

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF MARGINALISED SECTIONS OF SOCIETY

To be marginalized is to be forced to occupy the sides or fringes and thus not be at the centre of things. This is something that everyone probably experienced sometimes in their life. In the society, some groups of people or communities may have the experience of being excluded. Their marginalisation can be because they speak a different language, follow different customs or belong to a different religious group from the majority community. ,,,,They may also feel marginalised because they are poor, considered to be of 'low' social status and viewed as being less human than others.

Sometimes, marginalised groups are viewed with hostility and fear. This sense of difference and exclusion leads to communities not having access to resources and opportunities and in their inability to assert their rights.They experience a sense of disadvantage and powerlessness vis-a-vis more powerful and dominant sections of society, who own land, are wealthy, better educated and politically powerful. Thus, marginalisation is seldom experienced in one sphere. Economic, social, cultural and political factors work together to make certain groups in society feel marginalised.

Development of Marginalised Sections

After independence the Constitution of India, keeping in view the desires and aspirations of the people, values strengthened during national freedom movement and the ideas prevailing in the world, envisaged for State not only a democratic political order but also the goals of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. These goals are clearly reflected in the preamble of the Constitution, in parts on Fundamental Rights and Directive principles and other specific Articles in the Constitutions, in parts on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles and other specific Articles in the Constitution.

All these provisions suggest that India is a welfare state, committed to the welfare and development of its people in general and of vulnerable sections in particular. The vulnerable sections in India include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, Women, Minorities, Disabled and Children. For the welfare of these people mere guaranteeing of right to equality or universal adult franchise were not sufficient.The ideal of political democracy had to be backed by social and economic democracy. Therefore, what was required was a strong constitutional mechanism for protection of interests and rights of vulnerable or weaker sections of society and at the same time special schemes and programmes for their welfare, development and empowerment.

Scheduled Castes

Scheduled Casts are people belonging to those castes, races which have been or may in future be specified in a list in accordance with Article 341 of the Constitution. In traditional terms these are the people who were considered outcastes, categories as untouchables. This was a part of the rigid caste system dividing the Indian society into high and low on the basis of birth without any logic or rationale. The people lower casts considered untouchables were assigned menial jobs and occupations. They were oppressed and exploited by those who belonged to the higher castes. Economically and socially they remained extremely poor and marginalized.

During the course of history there had been emerging voices against the caste system. Religious and social reformers have been raising voices against it and for its abolition. Religious movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Bhakti movement in general had rejected the social and ritual justification of this caste system and oppression. The system, however, has remained. During colonial period with the arrival of western liberal

values and rise of socio-religious reform movements the question of caste discrimination came to the forefront. Within lower caste people themselves, there emerged a consciousness and awareness about their plight and demand for change.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, in particular, though in different ways, had brought up the issue of caste discrimination in a significant way. British colonial government, for various reasons had begun formulating some policies including those of reservations, for these castes. The national movement made the issue of Scheduled Castes upliftment part of its agenda. As such at the time of independence, there was both a demand and commitment for SCs welfare and development. The government, therefore, took up the task of SCs welfare right from the time of enactment of the Constitution.

Scheduled Tribes

Another social category economically, socially and politically marginalized is that of Scheduled Tribes. Legally like Scheduled Castes, tribes are people belonging to tribes or tribal communities specified in the list of such tribes as per Article 342 of the Constitution. Scheduled Tribes are weaker sections not in terms of caste. They are the people who have been living in remote forest areas and hill tracks as tribes without any access to modern socio-economic inputs.

It is difficult to define the tribal peoples of India in terms of any single set of formal criteria. They are popularly believed to constitute the aboriginal element in Indian society. But most tribals share certain common features like, nature of regality, illiteracy, economic backwardness, and social deprivation. Historically, one of the principal features of the tribal population has been its ecological, economic and social isolation. For centuries, the tribal people have been confined to hills and forests. This isolation has left definite impression on their social systems. It has also given them, in spite of wide cultural variations, a common destiny in the Indian society.

Like Scheduled Castes, it was during British colonial rule that there emerged a tribal consciousness. Here, the reason was little different. As mentioned above for centuries tribal areas had remained unconnected with the mainland and mainstream. Therefore, they were outside the effective control of state and state laws.

They had their own economy, tribal laws and customs. It was during British rule that with the extension of administration all over and lying of railways, roads, etc. that tribal area came under direct administrative control. Along with administrators, traders, money lenders and entrepreneurs also reached tribal areas. Tribals were deprived of their land and autonomy. In many cases this led to tribal revolts. There also emerged among national movement leaders and British administration a concern for protection and welfare of tribal people.

Empowerment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been the most disadvantaged and neglected people in Indian society. Their situation and needs were acknowledged by the framers of the Constitution themselves. Thus, on the one hand Constitution of India itself prescribed certain protective measures, safeguards and welfare measures for these sections and on the other hand successive Five – Year Plans have also regarded the welfare of SCs and STs as a major objective of development policy. In addition, both the Union and State governments have taken up specific steps and launched various schemes and programmes for their improvement.

Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution prescribes protection and safeguards for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It also prescribes safeguard measures for other weaker sections either specially or by way of insisting on their general rights as citizens with the objective of promoting their educational and economic interests and removing social disabilities.

Article 17 of the Constitutions abolishes untouchability and forbid its practice in any form. The untouchability (offences) Act was passed in 1955. Its scope was enlarged and its panel provisions were made more stringent by amending it in 1976. It was renamed as Protection of Civil Right Act. In 1989, another Act called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) was passed.

Special Schemes and Programmes for SCs and STs

In accordance with these Constitutional provisions and directives the government of India and all States have been formulating and implementing various schemes and programmes for the upliftment of SCs and STs within the process of Planning and outside. These programmes relate to education, skill formation, creating job opportunities and development of the areas in which these people are concentrated.

In the field of education in most of the States, education up to higher level has been made free for SCs and STs. Seats have been reserved for them, generally, in accordance with percentage of pupation, in various educational institutions. A Book Bank scheme has been launched to provide textbooks required for the students pursuing medical and engineering degrees, agricultural, veterinary and polytechnic courses. A Girls Hostel Scheme was started in Third Five – Year Plan and more recently Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya has been opened with the purpose of providing residential facilities to tribal girls in pursuit of education. A similar scheme was started for boys. Various schemes of scholarships have also been started including pre-metric, post-matric, and higher education. In addition to these there are other schemes also for helping improve educational levels and standards of SCs and STs.

To help SCs and STs in employment, apart from making reservations in jobs, specific schemes have been started for training and skill formation. One of these is the coaching and allied scheme started in the Fourth Five-Year Plan for imparting training to SCs and STs in respect of various competitive examinations held by recruiting bodies such as Union public Service Commission, Public Sector undertakings, banking service recruitment boards and similar agencies. There are State Scheduled Castes Development Corporations to uplift the SC/ST population living below poverty line.

Many vocational training centers have been set up in tribal areas to develop the skills of the tribal youth for gaining employment or self employment opportunities. The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India was set up with the prime objective of providing marketing assistance and remunerative prices to ST Communities for their minor forest produce and surplus agricultural produce and to wean them away from exploitative private traders.

Baba Saheb Dr Ambedkar Foundation

Apart from schemes for education and employment there also have been launched programmes in empowerment of SCs and STs. An important step in this direction was taken with the establishment of Baba Saheb Dr Ambedkar Foundation. The Foundation has been entrusted and the responsibility to manage, administer and carry on the schemes and programmes identified during the centenary celebrations of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Some of these are Dr. Ambedkar National Award for social understanding and uplift of weaker sections. Dr Ambedkar International Award for social change, harmony for the exploited and the under privileged; and putting up Memorial for Dr. Ambedkar.

Tribal Research Institutions

Some States have set up Tribal Research institutes, for research, education, collection of data, training, seminars, workshops, professional inputs in the preparation of tribal sub-plan, publication of tribal littered, codification of tribal customary laws, etc. The tribal sub-plan strategy was evolved during the Fifth Five Year plan. It is based on the twin objectives of (i) protection of interests of tribals through legal administrative support; and (ii) promotion of development efforts through plan schemes to raise their level of living. There are now 194 integrated tribal development projects.

State of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

From the above discussion of Constitutional and legal provisions and of some of the plans, programmes and schemes started for the welfare, development and empowerment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, it becomes clear that these people have not only been made equal citizen of India but have also been given special privileges, preferences and concessions to come out of their traditional lower and inhumane position.

At the same time if we look at the overall conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, particularly in rural areas, we find that in spite of constitutional provisions and various plans, the poverty, illiteracy, destitution, oppression and bondage of these sections in large areas remain intact. Untouchability, though banned under the law continues to be widely practiced. India's bonded labourers are almost exclusively drawn from SCs and STs. Only an elite class amongst SCs has benefitted from the government's policies and welfare measures. The reasons for this apathetic status of SCs and STs are many.

First of all the problem is that provisions and plans for the welfare of the SCs and STs are strong at the constitutional and planning levels, but weak in the implementation. In many reports of the Commissioner for Scheduled Casts and Scheduled Tribes, the Planning Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the Planning Commission and other bodies, it has been pointed out that the staff and administrative machinery provided by the States is not adequate to carry out the policy of welfare, even if necessary funds are voted by the Parliament, hence, the failure in implementation.

Another problem is of inadequate funds and corruption. To begin with, both adequate funds are not allocated for the plans and programmes or allocated funds are not made available. Many a times a significant proportion of funds do not reach the beneficiaries – a glaring example of the failure of land reforms. This failure has kept SCs in particular deprived of land and dependent on landlords and big farmers. In case of tribal development the bureaucrats, trained in the colonial tradition to maintain law and order unaware of tribal social, cultural and linguistic traditions and values, and unconcerned with their expectations end up as exploiters of tribals rather than their protectors.

The problems of administrative apathy and lack of funds is very much linked with problems in planning itself. The planning in general has been lopsided, piecemeal and middle class or even elite oriented rather than mass oriented. At the political level decisions are taken more keeping in view the immediate concern for votes and not the long-term visions. One result of this is that laws have established commissions, and enacted laws for preventing untouchability and other offences against SCs and STs, these provisions lack teeth and an effective machinery for imparting justice. Particularly in case of Scheduled Tribes, planners have not appreciated the tribal culture, language, religion, customs and land rights. They, therefore, formulate plans with their own assumptions and as parts of national plans.

A serious matter that has emerged during last decade or so with regard to status of SCs and STs is upper caste backlash in some areas. Reacting to emerging consciousness among these castes and their struggle for rights in some rural areas upper castes have begun coercing them violently including killing the activists and raping the women. In some cases this violence is being committed by organized groups like Ranveer Sen in Bihar. In view of the nature and orientation of bureaucracy and police, this backlash is not crushed with that heavy hand as it is required. Infact, in many cases there is connivance of police and other authorities in such cases of oppression.

Thus, in spite of Article 17 of the Constitution, untouchability offences Act and Protection of Civil Rights Act untouchability is practiced openly in many places not only in villages but also in cities. All this is resulting in alienation of those groups and emergence of Tribal and Dalit movements. These movements are using both constitutional methods to seek justice thereby posing new issues in India's political process.

Empowerment of Other Backward Classes (OBCs)

In India apart from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there are other weaker sections, who are economically, socially and educationally backward. They are known as Other Backwards Classes. Article 340 of the Constitution empowers the investigate into the consideration of Other Backwards Classes and make recommendations.

It is necessary to make it clear that the Constitution uses words “Backward Class”. It means not just any backward person, but a group of people having general characteristics of backwardness. Constitution, however, does not backward classes. The Government had appointed two Backward Classes Commissions. These commissions have given the criteria to identify backward classes on the basis of communities or castes.

The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1953 under the Chairmanship of Kaka Saheb Kalelkar. This Commission used four criteria for identifying the backward classes:

- low social position in the traditional caste hierarchy of Hindu society;
- lack of general educational advancement among the majority of a caste/community;
- Inadequate representation in government services; and
- Inadequate representation in trade, commerce and industry. The Kalelkar Commission on this basis identified 23999 castes and communities as Backward Classes. However, there were differences within the Commission. Therefore, government did not accept the recommendations of this Commission.

The second Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1978 under the Chairmanship of B.P Mandal and this was known as Mandal Commission. This Commission formulated 11 indicators: four on caste based social backwardness, three on educational backwardness and four on economic backwardness. In the Commission’s opinion backwardness was related to Caste. Accordingly, it identified 3, 743 castes as backward on the basis of above mentioned indicators. Since then these castes have come to be known as Other Backward Castes (OBC’s) meaning thereby backward castes other than Scheduled Castes.

The Commission recommended reservation of 27 per cent of jobs for OBCs in central services, public sector undertakings, nationalized banks, universities and affiliated colleges and government aided firms in the firms in the private sector. Some quantum of reservations for OBC students was recommended in all scientific, technical and professional institutions of education run by the Central and State Governments. The Commission also made recommendations for economic and occupational development of the OBCs.

In August 1990, Government of India announced the acceptance of Mandal Commission’s recommendations. Since then 27 per cent reservation has been made in jobs by Central government and various percentages by State governments.

National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation

This body was set up by the government of India in January 1992 with the objective of providing concessional loans to the members of backward classes living below the poverty line. The corporation has also launched a special scheme for eligible women beneficiaries of backward classes under the name of Swarnima.

Schemes for OBCs

Following schemes have been launched for the welfare of OBCs:

- Pre-examination coaching: to coach candidates belonging to OBCs whose parent’s / guardians annual income is less than Rs. one lakh.
- Hostels for OBC Boys and Girls

- Pre-metric Scholarships
- Post-metric Scholarships
- Assistance to voluntary organizations: The scheme involves the voluntary sector to improve educational and socio-economic conditions of the OBCs to get them gainfully employed.

Apart from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes the government has also made adequate provisions for the welfare of Other Backward Castes and also made adequate provisions for the welfare of Other Backward Castes. Some, observers, however feel that a number of castes which act economically well off are getting benefits in the name of OBCs for political reasons, whereas people who are economically backward but technically do not belong to these castes remain neglected. According to these observers Constitutions suggests that backwardness is to be identified by class and not by caste or tribe. They, therefore, suggest use of economic criteria for backwardness.

The Supreme Court in its judgement on 16 November, 1992 while accepted the criterion of caste as relevant for reservation felt that within Backward castes those whose economic advancement is so high or those who have occupied certain posts of high social status should be excluded from getting the reservation benefits meant for OBCs. Once they are advanced socially which also means economically and educationally they no longer belong to the Backward Classes. However, the judgement also suggested that those who have attained sufficient capacity to compete with others should be taken out of the OBCs. This has been described as rule of exclusions based on “creamy layer” concept. The implication of this judgement is (i) Caste though a necessary condition is no longer a sufficient condition. (ii) Economic test should be applied along with the already existing identification criterion.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that in accordance with the commitments made during national movement and declarations pronounced in the Preamble of the Constitution of India to secure to all citizens of India justice, Liberty and Equality. There had been provisions in the Constitution and policies in the planning process and otherwise for the welfare of those sections of society who have been denied justice and equality for thousands of year simply on the basis of birth. This has to be done because socio-economic justice implies rejection of the unjust social structure and status-quo. There are no two opinions about the fact that caste system in India denotes a hierarchical stratification of society based on division and gradation of people by birth. Therefore, it implies social inequality. For the lower caste people their lower position has got reinforced into a low class position by the deepening unemployment and poverty.

It was not sufficient merely to mention in the Constitution that all citizens of India are equal and free. There was need to create conditions and environment by which the exploited and oppressive system. For this were adopted various schemes and programmes for the welfare and development of Scheduled Castes Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes. At present the welfare of SCs and STs is given special attention by both the Central and State governments. Special programmes for their welfare have been undertaken in the successive Five Year Plans and the size of investment in these special programmes has been increasing from Plan to Plan. A number of persons belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes now are in various levels of government jobs, educational institutions, Parliament, State Assembles and local-self government bodies. They do have access to social institutions.

At the same time a large number of persons belonging to these categories in different parts of the country continue to suffer discrimination, social exclusion, and oppression. They still live in a pathetic situation of poverty, illiteracy and social marginalization. Mindset of a large section of persons in India continues to be besieged with beliefs of superiority and inferiority of caste. In rural areas at many places Scheduled Castes have to live outside the village. They continue to be engaged in traditional menial jobs. They suffer oppression and violence in the hands of upper –caste landlords, not allowed to vote in election and own land.

Reasons for this are many which include lack of political will, faulty planning, administrative apathy, lack of resources and widespread corruption. At the same time because of introduction of democracy and universal franchise the so-called lower caste and tribal people are becoming aware of their plight and rights. They are asserting for justice and change in the position. This on the one hand is forcing the State to take effective steps for their welfare and on the other hand is causing a backlash from certain upper castes who do not want any change in status quo.

Marginalisation among Minorities and Steps for their Empowerment

The Constitution provides safeguards to religious and linguistic minorities as part of our Fundamental Rights. The term minority is most commonly used to refer to communities that are numerically small in relation to the rest of the population. However, it is a concept that goes well beyond numbers. It encompasses issues of power, access to resources and has social and cultural dimensions.

The Indian Constitution recognized that the culture of the majority influences the way in which society and government might express themselves. In such cases, size can be a disadvantage and lead to the marginalization of the relatively smaller communities. Thus, safeguards are needed to protect minority communities against the possibility of being culturally dominated by the majority. They also protect them against any discrimination and disadvantage that they may face.

Given certain conditions, communities that are small in number relative to the rest of society may feel insecure about their lives, assets and well-being. This sense of insecurity may get accentuated if the relations between the minority and majority communities are fraught. The Constitution provides these safeguards because it is committed to protecting India's cultural diversity and promoting equality as well as justice. The judiciary plays a crucial role in upholding the law and enforcing Fundamental Rights. Every citizen of India can approach the courts if they believe that their Fundamental Rights have been violated. Now let us understand marginalization in the context of the Muslim community.

Muslims and Marginalisation

Muslims are 13.4 per cent of India's population and are considered to be a marginalized community in India today because in comparison to other communities, they have over the years been deprived of the benefits of socio-economic development. The data in the three tables below, derived from different sources, indicate the situation of the Muslim community with regard to basic amenities, literacy and public employment.

Recognizing that Muslims in India were lagging behind in terms of various development indicators, the government set up a high-level committee in 2005. Chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, the committee examined the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India. The report discusses in detail the marginalization of this community. It suggests that on a range of social, economic and educational indicators the situation of the Muslim community is comparable to that of other marginalized communities like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For example, according to the Report the average years of schooling for Muslim children between the ages of 7-16 is much lower than that of other socio-religious communities.

Economic and social marginalization experienced by Muslims has other dimensions as well. Like other minorities, Muslim customs and practices are sometimes quite distinct from what is seen as the mainstream. Some – not all – Muslims may wear a burqa, sport a long beard, wear a fez, and these become ways to identify all Muslims. Because of this, they tend to be identified differently and some people think they are not like the 'rest of us'. Often this becomes an excuse to treat them unfairly, and discriminate against them. This social marginalization of Muslims in some instances has led to them migrating from places where they have lived, often leading to the ghettoisation of the community. Sometimes, this prejudice leads to hatred and violence.

In the case of the Muslim community there is a link between economic and social marginalization. The experiences of all these groups point to the fact that marginalization is a complex phenomena requiring a variety of strategies, measures and safeguards to redress this situation. All of us have a stake in protecting the rights defined in the Constitution and the laws and policies framed to realize these rights. Without these, we will never be able to protect the diversity that makes our country unique nor realize the State's commitment to promote equality for all.

Problems of minorities

- The level of education among the minorities especially Muslims are very low.
- The per capita income of the minorities is low and hence they are forced to live in dismal living conditions and to lead avocations unsuited to them.
- Economic opportunities are unavailable or when available the skills to tap them are missing. Their share in government services is very low.
- They are made the victims of communal violence.

PM's new 15 Point Programme for Minority Welfare and their Empowerment

The government has announced Prime Minister's new 15-point programme, for the welfare of minorities in India. The programme is to be executed by the Ministry of Minority Affairs. Under the programme, students belonging to minority communities in the country i.e. Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, and Parsis could be able to get benefits specified under the scheme.

Programmes

- Equitable availability of ICDS Services
- Improving access to school education
- Greater resources for teaching Urdu
- Modernizing Madarsa education
- Scholarships for meritorious students from minority communities.
- Improving educational infrastructure through the Maulana Azad Education Foundation.
- Self-Employment and Wage Employment for the poor.
- Upgradation of skill through technical training.
- Enhanced credit support for economic activities.
- Recruitment to State and Central Services.
- Improvement in condition of slums inhabited by minority communities.
- Prevention of communal incidents
- Prosecution for communal offences.
- Rehabilitation of victims of communal riots.

Significance of the new programmes

- The new programmes will go a long way in improving the conditions of minorities.
- By improving education and exposing minorities to modern education, the programme will lead to skill development and skill improvement among the minorities which will ultimately make them suitable for the modern jobs available in the country and abroad.
- Their economic conditions will be improved.
- The programme clearly talks about the rehabilitation of the victims of communal violence, which has been a serious problem in India.