

Dalit Occupations and Existence at the Time of COVID-19 in West Bengal

Debarshi Roy

M.A. in Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta, India

Abstract: *In India there are dalit community members across the nation. In West Bengal almost constitute 25 percent of the state population. These dalit peoples of West Bengal living scattered in several districts of West Bengal are the worst victims and sufferers of Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent lockdown. The introduction of lockdown in March 2019 to combat Covid-19 became even worse condition for the dalit living merely as wage earners across the state. The complete lockdown in March 2019 meant that the daily wagherdalit involved in all sorts of work, cannot do their routine work and cannot continue to live in the same fashion that they did before the advent of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown. The appearance of Covid-19 pandemic changed the course of the life pattern of the dalit communities living across West Bengal and also in the whole nation. They struggled to survive in such a peculiar time where living became tremendously hard.*

Keywords: difficulty, uncertainty, struggle for existence, peculiar circumstances, animosities, hunger and poverty

1. Introduction

A closer look into the history of Indian civilization, specifically after the introduction of the caste system, will show that, the Dalit people or the outcastes has been facing a gruesome treatment at the hand of the upper caste people and made to live in the outer provinces of a particular village or locality for the fear of the upper caste people being getting polluted by the shadows or touches of these dalit peoples. They are made to live in the most unhygienic places and they are also made to do the most unhygienic operations, such as, manual scavenger, cleaners of drains, garbage collector, and sweeper. In fact dalit peoples are mostly included in the lowest forms of work for earning their livelihood. In Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchables* the existence of such people can be found presented in an efficient manner.

One of the primal focus of the study would be to look at the effects of Covid-19 in the caste system, which becomes much more severe and rigid in such instances of transmittable diseases. The present article will discuss about the occupations and their mode of survival specifically at the time of nationwide lockdown. The article under consideration will also be focusing at their mode of existence during this particular passage of time that is the lockdown circumstances in 2019 beginning from March 2019. The article also intends to point out the ways through which several homeless dalit survived and many of them died because of extreme hunger and poverty. The article will also become fundamental in highlighting specific situations where dalit community member got stuck in their working place long way from home because of the immediate lockdown in the month of March 2019.

The seriousness and ferocity of the circumstances of this particular kind, harms the ethics of human society and it debars men to show and practice the same kind of brotherhood and community tolerance. As a consequence men strive for their own life and become ferocious predators to sustain their own lives only. At this juncture people do not endeavor to protect the integrity of society and human

rights. Thus this study will also look at the impacts of such pandemics on the upper caste members of the community and their treatment towards the downtrodden people of the society, specifically the dalit community members. This present study will highlight the key factors and complexities in living of the dalit people amidst the upper caste people of the society. This study will also try to bring out the history of caste practices under such circumstances of epidemics and pandemics in India. This article will try to relocate the schemes and policies introduced by the government to protect this class people from the outbreak of unavoidable epidemics and pandemics in West Bengal. The study intends to point out the issues which prevented tranquility in the times of plague between the castes.

India has encountered several epidemics and pandemics throughout history. India being a third world country, has encountered a variety of epidemics and pandemics. Accounts of influenza, cholera, dengue, smallpox, and several others have been recorded throughout history. The effects of such epidemics and pandemics are very relentless in the life and organizations of any society. It affects the society in a multifarious way and such impacts are usually static in nature. The effects of such instances embezzle normalcy and bestow oddities, which causes tremendous amount of pain and suffering in terms of death and natural living. This sort of instances introduces pain, suffering, hunger, malice, inconveniences, inappropriate organization and fatality. And in this kind of situations the *Dalit existence* trembles the most. The so called "Untouchables", in Indian caste system, which can be trace back to 2,000 years, are treated with disdain. There are about 200 millions of Dalit people in India and this peoples has been shunned for centuries as the lowest in society, becomes the first and foremost pray of such atrocious epidemics and pandemics.

People of these communities live in the most unhygienic and improper places, in other terms, they are made to live in such places, which are unsuitable for living. The dalit people, being deprived of any authority in the society and even at some point they are also deprived of having the authority of their own lives. These peoples have been manipulated

Volume 10 Issue 1, January 2021

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

throughout centuries and their mode of existence being defined by the upper caste people, they had no other options but to succumb to the power and authority of this upper caste people. It can be easily observed that, people of “**considered outcastes**” communities, because of their occupation and involvement with trashy things, has been removed from almost every amenities and facilities needed for preserving their lives. They were deprived of owning lands, having things which are considered upper caste luxuries and even deprived of drinking water from wells. In such conditions, the dalit peoples found it hard to sustain their lives and the occurrence of plague, cholera or any kind of transmittable diseases, they were the first and foremost prey to such epidemics and pandemics.

In Mulk Raj Anand’s novel “Untouchables”, it can be found that, even doctors deny them treatment because of the inheritance of these people. Thus, such outcaste peoples never had the privilege of proper treatment in such conditions or even in their day to day life. The caste animosity made these people suffer and die without proper treatment. Thousands of people died because of not getting proper treatment and medication. People of such background died even in situations where a simple medication could have saved their lives. But doctors or practitioners of medication never helped these peoples even if they wanted to. The practitioners of medication or the doctor feared that visiting their houses would pollute them and allowing an outcaste in the hospital or the place of treatment would pollute the place and no upper caste would want to visit that place. This situation clearly points out the difficulty of the Dalit existence. Thus in a situation of epidemics and pandemics people of dalit communities living in slums died like falling pack of cards. Their bodies were dragged like objects and thrown into garbage places to rot. Such heart rendering scenarios can be found in the history of epidemics and pandemics in India.

Given the tenacity and pervasiveness of the caste system, it is hardly surprising that some of the worst sufferers of such kinds of epidemics and pandemics are India's untouchables. Plagues, cholera, dengue, and in the present day **Covid-19**, harmed the rhythm of these peoples’ lives. They are the worst victims of such diseases. In situations of such viral outbreaks, people of this community are treated disdainfully. They are barred from their day to day life pattern. People of this community chiefly comprise of daily wagers and thus these situations deprive them the opportunity to earn their livelihood. They have no other options but to risk their lives to earn their livelihood. They have to go out of their houses for earning a piece of bread for themselves and their family members. But these situations even deny them their right to live properly with the fewest of minimal amenities to continue living. It is needed to be mentioned that, this kind of situations does not allow men to roam outside their houses, not because of caste prejudices or communal animosities, but because of the fear of other peoples being getting affected with such kind of diseases. In these situations this dalit peoples are doubly disadvantaged. On the one hand these people are not permitted to do their tasks and on the other hand, because of being in the lower strata of community, they are not shown the same kind of

brotherhood that the other upper caste people share among them.

In several districts of West Bengal, several kind of animosities emerged because of the immediate tension and unrest brought forward by the **Corona Virus** pandemic. There are many districts in West Bengal where poverty is the key concern among the people and for survival people in those areas do various livelihoods earning work for preserving their lives. It is a fact that, agriculture is one of the most prominent occupations of the dalit community in West Bengal. But, it is a fact that majority of the dalit people living in West Bengal don't have their own land to work upon. And for this reason many a dalit people had to work as daily wagers in the fields of some wealthy owner. Not only that, there are several dalit community members working as coolie or goods carrier, driver, rickshaw driver, and as servants in all sorts of shops and hotels. Thus, it is a fact that dalit community members in West Bengal primarily work as servants and daily wagers. Statistics will prove that there are not many dalit government employees in West Bengal. Majority of the dalit are unemployed and several dalit community member in West Bengal has to beg for their living. And in the Covid-19 pandemic situation, they are the worst sufferers of lockdown.

There are sixty different dalit communities in West Bengal. As regards the numerical strength, Dalits of West Bengal can be divided into six different classes, as presented below in the table,¹

Population Size	Communities	Number
Above 100,000	Rajbanshi, Namasudra, Bagdi Pod, Bauri, Chamar, Jalia Kaibartta, Hari, Dhoba, Sunri (Excluding Saha), Dom, Jhalo Malo, Lohar, Mal, Kaora Tiyar, Generic Castes, Paliya, Bhuiya, Khaira, Konai	21
Above 50,000 to 100,000	Rajwar, Kandra, Bhumali, Keot, Dosadh Nuniya, Bind, Mallah	8
Above 25,000 to 50,000	Kami (Nepali), Turi, Karenga, Patni, Mahar, Pasi, Kadar, Kotal, Pan	9
Above 10,000 to 25,000	Musahar, Gonrhi, Damai (Nepali), Ghasi, Bhogta, Koch, Baiti, Kaur, Sarki (Nepali)	9
Above 1000 to 10,000	khatik, Chaupal, Behelia, Doai, Konwar, Beldar, Nat, Halalkhor	8
Below 1000	Kurariar, Bantar, Lalbegi, Kanjar, Dabgar	5
Total		60

The dalit community members, who are daily wagers, are unable to earn their livelihood amidst the Covid-19 situation. The lockdown situation debars them from coming out of their respective shelters and homes, and this prevent them the opportunity to earn their livelihood. Country wide lockdown, which is enforced for the safety measurements of people as the Covid-19 is a transmittable virus, resulted in an opposite direction for these dalit community members, the life preserving lockdown proved to be life hunting lockdown for several dalit communities, not only in West Bengal but across the nation. However, many a social worker tried their best to provide foods and other necessary

¹ Kumar Rana, *Problems and Prospects of Dalit emancipation in West Bengal*, Contemporary Voice of Dalit 1(2), 167-180, 2008.

amenities like medicine and clothes to several dalit families and other poor families. In West Bengal, many a wealthy families came in front to stretch their helping hands to rescue these community members and other poor sufferers. There has been several groups working for the betterment of the people around the country, but the fact remains that, the population of dalit community members in India and West Bengal becomes an obstacle for the social workers. The dalit community members being so many in numbers received lesser amount of amenities than needed for living a normal life. And many of the distant dalit communities and villages did not even receive any kind of food or other amenities. Cases of hunger and dying from not getting proper treatment rose significantly in this lockdown situation.

However, the State Government of West Bengal and Central Government of India tried to provide relaxations to the poor and needy families. Providing free ration and other amenities did help a lot amidst the lockdown situation but the other darker side remains constant, and that is the inability to work for their livelihood. Even though the government tried to provide several relaxation and free ration, the dalit community members still suffered immensely. The reason for their suffering is multifarious in nature, several dalit community members do not have ration card, bank account to access the facilities that the government provided. And in these situations several members of the community starved day in and day out because they were unable to access those facilities. In many occasions it is found that many a dalit community member and other poor members tried to break the rules and regulations of the lockdown situation, only because they have been starving for food and going out of their shelters has been their only option for survival. There has been such a pandemonium because of the lockdown. The West Bengal statistical abstract 2002-03 shows the people of Eastern India who lives below poverty line,²

S. No.	Years	West Bengal	Assam	Bihar	Orissa	All India
1	1973-74	73.16	52.67	62.99	67.28	56.44
2	1977-78	68.34	59.82	63.25	72.38	53.07
3	1983	63.05	42.6	64.37	67.53	45.65
4	1987-88	48.3	39.35	52.63	57.64	39.09
5	1993-94	40.8	45.01	58.21	49.72	37.27
6	1999-2000	31.85	40.04	44.3	48.01	27.09

This particular table above very accurately presents the existing condition of the eastern poverty level from the 1970's. Even though there has been a tremendous decrease in the poverty level throughout several decades but the existing poverty level is not a small margin by any stretch of imagination. It becomes a fact that, one third of the population of West Bengal is below poverty line and it is higher than the overall poverty level of India. It proves the fact that poverty is one of the biggest concerns of West Bengal and as a consequence of extreme poverty level being so high, people of West Bengal suffered greatly and found themselves unable to combat the Covid-19 situation and lockdown circumstances.

²Source: West Bengal, Statistical Abstract, 2002-03

West Bengal is one of the states with multiple tour destinations. There is a particular economic chain regarding tours and travels. And many a dalit community members in West Bengal are attached to such tourist places to earn their livelihood. There are various kinds of activities and occupations regarding tours and travels in several districts of West Bengal. Many a people, not only from dalit community but also from the other community members are associated with such economic activities. But the introduction of lockdown completely shut down the tours and travel activities across the nation. The tourist places being completely shut down for a long time, resulted in a very harsh manner over this section of economic activities and people associated with such economic activities and occupations.

Even after the complete lockdown across the nation there are still several traveling restrictions and even after easing the lockdown for the normal life to recover, there are lesser people traveling to such places in the present moment. Many a functional activities, religious activities stopped completely amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and this phenomena brought about a peculiar circumstances for those associated with such places. Again, it is a fact that, India is religious centric country and many a festivals and functions stopped because of the Covid-19 lockdown. As a result of such a pause in the popular activities and occupations surrounding festivals and religious activities many a dalit community member associated with this sort of activities became deprived of earning livelihood from such activities.

Complete lockdown and traveling restrictions became even harsher for those dalit community members associated with short distance traveling. Dalit community member and other members associated with Rickshaw, Van, Bus, Toto suffered tremendously because of their inability to venture out on roads. For a longer time, roads have been found empty because of lockdown and people were not allowed to come out of their houses. It is this moment that made these drivers and earners from this kind of economic activity suffered greatly as their income source broke down completely because of such particular situation and restrictions. In West Bengal, unemployed youth are many in numbers and being a densely populated state, there are lacks of job opportunity and paradoxically looking there is also various opportunities for people to earn livelihood by doing all kinds of works. But the lockdown scenario prevented them from exercising any of the livelihood earning ways. Almost all of the activities being paused for a long period people had no such opportunities but to invent new ways for survival even amidst the complete lockdown and even after easing the complete lockdown in a later part of the year 2019.

It is a fact that, Covid-19 introduced one of most peculiar conditions in the history of human civilization. Covid-19 pandemic introduced several new kinds of occupations and ways of earning livelihood from selling masks, sanitizers and many other things associated with Covid-19 phenomenon. Apparently, the introduction of Covid-19 and lockdown in 2019 changed the pattern of governing life and livelihood. To combat the spread of Covid-19 in India many a new rules and regulations have been applied across the nation and to tackle these auspicious circumstances dalit

community members and other poor members in Indian society had to change, shift, alter or modify their ways of earning livelihood.

It is said that if one door closes another door opens for you, apparently in Covid-19 pandemic situation the same thing happened. Many a work place, factories, shops, construction sites, religious places, tourism, several functions stopped completely and the normal life struggled for existence but to survive the dalit community members altered and shifted their mode of living and earning livelihood to combat the most auspicious situation. It is said that, necessity is the mother of all creation; this particular phrase can be very suitably applied to these dalit communities in India. To survive many a dalit member shifted from their normal occupation and changed their ways of earning livelihood. Many a dalit community member shifted towards agricultural occupations in the agricultural lands, they worked as daily wagers in those lands.

The so called new normal situation framed and shaped the existence of dalit communities in a different way. After the complete lockdown many dalit community members breathed a sigh of relief. In the lockdown situation many dalit families sold their minimal belongings, to survive the wrath of Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown harmed the dalit communities more than any other community because this particular community neither has the privilege to spend their reserve money and neither have they had the opportunity to work outside their houses in the Covid-19 situation.

To conclude on the discussion it can be said that the dalit existence trembled the most at the time of Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown across the nation. Dalit community members are the worst sufferers of the lockdown. In West Bengal where the poverty level is little bit on the lower side and so many poor families are there. In several districts of West Bengal dalit people are involved with multifarious occupations. In the modern day dalit community members are gradually finding their feet amidst the upper caste society and upper caste mode of living. But the introduction of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent lockdown impacted on their growth in the Indian society and economy along with the educational field. Covid-19 pandemic hampered the educational opportunities of the dalit students and it is primarily because of the online medium of education through digital media. Dalit students are deprived of any such facilities and thus they are unable to attend such classes online, as they neither have the smart phones or the equivalent electronic devices required for attending such classes or even giving exams online. Most of the dalit students are from a poor background and for this reason they cannot afford such privileges of buying expensive books and study materials, and the appearance of the virus only furthered their sorrow in the educational fields also.

Thus it can be said that dalit community people not only in West Bengal but across the world are worst sufferers of the pandemic. The livelihood earning pattern, occupations and age old traditions of several dalit communities and families changed due to Covid-19 pandemic. These people are not

only outcastes of Indian society but also the poorest among the other caste members in Indian rigid caste system. However, the dalit community members received helping hands both from the government and other high caste society's members and this particular situation brought about a feeling of brotherhood, leaving aside the auspicious animosities between the upper caste and the dalit. However, the suffering and the amount of pain that the dalit communities felt at the time of Covid-19 is unimaginable. They had nothing to work upon, not a single way of earning livelihood by doing any kind of job. Thus occupations of the dalit community members destroyed upside down and they had no other option but to leave aside their age old genealogical way of surviving with a new fresh mode of existence and new ways of earning livelihood. Dalit community members in West Bengal changed significantly after the impact of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown. In the end it can be said that the progress and rhythm that the dalit community members started to receive hampered significantly and their progress and existence differed after the impact of the pandemic.

References

- [1] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton University Press
- [2] Rajni Kothari, *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longman
- [3] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*
- [4] Dipankar Mandal, *Social mobility among dalit in West Bengal: a study of the district in West Bengal*, Mumbai, 2011.
- [5] Praskanva Sinharay, *To Be a Hindu Citizen: Politics of Dalit Migrants in Contemporary West Bengal*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 42 (2), 359-374, 2019.
- [6] Ayan Gupta, *Caste and politics in West Bengal: Traditional limitations and contemporary developments*, Contemporary Voice of Dalits 9 (1), 27-36, 2017.
- [7] Kumar Rana, *Problems and Prospects of Dalit emancipation in West Bengal*, Contemporary Voice of Dalit 1 (2), 167-180, 2008.
- [8] Pallavi Chavan, *Access to bank credit: Implications for Dalit rural households*, Economic and Political Weekly, 3219-3224, 2007.
- [9] Marine Al Dahdah, Mathieu Ferry, Isabelle Guerin, Govindan Venkatasubramanian, *The Covid-19 Crisis in India*, Books & Ideas, 2020.
- [10] Aparajita Bakshi, *Social inequality in land ownership: A study with particular reference to West Bengal*, Social Scientist, 95-116, 2008.