



The Indian Caste System and Consequent Challenges in Education for Historically Deprived and Disadvantaged Social Classes – How to Overcome the System and Meet its Challenges

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I. Demographic dividend and its sine-qua-nons

The concept of demographic dividend is well-known. But in order to reap this opportunity and to prevent the demographic dividend from turning into a demographic nightmare, it is necessary to equip the population in the younger age-groups with good education, health and skills. This requires not only educational, health-related and skill-development facilities, but also enabling all social classes to avail themselves of these facilities by the removal of all obstacles that block these facilities from reaching deprived social classes.

II. The Indian caste system (ICS) with 'untouchability' – serious obstacle to reaping demographic dividend

One of the serious obstacles to this process is the traditional socio-economic structure and system of India or the Indian Caste System (ICS) or caste system-with-"Untouchability". This has prevented children and youth of a large part of the population from getting access to facilities and opportunities in every field including education. In order to understand this clearly and devise and design effective remedial measures, one must correctly understand the nature of the ICS from the point of view of the historically deprived and disadvantaged classes.

III. The ICS and its function and effect

The ICS is not merely a matter of whimsical customs and practices. It is a system of gradation, degradation, deprivation and exploitation, in which there is a hierarchy of occupations also. Its design has been shaped in the self-interest of those in positions of

privilege and prestige, to monopolise advantages and secure labour and services from those below. This all-pervading system is the basic central and crucial phenomenon underlying the Indian social, educational and economic situation. The main function and effect of the ICS through the centuries to this day has been to lock up castes which provide agricultural labour and other labour and various services in such labour and services, with no/little scope for escape or upward mobility and deprive/minimise opportunities for their economic, educational and social advancement and retain monopoly/mere monopoly of advantageous positions and opportunities in the hands of the privileged castes/classes.

IV. ICS victims – Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the socially and educationally Backward Classes (BCs)

The worst victims of this system are the SCs, who have emerged in Indian society and economy as agricultural labour castes (ALCs) and castes which provide other forms of labour and 'menial' services such as 'manual scavenging', which no one will opt to provide except under compulsion. 'Untouchability' is a special instrument of ICS to keep SCs isolated from the society around them, demoralised and totally deprived of educational and other opportunities.

Comparable to SCs in the degree of deprivation are STs who are consigned to remote areas. Also deprived, though not subjected to "untouchability", are the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs), also known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and

Backward Classes (BCs) (hereafter BCs), consisting of castes of artisans and artisanal workers (blacksmiths, carpenters, potters, stone-cutters etc), service-providers (hair-cutters etc.), non-agricultural primary producers (e.g. fisher-folk) and providers of agricultural primary products (peasants) – though some of the castes of peasants who had the benefit of irrigation and access to market, modern technology etc have been able to climb out of social backwardness.

The above three categories of people – SCs, STs and BCs – constitute the overwhelming majority (about 75%) of India's population and contribute almost the entire physical labour force. Most of the Muslim and Christian minorities belong to specific BC communities, being converts from Hindu SCs and BCs.

V. Continuity of centuries – old ICS through colonial period to this day – inevitably resulting in emergence of reservation and other social justice measures

The two centuries of British colonial rule and the decades after Independence have introduced changes, but have not fundamentally altered India's socio-economic frame.

The continuity of the caste-traditional occupation-social status nexus to this day is illustrated by the following observation of the Supreme Court in its Mandal case judgment of 16-11-1992: "...a caste is nothing but... an occupational grouping... Even if one ceases to follow that occupation, still he remains and continues as member of that group.... Its social status and standing depends upon the nature of the occupation followed by it. Lowlier the occupation, lowlier the social standing... Lowly occupation results not only in low social position but also in poverty; It generates poverty. ... this is the stark reality notwithstanding all our protestations and abhorrence and all attempts at weeding out this phenomenon."

The functioning of the ICS meant denial, to 'lower' castes – SCs, STs and BCs – of

opportunities of education and advancement. Symbolic of this, in the pre-historic period, is the Ekalavya legend and, in modern period, the boycott of a Government school by 'upper' caste parents in 1853 when the first boy of an 'Untouchable' (Mahar) caste was admitted to school in Dharwar in Bombay Presidency (now in Karnataka).

The British introduced the concept of Equality before law, but did little to open up education for the downtrodden. I have elsewhere¹ described how the early British educationists desisted from actively encouraging education of 'despised castes' (whom they found to be the best pupils, capable of rising to high offices in colonial administration) out of fear of 'upper' caste backlash. I have also referred² to the Indian Education (Hunter) Commission (1882) giving instances of violence against and physical obstruction and waylaying of children of 'untouchables' on their way to schools in various provinces of India. Modern education and consequently jobs thus remained, as in the past centuries, a near-monopoly of a few castes accounting for 3 to 20% of the population of different regions, using caste solidarity as the instrument for appropriation and caste-cum 'Untouchability' as the instrument for exclusion of others.

It was in these circumstances that people of all castes/communities that had no/little share in governance/administration and no/limited access to education, especially English school education, began to demand reservation, and reservation became part of policy even before Independence. Since caste was the instrument of deprivation/ exclusion, it automatically became the instrument of mobilisation and reserved access.

VI. Constitution of India and its egalitarian architecture

The Constitution of India 1950 was born of the spirit of egalitarianism and of the goal of laying a sound base for enduring national integration. It contained far-reaching provisions for SC, ST and BC. Reservation was only one part of the

comprehensive measures envisaged by the Constitution to undo the continuing effect of the centuries-old injustice done to SCs, STs and BCs, to make educational and economic opportunities fully available to them, so that they are enabled to reach the level of the Socially Advanced Castes (SACs) or the Non-SC, non-ST, Non-BC castes (NSCTBCs) in all parameters including education at all levels.

VII. Social justice schemes for progress and equality of SCs, STs and BCs – their effect and limitations

Important schemes to secure educational progress and equality of SCs, STs, and much later BCs, were introduced at different points of time at the national level beginning, for example, with Post-Matric Scholarship scheme for SCs instituted by Dr. Ambedkar in 1943 as Viceroy's Executive Council Member. While these have helped to bring about some

progress, their full effect has not become available because of failure to undertake radical economic measures like endowing all rural SC and other landless agricultural families a viable extent of agricultural land; provision of irrigation for all agricultural lands of SCs and STs (both solemn undertakings of ruling parties and governments merrily and thoughtlessly forgotten); and quantitatively and qualitatively universalising and strengthening school and pre-school education for SC, ST and BC children.

VIII. Present scenario of continued gross educational inequality of SCs, STs and BCs compared to SACs/NSCTBCs

Consequently, we still find the continued existence of gross educational inequality at every level of education between the SCs and STs, at one end, and the SACs/NSCTBCs, at the other end, with the BCs in between, usually

| India (66th Round 2009-10) | | | | |
|---|------|------|----------------------|------------|
| | SC | ST | BC | SAC/NSCTBC |
| Not Literate | 41.5 | 44.6 | 33.2 | 20.1 |
| Secondary Level | 9.8 | 9.2 | 13.2 | 16.6 |
| Graduate & above | 3.4 | 9.2 | 5.4 | 13.6 |
| Delhi Females (61st Round 2004-05) (reflects metropolitan-Indian situation as Delhi is essentially metropolitan) | | | | |
| Graduate & above | 1.3 | 3.4 | No ST list for Delhi | 26.2 |

closer to SCs and STs than to SACs/NSCTBCs. The following NSSO data for age group 15 & above bring this out:

IX. Paramount need to buttress demographic dividend with equality dividend for India's optimal economic growth and all-round human resources development

Unless measures to eliminate this inequality are undertaken, we can neither fulfil the constitutional goal of equality, nor can we secure the demographic dividend, indispensable for India's optimal economic growth. In other words, we must bring in the concept of 'Equality Dividend', which can be achieved to benefit the nation by enabling the SCs, STs and BCs to become equals to the SACs

in all levels of education and in all other economic and social parameters.

X. Measures required for SCs, STs and BCs to secure equality

The various measures required to fulfil the Right of SCs and STs to Educational Equality and Parity at all levels and in all fields of education with SACs/NSCTBCs (as also those required for their economic advancement, equalisation of health standards, humanisation of living and working conditions) have been well-mapped out in various documents^{3, 4, 5, 6, 7}. I have prepared or in the preparation of which I have been closely associated with and which are lying with the Government along with proposals and recommendations made earlier

in Government files all these years with no attention/no serious attention and action.

The most important of them are briefly listed below:

- (1) An Anganwadi Centre (AWC) in every SC and ST habitation and isolated/distinct BC habitations (e.g. fishermen's hamlets), with a qualified teacher for every AWC, trained in Montessori and other such methods.
- (2) An open-ended pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme for SC Children from Class I to X as done for ST children from 1.7.2012.
- (3) For Class VI to XII, High Quality Residential Schools, one each for SC girls and SC boys, and for ST girls and ST boys, in every Block – 75% of seats should be for SC students in SC residential schools and 75% of seats for ST children in ST residential schools, and the remaining 25% for children of other groups including children of poor families of SACs/NSCTBCs. This 75%-25% formula will optimally serve the purpose of focus on the educationally deprived as well as social integration. The number of residential schools should be such as to cover all SC and ST children at this stage of education. Merely providing population-equivalent proportion of reservation for SC and ST children in schools for all like Navodaya and Central schools will not be able to remove the backlog of inequality inherited over the centuries.

Similar measures also required for BCs including BC Muslims and Christians.

A successful model exists since about 3½ decades in Andhra Pradesh. There are 288 residential schools for SCs and a similar number for ST children in the State and about 50 for BC children. Their results at Class XII are considerably higher than the State average. A provision of Rs 250 crores made, on my advice, for a national-level scheme of this type of residential schools for SC, ST and BC girls in 1996 and subsequently augmented to Rs 400 crores, was not utilised for this purpose.

- (4) Reservation for SCs, STs and BCs in Professional, Technological and other Higher Educational institutions in the burgeoning

private sector, along with other related supporting measures and facilities, in fulfilment of the Constitution (Ninety-Third Amendment) Act, 2005.

- (5) Removal of road-blocks in SC and ST Post-Matric and Overseas Scholarship Schemes (both of Ambedkar vintage of 1943) such as family income-ceiling and that too at self-defeatingly low level; and expansion of the latter scheme.
- (6) Similar removal of the ridiculously low family-income ceiling of Rs. 40,000 for rural areas and Rs. 55,000 for urban areas for eligibility for educational loans from National SC and ST Finance and Development Corporations for SC and ST students for professional and technical courses.

I can make available to those interested fuller details of the above schemes and particulars of a number of other schemes which require removal of road-blocks and expansion in order to remove the gap between SCs, STs and BCs, on one side, and the SACs/NSCTBCs, on the other, at all levels of education.

XI. **Banishing 'untouchability' and prejudices against social justice measures from schools and other educational institutions**

The continuing cancer of 'untouchability' against SCs and prejudices against Social Justice measures are a serious drag on the human, national and Constitutional mission of real actualisation of Equality in education. The prevalence of 'untouchability' in schools has been brought out in a Report of the Human Rights Watch (HRW) titled, "They Say We're Dirty: Denying an Education to India's Marginalised" released on 22.4.2014, based on its study of four States, including Delhi, right under Central Government's nose. These findings are true of most parts of the country.

The following measures need to be taken to root out 'untouchability' and prejudices against social justice:-

- (1) Pro-active steps to ensure that SC and ST children are intermixed with other children in class-room seating and mid-day meal seating.

In the mid-day meal scheme either the cook or the server should be an SC woman as an effective measure against 'untouchability'. Resistance should be firmly repelled.

- (2) Human rights education with emphasis on anti-human, anti-national and anti-Constitutional nature of the ICS, caste-based loyalties, biases and antagonisms, and particularly of 'untouchability'-based discriminations, and on Equality as enshrined in the Constitution should be introduced in every educational institution, at all levels, and every teacher-training institution. The experience of Institute of Human Rights Education should be utilized and the efforts of such institutions strengthened by active government participation in financial and other terms.
- (3) There should be a comprehensive campaign to sensitise the entire community of teachers so that they become a bulwark against 'untouchability'- based discriminations in all its forms in educational institutions.
- (4) Human rights education should also convey the historical circumstances continuing to this day which make reservation and other Social Justice measures inevitable and indispensable. The Constitutional architecture pertaining to Equality and the advancement of SCs, STs and BCs including BCs of religious minorities with particular attention to their women and specially vulnerable groups among them and its essentiality for national progress should be clearly brought out, and the national and patriotic duty of all to co-operate in these tasks should be driven home.

These educational measures have to be supported by counterpart economic, occupational, health-and-nutrition-related and living-conditions-related measures in order to secure full results. I can make details of these supportive available to those interested.

What can voluntary organisations and trusts do to meaningfully contribute to this task

The task is of such magnitude that it can be undertaken in its full dimension only by the Central and State governments and institutions. But voluntary organisations and trusts can contribute in a tangible manner. For example, each of them can take up all the villages and towns in one or more State/one or more districts/one or more Blocks, or one or more villages/towns, and in the selected spatial area establish Anganwadis and/or residential schools of the type mentioned at (X) (1) and (3) above. Those who have established private educational institutions out of genuine educational and social motivation can also contribute meaningfully to this task in this manner. Such voluntary initiatives, if taken seriously and sincerely, can establish models as Andhra Pradesh government has done.

But first, voluntary organisations, trusts and private educationists will have to adopt the policy of greater focus and more support to those who have been rendered unequal by the ICS over the centuries to this day so that they can become in fact equal to the SACs/NSCTBCs in education. Adopting a pious-sounding approach of not distinguishing among the different unequal social classes and serving all 'equally', will result in perpetuating the inequality created by the ICS. For, as even President Lyndon Johnson has said after the US enacted the Civil Rights Act in 1964, "it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates." The measures I have listed here and certain other measures are required precisely to create in the historically and currently deprived and disadvantaged classes of citizens of India this very ability to walk through the gates of opportunity and secure their due share.

From my knowledge and experience of 65 years covering the whole country in the field of social justice with focus on SCs, STs, BCs including BCs of religious minorities, I can provide inputs and guidance required by any sincere voluntary organisation/trust/private educationist who wants to join this human, national, patriotic and constitutional enterprise.

1. P. S. Krishnan (2009), "Empowering Dalits for Empowering India: A Road-Map", New Delhi: Manak Publications.
2. P. S. Krishnan (2006), "Logical Step – The socio-historical and Constitutional Perspective and Imperatives of the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Bill, 2006", Frontline, 23 (8), May 5, 2006.
3. The Dalit Manifesto (1996), formulated by P.S. Krishnan on behalf of the National Action Forum for Social Justice, reprinted in P.S.Krishnan (2009), op.cit.
4. Report of Sub-Group-I (Chairman: P.S. Krishnan) on Perspective Planning for Empowerment of Scheduled Castes in the XII Plan, set up by the Planning Commission and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment
5. Reports of Task Forces for the Educational Development of SCs and STs (2012), Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India.
6. Recommendations of the Group of Ministers on Dalit Affairs set up in 2005 under Shri Pranab Mukherjee's Chairmanship (2008)
7. Report of National (Venkatachaliah) Commission for Review of the Working of the Constitution (2002).

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