

The scheduled castes

❁ The Position of the scheduled castes has a bearing on the social structure of the "caste society", that is, division of Hindu society into caste groups. At the top of the caste hierarchy are Brahmanas. The "untouchables" come at the bottom. There are several caste groups in between. Ritual pollution and purity based on the birth in a particular caste group is considered the basis of high and low caste ranks. The value of pollution-purity pervades all aspects of social life including food, cloth, metals, occupations, etc. Thus, not only are persons and castes pure and impure or less pure or more impure, but everything in Hindu society is seen in terms of the value of purity-pollution. Gold is pure and silver is less pure; silk is pure and cotton is impure, etc. These are some of the notions we find even today among the Hindus.

❁ The notions of Dharma and karma are associated with caste-assigned roles and obligations. The dharma of a Chamar, for example, is to

remain at the bottom end of the caste hierarchy, to carry out his traditional occupation and to follow the norms associated with his caste in relation to other caste groups. This applies to all caste groups: but those who are at higher levels of the caste ranking are certainly less subjected to suppression and exploitation.

❁ The theory of Karma leads a person to the belief that his low or high caste position is because of his past bad or good deeds, and therefore, he cannot do anything about his position. He can improve his future by performing his duties in accordance with what he has been assigned to perform under the caste system. These twin notions of Dharma and Karma have made the caste system stagnant and regimented. Since Brahmanas were at the top of the caste hierarchy, they were the rule-markers and prescribers of norms. They are even today considered the models for social and cultural mobility.

❁ In chapters two and eight, we discussed the evolution of the division of labour and the caste systems. Those who occupied

the lowest positions pursued defining occupations. They were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, and were known as Chandals (exterior castes). They lived on the outskirts of town and villages. These castes remained low and suppressed for ages. They have been listed as Scheduled castes'.

Social and Economic Problems of the Scheduled Castes

✿ With a view to elevate their position the 'Untouchables', who are now known as 'Scheduled castes' launched several anti-Brahmanas and anti-'twice-born' movements in the past. They also began several reformative and status-emulative movements, which particularly aimed at the imitation of the life-style of the upper castes and rejection of their traditional practices and defiling occupations. The inhuman and exploitative conditions in which these scheduled castes were forced to live for centuries made them conscious of their deplorable condition in Hindu society. Besides their own realisation,

factors external to the caste system also contributed to the loosening of the rigidities of the caste system.

✿ The Constitution of India has listed the "untouchable" castes as the "Scheduled castes" with a view to provide them protection against discrimination, exploitation and degradation. It provides for their social, economic, political, cultural and educational upliftment. A policy of reservation of jobs, position, educational facilities and of reserved constituencies for state Assemblies and the Lok Sabha and of nomination to local bodies has been adopted by the government of independent India.

✿ Dr. Baba sahib Ambedkar was a leader who fought for a place of honour and dignity for the scheduled castes during the freedom struggle. The British conceded political representation to the Communal Award. Gandhi did not agree to this because the Muslims had already made such a demand with a view to quicken the growth of separatism and

communalization of social relations. Gandhi undertook a fast unto death against the Communal Award. The Award was withdrawn under the Poona pact, and Gandhi broke his fast. It was stated that Harijans were part of the Hindu social order, and, therefore, their condition had to be ameliorated within the framework of the system. Ambedkar became a Buddhist at the fag end of his life. However, he did his best as Chairman of the constitution Drafting Committee to make constitutional Provisions for the upliftment of the millions of downtrodden Harijans. The name Harijans was given to the "untouchable" by Gandhi. The word means "children of God" and implies that they needed special treatment. Gandhi started a periodical entitled Harijan to highlight the plight of the children of God.

✿ Provisions have been made against social discrimination and untouchability, with a view to attain equality of the SCs with the caste Hindus. However, ascriptive status cannot be changed simply by constitutional provisions. The

processes of social change and modernisation of traditional values alone can and bring about a change in course of time. The constitution of India makes provisions for the upliftment of the scheduled castes in economic, political and educational fields.

✿ Since these provision have made a tangible impact and have generated a certain level of consciousness among the scheduled caste, the upper and intermediate castes have begun to feel uncomfortable. Clashes between the caste Hindus and the scheduled castes have been frequently reported from different states. The scheduled castes are emerging as a force to reckon with; representing secular values, egalitarianism and the quest for equality.

✿ However, some sections of the scheduled castes who have derived considerable benefits from the constitutional provisions have attained an elite status among the scheduled castes. These sections continue to enjoy the special provisions despite enormous improvement in their socio-economic condition.

❁ In some areas the scheduled castes are still not allowed access to temples, tea stalls and public wells or water taps. However, today demands are rarely of a religious and ritual nature. What the Harijans demand today is to be treated as persons. They should not be driven from their land. They should no longer be bonded labourers, and should be given fair wages. Their children should be educated and considered equal to children of other communities. They should be allowed to have their say in all democratic institutions. However, the fact remains that the scheduled castes continue to be inferior to the caste Hindus in all secular or mundane matters. Scheduled caste leaders are subordinate to the caste leaders. The scheduled caste votes have been controlled by different political groups and parties. The leaders of these castes do not wish to be identified with the scheduled castes. They, in fact, desire to be identified with the upper caste leadership.

❁ Nearly 90 per cent of the scheduled castes live in

villages, and they continue to suffer because they work under the command of the dominant castes and landlords. They continue to be economically dependent on the upper caste and class groups. Constitutional provisions have been availed of by the poor Harijans in very marginal way. Since they continue to be poor, they are objects of exploitation.

Social Mobility among the Scheduled Castes

❁ It has been noted that there is an increasing possibility for upward mobility for all Harijans. Mobility is possible through two processes: (1) by corporate mobility; and (2) by competition between castes and within a caste. There is inter caste variability in regard to social mobility, also there are scared and secular models in different contexts. Migration, education and white-collar jobs (like those held by caste Hindus) have been the main source of social mobility among the scheduled castes. As a result of these factors of social mobility, there have been changes in their social status,

patterns of interaction, level of aspirations, family patterns employment patterns of the women and awareness of government policies. The scheduled castes have also used their caste associations for political action in towns and cities.

❁ Despite the pitiable condition of the Harijans, we notice two patterns of social mobility among the scheduled castes: (1) welfare measures have induced a certain level of mobility among some selected sections of the scheduled castes; and (2) a certain level of awareness about their own low status has emerged along with an anti-upper caste attitude. One serious consequences of the first pattern is a creation of unevenness in economic and social terms between different scheduled castes and among members of the same scheduled caste. The benefits of the constitutional provisions and other changes have not reached different scheduled castes and individuals uniformly. As a result of the second pattern, 'caste war' or hostility of the

scheduled castes against the upper castes has also increased.

❁ In general, certain sections of the scheduled castes who have extracted greater benefits have migrated to urban centres. They are educated and have taken up employment in towns and cities. Those who cannot get these benefits satisfy themselves with "Sanskritisation" or imitation of the life-styles of the upper castes. Even Sanskritisation does help in bringing about tangible social change among the scheduled castes.

❁ It is now universally that the scheduled castes suffer today not so much because of social and cultural disabilities, but because of the imbalances created by structural differentiation in their ranks. This unevenness is a result of the faulty execution of the policies and plans. The atrocities committed on Harijans and their exploitation by the dominant castes Hindus should be analysed in the view of these distinctions among the scheduled castes, and their relations with the caste Hindus.

❁ All the scheduled castes have not uniformly been victims of the atrocities of the landlords, rich peasants and upper castes. To say that the conflict between a landlord and a Harijan refers to a class war or to say that a conflict between a Brahmana and a Chamar refers to a caste war are not correct characterisations of the two situations. In the first case, it is not completely a class war, as the landlord is certainly an upper or upper caste landowner. In the second case, a Brahmana is not so poor as a Chamar is: he is certainly economically better off than a Chamar. Therefore, a given situation is neither purely a class war nor purely a caste war. Both the situations are composite ones. However, a class war has a tilt towards economic considerations, and a caste war is an expression of caste dominance.

Untouchability

❁ The rigidity regarding pollution-purity has been weakening for last several decades. The institution of untouchability is not

functioning in a rigid way. Its polluting aspects have receded. The caste Hindus do not seriously observe untouchability while dealing with the Harijans. The Harijans have also changed along with changes in wider society. The caste Hindus observe untouchability on very few occasions like birth, marriage and community feasts and festivals. In day-to-day life untouchability is not a consideration in relations between an upper caste man and a Harijan. Since caste has become resilient and adaptive, a corresponding change has occurred in the institution of untouchability as well.

❁ It is not that caste has withered away with all its class-like character, and untouchability has been continuing and vice-versa. Since caste remains a pivotal force (in the grab of class, untouchability refers to a situation of exploitation, suppression and powerlessness of the wretched of the earth. Naturally, the exploiters are the well-off caste Hindus, landlords and big peasants. Harijans may not be doing today what they

were forced to do a couple of decades ago, but they remain under the economic and social hegemony of the upper castes and the landed interests.

❁ **The Constitutional Provisions**

❁ Article 46 of the constitution of the India provides : " The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." In view of this constitutional obligations, several provisions have been provided; such as the reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes in the State Assemblies and Panchayati Raj institutions, Parliament, and reservation of jobs at various levels. Article 17 declare: "untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law."

❁ In pursuance of these constitutional provisions,

several programmes have been undertaken for the welfare of the Scheduled castes.

❁ The question is: How close to equality are scheduled castes? Compared to castes Hindus, the scheduled castes are still far behind in regard to landholding, and in economic and social mobility. Urbanisation and education are much less among them. Their per capita income is also low. Only a few of the posts in the administration reserved for the scheduled castes are actually filled. The same is true in regard to completion of education even up to secondary level.

Inequalities among the Scheduled Castes

❁ Several studies have shown that new inequalities have crept in among the scheduled castes due to uneven educational attainments. Education has not filtered down as expected. Equal access for unequal groups is not true equality. Even the awareness and acceptance necessary for the optimum use of educational opportunities are not uniformly

found among the scheduled castes. It is therefore said that the spread of education among the scheduled castes has created social classes among them on lines parallel to those existing among higher castes.

- ❖ A number of observations have been made which substantiate the emergence of inequalitarian relations among the scheduled castes. For example, the scheme of post-matric scholarship is neither equitably distributed nor optimally used. Caste patterns within the scheduled castes determine differential distribution and utilisation of scholarship and other amenities. Even independent of the imbalances created by education and other measures for their welfare, there are clear differences in terms of social and economic status. There is a well-recognised hierarchy among them. There are degrees of defilement and pollution among them. There are also religious cleavages among the scheduled castes. Each one of the scheduled castes is aware of its separate identity, and at the same time conscious of their

common status as scheduled castes.

- ❖ The scheduled castes have elites from within their ranks. The elites are educated economically better off, elected members of the State Assembly, Parliament, Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti. It is by and large realized that unevenness among the scheduled castes is inherently prevalent and is also created by the faulty implementation of policies and programmes designed for their welfare. It is unevenness that is mainly responsible for their backwardness. Awareness of this unevenness could have a leveling effect on these weaker sections. However, more changes would come only through effective distributive justice and decision-making.

Atrocities and Exploitation of the Scheduled Castes

- ❖ Because of the unevenness which we explained above, all Harijans are not subjected to the same ill-treatment and atrocities by the landlords, rich peasants and upper castes. The Harijans who are not victims of

atrocities and exploitation, belong to a higher class 'than their brethren who fall prey to the rich landlords. It is this class of Harijans who extract maximum benefits from various policies and programmes. The poor Harijans were victims of massacre, loot and rape in Belchi, Agra, Pant Nagar, Marathwada, Bajitpur and some other places. The role of caste is very detrimental to the progress of the "untouchables". While analyzing the caste-class tie-up, Ramkrishna Mukerjee observes that "caste-riots are frequent in those areas where the caste-wise social deprivation are manifestly correlated with the class-wise economic deprivation; such as, in Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, etc ". According to Mukherjee, these caste contradictions are due to inherent class contradictions in the caste system.

✿ The caste system functions both as a relation of production and as an ideology. Hence it is both an economic and a social organisation. It is a source of economic exploitation of the

untouchables. The caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Capitalist relations make agricultural and industrial labourers a distinct class in itself, but the caste system prevents them from being a class-for-itself. Caste and religion are used to perpetuate a particular class-structure. Caste persists as a part of feudal ideology. Caste has discouraged the emergence of class consciousness among the weaker sections of Indian society, and the fact is that caste performs class-like function and activities related to political power.

✿ It has been observed that literary, education and employment are the most important indicators of social mobility among the scheduled castes, and the phenomenon of violence is closely related to social mobility. These upwardly mobile scheduled castes have reacted sharply against their exploitation and suppression, and hence they become the target of the fury of the upper castes. Apart from prejudice among the upper

castes against the scheduled castes, it is also a fact that the rivalry is now between the well-off scheduled castes and the caste Hindus entrenched into or aspiring for the lucrative jobs, positions of power and high status. As such, it is a class war behind the apparent caste riots.

- ❁ The upper castes are making a demand for considering merit as the basis of giving higher education, jobs, promotions, etc. The scheduled castes have been demanding extension of the policies of protective discrimination and reservation to raise the weaker sections to the level of the caste Hindus. The upper castes are so strong that even today they escape punishment for flouting the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955. Under this Act, the practice of untouchability is a cognisable offence.
- ❁ The bulk of the scheduled castes are engaged as agricultural and manual labourers. They are victims of assault, murder, rape and other cruel and inhuman treatment. In case they even slightly react to these indignities, they become

the target of social boycott, denial of public facilities and denial of employment on farms by the landlords. Such incidents have taken place in Bihar, Uttarpradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, etc. Incidents of atrocities in Bihar took place in Kargdhar, Pathadda, Chhaundano, Gopalpur and Dharampur. Those people were killed not only because they were Harijans, but also because they were working as agricultural labourers and share-croppers for the rich and dominant landlords. The issues of minimum wages, the occupancy rights of the share-croppers and the access to public amenities were involved in these incidents. Some such atrocities are not committed on non-Harijans, there is an element of Harijanness in the atrocities committed on the Harijans by the caste-Hindus. At times the issues of dignity and upper-lower caste conflict prominently figure in de-humanizing the "untouchables".

- ❁ In July 1978, in Maharashtra, riots began due to the renaming

of the Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. The conflict crystallised between the Dalit and the Non-Dalit student activists. The movement against the Dalits provoked violence; including the killing of people, molestation and rape of Harijans women, burning of Harijans houses and huts, pillaging their bastis, eviction from their houses and villages, killing of their cattle, denying them drinking water and refusing them work. The upper caste dominants were indignant that the Marathwada University could be renamed after a Harijans leader. They thought it against their dignity and a step towards lowering their position in the region.

- ✿ Incidents of atrocities due to land disputes payment of wages at lower rates, indebtedness forced labour and denial of access to public places have become a routine matter. In 1977, there were 8905 cases of atrocities on the Scheduled Castes; and more than fifty cent of the cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh.

Conclusion

- ✿ Harijans have made several efforts to come out of the clutches of dominant sections of caste-Hindu society. These including Sanskritisation, conversion to Buddhism, migration, education, urban employment, etc. Recently, the educated Harijans have also shown some militancy against their oppressors. The Dalit Literature Movement in Maharashtra has been launched to create consciousness among the Harijans about their rightful place in Indian society. Dalit writers have written articles on the pitiable condition of the Dalits. Dalit magazines and periodicals have been launched. Seminars and symposia have been organised to propagate Dalit literature. The Harijans have yet to go a long way to achieve equality with the non-Harijans. These efforts are more in the nature of a quest for equality rather than actual realisation of equality with the caste Hindus.