

Problematising the Hindu Religious Identity of Dalits and Tribals: A critical Study of the Select Autobiographies of the Marginalized

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Abstract

The Cambridge Dictionary defines religion as “the belief in and worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship”. After Islam and Christianity, Hinduism is world's third-largest religion. It is distinct due to the amalgamation of many traditions and philosophies, and it is closely related to other religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. The cow is considered a sacred animal, “mother”, a symbol of Hindu devotion in Hinduism, and Sanskrit is regarded as the mother of all languages. The present research article entitled “Problematising the Hindu Religious Identity of Dalits and Tribals: A critical Study of the Select Autobiographies of the Marginalized” discusses how the marginalized groups are incorporated into Hinduism to strengthen Hindu religion and highlights the reasons, problems and consequences of Hinduization that force them to give up their belief system, way of worshipping, tradition, culture, and so on. In addition, this study investigates the exclusion of the marginalised from Hindu social structures following Hinduization.

Keywords: Dalit, Tribal, Hinduization, Religion, Exclusion, Marginalized.

Introduction

Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion after Islam and Christianity. It is distinct because it is a synthesis of many traditions and philosophies, and it is closely related to other religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Hindus believe in the principles of samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation), karma (the law of cause and effect), and dharma (code of living). The cow is revered as a sacred animal, “mother”, a symbol of Hindu devotion in Hinduism, and Sanskrit is revered as the mother of all languages. The present research article entitled “Problematising the Hindu Religious Identity of Dalits and Tribals: A critical Study of the Select Autobiographies of the Marginalized” discusses how marginalised groups are incorporated into Hinduism to strengthen Hindu religion and identifies the reasons, problems, and consequences of Hinduization, which forces them to give up their belief system, way of worshipping their gods, tradition, culture, and so on. For

this study, four autobiographies of the marginalized were chosen. They are Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), K.A.Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (2009), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu* (as told to) by Bhaskaran (2003) and *Mayilamma: The life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (as told to) by Jothibai Pariyadath (2006). In addition, this study investigates the exclusion of the marginalised from the Hindu social structure following Hinduization.

The religion, according to Ambedkar is the source of power, as evidenced by the history of India, in which the priest exercises control over the ordinary person, often more potent than the magistrate. Religion, social status, and property are the sources of power and authority that one man has control over another's liberty. Because society and religion are the sources of power and authority in society, social and religious reform are required. (AC 174) V.D.Savarkar (1923), founder of Modern day Hindutva movement, defines the Who is a Hindu.

1. Who acquired citizenship by paternal descent that is who was born in India,
2. Who was born of Hindu parents and thus possessed Vedic Aryan blood and
3. Who shared a common sanskriti (culture)“...suggestive of that language, Sanskriti, which has been the chosen

means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth preserving in the history of our race (92).

This definition expelled Muslims and Christians whose holy hands were in Arabia and Palestine, respectively, and was thought to be inherently treacherous, which led to Muslims claiming separate representation from the colonial government. Dayananda Saraswati founder of 'Arya Samaj' (1875), with his followers, declared themselves as 'Aryas' not Hindus. He started the movement 'Goraksini Sabha' (1881) for cow-protection, which gained popularity among the mass people, and stimulated and unified them as 'Hindus'. It strengthened their separate identity as opposed to Muslims, who were stereotyped as kine killers and beef eaters. Still, Vivekananda promoted and propagated Hinduism through Rama Krishna Mission (1897), which aimed to unite Hindus (Brekke 24). Even though eating beef is forbidden in Hinduism, he advised: "young men in India to eat beef to develop muscles" (Sharma 272).

However, the commissioner of Census Report (1910) laid down certain tests to identify those who were hundred per cent Hindus and those who were not. Among them, those who were not Hindus were included in castes and tribes, which;

1. Deny the supremacy of Brahmins.
2. Do not receive the Mantra from a Brahmin or other recognized Hindus.

3. Deny the authority of the Vedas.
4. Do not worship the Hindu gods.
5. Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests.
6. Have no Brahmin priests at all.
7. Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temples.
8. Cause pollution (a) by touch, or (b) within a certain distance.
9. Bury their dead.
10. Eat beef and do no reference to the cow (Untouchable 73).

According to Ambedkar, Untouchables (Daits and Tribals) were not part of Hindu population because they were not included in the Chaturvarna system, which consisted of Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and they were the beef eaters, which violated the law of cow slaughter in Hinduism. As a result, Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate from the British colonial government but Gandhi claimed that untouchables were an inseparable part of 'the Hindu fold' and referred to them as harijan (children of God). As a result, Dalits and Tribes were considered Hindus and included in the Hindu religion.

Although Dalits are Hindus, they are not permitted to enter Hindu temples to worship Hindu Gods in order to avoid pollution because Hindu temples are regarded as scared places. In The Scar,

Gunasekaran recalls that there is a Siva temple in Elayankudi, and he had never entered it. Instead, he worshipped by touching the four-foot stone figure of 'Ammanavayan sitting in front of this temple (1). He describes the thrill he felt when he went to Tanjore temple with his brother Arulandu for the cultural performance 'Nayanam' and waited in front of the temple and asked whether they were allowed inside. His brother responds, "Unless our people play the drums first, the drum inside the temple will not be played. It is our people who will lead the procession of the deity by playing the Parai; without us the deity will not go on a procession" (90). Gunasekaran inquired again, his brother replied, "we are allowed up till here. We cannot go inside the sanctum sanctorum where the deity resides." (90). It demonstrates that dalits are permitted to perform for other than worship. The custom is in vogue even today. When Dalits entered Seerani Nagammal Temple to worship Mariyamman God, the high caste people and temple authorities were shocked and ordered that temple be cleansed. (Yogarathnam76)

Dalits are Hindus in name only, and they do not worship any Hindu gods or goddesses because they worship their own family deity or spirit. Valmiki writes in Joothan, "At Janmashtami, the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna, they do not worship Krishna but Jahathpuri, another god. Or they worship the spirits" (J 47). Similarly, instead of honoring the Hindu goddesses Lakshmi during Deepawali festival, the Chuhras honoured Mai

Madaran, their family deity (ancestral god). Dalits had no concept of temple worship because they followed ancestral worship. They believed that their ancestors returned in the form of spirits after death. Kancha Ilaiah stated that the spirit, soul, and the dead return to live in their own surroundings as ghosts if they are not well fed while alive. However, there is no such thing as heaven or hell. All the dead, living together somewhere in the heavens, the Dalitbahujan spirit is a non-Hindu spirit by nature, because Hindu patriarchal gods do not exist among them at all. (7)

Chuhra people in *Joothan* had more faith in Mata deity, who was located outside of the village. People sacrificed animals, offered alcohols and the foods, while worshipping. Valmiki records that “there would be clothes chunariyas or long flimsy scarves bangles; coins; food, like pooris, malpuas (dessert pancakes), halvah, batashas (round white candies); sometimes a silver ring” (J 50). Following the celebration, all of the offerings were distributed among them. Another reason for Mata celebration was to make money by selling piglets. According to Valmiki “one tradition was to offer piglets, cocks, and rams to the Mata. Every house in the basti raised poultry and pigs for this occasion. It was a way of making a little money a little bit of relief from dire need”(J, 51). During the celebration, everyone in the household was busy selling piglets sacrificed in front of the temple.

Ambedkar classified people into three groups a) Those who are vegetarians, b) Those who eat flesh but do not eat cow's

flesh; c) Those who eat flesh including cow's flesh. (UN 94). According to this classification, the Hindu society was divided into three classes: i) Brahmins, ii) Non- Brahmins and iii) The Untouchables. Brahmins who eat vegetarians are considered superior, while untouchables who eat animals, particularly beef and pork, are considered inferior. Beef and pork, on the other hand, were essential foods of the untouchables because they were easily available and the Caste Hindus had not taken them.

According to the doctrine of 'purity and pollution, 'consuming non-vegetarian foods, particularly beef and pork, may thus be considered polluted in Hindu tradition.' On the other hand, they have been a special and tasty food for Dalits throughout India. Pigs have always played important roles in dalits' lives, including sickness, health, death, weddings, and religious ceremonies, but the chuhra people are now avoiding eating pork. Valmiki composes “...The educated among us. Who are still a minute percentage, have abandoned these conventions. It is not because of a reformist perspective but because of their inferiority complex that they have done so”(J 15).

High caste Hindus indirectly influenced dalits to believe that eating pork is inferior, forcing them to stop eating pork. Valmiki was also held accountable by his own Master Sahib, who inquired, “How many pieces of pork did you eat? You must have eaten at least half a pound” (21). All the boys teased him about them, saying, “Abey Chuhra, you eat pork”(21). Many

of the Tyagi boys also went to the Bhangi (dalit) basti at night to eat pork in secret, but they were not questioned or teased. Because upper caste people still believe that eating pork is polluting, some ate without anyone knowing and without being concerned about pollution or untouchability. Valmiki records this "One of these was TejaTaga. He demanded pork and liquor before he would give the loan. He was fond of the heavy, hot, spiced food cooked in the Bhangi households. Pitaji...had offered TejaTaja country liquor that day and pork sucking at the pork slices, his face had resembled a spotted dog's" (21-22). Both Tagas and Chuhras ate pork, but when upper caste people ate pork, it was not polluted. While Dalits ate, it was said as polluted. Caste Hindus deliberately spread the myth that eating pork polluted the environment.

Similarly, tribal children would go to the stream to catch fish, water snakes, fowls, and crabs, then cook and eat. Janu recounts her experiences "We caught fish with a makeshift net of worn cloth. To catch crabs we needed to make a noose at the end of a long thick blade of marappullu and place a muttal in it as bait. We would come back to our huts and cook the fish and the crabs and gulp them down"(MF 3). Mayilamma used to love catching crabs from the well and holes when she was a kid. Her mother made crab curry with natural herbs, "she would grind coriander seeds, peppers, cumin seeds and white garlic, and add tamarind pulp..., she would add the crab pieces and cook them" (M 31). Tribals

traditionally consumed crab curry to help clear mucus from the chest.

The Gupta kings prohibited cow slaughters in the fourth century A.D.. Still, the Untouchables continued to take non-vegetarians, particularly beef, even though it was against the law to slaughter cows, and they only took cow flesh that died naturally. During the independence movement, many leaders of the Indian National Congress argued that caste Hindus practiced untouchability on them solely to consume carrion. Thus, Gandhi urged them to stop eating beef because it was physically and morally polluting, and he also promised to abolish untouchability if *Harijans* (dalits) stopped eating beef. Ambedkar also advised his followers to stop eating beef, but dalits continued to eat it because they were too poor to get anything else, not because they loved it.

Tribal religion is known as animism, and it considers all things, including animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, and human handiwork, to be animated and alive. It discusses the fundamental thread of indigenous peoples' "spiritual" or "supernatural" perspectives. The spirit rules over various diseases and can be found in rocks, rivers, and waterfalls. To enjoy their freedom, all men must be at peace with spirits. They believed that if their relationship was violated, they would become ill. Tribal groups and sorcery know how to cure their illnesses. Adiya tribes in Mother Forest always perform rituals at death or when they are sick.

Janu writes “our people used to perform gaddiga whenever someone was sick or someone was dead. If sick, we would invoke maari and exorcise the evil spirit” (p.19). According to V. Indu Menon, Gaddiga is a ritualistic dance that can cure all diseases such as smallpox and chickenpox and also perform for the safe delivery of a child. It also aids in exorcism. Adiya tribes believe that God's wrath caused all of their problems and illnesses. So they performed Gaddiga to please God and to be cured of their illness. During the ritual, the performer can invoke their God maari, who answers all of the worshiper's questions and provides solutions to their problems.

There are no Hindu gods and goddesses in tribal communities. Tribal groups primarily worship tombstones placed near trees in memory of their ancestors who died as a result of natural causes or during the liberation of their tribes. The small stones represented children, while the large stones represented the elderly. During the festival, tribal women danced around the tombstone, clapping their hands and singing songs. Janu says “there used to be a big tree near out hut in Thrissileri and a stone placed underneath it. We used to worship that. Our forefathers rested there. Once in a year we appeased them. There used to be some rituals for that”(M, 19).

Tribals do not believe in converting a dead man's soul into another spiritual force because their souls are in contact with intimate relationships, but ancestor worship

appears logical. According to Nadeem Hasnain (2001), the Hos of Chhotanagpur believe that the soul's final departure from the body. While returning from cremation ceremonies, Nilgiri todas scatter thorns to prevent the soul from entering the village. They believe that life does not end with death because souls exist in various forms and should appear to save them from disease or other evil spirits. Through unique rituals, the tribes of Chhattisgrah invoke their ancestor's spirit (91).

When tribals came into contact with Hindus, their religious practices got changed. Hinduism had a significant impact on their beliefs, leading them to adopt popular Hindu deities, festivals, and religious beliefs as their own. The Eravallar tribes adopted Hindu deities such as Lord Muruga and Vinayaga as their own and worshipped them in all celebrations as Hindus. Mayilamma says “the lord Subramanya is our clan deity. We will never cut a Venga tree. Since Vellavar rides on a peacock, we never kill peacocks either. Like that every clan has its own deity. Velavar, is the deity for us who belongs to the Raja Kulam” (M, 40).

Tribals, like Hindus, celebrated Pongal festival for three days in January. All of the tribal women sing songs, dance the kummi, and offer pongal to Lord Ganesan during the celebration. Finally, Pillaiyar was made with wild turmeric root and served with offerings such as gramme, beaten rice, purified rice, and banana. The Pillaiyar was kept in the village centre and worshipped with the song.

O Pillayare! I brought you
up by binding, my hungry mouth, stomach

O Pillayare! Are you going
to drift away in the waters of the canal?

O Pillayare! Come out of
hiding and come running. He ran away and
(M 41)

All of the tribes greeted Vinayaka. Finally, they sang as they immersed the idol in the water. In Ganesh Chaturthi, Ruchi Agarwal writes that it is one of the most popular Hindu festivals, celebrated on the birthday of Ganesh across India, particularly in Maharashtra. Processions to immerse Ganesh's idol in the sea became an essential mode of displaying and asserting Hindu cultural and political identity. It is celebrated for uniting Hindus who were previously divided by the caste system. According to Virginius Xaxa (2008), contact between tribals and non-tribals has been changing toward absorption into Hindu society through complex social processes such as acculturation, assimilation, and absorption, which gradually transformed tribals into caste and is known as Hinduization and Sanskritization. In fact, outsiders impose their social status on tribals; even after Hinduization, tribals remain outside the Hindu society's hierarchical structure. (17-20)

Conclusion

Though Dalits and tribals are not Hindus, they have been incorporated into Hinduism in order to strengthen Hinduism and establish India as a Hindu state, where they are not considered Hindus and are

excluded from the Hindu social structure, forcing them to forget their gods, religion, belief system, customs, culture, and so on. Instead, they are forced to follow Hindu practices, customs, and cultures. As a result, marginalized writers have attempted to declare they non-Hindus and assert their religious identity through their writings.

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