



SCHEDULED CASTES IN INDIA: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The term 'scheduled caste' was coined by the Simon Commission (1927). The expressions, 'Depressed Class,' 'Exterior Caste' and 'Untouchables' were commonly used for the scheduled castes during the colonial period. Gandhiji called them 'Harijans'. Generally they are referred to as Scheduled Castes.

The scheduled castes along with scheduled tribes constitute about 24 percent of the total population in India.

The Constitution of India made a provision that the President may specify the castes, races or tribes which shall be deemed to be Scheduled Castes. The President of India has passed orders from time to time specifying the names of scheduled castes in the country.

The position of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) has a bearing on the social structure of the 'caste society', that is, division of Hindu society into caste groups. At the top of the caste hierarchy are Brahmanas. 'Untouchables' come at the bottom. There are several caste groups in between. Ritual pollution and purity based on birth in a particular caste group is considered as the basis of high and low caste ranks.

Social justice has special connotations for socially and culturally deprived communities such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) (that is, the former untouchables). (Certain communities suffered from various handicaps due to the social structure based on caste hierarchy, and, remained backward and fell victims to various social evils. Therefore, the concepts of 'equality' and 'equality of opportunity remain meaningless unless visualised through proper perspective. This perspective needs to be based on a comprehensive analysis of the problem involved. The criteria adopted for inclusion in the scheduled castes list are social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the stigma of untouchability. The better known scheduled castes include Chamar and Bhangi, (UP, Bihar, Punjab), Bagdi and Rajbansi (West Bengal), Mahar (Maharashtra), Mala and Madiga (Andhra), Cheruman and Pulayan (Kerala), Palla and Paraiya (Tamil Nadu). There are numerous other groups.

The scheduled castes are found in every state. The chief features of Scheduled Castes reflect their problems.

- The scheduled castes constitute the lowest strata of Indian society.
- They had been subjected to a variety of disabilities, deprivations and oppression under the traditional system.
- They were placed outside and down below in social and ritual hierarchy under the varna model of society.
- They were engaged in manual tasks which were considered impure and unclean. They were considered untouchables.
- They were denied entry into temples and to houses of the upper castes.
- Like the Shudras, they had no access to the study of religious texts.
- Generally they lived at the outskirts of the village in poor housing condition.

Besides this segregation, the scheduled castes formed an integral part of social life. At the village level, a large proportion of them worked as agricultural laborers for land owners belonging to high castes. Moreover, they provided a variety of specialized services. They worked as servants, scavengers, sweepers, drummers etc.

Hence they have been treated as the servants of the other caste people. The Scheduled Castes have always served the other castes, but the attitude of other castes is of total indifference and contempt.

They were kept at a distance from other caste people. In some instances (in South India) even the exact distance which an upper caste man was expected to keep between himself and the Harijans was specified.

The Historical Context

Traditionally, Indian society has been based on structured caste inequality, of which hierarchy and 'purity-pollution' has been the guiding principle. The society was divided into four *Varnas* — Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, wherein Brahmins have been at the top and Shudras (the untouchables) at the bottom. Each Varna consisted of many castes and each caste was further divided into many sub-castes. There were specific rules and regulations regarding social and religious life.



Caste members were not allowed to follow the occupations other than those prescribed by the institution of caste. The untouchables were known as *Atishudras* or *Avarnas* and treated as outcastes. Their social status in society was very low, stigmatised and their occupations were menial in nature and so treated as polluting. They had no right to property, land, education and religious rituals like that of upper castes. Thus, they were forced to live in pathetic conditions for centuries. They were subjected to social, economic and cultural suppression and exploitation.

The Scheduled Castes suffered for centuries from a number of social disabilities among which the following may be noted.

1. Lowest Status in the Hierarchy

In the Caste hierarchy the Scheduled Castes are ascribed the lowest status. They are considered to be 'unholy', 'inferior' and 'low' and are looked down upon by the other castes. They have been suffering from the stigma of 'untouchability'. Their very touch is considered to be polluting for the higher caste people.

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2. Education Disabilities

The Daliths were forbidden from taking up to education during the early days. Sanskrit education was denied for them. Public schools and other educational institutions were closed for them. Even today majority of them are illiterate and ignorant.

3. Civic Disabilities

Prevention from the use of Public Places. For a long time the untouchable castes were not allowed to use public places and avail of civic facilities such as—village wells, ponds, temples, hostels, hotels, schools, hospitals, lecture halls, dharamashalas, choultries, etc.

They were forced to live on the outskirts of the towns and villages during the early days. Even today they are segregated from others spatially. In South India, restrictions were imposed on the mode of construction of their houses, types of dresses and patterns of their ornamentation.

Some lower caste people were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to wear shoes or golden ornaments and to milk cows. They were prohibited from covering the upper part of their body. The services of barbers, washermen and tailors were refused to them.

4. Religious Disabilities

The Scheduled castes also suffer from religious disabilities even today. They are not allowed to enter temples in many places. The brahmins who offer their priestly services to some lower castes, are not prepared to officiate in the ceremonies of the 'untouchable' castes. They do not even bow down to the duties of these 'untouchable' castes.

The Vedic mantras which are considered to be more pure could not be listened to and chanted by the Harijans because of the taboos. They were only permitted to make use of the upanishadic mantras which are considered to be less pure. Burial grounds were also denied for them in many places.

5. Economic Disabilities

The Daliths are economically backward and have been suffering from various economic disabilities also.

- a) **No Right of Property Ownership:** For centuries the Scheduled caste were not allowed to have land and business of their own. It is only recently their ownership to the property has become recognised. The propertied people are comparatively less in them. Majority of them depend upon agriculture but only a few of them own land.
- b) **Selection of Occupations Limited:** The Caste system imposes restrictions on the occupational choice of the members. The occupational choice was very much limited for the Daliths. They were not allowed to take up to occupations which were reserved for the upper caste people.

They were forced to stick on to the traditional inferior occupations such as—curing hides, removing the human wastes, sweeping, scavenging, oil grinding, tanning, shoemaking, leather works, carrying the dead animals, etc. These occupations were regarded as 'degraded' and 'inferior'.



- c) **Landless Labourers:** Majority of the Scheduled cast people are today forking as landless labourers. More than 90.1 of the agricultural labourers in India belong to the depressed classes which include the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. More than 77.1% of the Scheduled Caste workers in rural areas are agricultural labourers.

A large number of Harijan families are in debts. About 64.1% of the agricultural labour households of the Scheduled Castes were indebted during 1956-57 as against 45.1% in 1950-51.

The average accumulated debt per household increased from Rs. 47 in 1950-51 to Rs. 88 in 1956-57. Their indebtedness is increasing day by day. The Harijans are economically exploited by the upper caste people. Even today they are the lowest paid workers; some of them continue to suffer as bonded labourers at the hands of the higher caste people.

6. Political Disabilities

The untouchables hardly participated in the political matters. They were not given any place in the politics, administration and the general governance of India, they were not allowed to hold any public post.

Political rights and representation were denied for them. Under the British rule, they were given the right to vote for the first time. After independence equal political opportunities and rights have been provided for the Daliths also. Politically, the Scheduled castes are yet to become an organised force.

Social and Educational Problems

The SCs are scattered all over the country. They are mainly settled in rural areas and are dependent on the upper castes for their livelihood. They are engaged mostly in low paid manual occupations and also work as bonded labourers. There is social hierarchy, practice of untouchability among different SCs in different regions. According to the 1991 Census (India, 1991), there are 1,181 castes among the untouchables (now known as ex-untouchables). The President of India has the power to dischedule or include any caste(s) fulfilling a fixed criteria. It is surprising to note that although the criteria for defining untouchability and SCs have been fixed, an SC in one region is not necessarily an SC in another.

This has been one of the major problems in the process of development at the national level. This paper focuses on the major problems of SCs which are common at an all-India level.

Social Problems

Understanding the social problems of the SCs is of practical need and theoretical interest to comprehend the processes underlying the advancement of the ideals of equality and social justice. The widespread occurrence of atrocities on these castes and caste riots over the issue of reserved quotas and other related issues have been a regular phenomena. The Government of India constituted, under the President's special order, an office of the 'Commissioner for the SC-ST', headed by a senior civil servant (recently replaced by the National Commission for SC-ST). This office was to receive, record and collect complaints, incidences of atrocities like social boycott, arson, murders, rapes, untouchability, land disputes, child labour against the SC/ST, with the help of state level officials. The reports were to be submitted every year to the President of India. Incidents of continued injustice, discrimination and oppression were recorded since the inception of this office. However, there was little follow-up done to prevent such occurrences, compensate the victims and punish the guilty.

Educational Problems

Education is supposed to lead to upward social mobility and positive Change in modern technological society. It has been revealed by various studies (Chauhan, 1975; Chitnis, 1981; Wankhede, 1978) that the role of education, insofar as the SCs and their development is concerned, despite limitations, is very crucial. For them, other means like political and economic power have proved to be a failure compared to education. But, at the same time, when it must be remembered that education also has its own limitations. Inherent problems exist within the system. For example, the pattern of education is not uniform, the contents of education have been under severe criticism and its relevance to practical life and indeed the overall development of education is questioned because of the fact that it is not indigenous.

Further, it is also found to be urban biased and pro-rich. As such, the role of education in developing the lot of the SCs along with special facilities, has not been very significant in qualitative terms. In quantitative terms, education was expanded for 'populist' motives as a counter to its 'elitist' nature. As a result, a new educated middle class (although a numerical minority) has developed among the SCs. It is largely urban based, due to forced migration for education and employment (Ram, 1988). It is also important to highlight and understand the nature and types of the problems this so called 'privileged' section face, after they are educated and get into white collar modern, secular jobs. In other words, it is necessary to analyse their 'achieved' status as against their ascribed one.



It is by now an established fact that educational problems do not exist only within the educational system and process, but also in the family and at home. These two sets of problems are interlinked and affect each other negatively. This means, we have to differentiate and identify the problems on two fronts, that is the school and the home.

The problems prevalent in the educational process will be discussed first. A majority of the SCs live in rural areas and hence are deprived of so-called 'better' education including higher education which is available only in urban areas. The lack of urban, modern exposure makes them unaware and ignorant of many basic things which are important for motivation and aspiration. Moreover, the SCs, being economically dependent on the upper castes, have to survive a hand-to-mouth.

Measures for the welfare of Scheduled Castes

The government of India has been trying to uplift the Scheduled Castes. The governmental attempts to promote the welfare of SC's through Constitutional and legislative measures.

The Government has incorporated some special provisions in the Constitution for the removal of untouchability and to promote the welfare of SC's. The Constitution ensures the protection and assures the promotion of interests of SC's in the fields such as (1) political representation, (2) representation in services, (3) economic development, (4) socio-cultural safeguards and (5) legal support.

Articles 15, 16, 17, 28, and 46 guarantee that the state shall not discriminate between persons on account of their religion or region and caste or class. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, race, sex or place of birth. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. It is further provided that the enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with the law. Article 46 promotes the educational and economic interests of scheduled caste.

Conclusion

The major objective of this paper was to identify and critically analyse the situation of Scheduled caste people in the country particularly social and educational problems of the deprived sections of India. The major problematic areas have been identified and specific problems have been discussed in detail. The underlying assumption is that with the principle of equality and social justice supported by constitutional provisions, the SCs are expected to make significant progress. The experiment of special provisions is in operation since the last 50 years and, therefore, it is expected that there have been changes in their socioeconomic conditions.

However, studies have revealed that the progress made by them is marginal and is limited to the urban situation. The majority, still, have a long way to go. Further, the problems of the SCs need to be studied separately, as they are not a single entity.

In order to assess their present social and education situation, given with the past, with special reference to historical background. The process of planned change was initiated by constitutional and legal safeguards with special programmes for improving their standard of life. Education was expected to contribute a lot to the social and economic status of the SCs. Various studies show that the educational progress made by the SCs is marginal, differs from state to state and caste to caste and is necessarily urban based.

They are still engaged in traditional occupations and a few of them are engaged in modern manual occupations. Many of them continue to work as bonded labourers. However, there is also some change in the overall stigmatised social status of the SCs due to both planned changes and modernisation processes. It is observed that a new educated middle class has come up among these people. This class has come up necessarily through education. Referring to the educational problems, currently the educational system itself is under heavy criticism for several reasons. Its alienating contents are incongruous with local realities and it is completely dominated by the English knowing class. Thus, the SCs are afflicted by problems such as non-enrolment, stagnation and dropouts, besides illiteracy. It is important for us to understand and analyse the problems in the context of their previous conditions which continue to have a bearing on the present. It is in this context that we find that they have made progress. But it is also due to this context that they continue to be backward compared to higher caste people. In sum, caste is an important variable in the analysis of contemporary social reality of India and if the goals of social justice and equality have to be met, through the education system, one needs to confront the problems of casteism squarely in the content and process of the education system.



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