

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

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STATUS OF DALITS IN INDIA: AN EFFECT OF THE ECONOMIC REFORMS

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ABSTRACT

India is considered to be the most stratified of all known societies in human history with its peculiar form of caste. The caste system is 'peculiar' in the sense that it is one of the greatest separating forces that have been used to divide human beings, mainly into two categories: higher castes and lower castes. This simple division is backed by certain religious sanctions, which yield to what sociologists' term 'purity' and 'pollution' concepts. These religious sanctions make possible a renewal of legitimacy of Indian caste system even after it is challenged throughout the course of history. Thus, the caste system with its myriad variations of super-ordination and subordination still exists in all the regions of India with different degrees of rigidity. It is due to this irrepressible caste system that the untouchables of India, who number more than 220 million and are known today as Dalits, have been systematically neglected and ostracised in Indian society throughout ages. The dalits in our country are known by many other names given to them by others, mostly to despise them or to show contempt. A man is not a mere label but a disclosure of a reality. They are Avarnas, colourless and nondescript; or panchamas, those left over as it were after the four castes have been counted; or aspirations of avast victimised section of the Indian population right down the ages. The 19th and 20th centuries saw great social reformers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Sri Narayan Guru, Jyothiba Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy Naickar and others. These social reform movements conducted many struggles against the caste system, caste oppression and untouchability in many ways. But, despite the struggles against caste oppression, the social reform movement did not address the crucial issue of radical land reforms. It got delinked from the anti-imperialist struggle. The Congress-led national movement on its part, failed to take up radical social reform measures as part of the freedom movement. Figures from the 2011 census confirm that there are more than 200 million Scheduled Castes (the official term for Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits) in India. The total number of Dalits is probably much higher as Muslim and Christian Dalits are not included in these figures.

KEYWORDS

status of dalits in India, economic reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit manual scavengers demonstrating for their rights. Many of them are Muslims, and not included in the official SC figures.

The number of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India increased by 35 million during the decade ranging from 2001 to 2011, recently released census figures have shown. This means that there are now 201.4 million Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits in the country.

The increase of 20.8 per cent is somewhat higher than the general population increase of 17.7 per cent. This means that the overall SC share of the population has grown from 16.2 to 16.6 per cent. India's demographic imbalance is reflected in the number of SCs of which there are 103.5 million males and 97.9 million females. More than three fourths of India's SCs are still living in rural areas, but since the 2001 census, there has been a 40 per cent increase in the number of SCs living in urban areas. This figure is now approaching 50 million, while more than 150 million still live in rural India.

India's Scheduled Castes are distributed across 31 states and union territories. The states with the highest total numbers of SCs are Uttar Pradesh, with more than 40 million, and West Bengal with approximately 20 million. The less populous Punjab is the state with the highest proportion of SCs to its total population – 31.9 per cent.

While the 200 million SCs constitute a significant proportion of India's population, the total, if unofficial, number of Dalits in the country is almost certainly considerably higher, as Christian and Muslim Dalits are not registered as 'Scheduled Castes'. Hence, they are not entitled to so-called 'reservations' in the education system and government jobs and other constitutional safeguards.

According to some estimates, there are 15-20 million Christian Dalits in India, while the number of Muslim Dalits may be as high as 100 million or more. Were these figures to be confirmed, the number of Dalits in India could exceed 300 million – or a quarter of the country's population of 1.2 billion people.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are two groups of historically-disadvantaged people recognized in the Constitution of India. During the period of British rule, they were known as the Depressed Classes. According to the 2001 Census, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes comprise about 16.2 percent and 8.2 percent, respectively, of India's population. This has increased to 16.6 percent and 8.6 percent respectively in 2011. The population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) grew by 20.8 per cent and 23.7 per cent respectively during the period 2001-2011.

EDUCATION

Education is the most important pre-requisite for achieving the goals of personal, social, political, economic and cultural development. In other words, education is the most effective instrument for meeting the challenges that dalits are facing. Historical evidences in this regard indicate that dalit community has been excluded from the whole process of education since centuries. So, vast inequalities exist within the education system in India. Although Article 21A of the Indian Constitution stipulates that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years it still remains an elusive. However, owing to reservation and affirmative action in the arena of education, substantial progress has been made in the field of education of dalits during the last few decades. The literacy rate of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) has increased from 10.27 percent in 1961 to 54.7 per cent in 2001 and for the country as a whole has increased from 28.3 per cent in 1961 to 68.38 per cent in 2001. Available data also reveal that there has been substantial increase in the enrolment of children belonging to the dalits at all stages. So reservation in the educational institutions and the financial assistance in the form of scholarships constitute perhaps the most important factor in the development scheme for dalits (George, 2013:14). It is a well known fact that without education other constitutional safeguards, reservation in services would be meaningless. It would also be hard for dalits to send their wards to the temple of learning. But it is to be kept in mind that the enrolment alone does not give any substantial amount of educational achievement when the rate of drop out is also substantially high among the dalits. Despite several kinds of State assistance, the dropout rate is also alarming at the primary, middle and secondary stages of education in respect of dalits. In spite of that the sphere of primary and elementary education could not remain unaffected from globalization. Commercialization of education is continuously increasing.

The system of primary and elementary education in rural and urban settings has been subverted almost totally. Since majority of the rich upper castes send their wards to the private/convent schools, government schools have been reduced into dysfunctional centres of learning for the marginalized sections of the society (Ram:2). Dalit children do not have access or the opportunity to attend high-cost and presumably 'good-quality' private schools. These schools are primarily located in urban areas and are, therefore, not accessible to the larger part of dalit children. In addition to that the tuition fees are so high that they are not affordable to the vast majority of the dalits. For dalits, the question is not whether the dalits can afford to send their children to private schools, but whether they can afford to send their children to school at all (Jameela Pedecini:14).

Even today, because of importance of the English language in business circles, the segregation between village and towns is almost completed in the sphere of education. So it is very difficult for a village student, educated in vernacular medium, to compete with his convent educated counterpart in cities and towns.

(Teltumbde,1997:22). Moreover, since the majority of the dalit students are generally enrolled in Arts and humanities, it becomes difficult for them to meet the job requirements of the multinational corporations.

Higher education is also severely affected by globalization. Due to reforms, the grants have already been frozen in many institutions and the expenditure on education, if not lowering, became stagnating. The free market ethos has entered in the educational sphere in a big way. So commercialization of education is no more a mere rhetoric; it is now a big reality. In other words, corporatization has also entered into this arena, transforming the education into an enterprise for profits. In the present day private educational institutions are more commonly known as education industry (George,2013:12)

In contemporary India, a number of medical, engineering, management and technological institutions have grown up which are mainly privately owned and the passport for entrance of these institutions is a large amount of money popularly known as capitation fees. In fact prestigious specialized and super specialized courses, especially engineering, management, technology and medicine are highly expensive and inaccessible to the dalits. The emerging areas of software, biotechnology, bio-informatics are almost beyond the reach of the dalits. Many elite institutions like IIMs, IITs, suddenly facing fund crunch, had to increase their fee structure and other prices manifold which are not affordable for the dalits. In a true spirit of globalization many foreign universities are invading the educational spheres through hitherto unfamiliar strategic alliances with the commercial agencies, of course, at hefty dollar equivalent prices (Teltumbde,1997:22). If wealth becomes the main criterion for admission, the wards of disadvantaged groups will not get any chance of entry into these educational institutions. It is precisely due to these reasons that dalits are rarely to be found in the prestigious management, engineering and technological institutions all over the country

IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS

Globalization process has directly hit the traditional occupations of dalits. It is a well known fact that the dalits have historically specialized in the production of all kinds of artistic tools and equipments for household and agricultural production. But Globalization is adversely impacting their traditional occupations now. Their livelihood and specialized occupation is now being replaced by global capitalistic productions. Easy availability of mass production goods from latest technology based industries at cheap prices has proved to be a big challenge for their traditional occupation (Sunar,2012). Dalits neither have the capacity to compete with these productions nor do they have an alternative way so far to earn their livelihood. Our traditional artisan culture and technological knowledge is on the verge of ruin.

Before the introduction of globalization as we know today, dalits would make a numerous essential equipment like pots, plough, clothes, shoes and other leather products etc. and also all kinds of artistic tools for music and dance. In fact, the smooth functioning of any household was simply impossible with the skill and craft of the dalit communities. We have to keep in mind, due to lack of adequate education and employment the livelihood of the majority of dalits are depended on their traditional occupation. So under the changing situation, the government needs to urgently take adequate steps to promote and preserve the unique role of these artisans and for realizing their full potential. Besides financial assistance and proper guidance the government should establish production factories for the traditionally skilled dalit community who can share their experience for producing goods and get employment. Priority should also be given to the local produce and artisans so their traditional occupation can be sustained (Sunar, 2012).

Access to Land The most disastrous effects of globalization policy can be seen in the deep agrarian crisis that had afflicted the rural sector. The vast majority of dalits live in rural areas. Some 89 per cent of them still live in villages. More than 50 percent of them are landless labourers, 26 per cent are marginal farmers. Only a small number of them are cultivators with marginal holdings (Teltumbde, 2011). Large-scale landlessness on the part of the dalits led to their dependence on the upper caste land owning communities. The social and political influence of the land owning classes has tried to maintain their traditional hold over the agrarian system and structure. This means that an overwhelming majority of the dalit population in agrarian India does not have its own sources of sustenance and depends on landowners' land for their sustenance (Sinha,2010:127). The successive central governments as well as state governments have failed to implement the land reforms for the last 66 years. Except for WestBengal, Kerala and Tripura, the other state governments completely neglected land reforms. Instead of taking land reforms, all the governments are promoting depeasantisation of Indian agriculture (Teltumbde :15). The land instead of giving it to the landless laborers is being given away to the big industries in the name of mega developmental projects or 'SEZ' (Special Economic Zone). In fact, as an integral part of globalization-liberalization policies the marginal people have lost their right over land (George,2004, Kirtiraj:285). Statistics also reveals that the incidence of landlessness has been increasing among dalits during the last two decades of globalization. The acquisition of the land from the people has not only created discontents but to conflict and violence among the farmers which has seen in the different parts of India. Due to such projects rural employment has sharply fallen and this has hit dalits, adivasis (Tribals) and women the most. Moreover, the mechanization of agriculture has further compounded the rural employment situation.

It is a well-known fact that the globalization leads to capital-intensive mode of production and it requires a greater proportion of highly skilled workers to manage automated production process. So a large number of migrations of unskilled labor to the agricultural sector have lead to lower wages for agricultural workers as a whole. During the colonial times when products of western mechanized factories entered and dominated the local market then the lower caste artisans and laborers became unemployed. Similarly, due to modernization and extension of technology in agriculture, the dalits who worked as agricultural laborers were again unemployed. In fact, the number of agricultural labourers is increasing day by day. The percentage of rural dalit labour households with land declined from 44.38 per cent in 1974-75 to 35.05 percent in 1993-94. On the other hand, the percentage of rural dalit labour households without land increased from 55.65 per cent in 1974-75 to 64.95 percent in 1993-94 (George, 2013).

Dispossession from land and commercialization of agriculture are the two main reasons behind this shift. Further the real wages of agricultural labourers of whom a large proportion are dalits, have fallen in many states. No efforts are made to implement minimum wage legislation even where it exists and periodic revision of minimum wage is also conspicuous by its absence. (Resolution of CPIM, 2006). The average number of working days available to a dalit agricultural worker in a year is also decreasing day by day. The growing unemployment and loss of jobs in the wake of deteriorating economic conditions over the past 20 years or more under the reforms regime have also added to the misery of the poor. In other words, ongoing economic reform continues to increase prices and unemployment, and the reduction and elimination of all subsidies and social sectors expenditures has further worsened the economic condition for dalits (Farnando1997) as cited in kumar (ed.,2010:139). In fact, higher costs of agricultural inputs like fertilizers, pesticides and seeds are making it virtually impossible for marginal farmers to survive. Farmers everywhere are being paid a fraction of what they received two decades ago. The results have been decreased net income of rural agrarian households as well as dalits households and thus lower purchasing capacity (Ghosh, 2001). As a result, hunger related deaths resurfaced in a big way in the 90's onwards for the first time since independence.

A large number of farmers are reported to have committed suicides in different states of India. In the case of dalits, there is a clear correlation between land holding and social and economic status. For improving socio-economic condition of vast majority of dalits, implementation of land reforms must be given highest priority as the majority of the dalits live in rural areas. In fact, sincere and strict implementation of laws relating to land reforms, which aims to surplus land to the landless, would have greatly enhanced the socio- economic conditions of dalits who constitute a substantial proportion of the agricultural labour. But except for West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the other state governments completely neglected land reforms.

THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

The impact of India's aggressive shift from a state regulated economy to a market economy with the privatisation of industries and the liquidation of policies and controls in economic planning and regulation has been most acutely felt by Dalits. The now decade-old economic reforms cling faithfully to the flawed 'trickle down' theory – a theory that holds even less relevance for Dalits for whom few benefits can permeate the caste ceiling.

Since 1991, the start of India's New Economic Policy, the country has made astounding progress in the areas of technology, infrastructure, machinery, science, space and even nuclear research. Much of this progress has meant little to Dalits; most continue to live without the very basic amenities of electricity, sanitation, and safe drinking water.

According to the Madras Institute for Development Studies, only thirty-one per cent of Dalit households are equipped with electricity, as compared to sixty-one per cent on non-Dalit households. Only ten per cent of Dalit households have sanitation facilities as compared to twenty-seven per cent of non-Dalit ones. Disparities in distribution are not accidental. 'Untouchability' is reinforced by state allocation of facilities; separate facilities are provided for separate colonies. Dalits

often receive the poorer of the two, if they receive any at all. In many villages, the state administration installs electricity, sanitation facilities, and water pumps in the upper-caste section, but neglects to do the same in the neighbouring, segregated Dalit colony. Basic supplies such as water are also segregated, and medical facilities and the better, thatched-roof houses exist exclusively in the upper-caste colony.

Available statistics reveal that between 1987 and 1993, the percentage of Dalits living below the poverty line actually increased by five percent, reversing a declining trend of the previous fifteen years. Half of the Dalit population lived below the poverty line in 1993 compared to a third of the general population. The poverty gap has continued to widen since 1993, as have the trends toward economic "liberalisation" and the state's failure to equitably allocate and distribute resources. As liberalisation leads to a capital-intensive mode of production requiring a greater proportion of highly skilled workers to manage automated production processes, a large migration of unskilled labour to the agricultural sector has led to lower wages for agricultural workers as a whole.

Eighty-five percent of India's Dalit population lives in rural areas and is directly associated with agriculture and cultivation. In addition to a reduction in agricultural subsidies, Dalits are also affected by the increased acquisition of coastal lands by multinationals (via the central government) for aquaculture projects. Dalits are the main labourers and tenants of coastal land areas and are increasingly being forced to leave these areas – to live as displaced people, for the most part – as foreign investment rises. A reduction in the budget and fiscal deficit, devaluation, privatisation, the elimination or reduction in subsidies, and export promotion have also all contributed to inflation. As is true the world over, inflation hits the poorest the hardest. With most of their earnings spent on food, shelter, and clothing, any rise in prices has had a direct negative effect on Dalits' level of consumption. A lack of purchasing power is compounded by the devaluation of currency. The devaluation, aimed at increasing exports and creating more markets for domestic industries, has also led to a rise in prices for general essential imports.

With the underlying economic philosophy of increased reliance on market forces, a dismantling of controls, and a drastically reduced role of the state, the public sector is shrinking. The reservations model is therefore affecting – and able to assist – fewer people, inasmuch as government-related jobs are being drastically reduced. Reservations in educational institutions and scholarships for Dalit students represent a critical component in Dalit socio-economic development. Economic reforms have also led to a freezing in grants to many institutions. The privatisation of social services is also turning education and health services into commodities only affordable to the rich.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of caste-based prejudices and the denial of access to land, education, and political power have all contributed to an atmosphere of increasing intolerance and growing movements by Dalits to claim their rights. These claims are increasingly met with large-scale violence and attempts to further remove Dalits from economic self sufficiency. Any attempt to reverse entrenched discrimination and dangerous new trends necessitates a closer look at the rights violations hidden under a landscape of poverty.

Poverty is deceptive. It makes one conclude that all suffer from it equally. Poverty also masks a lack of political will to change the status quo by shifting the debate to a lack of resources. But a closer look at India's poverty reveals the discriminate on inherent in the allocation of jobs, land, basic resources and amenities, and even physical security. A closer look at victims of violence, bonded labour, and other atrocities also reveals that they share in common the lowest ranking in the caste order. A perpetual state of economic dependency allows for atrocities to go unpunished, while a corrupt and racist state machinery looks the other way, or worse, becomes complicit in the abuse. Nationally, the government must act to uphold its own constitutional principles and work toward the uplifting of all citizens, regardless of caste. Globally, the international community must acknowledge its own role in sustaining economic and racial discrimination and then play its part to dismantle India's 'hidden apartheid.'

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