to live better, invest in machinery, obtain and use new varieties of seed and gain new ideas about farming from abroad. Also with the outflow of people, the pressure on the land decreased so that there was more production for less people. Emigration played positive role in the development of Punjabi community including dalits.

Judge (2010) highlight that how emigration played significant role in the dalit moments occurred in Punjab. He believes that Mangoo Ram, the founder of the Ad-dharam movement in Punjab was the product of two major processes that occurred in Punjab, namely the international migration and the Ghadar movement.

Judge (2004) in his study of Hoshiarpur district of Punjab highlighted that how international migration has become the part of Dalit culture. Even gulf migration has also made entry to the folk consciousness as is evident from the following couplets he mentioned

Bareen barsin khattan gaya si, khat ke liande rambe; Dubai lai gai lut ke sare ronki bande

(Dubai has snatched all the lively men from the village)

### **Conclusion :**

Dalit Diaspora today can be earmarked as a fraction of the Global Indian diaspora and cannot be called as a 'separate diaspora'. This is because of the fact that, the Dalits are part of the larger Indian groups who have emigrated to various parts of the world. Secondly, Dalits did not maintain such 'isolated identity' in the diaspora unlike other Diasporas from the beginning and which they are holding in India now. Thirdly, in order to avoid poverty and unemployment those Indians who migrated under inhospitable conditions as indentured labour to the British and French colonies had lost their caste and class identity. Similarly Punjabi dalits have emigrated and settled in the host countries as part of larger Punjabi diaspora. Unlike emigration of Indian dalits which started in the pre independence period as indentured laborer or forced laborer, the Punjabi Dalit's emigration is a post independence phenomena as a voluntary laborer. And it resulted their economic development initially *Chamars* of Doaba region were numerically predominant among the Dalits in the emigration process which seems to be result of their economic improvement. The change in the economic conditions of Dalits is both a cause and consequence of emigration

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