

EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUP IN INDIA

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India has always been a welfare state, committed to the social wellbeing and overall development of its people especially the deprived or disadvantaged sections of society. Human rights bestowed by our constitution, have never shown any kind of discrimination towards any individual or group of people. These rights are equally applicable to individuals without any prejudice on the grounds of language, sex, race, religion, caste or community. They only promote welfare and well-being of all persons with equal treatment in all spheres of life. However, the diversities along the socioeconomic, political and cultural aspects are found everywhere across the world and the politics of the nation, region or state deprive the free exercise of human rights to a certain number of people or groups of people. Any type of denial can have a direct effect on the right to life and the dignity of people which can certainly deprive them of the enjoyment of their guaranteed human rights. Such deprived people are generally referred as disadvantaged groups or communities.

Education is the right of every child. Since independence, various union governments have faced the greatest challenge of ensuring easy access to education for the disadvantaged section of society by diminishing the social ill effects of caste system, which still remains rooted in the Indian society. The government of India has introduced various welfare measures from time to time for the upliftment of people who are intellectually, culturally and economically deprived. It is a fact that the government is sincere in implementing various ameliorative measures for all round development of this section of society. Efforts are being made to sensitize administration and institutions to the requirement of special efforts for disadvantaged sections of society to bring them at par with the rest of the population. The government is alive of the conditions of these castes which are obvious from the objectives of various Five-Year-Plans and many economic measures adopted for their development. The government and non-government agencies have initiated various schemes like free and compulsory education, free mid-day meal, free uniforms, free study materials, scholarships and transport to name a few.

Significant progress has been made in the direction of improving the access to education at various levels and also in increasing the participation of these groups in the field of education. The educational level and status of these groups has been improving when relatively compared to their earlier situation as well as when compared to the general population. In spite of these concerted efforts made at the government level, the factual condition of disadvantaged sections has not improved to a satisfactory level. A majority of socially disadvantaged population is still living in abject poverty and inhumane conditions even after about seven decades of independence. It has been observed that they often do not come forward to avail the economic and welfare opportunities open to them. Many of them are below poverty line and being illiterate, are not aware of the various rights and opportunities provided to them by the government. Moreover oppression, aggression and flaws still remain in the social programs in Indian society which prevents education growth of this section of society (Source - NCERT Journal of Indian education, 2011). The socially disadvantaged students face grave problems and difficulties especially in their adolescent age period. The Indian society generally tends to ignore them and the various issues related to them. This may lead to them feeling isolated and face physical, health, emotional and educational problems.

Though government of India has formulated many policies for the upliftment of education status of socially disadvantaged students, but just making attractive policies and ensuring their enrolment in the schools cannot be considered as an indicator of their progress and development. There is also strong need to systematically analyse the reasons of low academic achievement among this section of society. It has been accepted that many psychological and health problems affect the learning and performance of socially disadvantaged students in various ways. Some of these factors are home environment, mental health, personality, intelligence, parental education, study habits and achievement motivation etc.

Who are Socially disadvantaged?

In India, the concept of disadvantaged groups is as old as the human civilisation. During the period of British rule, they were known as the depressed classes. These people are the main targets of the advantaged sections of the society ever since the ancient times. The disadvantaged sections of society constitute that part of population which is denied the opportunity to fully explore and utilise its abilities and enjoy a quality life.

There are various types and modes of discrimination of disadvantaged sections: physical, mental, social & cultural, educational and emotional etc. Socially disadvantaged can be defined as those individuals who have been put to prejudice on racial or ethnic levels or any type of cultural bias and discrimination because of their identity as a member of a group without giving due recognition of their individual qualities. They are not handicapped by any genetic deficiency, but by the socioeconomic circumstances of their lives related to their birth. This prevents them from developing and enhancing their basic and natural potentials. They are often harassed on the grounds of customary & social practices and cultural factors. In a number of circumstances, they are constantly denied freedom to enjoy their basic human rights.

The idea behind this biased behaviour is to keep away such disadvantaged people from the main-stream of social activities and deprive them of their basic life and liberty. It further tends to keep them at a distance from the society, depriving their economic, intellectual capabilities to serve the needs of the rich and dominant people of the society. Among the various problems that affect them is the renunciation of land and property related rights which deprives their social and cultural status in the society. Since every individual possesses human rights to exercise on an equal basis, denial of their rights due to customary, social, economic and cultural perspectives is in complete disharmony with the very concept of development of the society as a whole.

The various groups identified for facing discrimination due to their social disadvantaged status include – Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Backward Class (BC), Women and Minorities.

1. **Scheduled castes (SC)**

India is considered as a whole, an acutely caste-dominated country. In constitutional terms, dalits are generally known as the scheduled castes. There are currently 166.6 million dalits in India making them about one-sixth of the Indian population (Source - www.dalitsolidarity.org/dalits-and-untouchability.html). Before independence, they were also referred to as ‘untouchables’ mainly due to their low level occupations like cobbler, scavenger and sweeper etc. Despite their large share in population, dalits are considered as a community whose human rights have been severely violated and under-valued. They are denied access to land and forced to work in degrading conditions. They suffer discrimination in education, health care, housing, property, freedom of religion, free choice of employment

and equal treatment before the law. Dalit children also face continuous hurdles in education. They are made to sit in the back of classrooms and suffer verbal and physical harassment from teachers and other students. The effect of such abuses is confirmed by the low literacy and high drop-out rates for dalits.

Dalit women have been even more badly affected. They are discriminated against not only because of their sex but also because of religious, social and cultural structures which have given them the lowest position in the social hierarchy. These women face problems of gender discrimination with their high caste counterparts, problems related to their caste and ethnic backgrounds, extremely low levels of literacy and education, heavy dependence on wage labour, discrimination in employment and wages, heavy concentration in unskilled, low paid and sometimes hazardous manual jobs, violence and sexual exploitation.

2. Scheduled tribes (ST)

India has many tribal communities and they generally don't mix with the main society and are categorized into scheduled tribes. Scheduled tribe is also used as an official term for 'Adivasis'. Historically, they have suffered from isolation, exclusion and underdevelopment due to their different ethnic identity from the mainstream Indian society and due to them having a distinct culture, language, social organisation and economy. Being the tribal communities, they generally practice hunting, food gathering, shifting cultivation, and inhabit river valleys & forest regions. As a result, they are considerably deprived and have remained uneducated for generations.

The tribal population of the country as per 2011 census is 10.43 crores, constituting 8.6% of the total population, 89.97% of them live in rural areas and 10.03% live in urban areas (Source - www.censusindia.gov.in). More than two third of the ST population is concentrated only in the seven states of the country, viz. Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. There is no ST population in three states (Delhi NCR, Punjab and Haryana) and two UTs (Puducherry and Chandigarh). Their percentage in the population and numbers however vary from state to state.

They are mainly landless with little control over resources such as land, forest and water. This community generally comprises large proportion of labourers working in agriculture, casual work, and industries etc. This has resulted in extreme poverty, low levels of education, poor health and lower access to health care services among these people. Most of these community members belong to the poorest strata of the society. Just like scheduled

castes, the scheduled tribes also in general face severe levels of discrimination and deprivation in the Indian society.

3. **Backward class (BC)**

Backward class is a collective term used by the government of India to classify castes which are educationally and socially disadvantaged. These were found to comprise 52% of the country's population by the Mandal Commission report of 1980, a figure which had shrunk to 41% by 2006. The Backward Class Commission was appointed in 1953 with Kaka Kalelkar as the chairman. The Commission was asked to determine the criteria to be adopted to provide concessions to “socially and educationally backward classes” besides the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The commission prepared a list of about 2400 castes under this category (Source – www.planningcommission.nic.in).

The backward classes generally suffer from age-old disadvantages and disabilities which are as old as the Indian civilisation and derive their origin mainly from the caste system. The backward classes in India are considered socially, economically and educationally as among the most backward sections of Indian society. Low status, poverty and illiteracy are their common social problems which they have inherited as the virtue of them being born in a low caste or tribe.

4. **Women**

According to constitution of India, women are legal citizens of country and have equal rights with men. But traditionally Indian women suffer abundantly due to lack of acceptance of their equal rights by our male dominant society. In Indian society, women are generally considered responsible for only bearing children, yet they are generally malnourished and in poor physical health. Many of the Indian women are uneducated. Even though the Indian constitution has guaranteed free primary schooling to everyone till 14 years, very few girls actually attend proper schooling. Only about 39% of women in India actually attend schooling till primary education level (Source - www.global_india1.tripod.com). If the women are not properly educated, they are not able to hold prestigious jobs and consequently have to take on the most physically difficult and undesirable jobs.

In the Indian society, women face double the discrimination as besides being members of specific disadvantaged class, caste or ethnic group, they also face all the additional discriminations associated with the feminine gender. They have little control on

the resources and also on many important decisions related to their lives. In general, women have lower social status as compared to that of the fellow men.

5. Minorities

A minority can be defined as a sociological group or community that does not comprise a dominant voting majority on the political level out of the total population in a particular society. The union government has notified in total six religious communities as the minority communities in India. These are namely Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains. As per 1991 census, the minority community has total population of 145.31 million (17.2%). (Source - www.planningcommission.nic.in).

Among all the minorities, Muslim community is considered the most backward. One of the most important reasons of the backwardness of Indian Muslims is the lack of education. The proportion of population of Muslims has increased from 13.4% as per 2001 census to 14.2% as per 2011 census. They constitute about 72% of total population of minority communities of India. But in term of access to education particularly in higher education, the Muslim community is the most backward community (Source - euacademic.org/bookupload/13.pdf).

Need for development of socially disadvantaged

It is a well-known fact that the SCs, STs, BCs and the minorities in general, have been forced to remain as the relatively weaker sections of the Indian society. These people have been left behind in main-stream and are quite insulated from the economical growth and require special attention and care. On the other hand, for more than five millenniums of our great civilization, the women generally have been confined and oppressed to be the most exploited and disadvantaged sections of the Indian society. As listed in the above data, SCs and STs, together constitute about one fourth of the total population of the country. Such large group of people which are traditionally landless and daily wage earners still live in acute poverty and inhuman conditions. Such a condition does little to motivate them to aim high in academic and professional sphere.

But this bad situation cannot and should not continue anymore, definitely, not in the twenty-first century, when we are living in a fast changing and modernised digital world. In this world there should be no discrimination among the people. There is a strong need for the government to do something special and useful to free and liberate these weaker sections from the web of suppression, marginalisation and backwardness. But realistically, this vision

cannot be achieved by the government efforts alone. This centuries old malaise runs deep in the Indian society and requires strong contribution from the people too.

Indian constitution with regard to education of socially disadvantaged

Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes can be arguably considered as the two most deprived sections of the society in our country. These communities have been provided statutory safeguards under the Indian constitution, thereby making it obligatory on the part of the state to take special corrective measures for their educational upliftment.

There are several provisions in our constitution that provide the base for protection and promotion of the interests of these socially disadvantaged groups. These provisions have been listed below:

Art. 15 (4): It says, "Nothing in this article or in article 29(2) shall prevent the state from making any provisions for the advancement of any socially and economically backward classes of citizens or for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes". This clause started the era of reservations in India.

Art. 15 (5): This clause was added in 93rd amendment in 2005 and allows the state to make special provisions for backward classes or SCs or STs for admissions in private educational institutions, aided or unaided.

Art. 16 (4): This clause allows the state to reserve appropriate vacancies in the public service for any backward classes of the state that are not adequately represented in the public services.

Art. 16 (4A): This allows the state to implement reservation in the matter of promotion for SCs and STs.

Art. 16 (4B): This allows the state to consider unfilled vacancies reserved for backward classes as a separate class of vacancies not subject to a limit of 50% reservation.

Art. 17: This article is to abolish untouchability and its practice in any form.

Art. 19 (5): It allows the state to impose restrictions on freedom of movement or of residence in the benefit of scheduled tribes.

Art. 40: This article provides reservation of one-third seats in panchayats to SC/ST.

Art. 46: Enjoins the states to promote with care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, especially SC and ST.

Art. 164: Appoint special minister for tribal welfare in states of MP, Bihar and Odisha.

Art. 275: Allows special grant in aids to states for tribal welfare.

Art. 330/332: Allows reservation of seats for SC/ST in the parliament as well as in state legislatures.

Art. 335: Allows relaxation in qualifying marks for admission in educational institutes or promotions for SCs/STs.

Art. 338/338A/339: Establishes a national commission of SCs and STs. Art. 339 allows the central government to direct states to implement and execute plans for the betterment of SCs and STs.

Art. 340: Allows the President to appoint a commission to investigate the condition of socially and economically backward classes and give the report in the parliament (Source - www.legalservicesindia.com/.../vulnerable-groups-in-India-status-scheme...).

Steps taken by government of India to improve the situation of socially disadvantaged

Since independence, various governments have been making efforts through constitutional directives and amendments, committees, commissions, national policies and programmes to strengthen the level of education in the disadvantaged sections of society. Some of the initiatives in this regard include a number of centrally sponsored schemes for SCs, STs and other backward sections of the society. These are;

6. Initiatives to destitute families to send their children to school regularly till they attain the age of 14 years.
7. Scheme of pre-metric scholarships starting from class-I onwards for children of families engaged in manual occupations such as scavenging and tanning.
8. Post-metric scholarships
9. Grant-in-aid to voluntary organisations working to promote education among SC and ST children.
10. Abolition of tuition fees in government schools of all the states up to the upper primary levels. Besides this, most of the government schools have abolished tuition fees for SC and ST students up to senior secondary levels. Further, these states also provide various incentives like free textbooks, school bags, slates, uniforms and mid-day meal etc. to these children.
11. Special education development programmes for girls belonging to schedules castes having very low levels of literacy.
12. Provision of hostels for SC & ST boys and girls.

13. Reservation in recruitment of teachers from SC and ST applicants.
14. Location of school building and adult education centres to facilitate full participation of SC and ST students.
15. Provision of primary school and informal education centre in every ST habitation.
16. Provision of educational facility in pockets having low literacy levels for the development of girls' education in tribal areas. Residential schools including ashram schools are being established on a large scale for ST children as demonstrated in states like Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.
17. Various important projects like 'Lok Jumbish' and 'Shiksha Karmi' have been designed with special focus on SC and ST community habitation.
18. Reservation for SC and ST children at all levels of education in educational institutions.
19. SC and ST populations are the main targets covered under total literacy campaigns.
20. In Navodaya Vidyalayas, admission for SC and ST children are reserved on the basis of either the national norm of 15% and 7.5% respectively or the percentage of SC and ST population in the district, whichever is higher.
21. Coaching and teaching classes are being organised for SC and ST and other backward class students to enhance the scholastic achievement levels of these students. Special coaching for entrance examination for institutions of higher learning particularly for professional courses is being provided to SC and ST students of class X and XI.
22. Additional scholarships are provided to SC/ST girl students in the secondary and senior secondary classes.
23. Special coaching and remedial courses are being organised for SC/ST girl students.
24. NCERT, New Delhi has developed & published 10 textbooks in tribal dialects and prepared teaching and learning materials in 15 tribal dialects
25. (Source—[www.legalservicesindia.com/.../vulnerable-groups-in-india-status....](http://www.legalservicesindia.com/.../vulnerable-groups-in-india-status...))

Current status of Socially disadvantaged group

India's economic growth has been steady and it is also contributing towards the alleviation of poverty. However, a huge chunk of the world's poor still live in India and about 30% of the population were below the poverty line in 2009-2010 (Varadharajan, Thomas and Kurpad, 2013). What is more distressing is that most poor people in our country belong to the lower castes. Most of the people belonging to lower castes are illiterate. Education can be considered as the most potent tool for empowering the socially disadvantaged groups. After

independence, the government of India has taken a variety of constitutional and administrative measures for socioeconomic development of socially disadvantaged population in the country. There have been several levels of reservations in government sectors. The aim of these reservations is to pull out the disadvantaged sections of society and make them at par with the main stream of society. A number of laws were formulated like the Protection of civil rights act 1955/1976 and the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) act 1989 (Source - <https://palakmathur.wordpress.com/.../minorities-in-india-dalits-by-palak>). However, in practical sense, most of these laws have been quite ineffective in their proper implementation.

Despite various laws, developmental plans, facilities and provisions, inequalities continue to exist in all aspects of social life including education. The benefits extended by the government from time to time often do not reach a larger majority of socially disadvantaged people. Many of these people due to their illiteracy fail to utilize the special privileges under these welfare schemes. Though significant improvements have been obtained in the overall living conditions of disadvantaged, but these groups still remain backward due to some persistent problems that they have been facing. They have overall very low literacy rates besides the increasing gap between the educational status of socially disadvantaged and the general population. Adding to this is the region-wise and caste-wise variations which though quite disturbing, still continue to persist. Further, the educational status of scheduled caste women is even more depressing as it continues to be very low as compared to the total female literacy. Though over the years, reservation has helped in the creation of new educated dalit middle class, but this is relatively very small in size as majority of the dalit children in both rural and urban areas still do not attend schools regularly. The facts listed in various education documents emphasise that in rural areas schools are now available within walking distance to all children, but a closer look at these statistics reveal the other side of this story. There have been a number of suggestions proposed as to why the socially disadvantaged have yet to take advantage of open access to education. Some have suggested that this group possess an apathetic attitude towards education, and so the thought of attending school seems unappealing and inefficient compared to entering the workforce or doing nothing at all. Another suggestion of the cause for lower access to education to socially disadvantaged is that most families are caught in a vicious cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Therefore, not only do parents have no incentive to have their children attend school, but they also frequently

lack the financial means to send them to the fee-based schooling system of India (Nambissan 1011). The most realistic reasons for why the socially disadvantaged have failed to take advantage of their access to education is a combination of a history of oppression and a lack of access to local, quality education systems.

Conclusion

There have been many attempts over the past one hundred and fifty years to help increase the quality of life for the Socially disadvantaged section of India through various policies and provisions. The lack of incentives to pursue education for the socially disadvantaged of India can be traced back to a long history of mistreatment and oppression. Still occurring today, caste harassment makes teaching environments unstable for disadvantaged children, it places caste homes on the outskirts of towns so that children have greater distances to walk to school, and it economically suppresses them so that they are unable to pay for their children's education. Minor increases in incentives for socially disadvantaged to pursue primary education have been beneficial, but not sufficient in equalizing the enrolment gap between the members of socially disadvantaged and members of upper castes. For significant progress to be made in increasing the primary enrolment rates of these children, development organizations must continue to explore varying levels of incentives and pursue national social equality in India.

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