
UNIT 21 SCHEDULED CASTES

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21.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the discrimination faced by the Scheduled Castes;
- discuss various reasons as to how they were scheduled by the Government for the purpose of reservation or constitutional benefits and to what extent they have benefited from the Government's development programmes; and
- analyse how the Scheduled Castes have organised themselves socially and politically vis-a-vis the upper castes.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall analyse the Scheduled Castes as a separate and socially stratified category. We shall look at their historical background and examine the problems faced by them vis-a-vis the other upper castes. Following this we shall deal with Scheduled Castes and their social mobility. Then we shall examine the various constitutional measures and development programmes which have been adopted for the Scheduled Castes. Finally, we shall wind up this discussion by examining the working of the reservation policy and the position of the Scheduled Castes in the contemporary India.

21.2 SCHEDULED CASTE AS A COMMUNITY— THEIR STRENGTH AND THE BACKGROUND

You must have come across the term Scheduled Caste and untouchables several times. I am sure you must have wondered what the term meant or who these people are? You must be having an idea that these people are from the lowest

strata most of them working as menial labour. But do you know exactly who the Scheduled Caste are and how they came to be, what their composition is? In the sections to follow you will get to know who Scheduled Caste are, their strength and occupation. You will also familiarise yourself with explanations on the origins and the historical background of the Scheduled Caste.

21.2.1 Scheduled Castes: Social Backgrounds

Caste system forms the essential component of stratification system in India. The Varna system, constitutes a status-hierarchy with the Brahmins on the top followed by *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. The scheduled fall out of the fourfold Varna System.

The Scheduled Caste is a politico-legal-term. It was first coined by the Simon Commission and then Government of India, Act, 1935. When India became independent this term was adopted by the Constitution for the purpose of providing them some special facilities and the constitutional guarantees.

Yet Untouchables or the Scheduled Castes do not constitute a homogeneous group. They are internally differentiated in terms of occupation, numerical segregated on the criteria of untouchability.

Another term used for the Scheduled Castes or Untouchables is “Harijans” (the children of God). This term was first used by Mahatma Gandhi, which refers to an aggregate of castes which may differ from each other and which have been reduced to the lowest ritual and social status in the caste hierarchy. Another term which comes into currency almost at the same time is depressed class or classes. This term was used by Dr. Ambedkar and it referred to those classes of categories or people who were poor, exploited and socially and ritually or religiously degraded. They were treated as *pariah* or socially defiled. In term which is currently popular and is preferred by the scheduled caste is the term *dalit*. The word *dalit* is inclusive, in the sense that it includes also those communities groups of people, who are marginalised and subjugated it is used in a generic sense to the untouchable or the scheduled caste.

21.2.2 Strength of the Scheduled Castes

Each Indian state has its own list of Scheduled Castes many of their names are synonymous. Some of the castes number several million members each.

The total population of the Scheduled Castes according to 1991 census was 138.22 million which constituted 16.5% of total population of the country. The largest of these castes are the Chamars who form – one quarter of the number of Scheduled Caste – *Banghi*, *the Adi-Dravida*, *Pasi*, *Madiga*, *Dusadhi Mali*, *Parayan*, *Koli Mahas*, *Adi-Karnataka*, *Namashudra* etc. almost half of the total number of Scheduled Caste people live in the five states of Hindi belt in U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana. In the south they are concentrated mainly in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In the East in West Bengal. The highest ratio of the Scheduled Caste is in Punjab 28.3. About 84% of the scheduled castes live in rural areas and are working as agricultural laborers, share-croppers, tenants and marginal farmers. Among the, Harijan the ratio of agricultural workers is particularly high in Bihar, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Kerala. More, than one-third of the agricultural workers of India belong to the untouchable castes. A vast majority of the scheduled caste do not possess land, 32.2% have less than 1 hectare.

Almost all persons engaged in jobs like sweeping, scavenging and tanning are from Scheduled Castes. About 2/3rd of the bonded labour are from Scheduled Castes. Literacy among the Scheduled Castes is extremely low. Most of the Scheduled Castes live below the poverty line and are victims of social and economic exploitation. Let us see what the justifications are for the origins of this exploitation.

Distribution of Scheduled Caste Population (1991 Census) in 15 States which Account for 97.2% of Their Total Population

	Total population in 1991	SC population in 1991	SC population as % of State population	SC as % of total population	Cumulative SC population
India	838,583,988	138,223,277	16.5	16.5	
15 most populous states					
Uttar Pradesh	139,112,287	29,276,455	21.0	21.2	21.2
West Bengal	68,077,965	16,080,611	23.6	11.5	32.8
Bihar	86,374,465	12,571,700	14.6	9.1	41.9
Tamil Nadu	55,858,946	10,712,266	19.2	7.7	49.6
Andhra Pradesh	66,508,008	10,592,066	16.9	7.7	57.3
Madhya Pradesh	66,181,170	9,626,679	14.5	7.0	64.3
Maharashtra	78,937,187	8,757,842	11.1	6.3	70.6
Rajasthan	44,005,990	7,607,820	17.3	5.5	76.1
Karnataka	44,977,201	7,369,279	16.4	5.3	81.4
Punjab	20,281,969	5,724,528	28.3	4.2	85.6
Orissa	31,659,736	5,129,314	16.2	3.7	89.3
Haryana	16,463,648	3,250,933	19.7	2.4	91.7
Gujarat	41,309,582	3,060,358	7.4	2.2	93.9
Kerala	29,098,518	2,886,522	9.9	2.1	96.0
Assam	22,414,322	1,652,412	7.4	1.2	97.2
Total for 15 major states	811,260,994	134,323,785	16.6	16.6	97.2
Other smaller states	27,322,994	3,899,492	14.3	14.3	2.8
India	838,583,988	138,223,277	16.5	16.5	100

Source : Census of India 1991

21.2.3 The Untouchable Castes and their Origins

The term Scheduled Castes signifies those groups of people who were out of the caste system or the varna hierarchy. They comprise the bulk of “untouchables” or untouchable castes. These groups or castes have been discriminated against by the superior castes through the ages and they have never had any kind of social acceptance from the majority of the people who belong to the upper castes. The Scheduled Caste were deemed untouchable and polluting by the upper caste due to their so called polluting activities like

Projected Scheduled Caste Populatio in 2001
(assuming same proportion of states' population as in 1991)

	Total population in 2001	SC population in 2001	SC population as % of State population	SC as % of total population	Cumulative SC population
15 most populous states					
Uttar Pradesh	175,626,000	36,960,838	21.0	21.2	
West Bengal	80,312,000	18,970,397	23.6	11.6	
Bihar	102,423,000	14,907,545	14.6	9.1	
Tamil Nadu	62,400,000	11,966,667	19.2	7.7	
Andhra Pradesh	76,773,000	12,226,896	15.9	7.7	
Madhya Pradesh	81,666,000	11,879,094	14.5	7.0	
Maharashtra	92,314,000	10,241,959	11.1	6.3	
Rajasthan	54,816,000	9,476,670	17.3	5.5	
Karnataka	52,922,000	8,670,993	16.4	5.3	
Punjab	23,858,000	6,755,026	28.3	4.2	
Orisssa	36,284,000	5,878,509	16.2	3.7	
Haryana	20,204,000	3,989,508	19.7	2.4	
Gujarat	49,194,000	3,644,463	7.4	2.2	
Kerala	32,605,000	3,234,359	9.9	2.1	
Assam	26,589,00	1,968,478	7.4	1.2	
Total for 15 major states	967,968,000	160,771,375	16.6	16.6	
Other smaller states*	49,558,000	7,036,794	14.3	14.3	
India	1,017,544,000	167,858,169	16.5	16.5	

Source : Population estimates for 2001 are official estimates based on projections by the Expert Committee.

scavenging, cremation, skinning and hiding, etc. Not only because of their unclean occupations, but also due to their so called 'dark complexion' they were placed at the bottom of the ritual and social hierarchies of the caste and varna system. Since the *Varna ashram darma* – the philosophy and the religious duty demanded that each *jati* was to follow one's traditional occupation – like priest's son becomes a priest and a shoe-maker or tanner's son or a becoming a shoe maker or a hereditary tanner. It was impossible for the untouchable castes to better their position by changing their occupation. The association of occupation with caste became inseparable, so much so, that the very fact of being born into a community, whether you engaged in clean or unclean activity had become irrelevant. Thus untouchables are those castes which were outside the pale of varna system. They were said to be polluting and marginalised and consigned to the lowest rung in society. Several ideological justifications existed for the sustenance of these hierarchical system, which kept everybody in their place.

The untouchables had no share in the social, political and judiciary powers and their position was almost like that of a slave. Various scholars have given different viewpoints and explained why untouchability was practised in the Hindu caste society.

G.Hanumantha Rao in his book *Caste and Poverty* says that low social status attached to certain occupations is the cause of untouchability. It relates to impure occupations such as removal of carcass, spinning, tanning, scavenging etc. While analysing the origin of caste, system J.H. Hutton suggests that ideas of ceremonial purity were first applied to aboriginals in connection with sacrificial, ritual and certain occupational activities. Max Weber, also has described certain occupations as ritually impure. He states, that the lowest caste structure was considered to be absolutely defiling and contaminating. Thus, the ideas of purity, whether occupational or ceremonial, is found to have been the factor contributing to the genesis and evolution of caste and the practise of untouchability,. The Vedic literature has referred to the Dharmashutras that declare *Chandalas* (cremators) as a progeny of the most hated people of the reverse order of mixed unions, that is of a Brahmin female with a Shudra male. Kautilya agrees with the Dharmashutra writers and he says that people born out of mixed unions were separate castes. He recommends that marriage between different castes should not be allowed and people of such unions should be treated as Shudra.

Manu, the earliest law giver, has very explicitly talked about a caste called *svapathas*, who were grouped with *Chandalas* and were prescribed to live outside the villages, use of shrouds of corpses as their clothing, broken pot-for meal, iron for ornaments and dogs and donkeys for their wealth. *Mritapas* were also another type of Shudras. The food vessels of *Chandalas* and *Mritapas* could not be used by others because no known method of cleaning pots was regarded as adequate to purify them.

Patanjali, who lived before Manu the great grammarian, had said that both the *Chandalas* and the *Mritapas* resided like other Shudras such as carpenters, blacksmiths, washermen or weavers, within the limits of the towns and villages of the Aryans. In the days of Manu they were not only excluded from the village but were assigned duties of cremators or hangmen which were totally unclean.

In about 1020 AD the *Doms* and *Chandalas* were two groups not reckoned among any caste or guild. They were-occupied with works like cleaning of the villages and similar other services. They were considered as one sole class and were distinguished by their occupations. The first group of the *Antyajjas* who had further sub-divisions following certain crafts were totally eight in number. They lived near villages, they were jugglers, basket and rope makers, sailors, fishermen, and hunters of wild animals and birds. They could freely intermarry though they belonged to separate caste groups. They could not marry with the shoemakers and the weavers however. The shoemakers and weaver were another group of *Antyajjas* who could marry only among themselves. In the past the untouchable castes as a whole were barred from any of the rituals. They did not have any sanctity to perform or participate in any religious or sacred ritual.

It was thought, that the untouchable is unclean by birth; he is born into a caste every member of which, irrespective of birth or occupation, is an untouchable.

Hinduism does not provide any means to him to become clean by the performance of any ritual. They were assigned to their unclean task and never allowed to come out of it. The main condition of their survival was the strict observance of a code of conduct established for them. The bounds of which they were not permitted to cross. Not only did they not have access to public places, but they were not allowed any physical contact by their breath and glance as well. The use of force occupied a main place in keeping the untouchables in their place. Punishment for any breach of rule was mutilation and even taking away life.

Another important explanation to the origins of untouchable caste has been that of the materialists. According to the materialist untouchability grew out of a social class who are in the lowest rung who did not possess the right of holding and usage of land. These landless workers were semi-slaves and were in debt bondage, who not only toiled on other people's land but were forced to carry on unclean occupations. They were secured by the social bondage and by the concept of destiny or karma where they were ordained to be doomed to sub-human living.

These castes are referred even today in different regions according to the dialects and languages, which they speak. These people have occupied a very low social and economic position in the caste and class hierarchies.

Besides, they were subjected to various types of social disabilities. For instance, they were not allowed to enter the house of the higher castes. However, they were allowed to work as labourers during construction or repair, stoning the grain, etc. But later the houses so constructed were purified by sprinkling cow urine or cow dungs. In the event of their touching the utensils and other non-inflammables, these things were to be put on fire and then purified by sprinkling cow urine. They were also not allowed to walk on streets or public roads, or enter the temples, or heard in the court of justice. These practices have remained inherent part of the Hindu caste society. Such disabilities of the Scheduled Castes have posed tremendous obstacles for their progress as well as of the society as a whole.

The segregation based on occupation has slowly narrowed down and instead it is primarily based on birth in the low castes. Even if the person is not engaged in the traditional occupations but since he/she is born into the caste, it became his/her status and position in the society. On the basis of their birth in the low castes, untouchables were always pushed into the background and their socio-economic contribution was never recognised in the history. Manus had always proclaimed superiority of the Brahmins which closed the channels of upward social mobility for any other castes and the worst affected groups were the untouchables. Even today the Scheduled Castes lag behind the upper castes in almost all fields and they undergo hardships, sufferings and oppression by the upper castes.

It can be seen from the preceding discussion that various justifications, reasons have gone into placing the Scheduled Castes in a exploitative situation and that this exploitation has gone on for centuries. Modern India realised a need to redress this marginalised state of the Scheduled Caste. In our next section. We will examine the various measures, which are institutionally provided to improve the status of Scheduled Castes.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) When was the term Scheduled Caste first used?
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- 2) What are the various names used to address the Scheduled Caste?
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- 3) What explanation is given by materialist class analyst to explain the origin of untouchable caste?
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21.3 CONSTITUTION AND THE SCHEDULED CASTES

Before being scheduled and embodied in the Government of India Act 1935 and later in the constitution of free India in 1950, these castes were classified as “exterior” or “depressed” castes or classes. A caste was classified exterior or depressed if it was found subjected to a set of social disabilities or restrictions. According to the 1931 census, these disabilities or restrictions were: (1) inability to be served by clean-Brahmins; (2) inability to be served by the barbers, water carriers, tailors, etc. who served the caste Hindus; (3) inability to serve water to caste Hindus; (4) inability to enter Hindu temples; (5) inability to use public convenience such as roads, ferries, wells or schools; and (6) inability to dissociate oneself from despised occupation.

Ambedkar played key role in the fight to give Scheduled Caste a dignity and their rights. He among others championed the cause of Scheduled Caste. During independent India certain reforms were undertaken to remove the discriminatory practices of intouchability.

With the coming into force of the Constitution of India the Scheduled Castes were guaranted certain essential rights and benefits. Under Article 341(1), the Constitution after consultation with the governor of a State may specify,

“The castes, races, tribes or, parts of groups within castes or races, tribes which shall be deemed to be scheduled castes for the purpose of the constitution.”

However, according to the Article 341 (2) the Parliament of India, can include or exclude any group from the list of Scheduled Castes through an enactment of law.

The Scheduled Castes are socially and economically backward groups and, therefore, the constitution gives special protection to them. Under Article 46 of the constitution, it is the responsibility of the State to promote with special care the educational and -economic interests of the weaker sections of people and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in particular, and to protect them from social injustices and all forms of exploitation. The Preamble reflects the basic philosophy of the Indian constitution which stands by the Scheduled Castes.

There are a number of articles included in Part-III of the constitution which provides fundamental rights to the citizens, Article 14, 15, 16 and 17 provide rights to equality. Article 14 of the constitution provides right to equality before law that means, every citizen in the country is equal before law. Article 15 prohibits social and educational discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. This article provides that no citizen shall be prevented from access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, place of entertainment, use of public facilities like wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, places of public resort, etc. This also empowers the State to make special provision for advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes of the citizens.

Article 16 prescribes the equality of opportunity in matters of public appointment. It provides that the State can reserve posts in public services for members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Then, finally Article 17 of this part of Constitution legally abolishes the practice of untouchability in any form against the Scheduled Castes. This article treats practice of untouchability as a legal offence and the offender is to be punished in accordance with the law. The offender may be imprisoned and or be subjected to fine. Later the provisions made under this article of the Constitution were strengthened and made more stringent under the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955.

Article 46 mentions specifically that the State must endeavour to promote the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes among the weaker sections of the society.

More precisely, the State shall reserve the public jobs for the members of the Scheduled Caste and Tribes. Two Articles, 330 and 332, lay down that there shall be reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha (Article 330) and State Legislative Assembly (Article 332) in proportion to the number of the Scheduled Castes in various states. And finally, according to Article 340, the President can appoint a commission to investigate the difficulties of the socially and educationally backward classes of the citizens and to make recommendations to remove such difficulties. The commission is also empowered to take stock of the progress made by these classes of citizens due to provisions made under various articles for their welfare, protection and development.

21.3.1 Reservation Policy for the Scheduled Castes

We have mentioned various articles enshrined in the Constitution for welfare, protection and development of the Scheduled Castes. Here, we shall discuss some articles which specifically provide reservation to these castes.

The aim of the reservation policy is to help Scheduled Castes to come up, within specified time, at par with others in the society. The reservation policy has three major components.

These are:

- 1) reservation in government appointments,
- 2) reservation in admission to educational institutions and
- 3) reservation of seats in the House of People (Lok Sabha) and the Legislative Assemblies of the States.

There are other progressive measures to boost employment and steps are taken to eliminate poverty. Further, 15% and 7.5% posts are reserved for the Scheduled Caste and Tribe candidates in government jobs. Such reservations of posts are applicable in all the categories of jobs both in the Central and State Government services. In the recent years, such reservation has been extended to the services in the public undertaking units.

In addition to these, the State Governments have also adopted other measures for school children of the Scheduled Castes. These are:

- a) provision of books;
- b) provision of educational equipment;
- c) provision of mid-day meals;
- d) provision of stipends;
- e) provision of school uniforms etc.

Besides, 15% seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and 7.5% for tribes' in admission in public schools. Similar provisions are also available for the SC/ST students in their admission to colleges, universities and other educational institutions. Then equal percentage of hostel seats are also reserved for them. There are post-matric scholarship by the various state governments to the students belonging to these castes and tribes.

Out of 542 Lok Sabha seats 79 seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Similarly, out of 3997 seats 541 seats in the State Legislatures are reserved for Scheduled Castes.

The bulk of the Scheduled Caste constituencies contain 10 to 30% of the Scheduled Castes population, and around 75% of the Scheduled Castes population live in scattered fashion outside the constituencies reserved for them. This means, the elections of the Scheduled Caste candidates even from the reserved constituencies are largely dependent on the non-Scheduled Castes. Besides, the Scheduled Castes in rural areas are politically less conscious and are influenced by caste politics. Many of them do not exercise their franchise or they are absent during the time of voting due to reasons of migration for employment. In the urban areas, the Scheduled Castes are relatively in a better position. But in spite of the reservation and other developmental measures the deprived sections who are less in number and who are uneducated continue to

remain backward. The caste class nexus works strongly and allows only a few castes to be politically or socially mobile. This has defeated the very purpose of the reservation and the intention of the constitutional measures for development of the Scheduled Castes.

21.3.2 Developmental Programmes

Besides the above mentioned provisions and measures, a number of other developmental schemes have been adopted for the people in general and the Scheduled Castes in particular in the rural areas. Some of these are: integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), the new 20 point programme etc. But incidentally these programmes have not properly been implemented at the block level. A comprehensive strategy was worked out during the 6th Five Year Plan which had 3 aspects:

- 1) Special Component Plans (SCP) for the Central and the State Governments for monitoring various programmes for development of the Scheduled Castes.
- 2) Special Central Assistance (SCA) for Special Component Plans for the Scheduled Castes in the different states.
- 3) Scheduled Caste Development Corporations (SCDC) in the States.

The SCP identifies schemes for welfare and development of the Scheduled Castes and provides financial assistance to the State Governments to various programmes under these schemes, it acts as an interface between the Scheduled Caste families and financial institutions in respect of bankable schemes of economic development. The corporation provides subsidy loans and other kinds of assistance to these families, and thereby, helps to increase the flow of funds from financial institutions to the Scheduled Caste families. In the Seventh and Eighth Five Year Plans also the Central and State Governments have set up a large portions of the plan outlays for the welfare and development of the Scheduled Castes under the special component programmes.

While the constitution emphasises on social and educational backwardness of certain castes and tribes for their being eligible for the benefits of the constitutional provisions, the present controversy centres around the definition of backwardness itself. According to this, the criteria for identifying those deprived sections of population who are eligible for the Government's privileges and concessions have not been clearly identified in the present reservation policy. There are many socially backward castes who are economically forward and are reaping the fruits of reservation while the majority of the needy population have no access whatsoever to these constitutional measures. The experience in the last fifty years or so has shown that the reservation policy has not delivered the desired results to the right people. The policy has generated conflicts and tensions between those who are beneficiaries of reservation and those who are out of the purview of the policy. We have to accept the fact that the opposition of the weaker sections by the stronger sections of the society has not ended. The benefits of development in every aspects of life have been appropriated by about 20% of the population who are at the top and are drawn more from the nonscheduled and less from the scheduled castes.

The intended benefits of the reservation policy as well as of the other developmental programmes are not, made available to those people who rightly

deserve them. There are various infrastructural levels at which these benefits are appropriated as the caste and class politics works very strongly given the existing social circumstances. At the operational level, there are innumerable barriers, which have to be removed. Against this backdrop, it is realised that the Scheduled Castes have to organise themselves socially and politically in order to get their due share and rights and to fight against the dominant castes or class and remove the caste differences among themselves.

The attitudes of the upper castes towards the reservation policy and other developmental measures have also to be positively directed so that the goal of social progress, social justice and social equality can be achieved. The Government and the power elite have to understand the socio-economic factors which seem to make reservation necessary for those people who have been victims of social discrimination and social injustice for over centuries. Their attitudes and perception towards the lower castes have to undergo radical change for getting the above goals realised.

The analogy of footrace here is applied for minorities facing disadvantaged and the need for affirmative action therefore. This analogy was used in the United States to reassert the need for affirmative action. The analogy can also apply to Scheduled Castes who are saddled with all kinds of disadvantages. The minority female that the box talks about could well be a Scheduled Caste woman or man who has been wearing the weights of discrimination for centuries.

What Makes a Fair Foot-race?

Imagine two runners in a 20 mile race. One of the runners must start with a 10-pound weight on each of her feet. As a result, she cannot run as fast, tires more quickly, and falls far behind. Almost anyone would agree that this is not a fair race. So, halfway through the race, the judges decide that she can take off the weights. Is this enough to make the race fair? Does she have any realistic change to win from her present position? Would it not be fairer to allow her to move ahead to the position of the other runner to compensate for the disadvantage of wearing the weights for the first half of the race?

This analogy had been used to illustrate the reasoning behind affirmative action (Farley, 1988, pp. 265, 336). The runner represents a minority of female individual seeking a good job or entry into graduate or professional school. The weights represent the effects of both past discrimination and the institutional discrimination she encountered in her elementary and secondary education. Examples of such discrimination, which may or many not be intentional, include low teacher expectations, tracking, biased tests and classroom materials, lack of minority and female role models, and under funded and segregated schools. Just as the runner is disadvantaged by the weights, the minority applicant is disadvantaged by poverty and institutional discrimination. Just as the other runner was not encumbered by weights in the first half of the race, the white male applicant was not burdened by these disadvantaged in early life. Most people would agree that is would not be fair to expect the runner to catch up after having to run half the race with weights. Could the same argument be made in the case of the minority or female applicant who often has to run the first half of the “race” of life with the “weight” of poverty and educational disadvantage? Is it fair, when that minority person applied for college or employment, to say “Now the weights are gone, so it’s a fair race?”)

21.4 IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG THE SCHEDULED CASTE

From our discussion in the preceding pages it is very clear that Scheduled Caste or the dalits have always been kept at the fringes of society, treated as untouchables they have been exploited for centuries. To improve their conditions the constitution has not only banned untouchability but gave various provisions which have offered an avenue for a mobility and new identity among the Scheduled Caste. Besides this, the Scheduled Caste as a community have tried to forge a new identity and also, found ways of moving upwards both at socio-cultural as well as political level. In the section to follow we will talk about social mobility and identity among the Scheduled Caste.

21.4.1 Scheduled Castes and Social Mobility

Besides, the various constitutional provisions and welfare and developmental measures for socio-economic progress of the Scheduled Castes after independence, the dalits and their sympathisers have carried out a number of social movements. In the modern times some major movements were led by Gandhi and Ambedkar. Here, we shall examine the movements led by Ambedkar and Gandhi as well as constitutional provisions and measures which have been able to bring a direct influence on the status or positional uplift of the Scheduled Castes.

Yogendra Singh, in his book *Social Stratification and Change* in India has argued that there are two kinds of social movements. One is with the integrative orientation and the other is with the alienating orientation. The efforts made by the lower castes to sanskritise themselves may be called a movement with an integrative orientation because it does not renounce caste as a system of social stratification. The motive force for the backward and the Scheduled Castes to sanskritise was just to ventilate their deprived feelings of status and position which were denied to them for centuries. By imitating the higher castes they tried to find a position as that of the upper castes. But they have not always succeeded in their efforts, as there is no legitimate acceptance by the upper castes.

The movements of the Scheduled Castes with integrative orientation have changed the emphasis in the present time. From imitating the upper castes, the Scheduled Castes have started looking at them (upper castes) with disdain. This has led to a horizontal level caste consolidation. The evidence is provided by many sociological studies. The sub-castes within the scheduled castes have started coming together to form a 'homogeneous' caste group and exploring a new identity. There is change from sanskritisation to consolidation of power and to acquire a positive identity. The consolidation of power is also seen in the increasing presence of dalit based parties, especially BSP in the Indian political arena. In turn, this has contributed to independent identity for Scheduled Castes and has made them less dependent on the upper castes.

Ambedkar has led another movement which was a move from the caste affiliations to embracing Buddhism. In 1956, he launched the drive for mass conversion of the Scheduled Castes to Buddhism, within a few months after his death, his followers organised the political wing of the Scheduled Castes in the name of the Republican Party of India. Both these reflected the alternate

religio-political orientation of the scheduled caste movement with respect to caste based social stratification and political mobilisation. In this regard, Yogendra Singh concludes that Scheduled Caste movements for social mobility has oscillated, on a tendency of integration to sanskritisation and of alienation, conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism or Christianity to Islam.

Undoubtedly, there is relative improvement in terms of upward mobility of certain Scheduled Caste families and individuals. There are also favourable shifts in the political and social awakening among the Scheduled Castes. But the constitutional measures have helped only those Scheduled Castes who have a dominant minority position in a particular region. An analysis of the enforcement of the Untouchability (Offences) Act in various courts indicate that most cases are not against individuals or specific castes but only against institutions. It is also revealed that the enforcement of various measures under the Act is more effective only in those places where the Scheduled Castes are politically more conscious of their rights or have high literacy rates. Relatively speaking there has been a considerable improvement in the social and economic status of the Scheduled Castes but they still lag behind, in many ways, in relation to the upper castes.

Activity 1

Visit the nearest settlement around your house which has predominant Scheduled Caste population and ask them their problems and write them down. Compare your note with others at the Study Centre.

21.4.2 Scheduled Castes Seeking a New Identity

Untouchability is a cultural problem related to the Hindu religion and the caste system. Many social movements were launched by social reformers and religious leaders against untouchability. A number of such movements launched by the *dalits* or the Scheduled Castes under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar gained strong momentum. This was, reflected in the growing self consciousness of the Scheduled Castes which continues even today. However, the spontaneous revolts and organised struggles launched in different parts of the country against the practice of untouchability and their economic exploitation are not recent phenomena. There had always been anti-untouchability movements throughout the history. But their numbers had increased since the British rule in India and especially during the freedom struggle.

a) Anti-untouchability in Bhakti and Arya Samaj movements

The anti-untouchability movements may be classified into two categories: (1) reformative movements and (2) alternative movements. The reformative movements aim to reform the caste system in order to put an end to the problem of untouchability. The alternative movements aim to create 'an alternative cultural environment by conversion to' another religion. The reformative movements arrived out during different periods in India are broadly of three types: (1) bhakti movement (2) neovedantic movement (3) sanskritisation movement. Bhakti movement was popular during the medieval period in India when there was a succession of foreign invaders like the Mughals, Turks, Arabs and the Afghans. The bhakti movement tried to bring some sort of cultural and emotional integration between the upper castes and the lower castes. Kabir, Ramanand, Chaitanya, Tukaram and Ramanujam were the noted saints, of that

period who spread the spirit of brotherhood among all human beings. They preached that every caste member could attain salvation through Bhakti to God. In spite of all this, the socio-economic position of the Sudra/untouchable castes remained unchanged. Even the temples constructed by the members of the bhakti movement did not allow the untouchables to enter their premises.

Neo-vedantic movement assumed two forms namely neo-vedantism and sanskritisation. Vivekanand, Dayanand and Gandhi emphasised on secularisation of profession. Dayanand Saraswati the founder of the Arya Samaj believed that the caste system was a political institution created by the rulers' for the common good of society and not a natural or religious distinction.

b) **Gandhi and the Movements of Untouchables**

Gandhi also said that all the four varnas were equal in status but not equal in opportunity and occupational division. For him, the varna system was not a hierarchical order. A scavenger had the same status as a Brahmin. As stated earlier in this unit, he symbolically called untouchables as "Harijans", that is "the people of God". Gandhi believed in the unity of various social groups. This was reflected in all his actions like his adoption of a harijan girl as his own daughter. He voluntarily decided to live with the untouchables to become one with them in appearance and in the standard of living. He even opposed separate electorate for the untouchables because, in his opinion, it could intensify the social division, which already existed in Hinduism. Gandhi had organised the Harijan Sevak Sangh for improving the life of the Harijans. The Sangh started hostels for the school untouchable children and improved work conditions of Harijans.

c) **Sanskritisation: Anti Untouchability Movements in South India**

Further, there were quite a few movements launched by the untouchable castes in different parts of the country which successfully mobilised the people of these castes to forego their traditional way of life, food habits and even name of the castes. These were very much in tune to sanskritisation. In some cases sanskritisation encouraged upward status mobility to honour castes. By abandoning their traditional occupations many of the lower castes had struggled for a higher status in the caste hierarchy. They followed Sanskritic norms and rituals and justified their claims to a higher status by creating their own mythologies according to the local traditions. However, how far their claims for equality with the upper castes was accepted in a particular region was always a question. Those castes who have tried to seek a new identity by identifying with and imitating certain customs and practices of upper castes are still treated as untouchables in their places of residence. But there are a few caste groups like the *Nadars* in Tamil Nadu, *Ezhavas* in Kerala and the *Jatavs* of Agra in Uttar Pradesh who have somehow been able to organise themselves to fight against the oppression meted out to them.

Hardgrave has studied the *Nadar* community in Tamil Nadu. The Nadars who were traditionally engaged in toddy-tapping were treated as untouchables. They rejected their title or surname of *Shanan* and *shavar* to adopt a new title or surname of *Nadar*. This attempt was mainly to dissociate themselves from the traditional occupation of the community. They followed Sanskritic rituals and made attempts to enter temples as early as in 1970. A section of *Nadars* in some villages and towns also converted to Christianity and formed organisations to strengthen unity among them. Many of their attempts to enter temples were

not fulfilled in the beginning because there were lot of restrictions and resentment posed by the caste Hindus or the upper castes. Some cases were taken to the court which delivered the judgement against the *Nadar* community and they were asked to pay Rs. 500/- for purification of the temples in which they attempted to enter. Despite all these failures, the *Nadars* continued their efforts for status elevation and undertook many secular activities. They formed the *Nadar Mahajan Sangham* which carried out literacy programmes and campaigned against toddy-tapping within the community. They also participated in political activities and even obtained political positions. In the 1921 census they got themselves registered as *Nadar Kshatriyas*. M.N. Srinivas has noted that the census operations introduced by the British made every caste self-conscious of its rights and status. This activated the process of sanskritisation.

Similar to *Nadar*, the *Ezhavas* in Kerala also tried to achieve upward social mobility. The *Ezhavas* were also traditionally toddy-tappers. They were led by Shri Narayanan Guru and the S.N.D.P. Yogam, forming an association called *Shri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalayan*. In the latter part of the 19th century the association launched activities for sanskritising the norms and customs of *Ezhavas*. It undertook secular programmes such as establishing schools and co-operative societies. The *Ezhavas* also joined hands with Christians and Muslims for achieving their aims.

d) **Anti-untouchability movement in U.P.**

The Jatavs of Uttar Pradesh also tried to sanskritise themselves by giving up their traditional occupation which were directly linked with the Jajmani system, that is, hereditary occupational services to the upper castes by the lower castes. The Jatavs of Agra were urban dwellers and the majority of them were also engaged in the leather work (shoe making). So, many of the Jatavs could improve their social and economic conditions once the shoe industry developed in and around Agra. Like the *Nadars* and *Ezhavas* the *Jatavs* and *Mahars* also formed organisation to spread sanskritic norms and customs among their caste members. They started schools and distributed scholarships to deserving students of their jatis, in order to identify themselves as a higher caste, like the *Nadars*, the *Jatavs* also claimed for a new and separate identity (from the rest of the Scheduled Castes). O.M. Lynch in his book "Politics of Untouchability" has shown that the *Jatavs* claim to be recognised as a separate caste among the scheduled castes without being amalgamated with other castes under the list of scheduled castes which the *Jatavs* claim not to have any connection.

e) **Anti-untouchability movement in Maharashtra**

The *Mahars* in Maharashtra under the leadership of Ambedkar demanded, in 1919, separate electorate for the depressed classes.

Many of the militant *Mahars* also got extremely frustrated with their abortive attempts towards sanskritisation and even gave up Hindu religion completely. Many *Jatavs* also followed this example later. In the early fifties, Ambedkar found that Buddhism was appropriate as an alternative religion. He preferred Buddhism primarily because in his opinion, it is an indigenous

Indian religion of equality, a religion which was anti-caste and anti-Brahmin. Consequently, along with him a large *Mahars* of Maharashtra converted to Buddhism. The Militant *Mahar* youth organised the Dalit Panther Movement

in 1942 because the religious conversion did not make any significant change in their socio-economic condition. Now, the scheduled castes are involved in civil rights movements, students movements in the university and college campuses, and also in the ecological movements in many regions. Thus, they are collectively endorsing their identity in various ways to pave a brighter future for themselves. The new identities of the scheduled castes are being accepted by others. Because of their educational development and the westernisation the practices of untouchability and discrimination against them are slowly becoming less. The welfare and developmental measures undertaken for the improvement in their economic position and upliftment of their social status have been responsible for opening new vistas for the depressed classes. In spite of all these, we cannot say for certain that the Scheduled Castes are enjoying an equal status at par with the others. Their present generation has just set the stage for development and we can hope that the Scheduled Castes would acquire a new and a positive identity vis-a-vis rest of the castes and communities in years to come.

A few more untouchable castes left Hinduism and developed their own separate religion. The *Chamars* and *Chuhars* of Punjab formed the *Adi Dharm* which believed that they were not part of the Hindu caste system. Later, the followers of *Adi Dharm* were politically aligned and absorbed in Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation in the late 1940s. Some Untouchables followed Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, and all those who were converted to Christianity or Islam did not make any attempts to Sanskritise them. The classic case is of the *Nadars* of Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu who converted to Christianity. However, all those who have become Christians have not ceased to be untouchables. Caste differentiation has permeated itself even within the Church. The economic differentiation between the *Pulaya* Christian (traditional untouchables) and the Syrian Christians in Kerala still persists. Earlier, the Syrian Christians considered themselves to be more superior to *Pulaya* Christians in terms of education and employment. But now their situation is gradually improving. K.C. Alexander who has made a noteworthy study of social mobility among the *Pulaya* Christians has observed the *Pulayas* who now are university graduates and who are employed in white collar jobs are rarely treated as untouchables.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The scheduled castes are:
 - a) Kshatriyas
 - b) Brahmins
 - c) Shudras
 - d) Untouchables outside the four-fold division of various systems or the caste system.
- 2) Antyajnas was referred in the Writing of
- 3) Which of the statements is right? Put a (✓) mark in front of the correct statement:
 - i) Untouchables do not constitute a homogeneous group.
 - ii) Ambedkar called the untouchables Harijans.
 - iii) Sanskritisation is process of alienation.

21.5 LET US SUM UP

We have analysed the problems of the Scheduled Castes from the very early times till date. We have seen how untouchability as a phenomenon is inherent in the caste-ridden Hindu society and social mobility for the untouchables is hampered because of their low caste status.

The Scheduled Castes are slowly trying to recover from their disabilities of untouchability of and discrimination. We have seen that there are a number of constitutional provisions made for them in the independent India. We have looked at the operational inconsistencies of the governmental measures adopted for enhancement of the status of the Scheduled Caste. We have also the possible measures to be adopted and properly implemented for a better future of the depressed sections of the people in India.

21.6 KEY WORDS

- Scheduled Castes** : The untouchable castes listed in the Schedule for the purpose of constitutional measures and concessions for their welfare, protection and development.
- Chandalas, Mritapas** : Particular categories of untouchable castes who performed unclean occupations in the past and were regarded the most down-graded people in the Hindu society.
- Antyajjas** : Another term used for untouchables who live outside the habitations of the caste Hindus in the past.
- Alienation-orientation** : The untouchable castes getting out of caste system and converting to Buddhism, Christianity or Islam.
- Integrative-orientation** : Assimilation into the upper castes through sanskritisation process, i.e. imitating the culture, behaviour of the styles of life and upper castes.
- Homogeneous** : United whole, without differences.
- Infrastructure** : The facilities available in the existing structure.
- Reservation** : Special concessions and privileges granted by the constitution for the socially and educationally backward sections of the society. Reservation is applicable in admission to educational institutions, hostels, fee concessions etc. for recruitment in government services; and in representation in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislatures.

21.7 FURTHER READINGS

Singh, Yogendra. 1980, *Social Stratification and Change in India*, Manohar, New Delhi.

Benjamin, Joseph. 1989, *Scheduled Castes in Indian Politics and Society*, ECS Publications

Kamble N.D. 1982, *The Scheduled Castes*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi.

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21.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The term Scheduled Caste was first used by the Simon Commission.
- 2) Some of the terms used to address the Scheduled Caste are Untouchables, *Harijans*, *Chandalas* and *Dalits*.
- 3) According to the materialist class analysis Untouchability grew out of a social class who did not possess the right of holding and usage of land. These landless workers were semi-slaves and were in debt bondage. They toiled for other peoples land but were forced to carry on unclean occupations. They were secured by the social bondage and by the concept of destiny or Karma.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The scheduled castes are:
 - a) Kshatriyas
 - d) Untouchables outside the four-fold division of various systems or the caste system.
- 2) “Antyajjas” was referred in the Writings of Alberuni.
- 3) The correct statement is :
 - i) Untouchables do not constitute a homogeneous group.