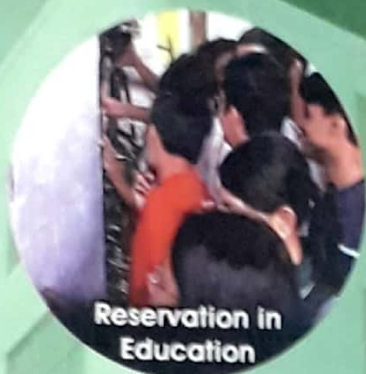


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RESERVATION IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND LEGISLATURE: PRESENT STATUS AND EMERGING ISSUES OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE IN INDIA



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ABSTRACT

The thoroughly reactionary varna and caste system has hounded Indian society for thousands of years. India is the only country in the world where such a system came into being and still exists. The varna and caste system was sanctified by Hindu religion and by Vedic scriptures. This was the main reason for its consolidation. The notorious text, Manusmriti, codified the then prevailing social norms and consigned the shudras, and women to a thoroughly unequal and miserable existence. The distinctiveness of the caste system was that it was hereditary, compulsory and endogamous. Thus, dalits were subjected to both social exclusion and economic discrimination over the centuries. In one form or the other, this continues even today in most parts of the country. The term 'Dalit' is referred to the 'untouchable' class in the erstwhile Indian society which was entrenched by the caste system. Historically dalits were categorised by their occupation which involved taking on menial tasks in the society such as cleaning, leatherwork, butchery and waste removal. They were segregated, discriminated and never involved in active public life primarily because of their occupation, which was considered polluting and contagious. This revolting practice of isolating the community was largely prevalent across India and post-1950 the government took initiatives to abolish this practice. The ugly face of the caste system shows up and we still hear reports on the public humiliation of dalits till today. To eradicate the caste system from rural India is still a distant dream but we seek to make a difference, even if it is in a small way. In this regard the proposed paper attempts to bring out the conditions prevailed before independence and analyses the present situations of dalits empowerment.

Introduction

The thoroughly reactionary Varna and caste system has hounded Indian society for thousands of years. India is the only country in the world where such a system came into being and still exists. The Varna and caste system was sanctified by Hindu religion and by Vedic scriptures. This was the main reason for its consolidation. The notorious text, Manusmriti, codified the then prevailing social norms and consigned the shudras, and women to a thoroughly unequal and miserable existence. The

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Thus, dalits were subjected to both social exclusion and economic discrimination over the centuries. In one form or the other, this continues even today in most parts of the country. The term 'Dalit' is referred to the 'untouchable' class in the erstwhile Indian society which was entrenched by the caste system. Historically dalits were categorised by their occupation which involved taking on menial tasks in the society such as cleaning, leatherwork, butchery and waste removal. They were segregated, discriminated and never involved in active public life primarily because of their occupation, which was considered polluting and contagious. This revolting practice of isolating the community was largely prevalent across India and post-1950 the government took initiatives to abolish this practice. The ugly face of the caste system shows up and we still hear reports on the public humiliation of dalits till today. To eradicate the caste system from rural India is still a distant dream but we seek to make a difference, even if it is in a small way.

There are three powerful class interests; the imperialists, the landlords and bourgeois leadership were acting as the defenders of the caste system, by protecting the landlord and pre-capitalist land system. It will be seen from here that the interests of the bourgeois class rested in maintaining the status quo. There has been no basic change in caste system after nearly 60 years of independence after independence as the bourgeoisie compromised with landlordism fostered caste prejudices. After independence also, the basic structure of land relations, overhauling of which would have given a blow to untouchability and the caste system has not been changed.

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. Diametrically opposed to the progressive role of the reform movement was the thoroughly reactionary role on social issues that was played by the RSS and the Sangh Parivar ever since its inception. Apart from its rabid communal ideology, the RSS adopted a Brahmanical stance right from the beginning. With this understanding, the RSS opposed the amendments to the Hindu Code Bill after independence. The BJP's opposition to the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations was also on this basis.

The term 'Dalit' is referred to the 'untouchable' class in the erstwhile Indian society which was entrenched by the caste system. Historically dalits were categorised by their occupation which involved taking on menial tasks in the society such as cleaning, leatherwork, butchery and waste removal. They were segregated, discriminated and never involved in active public life primarily because of their occupation, which was considered polluting and contagious. This revolting practice of isolating the community was largely prevalent across India and post-1950 the government took initiatives to abolish this practice.

Empowerment Strategies: Private Reservations for Dalits

Main intention of the reservation policy can be considered just as an inclusive one that ensures social representation policy was to assure. With dalits representing 17% of the Indian population, it is hard to ignore their economic empowerment of Dalits, who constitute around 16 percent of Indian population, were disempowered from times immemorial. In the case of employment, both the sectors, public and private were essential in securing empowerment of dalits. The private sector that attracts around 90% of the job market was left free from state control. As part of constitutional obligation, the reservation strategy was restricted only to the public sector. Even these reservations were never implemented beyond 10 percent in the middle category of posts. Upper casteist bureaucracy on the one hand and lack of will on the part of political leadership on the other hand were responsible for sabotage from 'within' for this failure. Thus, thousands of such posts were kept on vacant year after year for want of 'able' candidates. In consequence, these reservations were being renewed decade after decade.

Reservation and Globalisation

The Nehruvian policy of mixed economy, the private

sector was given a favourable treatment, whereby the public sector suffered setbacks. Initially, the Industrial Act of 1948 reserved a mere 18 sectors into public domain, leaving the rest to the private sector. Over a period of time, the Public sector was constrained with just half a dozen units in its purview. The Private sector became so potent that it dictated terms to the government. Obviously, the private sector that employs around 90 percent of work force in the country was under no obligation to employ dalits. Meanwhile, several studies referred by Prof. Sukhdev Thorat on Labour Market reveal that insignificant percentage of these communities was employed, while excluding large majority of them by way of social discrimination.

The globalisation phenomenon further excluded those who could not afford quality education in the corporate institutions. That was a time when the issue of caste discrimination was taken up, on par with the racial discrimination, at the World Conference in 2001 at Durban, South Africa. At the national level too, there were some attempts to raise the issue of reservations in private sector at Bhopal and other places. Similarly, the SK Shinde-led Maharashtra government, tried to implement the same but failed, due to protest from the business lobbies. In any case, this concept of private reservation cannot be considered as charity, but a right from a government that promoted the private sector at the cost of public sector. Obviously, over a period of time these physical benefits have instilled some confidence in Dalits. Besides economic benefits, political reservations have also helped them to occupy the positions of power at all levels.

UPA Promise and BSP Initiative

Ever since the previous (2004-9) United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government at the Centre promised to introduce job reservations in the private sector, there were a few discordant reactions from some elite and non-political quarters. In fact, as part of its Common Minimum Programme (CMP), the Congress-led political coalition provided this measure in the election manifesto way back in 2003 itself. Meanwhile, the UPA promise (private reservations) has created many a controversy on the subject. Incidentally, there arose some reservation critics from different quarters. Although undeclared reservations to certain privileged communities (upper castes) were never done away with, the defenders of 'merit' were making hue and cry on the concept of reservations in the private sector. As usual, a section of media has persistently been

prejudiced against the downtrodden and dalit communities in this country. At last, there emerged some political consensus, following apparent attempts from several Ambedkar organizations and Dalit-based parties.

Meanwhile, within a decade of its existence, the Bahujan Samaj Party became a third largest national party, having its strong base in the state of Uttar Pradesh. By the year 2007, Mayawati, a dalit herself, became the chief minister (fourth time) on her own! More than what she achieved as the alternative power centre in the country, created confidence among the Dalits in the state and outside. Mayawati had not only promised the reservations in private sector, but also implemented them in a big way. Besides dalits, backward classes (BCs) and the economically backward communities (EBCs) were also offered private reservations in the state. Her strategy towards the private sector was that it should provide reservations to these marginalised communities, as the private sector was getting the benefit of government concessions in the establishing of industries and ventures.

Conclusion

Very recently senior Congress leader and Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram has said education and political empowerment alone could provide economic empowerment of Dalits. On the occasion of addressing a SC/ST conference organised by the party, he said education alone could uplift one's life and exhorted the Dalits to educate their wards, making use of every opportunity and by availing the number of scholarships announced by the Centre. While banks made available interest-free educational loans, the Centre offered various scholarships for several crores of rupees, he said and wanted the Dalits to make use of them. Detailing the number of welfare schemes implemented by the Centre for improving the lot of Dalits, Mr. Chidambaram said "even if we serve you the feast, you cannot eat if there is no salt." Likewise, Dalits could not liberate themselves if they were not given political empowerment.

Advising the Dalits to grab political power as no political party other than the Congress would be willing to give them the power, he said the country had seen Janata, Janata Dal, United Front and the BJP-led NDA

governments, but none of them had made a Dalit a Defence Minister. The Congress had made Jagjivan Ram as Defence Minister and had made Kakanji as Home Minister in Tamil Nadu 47 years ago. The Congress went on to make Dalits as President of the country and Lok Sabha Speaker, he said adding the present Home Minister, Railway Minister and Social Justice Minister were from the Dalit community. Under the Scheduled Caste sub-plan, the Centre had spent Rs. 35,800 crore for the Dalits during 2013-14 and allocated Rs. 48,638 crore for the year 2014-15, he said. Here it is to be noted that only because of the strong constitution created Dr. B.R. Ambedkar the Dalits are enjoying the fundamental rights today.

Even though Dalits are getting empowered, still caste discriminations are existing. So, this is the status of the affair. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said, only legislature can't solve the deep-rooted social problems alone. We all need to work for a casteless society. Independent India has banished the untouchability and made its practice unconstitutional and subject to penal action against anyone offending this law. Suggestions from various quarters of society have come for the abolition of this evil. But the real solution lies in the hearts of Indians, particularly those who come from the upper castes.

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