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## **SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE SCHEDULED CASTES**

The Scheduled Castes who constitute a sizable proportion of the population of India (15%) have come to the fore front to-day in all discussions, conferences and seminars. There are two important reasons for this. First, they were neglected and quite often oppressed for a long time on the ground of untouchability. They were subjected to all forms of social discrimination and hence their status remained the lowest in the Hindu society. However, since independence the state has attempted to improve the status of these people. The Five Year Plan documents contain various general and specific schemes for their around development. These schemes include educational opportunities, employment opportunities, grant of lands, housing schemes, facilities to participate in several organizations for development, reservation of seats and jobs in educational institutions and Government services and removal of untouchability. These facilities involving millions of rupees are expected to improve the social and economic status of the S. Castes.

Secondly, the recent phenomenon of mass-conversions of Meenakshipuram has thrown fresh light on their depressed conditions. Even though some of them have improved educational status, social discrimination is still practised. Anyway, the mass conversion movement has created a great social unrest in the Indian Society today and various conflicting explanations and excuses are being offered by several social groups.

### **Theme of the Paper**

The main theme of the present paper is to consider the socio-economic status of the Scheduled Castes in the context of the recent conversions in the country. The present paper is an exercise to highlight the salient features of the social status of the Scheduled Castes and the constraints which affect their development despite the policies of the State for their overall development.

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### **Development with Social Justice**

Until recently development did not stress the importance of social justice to be meted out to the traditionally deprived sections like the Scheduled Castes. The gains of development accrued more and more to the affluent and advantaged sections of the Society. However, of late there has been a marked shift in the policies of the State in all its developmental activities. "The Concept of Development with Social Justice represents a change in the approach to development and sets forth a new strategy in which participation of all the people is both the means and an end to development itself."<sup>1</sup>

In any attempt to describe the social status of the Scheduled Castes, we have to bear in mind the social stratification system which has three desirables, as pointed out by Max-Weber.<sup>2</sup> It is not just equality that is important in the case of Scheduled Castes, but how this concept of equality benefits them in joining the main stream of the Society. As Popenoe observes "all people may be treated equals atleast according to the Constitution but from the moment of birth they are faced with great inequality. The supply of things people desire is limited and no society has found a way to distribute all desirables equally."<sup>3</sup> However, attempts should be made to distribute the available resources among all sections of the society.

It is in the background of all these development schemes that we have to assess the changing social status of the Scheduled Castes. Three important issues need to be examined here.

1. What is the amount of change observed as a result of the schemes?
2. Who gains from these developmental programmes?
3. What are the constraints and deficiencies which affect total implementation of the programmes for the over all development of the Scheduled Castes?

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1. D.M. Nanjundappa, *Development with Social Justice*, (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1976), p. vii.  
2. Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, Trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C.K. Wrigst Mills, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 180-95.  
3. David Popenoe, *Sociology*, (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall INC., Englewood Cliffs.)

## The Changing Scene

The extent to which the conditions of the Scheduled Castes have changed consequent to the planning strategy has been examined by the author in his earlier books.<sup>4</sup>

## Educational Status

Education is one of the most important instruments of social change. There are quite a few reports concerning development through trained man power. The various arguments advanced in these reports indicate the urgent need to provide opportunities for education among the Scheduled Castes. Richard<sup>5</sup> has held the view that the greatest and assured means for the development of Harijans is modern education which acts as a solvent of caste barrier. Similarly Banks<sup>6</sup> and Centres<sup>7</sup> have stressed the importance of education for mobility among the backward people.

Realising that education is a must, the State undertook several measures to promote education among the Scheduled Castes. Several lakhs of rupees have since been spent on education, not only for children but also for adults. Many facilities including scholarships, clothes, books, mid-day meal etc., are provided to the trainees. These facilities are expected to result in a higher rate of literacy among the Scheduled Castes.

It is observed that a very high percentage (80%) are illiterates. Around 12 percent have had primary education, 6 percent high school education and only 2 percent college education.

This dismal literacy position is mostly because of the poor involvement of the females in educational programmes. While 59 percent of males are illiterates, 91 percent of females are illiterates. Further, while 22 percent of males have primary education, only 7 percent of females have

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4. Mumtaz Ali Khan, *Scheduled Castes and their Status in India*, (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1980) and *Seven Years of Change: A Study of some Scheduled Castes of Bangalore District*, (Madras; C.L. Society, 1979).
  5. Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 254.
  6. Olive Banks, *The Sociology of Education*, (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1971), p. 36.
  7. R. Centres, 'Education and Occupation Mobility,' *American Sociological Review*, Vol. XIV, FCS, 1940, p. 143.

primary education. Higher education among the females is extremely poor from any count.

Education is a methodological process of the socialisation of young children who are inducted into the society. Scheduled Caste children have to face several handicaps because of the family background in receiving education. Therefore special attempts have been made to see that they receive adequate attention.

Illiteracy comes to nearly 40 percent among the children. It means that the literacy position is quite impressive. But we have to take into consideration the fact that nearly 40 percent children have had lower primary education. This has two important implications. First, a large number of them become reverted illiterates as they do not keep in touch with learning after dropping out of schools. Secondly, those who go to upper primary are limited in number. The gap between the lower primary and upper primary is very wide. Participation in higher education is discouraging.

Analysed in terms of sex, illiteracy is rampant among the female children. While 53 percent female children are illiterates, only 30 percent male children are so. Further, there is a significant gap between boys and girls at all levels of literacy. This gap has sociological significance in the sense that this would lead to imbalance between them posing matrimonial problems and also psychological adjustments later on in life.

Though the Compulsory Education Act expects every child in the age group of 6-14 to attend schools, in practice this is rarely observed. Enrolment is a farce and dropout is certain. This is because of poverty, besides lack of educational values among the parents.

Dropouts occur mostly at the lower primary level around 52 percent of the children have dropped out at the lower primary level. There is not much difference between the male and the female children here. And most of these children become illiterates once again.

### **Adult Education**

Adult education has been given lot of encouragement. As observed by Mosher,<sup>8</sup> adult education is a must, particularly for agricultural deve-

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8. A.T. Mosher, *Getting Agriculture Moving*. (New York: Frederic A. Praeger Publishers, 1966), p. 124.

lopment. But the author's field work experience is that the response of the Scheduled Caste adults is extremely poor. They have neither value for adult education nor time for it. Thus, a large number of the adults remain ignorant of the Developmental processes and the development technology in the context of rural development. Further, the illiterate adults, particularly females, do not lend support for child education.

### **Untouchability**

One of the main social problems and humiliations of the Scheduled Castes is the practice of untouchability. This social oppression or social discrimination has been there in the Hindu Society for a long time, and till recently the social situation was accepted as a social reality. Untouchability is practised by the caste Hindus because of the traditional attitudes and beliefs. Though the Scheduled Castes in Karnataka are mostly Hindus, the basic Hindu rights are denied to them. Untouchability is practised in all the three major activities, namely religious activities, economic activities and social activities. Of course, total discrimination is absent in relation to shopping, hotels, public places and residential areas. So far as temple entry is concerned, nearly 55 percent respondents are not at all allowed. Similarly, drawing of water from public wells is not allowed to the extent of 45 percent. Though hotel entry is not totally banned as said earlier, partial discrimination is largely practised. House entry and dining are mostly not allowed at all. However, the variations are due to some touchables and urban villager in the sample.

### **Conflicts**

The practice of untouchability leads to social conflicts when the educated and the militant Scheduled Castes assert their Constitutional rights. The study reveals quite a few conflicts in the rural areas when attempts were made to enter the temples, participate in religious procession and hotels and even at the burial grounds.

### **Factors of Change**

It is further observed that the traditional rigid attitudes of the caste-Hindus are not unchangeable. Though the extent of change is generally not encouraging, even limited change is an encouraging feature. But the question is, has this limited change come about because of change of heart among the caste Hindus or because of the attempts made by the educated Scheduled Castes or because of the intervention of the State.

The available evidences indicate that it is because of the intervention of the State that the caste Hindus are relenting to some extent atleast and the Scheduled Castes are asserting their rights.

### **Social Organizations and the Scheduled Castes**

It is generally admitted that development of any social group is dependent on its participation in organizations which have programmes for socio-economic progress. For a long time the Scheduled Castes had absolutely nothing to do with the various organizations that have been established either by the State or by voluntary organizations of caste Hindus. But in course of time, the State established a few organizations in which the Scheduled Castes could also participate. In an attempt to find out the extent to which the Scheduled Castes had participation, it was found that the general awareness of many of these organizations was not known to the majority of them. Only co-operative societies and Village Panchayats were known to a large number, accounting for 89 and 82% respectively. This was followed by Farmers Service Co-operative Societies with 43%. The Scheduled Caste membership of certain organizations was also examined. It was observed that membership is extremely poor excepting in the case of caste associations. Various reasons are given for this poor membership of the Scheduled Castes. Besides lack of awareness, the other reasons given are: lack of money for enrolment, non-availability of benefits from the organizations, hostile attitudes of the caste Hindus and their indifference.

Of these organizations, the most important from the point of view of the development of the Scheduled Castes in the rural areas are, the Farmers service Co-operative Societies (FSCS), the General Co-operative Societies and the Village Panchayats. Involvement of the Scheduled Castes in the FSCS is very essential because of the fact that more and more Scheduled Castes are getting lands and a large number of them are farm labourers. The Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) has specific schemes for the small farmers and the labourers. In order to enable these sections take advantage of the development processes, FSCS have been established. But in actual practice it was observed that even the benefits of FSCS mostly accrued to the bigger farmers who were also generally caste Hindus. So far as the General Co-operative Societies are concerned, they were almost virtually under the control of the rural elite who were mostly caste Hindus. The interest of the Scheduled Castes was hardly recognised by these people excepting for purposes of elections.

The Mandal Panchayats are entrusted with the statutory responsibilities to promote the cause of the Scheduled Castes. In other words, the Mandal Panchayats are expected to be vehicles of change in the conditions of these people. But the social reality is that very rarely the Mandal Panchayats had taken definite measures for the development of the Scheduled Castes. The Chairmen were generally members of the higher castes and their mental attitudes were not conducive to the development of these people. Further, village politics had also generally stalled rural developmental activities. Another very significant feature that even in such villages where the Scheduled Castes had numerical majority, they were controlled by the numerically minority caste Hindus.

### **Scheduled Caste Organizations**

Until recently, the Scheduled Castes did not have their own organizations to take up their problems and fight for their legitimate rights. Of late, however, some organizations have sprung up with certain definite programmes. The most notable among them are the Ambedkar Associations, Dalit Action Committee and Dalit Sangharsh Samithi. These organizations are voluntary and un-aided by the State. They are mostly concerned with the problems of atrocities and oppression. However, whatever may be the limitations in their objectives and operations, they have created a tremendous awakening among the masses and through sustained efforts these organizations can function as catalysts and work for a rapid development of the Scheduled Castes, if their scope of activities is enlarged.

### **Legal Measures**

The Constitution of India (Art. 17) has laid down that the practice of untouchability is abolished. Its practice in any form is punishable. In order to translate this Constitutional mandate into action, the Government of India got the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955 enacted. According to this Act, untouchability is to be abolished. Certain punishments were prescribed for those who practise untouchability. Offences under this Act were made cognizable. Police start registering cases whenever they are brought before them. Investigation could be done and cases could be filed in the court but this Act was not very effective. Its provisions were often evasive. Therefore a Parliamentary Committee was appointed to examine the relevance of the provision of the Act and made

certain recommendations in the year 1976. The original Act was amended and the Act itself is now called Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCR Act). This Legislation is definitely an improvement over the previous one. Under this Act, offences are not only cognizable but also non-compoundable. For the first time the term 'Civil Rights' was explained. The Act covered a number of areas where social discrimination is practised. Punishment has been made more deterrent. Collective fine is suggested so that the entire village barring the minorities and the non-scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes are made accountable to pay the fine. Special courts are suggested. Summary trial is also prescribed. Provision is made for legal aid.

However, even this legislation is not effective. There has been no single instance of collective fine. The Police and also the judiciary are not effective to provide the much required relief effectively and timely. Disposal of the case is very poor. A large number of cases are pending before the court. To get witnesses would be a great problem either for fear of the dominant caste groups or for loss of income. Cases ending with conviction did not cross one percent. Around eleven percent of the cases resulted in acquittal. It is surprising to note that nearly eighty-eight percent cases are pending before the court in Karnataka. Even at the all India level the position is no better. While about eight percent cases end in conviction, twenty-six percent end in acquittal, as high as sixty-five percent cases are pending before the court.

Every state has a body to monitor offences under this Act. The body is called Civil Right Enforcement Cell (CRE Cell). It is headed by a Superintendent of Police or Dy. Inspector General of Police or Inspector General of Police. This cell has to monitor implementation of the Act.

In spite of all these legal provisions, offences are on increase. New forms of atrocities are seen. The police and judicial systems are unhelpful. The Dalit militant groups are on the offensive. The whole situation is becoming more complex. Recently in Bendegere Village in Karnataka state, Scheduled Caste youths were made to consume human excreta. Scheduled Caste men were subjected to all types of torture. Their lands were either illegally occupied or crops were cultivated. There are instances of compelling or enticing Scheduled Castes people to do beggary or other similar forms of forced or bonded labour. During elections, they are forced either not to vote or vote to a particular candidate. Assaulting



Scheduled Caste women with intention to outrage their modesty has also been witnessed. In some cases they are forced to vacate the house from the village.

In order to overcome these new forms of atrocities, the Government of India enacted 'The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989. This Act provides for severe punishment, collective fine, legal aid, T.A. and D.A. or boarding and lodging and transport expense of the witnesses or the victims, etc.

### **Conclusions**

From the aforesaid analysis, it becomes evident that there has been some amount of change in the educational and social conditions of the Scheduled Castes. But these changes are not at all adequate. The three decades of planning have left much to be desired. The general thinking among the caste Hindus is that the Government is discriminating against them and giving too much of importance to the Scheduled Castes. There has been a sort of prejudice and hatred in the minds of the Caste Hindus. But the factual situation is that the Scheduled Castes are not much benefited. A large number of them still suffer from utter poverty and majority of them are below the poverty line. Whatever mobility we find is mostly horizontal mobility. Only a small microscopic section has moved in the upward direction. The fact that the majority of them are illiterates, and even those who have received education upto the Lower Primary standard are virtually illiterates, is a dis-heartening feature. Higher education is confined to a small section and that too to a few families only. The gap between the male and the female literacy level is too significant and would mean that female education has been generally neglected. The argument that a poor Scheduled Caste cannot educate both sons and daughters is to some extent countered by others on the ground of scholarships and other incentives from the Government. But a probe into the incentives of the Government would clearly demonstrate that no sincere attempts have been made to bridge the gap between the males and the females.

Poverty which is the root cause for educational backwardness of the Scheduled Castes all these years is still the root cause to-day. Whatever incentives the Government has given for advancement of education among the Scheduled Castes have not really helped the poor Scheduled

Castes. Poor economic conditions are still responsible for illiteracy and massive drop outs. Farm labour is still the chief source of maintenance for majority of them. Income from farm labour is not only meager but also irregular. Scheduled Caste women who work on the farm for sweating wages have hardly anything to contribute to the education of their children. For a paltry sum earned by them, the social consequences are disastrous. What has happened to the Compulsory Education Act? What has happened to the Minimum Wages Act? What has happened to the other Social Legislations which prevent child employment and hazardous nature of employment for children? Statutes are in abundance, but who has the patience and the mind to see whether statutes are effective in their implementation so that the Scheduled Caste Children and adults come up in life?

Scholarships given to the Scheduled Caste children at the College level needs to be examined. Is this amount sufficient to meet the demands of higher education? Secondly, does this amount really benefit students, and the boarders in the hostels? Scholarship amounts fixed a decade ago was till recently the quantum given to the students. How could this rate fixed ten years ago hold good today when the cost of living has gone up several times? Further, sons and daughters of the well to do Scheduled Castes as well as sons and daughters of the poorest of the poor get equal treatment at the hands of the Government. While what is given to the children of the advantaged Scheduled Castes generally meets the out of hostel expenses of these children, what is given to the children of the poor Scheduled Castes does not meet the basic needs of the hostel bills. Quite a few parents have to sell or mortgage their immovable or even movable property just for the sake of their children's education. Further, the Scheduled Caste children are subjected to humiliation at the hands of the wardens if the hostel mess bill is not cleared in time. It is also observed that the caste Hindu boarders also insult the Scheduled Caste students who eat in the hostel without paying the mess bill pending receipt of the scholarship amount from the Government. Has the Government taken steps to protect the interest of the Scheduled Caste boarders by paying reasonable scholarship amount and within time? Has the Government ever thought of in terms of providing better facilities for the Scheduled Caste students coming from the poorer and rural sections? How can the status of these students improve at this rate?

### *Scheduled Caste Women*

It is evident that the status of the Scheduled Caste women is virtually as low today as was earlier barring a few exceptions. The exceptions cannot represent the true image of the Scheduled Caste women in general. Their educational conditions have not improved much. These women do hard work, earn something to the family, maintain the children, and husbands also in many cases where the husbands are irresponsible and drunkards. What programmes have we extended to them all these years to make them earn better without sacrificing the interest of their children? It is no use in providing large employment opportunities in agriculture or industrial labour sector. If they are made to be labourers even by improving the wage structure and providing certain guarantees, this will not help them to improve the status in the society. Horizontal mobility from one type of labour to another type of labour is like a frog hopping step by step. The real effort should be to improve the economic conditions of Scheduled Castes by providing cottage industries for self-employment. Besides this, facilities for raw material and also for marketing of the produce should be ensured by the Government. Several industrial houses could be involved in this direction. Improvement in the status of Scheduled Caste woman will successfully lead to the improvement in the status of men too. The Scheduled Caste women, constitute 50 percent of the Scheduled Caste population and therefore, realistic, pragmatic and time bound projects are needed on priority basis today.

### *Overall View*

It is thus seen that the social status of the Scheduled Castes has not undergone the desired changes which could guarantee wealth, power and prestige that are very important in the society. There is also status inconsistency resulting from social mobility. Is this the ultimate impact of the Five Year Plans as well as the legal safeguards on the status of the Scheduled Castes? Are there no practical and radical solutions to raise their social status? The answer could be in the affirmative. But this requires certain changes in the policy prescriptions of the state. A few recommendations are made here.

### *Recommendations*

1. Adult Education Programmes should be made more realistic and accessible to all the adults not exceeding 35-40 years. There is no

meaning in making efforts for educating persons who cross 40 years. Further, adult educational responsibility should be entrusted to committed organizations other than the reactionary social groups.

2. Compulsory education for the children should be enforced by providing adequate intra-structural facilities and also removing the constraints for educating the children. This should be fought on war-footing and must be made time bound. Business houses should be involved in educational programmes of the children. Child Development Centres should be organised by the State and the State should also liberally extend financial assistance to the voluntary organizations for this purpose. The coverage should be as wide as possible.

3. Special attention should be paid to bring female population under the umbrella of literacy programmes. Their inhibitions and constraints should be removed through workable mechanisms.

4. Hostels should be made more useful and meaningful to the students who spend the best part of their early life, away from their parents. Hostel management should be entrusted to organizations known for honesty and dedication. Scholarships should be liberal, realistic and free from bureaucratic delay. The rich or those who have attained a reasonable standard of life should not be given scholarship facilities as the resources at the command of the Government are limited and therefore, judicious appropriation is needed.

5. The Civil Rights Enforcement Act should be made more effective. For this purpose, the rural people should be properly educated. Religious leaders may also be involved. However, mobile police and mobile courts can provide more effective and quicker solution to the problem. Collective fines should be practised. Social organizations should be established in the Scheduled Caste areas so that there could be more social interactions between the Scheduled Castes and Caste Hindus which are likely to remove social distance.

6. There should be exclusive co-operative societies for the benefit of the Scheduled Castes. The Village Panchayats will have to be restructured so as to make the participation of the Scheduled Castes more effective and more meaningful. Further, such of the chairman who fail to develop the Scheduled Castes in accordance with a well prepared plan

and within a scheduled time, should be given deterrent punishment. Further, Scheduled Castes should be encouraged to join as many social organizations as possible and take advantage of the benefits.

7. Scheduled Caste organizations should be encouraged by the State through financial assistance to promote education among the adults and children. Drop outs could be brought under non-formal educational programmes. These organizations should be consulted by the State administration whenever new programmes are contemplated.