

# EXPLORING THE DALIT SELF: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE PHD RESEARCH SCHOLARS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

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## ABSTRACT

*On the basis of the interviews taken from the research scholars of the University of Delhi from across the Departments, the proposed paper is a humble attempt to understand how the Dalit self asserts itself in the public space like educational institutions to construct and re-constructs its own identity. I argue that self-making is a contested process where self and others are in constant dialogue and Dalit self always try to assert its self-worth.*

“The self is a location, not a substance or an attribute. The sense of self is the sense of being located at a point in space, of having a perspective in time and of having a variety of positions in local moral orders. It is not having an awareness of some kind of being, particularly not an awareness of an entity at the core of one’s being.”<sup>1</sup>

(R. Harré, *Social Being*, 2nd edn., 1993, p. 4)

## INTRODUCING THE SELF

The proposed paper argues that ‘Self’ functions primarily in both the spatial world; space and time and cultural world; place–time. And this understanding of self recognizes the significance of both of the ‘body’ and of ‘social relations’ in which it realises its meaning and worth.

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves. To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself. From psychosocial perspective of identity development as proposed by Erikson (1968, p. 22), identity formation is a psychosocial process situated within the core of individuals and in his/her communal culture. Identity includes both conscious and unconscious aspects of self

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<sup>1</sup>Benson, Ciaran (2001), “*The Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Arts in Human Worlds*”, P.IX, Routledge, London & New York.

therefore; this perspective postulates that identity can accommodate elements of communal culture including parents, schools, peers and teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Rogers further divided the self into two categories: the ideal self and the real self. The *ideal self* is the person that you would like to be; the *real self* is the person you actually are. Rogers focused on the idea that we need to achieve consistency between these two selves. We experience *congruence* when our thoughts about our real self and ideal self are very similar—in other words, when our self-concept is accurate. High congruence leads to a greater sense of self-worth and a healthy, productive life. Conversely, when there is a great discrepancy between our ideal and actual selves, we experience a state Rogers called *incongruence*, which can lead to maladjustment.<sup>3</sup>

## DALIT SELF: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

The social stratification of the Hindu society does not allow depressed and suppressed classes to be treated on par with others. They are considered as polluted and excluded from the mainstream of the society and also denied of dignity and self-respect. It results into denial of various political, socio-cultural and economic rights. The term *Dalit*, as a category, is being used for ‘crushed, ground, destroyed’ which leads to the meaning of ‘depressed’. This is a self chosen word derived from the Sanskrit and Marathi word for ground down, broken, that is oppressed. It is used to indicate that untouchability is imposed by others, not a result of inherent pollution. It is also used to include all the deprived and oppressed of India.<sup>4</sup>

Dalit is a new category chosen by untouchables themselves” to indicate their lack of belief in

being pollution, their sense that their condition was the fault of the caste system, and their inclusion in the Ambedkar movement of all those subordinated by their religious, social and economic status”.<sup>5</sup> Dalits in India are economically exploited, politically suppressed and socio-culturally excluded by the Brahminical order.

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<sup>2</sup>Jose, Justin Pallickal and C., Shanuga, “Psychological Determinants of Dalit Identity: Evidences from Dalit Women of Tamilnadu in South India”, *Voice of Dalit*, Vol.7, No.2, pp. 163-185, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>Source: Boundless. “Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Personality.” *Boundless Psychology* Boundless, 20 Sep. 2016. Accessed on 16 Jan. 2017 from <https://www.boundless.com/psychology/textbooks/boundless-psychology-textbook/personality-16/humanistic-perspectives-on-personality-78/rogers-humanistic-theory-of-personality-308-12843/>

<sup>4</sup> Mandavkar, Pavan (2015), “Inidan Dalit Literature: Quest for Identity to Socail Equality”, *Humanities and Social Science review*, Vol.3(2), p.61

<sup>5</sup> Zelliott, Eleanor (1992), “*From Untouchable to Dalit: An Essay on the Ambedkar Movement*”, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, p. vii

In general, the Dalit self is a depressed, subjugated, suppressed, exploited and excluded self which is constantly struggling hard to construct their identity through various modes of assertion in Brahminically hegemonised public space. It is generally realised and seen in opposition to the Brahminical self. The construction of the Dalit Self starts with analyses of modes of oppression and transforming the previous stigma of community. It rejects all negative stereotyping labeled by hegemonic Brahminical culture and transforms one's own sense of self and community. In the Indian context for instance, the self-identification of scheduled caste or untouchable groups as 'Dalits' was constructed to struggle against Brahminical hegemony and mobilise all those who suffered similar types of oppression. Often these struggles convert into organised social movements to achieve their demands. They build new symbols, idioms and values to create an alternative space. For instance, open confrontation between the Dalit Panthers (Dalit organisation formed in Maharashtra in the 1970s) and upper caste Hindus took place several times in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

The construction of the Dalit Self is not a passive and individualist act rather it is always active and collective asserting and re-asserting its communitarian identity. The assertion of the Self is fluid and dynamic and they are not arbitrary in character. They are not aimless and passive constructions. Historically, various caste communities and socio-cultural groups have constructed certain kinds of identities because they have felt suppressed, exploited, subjugated and dominated by hegemonic structure. It could be economic exploitation, political suppression or cultural exclusion. And thus categorization of the self is very important for the formation of identity. In general, one's identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles and how individuals view themselves in terms of meanings imparted by a structured society.<sup>7</sup>

The proposed paper, on the basis of the narratives, found that Roger's idea of congruence and incongruence of the ideal and real self functions prominently in the operational aspect of the *Dalit Self* and it is reflected at various layers of social relations. The patterns of these kinds of congruence and incongruence have also been found in the narratives of many of the respondents. And they have been thematically analysed in this paper as follows:

## **METHODOLOGY AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES**

The proposed paper is written on the basis of the semi-structured interview conducted from the Dalit PhD research scholars from across the Departments of the University of Delhi. The

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<sup>6</sup> Omvedt, Gail, "Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India" in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.) *Dalit identity and politics*, Sage publications, New Delhi, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Stets, Jan E. and Burke Peter J. (2000), "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory", *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol.63, No.3, pp. 224-226

study uses qualitative thematic analysis on the basis of the narratives collected by using the random sampling. This thematic analysis is based on 10 interviews in which 5 male and 5 female PhD research scholars were selected through the method of random sampling. And the average length of the interview was approximately 40 minutes.

This study uses Braun and Clarke's methodology of thematic qualitative analysis. Generally thematic analysis has three variants; 1) essentialist or realist method, 2) constructionist method and 3) contextualist method. And it uses constructionist method of thematic analysis for the reason(s) that it examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within the society. Therefore thematic analysis can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to unravel the surface of "reality". And so this paper attempts to derive the patterns/themes out of the narratives.

### 1. Humiliation and Self-suffering

Gopal Guru argues that humiliation rests at the heart of the major problems of modern Indian life: the tension between the private and the public; the national and the local; a state based on western ideas of self and society, and a culture based on inherent inequality. This makes understanding of humiliation not only interesting, but also imperative.<sup>8</sup>

As per the respondents' narratives, the first major and significant theme identified is "Humiliation and Self-suffering". Each respondent narrated his/her life experience and without any exception mentions that they have compromised with their dignity in the hands of Brahminical structure at all public places. One respondent narrated the similar experience of humiliation when the respondent visited to enquire about the status of his Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF). "*official aur karamchahi the DU ke scholarship cell mein, wo log aksar kaha karte the ki tum logon ko to fellowship bina kisi competition ke mil gaya hai, fokat mai le rahe ho tum log, aur usmein discriminate karte the ki jaise hum log bolte hain ke bhai aap log JRF walon ke liye aisa niyam banate ho aur RGNF walo ke liye aisa niyam banate ho, to kehte hai ke JRF wale competition paas karke aaye hai aur aap logo ko to Fokat mai mil raha hai*". This shows how a hierarchized society and its democratic educational institutions still treat people on the basis of ascribed status. This view of humiliation and self-suffering was reported by almost all the respondents in more or less in same manner.

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<sup>8</sup>Guru, Gopal (2009) (ed.), "*Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*", Oxford University Press.

It reminds me what Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has mentioned in his seminal text “*Annihilation of Caste*” (p.6), “Under the rule of the Peshwas in the Marathas country the untouchable as not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch through mistake. In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on, lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot, hung in his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.

Another respondent reported how the village construction humiliates the Dalit by socially segregating their place of living. Respondent argues that “*Gaon mein jaatiye bhawna itni thi ki, pura gaon jo hai wo pure mohhale mai bata hua tha jaise pasiyo ka mohola, chamaro ko mohala bhangiyoo ka mohola, panditoo ka mohola saab is tarah se tha, to is tarah se saabi aapne aapne mohale mai rehte the*”.

This demarcated spatial arrangement of the human settlements actually highlights believe in the purity and pollution. The respondent also highlighted that movement across these settlements are not allowed, Dalit cannot visit the Brahminical settlements. And this is practiced seriously even today.

## **2. Academics and Dalit Self Assertion: --**

One respondent, very categorically, highlighted the practices of social exclusion in the academics, particularly in the subject matter of the research of the University of Delhi.

One of the respondents shared a very interesting incidence related to the PhD admission, “*aur yahan bhi mai jab main apne PhD admission ke liye jab research topic lekar aaya us samay ke head of the department se mila. maine Dalit sahitya mai main apni research ruchi ka vishay lekar aaya, to pehle to ye kaha gaya tha ke Dalit sahitya mein kaam nhi ho sakta hai, matlab unhone kaha dalit sahitya mai kaam nahi ho sakta. Is research mudde pe referenc ki kami hai, lekin jab maine kaha ki maine to Sandarbh Soochi bhi di hai to unlogon ne meri baat pe bilkul bhi dhyan nahi diya aur mere Shodh Prastav to reject kar diya. Mujhe aisa lag raha tha ki shaayad Vibhaag ko Dalit Sahitya mein research karaana pasand nahi tha.*”

Another respondent reported the incidence of the PhD admission and stated that, *“jab meri admission hue to mere kaafi classmates thein jinhone bola ki yaar yahaan par to sirf unhi logon ka admission hota hai , yato jin logon ki Pahunch hoti hai ya phir jo category se aate hain. yahaan pe mera ek classmate bhi tha , jisse bahut achhe se baat hoti thi , par admission ke baad ye uske wordings the ki yaar mujhe to lagta hai ki “Brahman” hona to paap. Yahaan to Daliton ka raaj hai, kash mai bhi usi caste ko belong karta hota to mera bhi aaj kahi na kahi PhD mein admission ho jaata.”*

This is very clear from the narratives that growing representation of Dalit research scholars in the academics of the University of Delhi seen as challenge to the Brahminical hegemony in the academics. And also the gradual assertion of the Dalit self intellectually is taken very seriously by the high caste and they think that it is only due to the reservation all Dalit have been empowered in the academics. They do not see the pains and hard work of the deprived communities to come so far. In the most of the Departments, the research proposal related to the Dalit themes or thinkers are rejected by saying that it is irrelevant and redundant. But the growing phenomenon, certainly is a wave of the Dalit Self-assertion in the academics which can recast the Dalit's share in the public space and institutions.

### 3. Self and Identity

All the respondents, proudly, were happy of their Dalit identity and they reiterated their feelings of belongingness to the Dalit community. For them valourisation of the Dalit self is very crucial to assert and re-assert their identity in the public space and institutions.

One respondent reported that *‘In every case I would love to represent myself I would say that I am a Dalit guy I would work hard to prove my mettle. We too have the same capability as compared to the high caste. I have never hidden my caste identity and why should I do this? Another respondent narrated, “I never hide my Dalit identity, though I am a woman. So far my Dalit identity helped me in judging high caste people. I really feel proud of my parents who struggled a lot for upbringing me here and helping me in realizing my Dalit identity.”*

Another respondent shared an interesting incident, *“Mujhe samajh nahi thi ki in surnames mai aap kya caste samajh sakte ho, ye mujhe kabhi nahi pata tha par haan itna bata tha ki SC kuch neeche jaati se hai aur aap kitna bhi kuch karlo wo aapko neeche nazar se dekhenge. Aur bahut dukh hota tha jab ye chote chote bachchon main ye bat aati thi, batate the ki kaam wali ke bartan alag hote hai unse bat nahi karna wo to bhangi hai wo to chamar hai, bachpan se hi ye saab cheeze sunte aana kabhi dheere dheere jaise jaise bade hue to logo ko to pata hi chal jata hai kaunsi caste ya category se hain. School ek institute hai jismai har*

*jati ke har jagah se log aate hai aur mera to school bhi kendrye vidyalaya tha jismai defense ya goverment employees ke children hote hai unmein bhi discrimination jaisin cheeze thi. I told you I have always been hard working girl in studies and mera Hansraj college mai admission hua to mujhe aapne hi classmate se ye sunne ko mila ki tera to admision SC category mai ho gaya hoga aur .mujhe bahut dukh hota tha. Aur main unko ek point ke baad wait karti thi aur ek time aisa aaya ek mai unko srif ek jawab deti thi ki agar tumhe lagta hai ki mera SC category mein aane se admission aasani ho gaya hai. To aisa zaroori nahi hai ,, i mean jab mujhe Gold medal mila to maine kaha ki isme to mere SC status koi help nahi hai na and that was purely my academic capabilities.”*

Even today, in academics, high caste people suspect the potential of the low caste people primarily because they come from the reserved categories.

#### 4. Unequal Status

Hindu social order gives birth to an unequal society where individuals are put into different layers as per their ascribed status. It is very significant to quote how Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has rejected the logic of caste system. In his “*Annihilation of Caste*”, he argues that “It is a pity that caste even today has its defenders. The defences are many. It is defended on the ground that the caste system is but another name for division of labour and if division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society then it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. Now the first thing is to be urged against this view is that caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labours. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water tight compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of lobourers, which is quite different from division of labour-it is a hierarchy in which division of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers.”

One respondent reflected on the social dimensions of unequal status- “*Neech- Uccha kul (low-high caste), Shrestha-Heen (superior- inferior), Chhut-Achhut (touchable-untouchable) and Pavitra- Apavitra (Pure-impure) samaaj ka prathmik unit hai.*” The hierarchal structure of Indian society makes Dalit second class citizen. They are considered inferior, untouchable and polluted/impure and not deserving to share public space with higher caste, not allowed in sacred places like temples or other place to worship.

Another respondents narrated that “*Guhana ki jo ghatna hai wo ye hi thi ki waha ke dalit jo hai wo bohot sampan ho gaye the aab jo waha ke upper caste jaat hai unko nahi Suha raha*

*tha ke bhai ye sampan ho to jab unke gharo ko jalaya gaya to puri dalit basti ko gher karke jala diya gaya aur suman nam ki ek ladki ko jo ki viklang thi aur uske pita ko ghar ke aander zinda jala diya gaya ye ghatna 2009 ya 10 ki hai aur wo saab yehi tha ke kyuki aap saab lower caste ho aur humse acha ghar kaise bana sakte ho humse acha kaise shirt kaprda pehan sakte ho humse acha aur aao jab chalte ho to kyun 4 wheeler gardiyo se chalte ho, unki grinha jo thi nafrat jo thi wo kis roop mai nikali thi ke jo unke sofa tha khotiya thi badi badi unmai jo sofe the unko chote chote screw se phard diya gaya tha, itni nafrat bhari thi unke logo ke dilo mai, jo is tarah se nikali”.*

## 5. Physical Appearance and Caste Stereotyping

Stereotypical caste -based discriminations was reported by almost all the participants of Dalit research scholars. Most of the male participants reported double standard adopted by the upper caste persons while interacting with them.

Dalits have been historically associated with ritually polluting occupations, and hence used to be considered untouchable. For this reason, they have been deeply stigmatized and it directly affects the “social status, psychological well-being, and physical health of the stigmatized” and due to this stigma they are force to internalise the low worth that society places upon them. And over the period it becomes the basis of the “stereotype threat”. Jaspal (2011) finds that negative stereotypes against the Dalits lower their self-esteem.<sup>9</sup>

One participant reported that *I was on the field work as a researcher from Anthropology department so we have to stay in field often for data collection. There I happen to visit one collage, when I introduced myself as a researcher and the moment I told about my SC background immediately teacher over their replied that u don't look like SCs. Many a time it has happened with me also. When people come to know about me being Dalit, they say, and of course in appreciation that I don't look like...I usually become confused that should I take it as a complement or an insult to my Dalit identity.*

One participate stated *“ek tareke ki soch to hai ke is caste ko jo log belong karte hai wo aise hote hai gande rahte hai, ya jo bhi hai jaisa hai bhi, dark skin hoga , kapde aise pehanege dirty honge , ye saare notions hai, theek hai. Wohi to mai keh rahi hun ke chhuya chhut jo hota hai wo sirf aapke physical aapke usmai nahi hota hai , aap us cheez mai kitni respect milti hai, wo matter karta hai, aap aapko chahe aap kisi bhi cast ko belong karte ho mere khayal se, aapko wo respect milni chahiye.”*

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<sup>9</sup>Goel, Deepti and Deshpande, Ashwini (2016), “Identity, Perception and Institutions: Caste Difference in Earning from Self Employment in India”, *IZA Discussion Paper No. 10198*, Germany.



## 6. Victim of Vote Bank Politics

The sense of victimization by the vote bank politics of national and regional parties is another running theme among Dalit participant. All national and regional political parties in India mobilize Dalit in their favor by pretending that they understand and sympathize with the history of discrimination, exploitation, and humiliation of Dalit. But after winning the election, political power is not shared with Dalit community, their issues are pushed aside and Dalit continue to live in unfortunate fate. Even if Dalit leaders are given power, most of the time it is used in making their own fortune. And this is happening continuously even after so many year since independence. So, the sense of the victimhood of caste vote bank politics has become part of Dalit inner self. One participant share, *“It happens all the time, when election come these leader come and say u people have suffered so much but no more from now. They promise open school, give loan to open business but once election is over, everything is forgotten, just to repeat the same in next election”*.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of narratives of Dalit Research scholars, I can safely deduce and argue that the Dalit Selves, since time immemorial, have been socially excluded and exploited in the hands of Brahminical hegemonic structures. The result shows that psychological understanding of the Self and Others operates in a socio-cultural space which gives a particular meaning to every act and interaction, and especially in a Casteist society. And the experiences of varieties of humiliation in public space creates is a specific kind of psychological problems resulting out of the caste stereotyping and stigma. Traditionally, they have been excluded from the public space and institutions and any attempt of Dalit self-assertion were taken as anti-Brahminical. And so they were denied of the basic rights and opportunities to realise their selves. Even in modern Indian society they have to struggle a lot to secure their constitutionally given rights.

According to few Dalit respondents, the growing representation of the Dalit research scholars in the academia of the University of Delhi invites huge critiques of the reservation policy and also seen as a challenge to the high caste dominance in the academics at large. It is seen that in the contemporary Indian society the Dalit Self is a victim of caste stereotyping. Even educational institutions are following the policy of social exclusion but the pedagogies of caste discriminations have changed. Dalit Self is still struggling to realise its congruence between the ideal self and real self in the public space of Indian society but according to narrative or patterns we have found in our analysis show that Brahminical institutions are too hegemonic to assert their identity. But the assertion of Dalit Self must be a continuous effort in all spheres of life to carve out their own space, which is seen in various Dalit movements in contemporary India.

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