

The Other Backward Classes

❁ THE Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes together are considered backward and form about one-third of the total population of India. We have discussed the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in earlier chapters. In this chapter we will cover the other Backward Classes in our discussion. The Other Backward Classes are entitled to special provisions in education and employment. Unlike the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, they are not given the privilege of political representation through reserved constituencies. How do we define the category "backward classes"? Caste and occupation are two structural criteria which we could use to define the term "backward classes". In terms of caste, rank and occupation, the backward classes were higher than the Harijans in the caste hierarchy. In terms of the criterion of caste, the backward classes would comprise intermediate agricultural and functionary castes.

❁ Andra Beteille considers peasants castes the core of the backward classes. The backward classes have certainly been far behind the upper castes in education, professions and government jobs. They are also at a lower rung in the caste hierarchy. One view is that those who belonged to the "Shudra Varna" could be considered the Backward Classes. Ritually as well, the Backward Classes have been inferior to the "twice-born" caste. The name "Backward classes" implies that there are forward classes and this is how people in Bihar are being identified as backward and forward. The "forwards" look down upon the "backwards". The Backward Classes movement in Bihar gained currency in the late 1970s; particularly in 1977, when the Janata party formed government at the centre and in various states. Karpoori Thakur, who belonged to a backward caste, was Bihar's chief minister in 1977.

❁ Caste and agriculture are closely related in India. The higher castes have traditionally

large landholdings. The lower castes work as landless agricultural labourers. The intermediate castes are the principal agricultural castes in terms of actual cultivation as peasants. Thus, they are not at the intermediate level in terms of both caste and agricultural pursuits. However, the situation has changed considerably since Independence in regard to both the criteria, namely, caste and occupation. Caste-based distinctions do not have a place in the constitution of India. Segregation based on caste is an offence. Land reforms have given an opportunity to the backward classes to make claim of ownership of the land which they cultivated as tenants. Adults franchise has generated consciousness for political mobilisation and participation. The backward classes are still culturally, socially and economically backward, and therefore, they have started movements for their upliftment and for a greater share in the fields of education, employment and political decision-making.

Defining the Backward Classes

✿ The term "backward classes" has been used in terms of weaker sections of society, particularly the scheduled castes, the scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes. The term has also been used to designate any other backward classes in the beginning, after India's Independence, the term "backward classes" had a less fixed and definite reference. It has a variety of referents. Earlier the term "depressed classes" was used for the "untouchables" and other backward groups. It is certainly a fact that the backward classes are above the ex-untouchable groups and below the twice-born castes. They need special protection and help for their economic and social upliftment. We find reference to this term in 1917-18, but the term was more specifically used in 1930 or 1931. In 1937, the state of Travancore used the term "backward communities" to include all educationally and economically backward communities. But in the

Madras Presidency, the term "backward classes" was used to refer to the strata above the untouchables. In 1934, the Madras Provincial Backward Classes League was founded. The "backward classes" in Madras included more than a hundred communities and 50 per cent of the total population of the Presidency. Thus, the term "backward classes" had no uniform meaning at the national level. There was no all-India organisation of the backward classes.

✿ In 1948 it was visualised that a Backward Classes Commission be appointed to go through the whole of the country to find out which Castes of Hindus, Muslims, etc., were really backward according to certain standards - educational, social, economic, etc. The Commission was supposed to find out the difficulties under which they worked and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and improve their condition. The Commission was actually appointed in 1953.

✿ The University Education Commission (1948-49) also mentioned the reservation of a certain proportion of seats for students belonging to the backward communities. In 1947, the Bihar Government made provisions for other backward classes in post-matriculation studies. In 1951, the Government of Bihar announced a list of backward classes.

✿ The list contained the names of various castes, which constituted 60 per cent of the state's population. In 1948, the Government of Uttar Pradesh gave educational concessions to Other Backward Classes. A list of 56 castes was prepared, which covered 65 per cent of the population. Thus, even before the implementation of the constitution, the nation of Backward Classes existed; referring to the groups between the top and the bottom strata of society based on their economic and educational backwardness.

✿ Several backward classes organisations emerged in late 1940s. The Bihar State Backward Classes Federation was founded in 1947. In 1954,

there were 88 organizations working for the Backward Classes in 15 states. Seventy four of these were named after specific castes and fourteen functioned in general, on a regional or local basis. The All-India Backward Classes Federation was also formed in 1950. A national federation was also formed. Lists of Backward Classes were prepared by the state governments. The list in Karnataka included Muslims, Christians, Brahmanas. However, the lists in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra did not include the higher non-Brahmana castes.

- ✿ Backwardness is considered an attribute of a group and not of an individual. Membership to these "backward classes" is determined by birth, like for all other caste groups. In theory, Backward Classes may include individuals who are educationally and economically well off. Since some castes have been designated as "backward" by the Government, they are entitled to get certain benefits and facilities. The Backward Classes are, thus, large and

complex constellation of groups and individuals.

- ✿ Since we are have concerned with the backward classes who are, in effect, intermediate castes in between the Harijans and the upper castes, we do not refer to the term "backward classes" in a broad perspective. The "backward classes" are "backward" because they have been lagging behind in education, government services, professions, business, etc. However, in the recent years, they have advanced in economic and political fields. They are small landowners, depending mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. Numerically, they are preponderant, but they are not a monolithic group society, culturally and economically. According to the Mandal Commission, the Other Backward Classes constitute nearly 52 per cent of India's population.

- ✿ The Constitution of India mentions the backward classes as being "socially and educationally backward classes of citizens". Article 340 authories the President of India

to appoint a commission to investigate and report on the conditions of the backward classes in different parts of the country. The state governments also [under article 15(4) and 16] can appoint commissions to look into the social and educational problems of different backward castes, and can also make reservations in educational institutions and government services based on the findings of such commissions. The criteria of backwardness differ from state as no all-India index of backwardness exists.

Kaka Kalelkar Commission

✿ A Backward Classes Commission was appointed by the President of India on 29 January 1953 with Kaka Kalelkar as its Chairman. The Commission was directed to determine the criteria to be adopted in considering whether any section of people should be treated as socially and educationally backward. It was also to prepare a list of such classes. The Commission was also directed to investigate the conditions of all such socially

and educationally backward classes and the difficulties which they encounter in carrying out their work. It was asked to make recommendations on the following matters: (1) as to steps that should be taken by the union or any state to remove such difficulties or to improve their conditions; and (2) as to the grants that should be made.

✿ The Commission took two years to complete its work, and prepared a list of 2399 castes and communities and suggested several measures for their social and economic development. About 70 per cent of India's population was considered backward. The following criteria were suggested for determining backwardness.

- ✿ Low social positions in the caste hierarchy;
- ✿ Lack of educational progress;
- ✿ Inadequate representation in government service; and
- ✿ Inadequate representation in the fields of trade, commerce and industry.
- ✿ Caste was taken as the key factor in making a list of

backward classes. The commission thought that the problems of a caste-ridden society could be minimized by promotion of the socially and educationally backward classes. Though the commission did not have adequate data on castes. It proposed reservation of at least 25 percent in class 1, 33.5 per cent in class 2nd and 40 per cent in class 3rd and 4th services for the caste listed as backward. It recommended 70 per cent reservation in the fields of medical, scientific and technical education. The Commission also recommended the formation of a separate ministry for the welfare of Backward Classes.

✿ Thus, caste was used as the sole criterion and unit for determining backwardness and for the classification of backward classes. The position of a caste as higher and lower or superior and inferior was made as the basis. No attempt was made to know the "backward individuals" of a caste group. A caste as a whole was considered backward. The commission believed that the real social equality could be

achieved in India only by eliminating caste distinctions and social discrimination. The evils of the caste system could be attacked only by talking caste into account. However, the other view is that the individual and family should be treated as the basis of backwardness.

✿ The Commission was aware of the fact that backwardness could be assessed by poverty, residence and occupation in addition to the criterion of caste. It was felt that those members of the Backward Classes who had reached a certain level of economic and educational advancement should be declassified. The individual and family would be the best units for judging backwardness because the criterion of caste was somewhat vague and was also against the principles of democracy as it further promoted caste and class distinctions.

✿ The Government of India rejected the recommendation of the Commission that caste be the basis for identifying economic and educational backwardness. The centre

asked the state governments to conduct surveys to identify members of the backward classes, and then to extend them all reasonable facilities. In 1961, the Centre decided not to draw up any list of Other Backward Classes. The states were advised to draw up their own lists using economic tests, rather than going by caste. A number of states decided to use the criteria of occupation and income to classify backward groups.

The Criteria of Backwardness in States

- ✿ Only eight states are reported to have accepted the policy of reservation in the services. Since the Centre did not come to a conclusion regarding uniform criteria for determining backwardness, the states were left free to evolve their own criteria and lists of backward groups. Sometimes local, social and political conditions have influenced drawing up of the lists of backward classes in different states. Some politically influential groups make efforts to remain classified as backward classes

to retain the facilities and concessions extended to them. Even the economically better off and socially upward mobile groups have a vested interests in continuing to be classified as backward. Several caste groups have demanded their inclusion in the category of backward classes. "The Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka. The Ezhavas and Nayars in Kerala, The Reddis and Kammas in Andhra, Nadars and Vaniyars in Tamil Nadu, Kurmis, Ahirs and Koris in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have always exerted pressure for their continued recognition as backward classes. The dominant castes are able to strike a political bargain with those in power for being classified as backward classes." A number of castes like the Jatavas of Agra, who found Sanskritisation no longer attractive, decided to politicise themselves to extract greater dividends.

- ✿ In 1966, the Government of Andhra Pradesh decided to use "family" for classifying backward groups instead of caste. However, this was dropped due to legal

complications, and in 1970 a list of 92 communities was prepared which are now treated as backward classes. 25 per cent of the government jobs are reserved for these castes and communities. The Government of Bihar introduced the policy of job-reservation for 128 backward castes and communities in 1978. Their decision was based mainly on the suggestions of the Kaka Kalelkar commission and of the Mungeri Lal commission. The latter was constituted by the Government of Bihar, Ahirs, Kurmis and Koris from about three-fifths of the total population of backward classes in Bihar. They are, in fact, not so backward as in Bihar. They are, in fact, not so backward and derive maximum benefits from the policy of job-reservation. Violent protests were witnessed against this policy in Bihar. It was decided to fix an income ceiling of Rs.12,000 per annum per family for qualifying as a beneficiary of the scheme. Today 26 per cent of jobs are reserved for backward classes in Bihar.

✿ Since 1960, the Karnataka Government has decided to adopt the criteria of income and occupation of a family, irrespective of caste, religion or race, as the basis of backwardness. However, up to 1960, all the castes were treated as backward, except the Brahmanas in Karnataka. In 1972, the Government of Karnataka appointed a Backward Classes Commission with L.G. Havanur as its Chairman. After conducting a massive survey, the commission prepared a list of backward castes and communities. The Commission rejected the criteria of income and occupation, as it benefited the Brahmanas, Lingayats and Vokkaligas most, to advance their interests at the cost of the really backward groups. The Commission prepared a list of the backward classes based on the criteria of caste and economic standing. A reservation of 32 per cent of the jobs was recommended for these classes. However, the government decided to include a few more castes in this category and also increased the

quota of reservation from 32 to 40 per cent.

- ❁ The Kerala Government appointed a Backward Classes Commission, under the chairmanship of P.D. Netti, which submitted its report in 1970. The Commission recommended the criteria of educational attainment, economic position, and appropriateness in the appointment to government service and social backwardness. The Commission made an effort to eliminate the already advantaged families, irrespective of their caste and religion. Despite legal and other difficulties, some success has been achieved in Kerala.
- ❁ In Maharashtra, 14 per cent, and in Tamil Nadu 50 per cent of jobs are reserved for the listed backward classes. The Uttar Pradesh government has listed 58 per cent of jobs are reserved for them. Jammu and Kashmir has reserved 40 per cent of the jobs for the backward communities and castes.
- ❁ Thus, the states which have made reservation for the

backward classes are: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. These states have accepted the principle of compensatory discrimination to counter the inherited caste-based inequalities. However, this principle has been used by dominant political groups and parties to their advantage to some extent. Income occupation, as criteria of determining backwardness, have been upheld, but could not be implemented. Caste continues to be the sole criterion for judging backwardness.

The Mandal Commission

- ❁ The spirit behind the term "backward classes" is that the middle strata of the people have suffered most and remained ignored. The Janata party, in its election manifesto in 1977, called for an end to caste inequalities. It promised a "policy of special treatment" in favour of the weaker sections of Indian society. The party promised to reserve between 25 and 33 per cent of all

appointments to government services and educational opportunities for the Backward Classes. The Government of India, headed by the Janata party, appointed a Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal, Member of parliament, with a view to get definite recommendations by which it could implement its election promises. The following were the terms of reference of the Mandal Commission :

- ❖ To determine the criteria for defining the socially and educationally backward classes;
- ❖ To recommend steps to be taken for the advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes of citizens so identified;
- ❖ To examine the desirability or otherwise of making provision for the reservation of making provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of such backward classes of citizens which are not adequately represented in the services of both the central and the state government/union territory administrations; and

- ❖ To present a report setting out the facts as found by them and making such recommendations as they think proper.

- ❖ The Commission observed that backwardness is both social and educational.

- ❖ Caste is also a class of people. In case a caste as a whole is found socially and educationally backward, reservation for the entire caste be allowed. The backward classes, including the non-Hindu castes and excluding the SCs and STs, constitute 52 per cent of India's population according to the Mandhal report. The Commission recommended a reservation of 27 percent of jobs educational facilities for this 52 per cent population.

- ❖ The Commission suggested the following steps:

- ❖ The reservation of 27 per cent jobs for those who do not qualify on the basis of merit.

- ❖ The reservation of 27 per cent for promotions at all levels.

- ❖ The reserved quota, if unfilled, should be carried forward for a period of three years and de-reserved thereafter.

- ❖ Age relaxation for the backward classes should be the same it is in the case of Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
- ❖ A roster system should be prepared for the backward classes, on the pattern of the one done for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
- ❖ The principle of reservation should be made applicable to all the public sector undertakings, banks, private undertakings receiving grants from the Central and state governments, universities and colleges.
- ❖ The Government should make the necessary legal provisions for implementing these recommendations.
- ❖ The Commission recommended the implementation of an intensive and time-bound programme for adult education, particularly for the Backward classes, and the setting up of residential schools for the Backward classes students. The principle of reservation of 27 per cent was suggested for the reservation of seats in educational institutions as well as in jobs. Suggestions for the

economic upliftment of the Backward Classes were by the Commission, with a view to bring about structural changes in Indian society.

- ❖ The Janata Dal which is the major constituent of the National Front Government at the Centre has promised to implement the recommendation of the Mandal Commission. As a reaction to this commitment of the Government, there has been large scale protests in some of the states, particularly in Uttar Pradesh in December 1989.
- ❖ After the Janata Dal Government announced its decision in August 1990 to reserve 27 per cent of jobs for the 'other backward' castes in the Government departments and public sector undertakings, large scale protests erupted throughout the country particularly in northern and western India culminating into self-immolation, suicides and killings in police actions. One of the social consequences of this step taken by the government was a further

deepening of the caste divide Indian society.

The Backward Classes Movements

- ❁ The upper castes dominated in traditional Indian society. The Backward Classes aimed at capturing political power and socio-economic ascendance in the states. The Backward Castes leaders insisted upon caste as the basis of determination of backwardness. The important Backward Classes movement in pre-Independence India included : (1) Jyoti Rao Phule's movement in the Bombay Presidency (1870-1930), and (2) the anti-Brahmana Nadar movement in Madras.
- ❁ Jyoti Rao Phule founded the Satayashodhak Samaj in 1873. The leadership of the Samaj came from the Backward Classes, namely, the Malis, Telis, Kunbis and Satis. Phule himself was a Mali. Social service and spread of education among women and lower caste people were the main aims of his movements. Brahmanas opposed the movement as it challenged the Brahmanical

supremacy. Phule aimed at the complete abolition of the caste system and socio-economic inequalities. He was against Sanskritic Hinduism. One view is that phule focussed on cultural and ethnic factors alone ignoring the economic and political ones. It was in essence an anti-Brahmana movement. It was sort of "cultural revolution".

- ❁ The backward castes movement in South India was an anti-Brahmana movement. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker was the leader of anti-Brahmana movement. The Dravida Kazhagam in Tamil means the organisation of the Dravidians. The D.M.K. was formed by C.N. Annadurai in 1949; and, in 1970, M.G. Ramchandran founded the All-India D.M.K. These parties has taken an anti-Brahmana stance in politics. The S.N.D.P. movement in Kerala was more of a reformist movement as it emphasised the upliftment of the backward communities particularly Ezhavas. Thus, the main goals of the backward castes movements have been either

anti-Brahmanism or reformism or both.

❖ Brahmans have enjoyed not only their superiority over others, but also have acquired greater power and privileges as a result of the spread of western education. They became, therefore an object of envy for other castes, particularly for those at the middle rung of caste hierarchy. The Brahmanas have been a numerical minority, and they were distrusted by the British because they spearheaded the national movement. On these two counts, the backward classes thought it necessary to weaken the social and political hegemony of the Brahmana, the western-educated elite from among the backward castes took up the leadership of the anti-Brahmana movement. In fact, the Backward Castes movement expressed the ambitions and frustrations of the educated youth from the intermediate castes.

❖ In the Madras Presidency, though the Brahmans comprised about 3 per cent of the total population, 71 per cent of the total graduates between

1886-1910 were Brahmana. In 1921, the literacy rate among the Brahmanas in Madras state was 28 per cent as against 2 percent for the Vellalas. In 1913, out of 478 Hindu government officials 350 were Brahmana. The Brahmanas were also ahead of other castes in the national movement. In 1918, in Mysore state all castes except Brahmanas were bracketed as "backward castes". In 1925, the state of Bombay declared all communities other than Brahmanas, Prabhus Marwaris, Parsis, Baniyas and Christians as backward. In 1928, the backward castes were defined as "castes or classes which are educationally backward".

❖ Thus, the backward castes include all castes, except the upper castes, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. These included peasant castes of various descriptions with a low ritual status. The peasant castes are a dominant force in the economic and political life of the economic and political life of the countryside. The maximum benefit of the green revolution,

rural development schemes and of democratisation and adult franchise have gone to the peasant castes.

- ✿ It has been reported that the status of the Kurmits in Bihar kept rising on account of their benefiting from commercial agriculture. Economic betterment encouraged them to from the All India Kurmi Kashtriya Sabha and also prompted them to adopt more Brahmanical ritual practices. The notion of the Prajapati or Ajar castes emerged, which signified unity among the major agricultural castes such as Ahir, Jat, Gjuar, etc. The Kurmis in Bihar formed a socio-political organisation in association with the Yadavas. This was Known as the Triveni Sangam.
- ✿ It is fact that the backward castes movement did not meet with as much success in north India as it did in the south. The upper castes reacted more strongly to the backward castes movement in the north than in the south. This was because the backward castes are 20 per cent and 14 per cent in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar respectively of the total population, whereas

they are only a small percentage in the south. The states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh witnessed backward caste movement, particularly in the late 1970s with the emergence of the Janata Party government at the Centre and the many of the states.

Conclusion

- ✿ The middle strata of rural society in India are the peasant castes. The abolition of landlordism and the introduction of adult franchise, Panchayati raj and the green revolution have made these castes economically and politically important in Indian society. The emergence of the backward castes movement has received impetus from improvement in their general social and economic standing. They do not now suffer from several disabilities, as they have been granted certain advantages and concessions.
- ✿ Compared to the upper castes, they still lag behind in the economic and educational spheres. However, these castes have made rapid progress in economic and political fields.

Social change among the Backward classes has been quite uneven-between backward castes of different states and within a given caste. The backward castes have been granted concessions and reservations in educational institutions and jobs to bring them at par with the upper castes.

