



THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION OF BACKWARD CLASSES IN MAHARASHTRA

Prakash Bhausaheb Salavi, Ph. D.

Senior Research Fellow, Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR)

At Indian Institute of Education, Pune.

Abstract

This essay on the problem of backward classes in Maharashtra is not only a very, very important issue, since neoliberalism has now made dominant agrarian castes impoverished and thus pushed them down the ladder of political economy. It is also important since it recalls the very important question: should Indian society be understood in terms of “class” (the usual Marxist analysis) or that of “caste”? And where does one fit in the idea of “backward classes? Is this idea a scientific one? It is with these questions that we turn to the problem of education of backward classes in Maharashtra.

After independence we had First Five Year Plan in 1951 in which we decided to provide special facilities for the education of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. It was expected that their advance would be so rapid that within a period of 10 years protective discrimination would no longer be required. In other words, it was hoped that the gap between the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and the others was expected to be bridged during the space of these 10 years. It is necessary to point out here how these expectations have been fulfilled in Maharashtra.



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Nearly seventy years after the Constitution was adopted in Indian polity, caste unfortunately has not been dislodged from the ivory tower where it had placed itself centuries back. Serious debates of caste have been taking place for more than a century. One recalls B. R. Ambedkar's 1916 'Castes in India' and M. K. Gandhi's 1920 'The Caste System' and not only the conflicting conclusions that the two deduced from their works, but also the conflicting ideas of Indian society itself. This essay on the problem of backward classes in Maharashtra is not only a very, very important issue, since neoliberalism has now made dominant agrarian castes impoverished and thus pushed them down the ladder of political economy. It is also important since it recalls the very important question: should Indian society be understood in terms of “class” (the usual Marxist analysis) or that of “caste”? And where does one fit in the idea of “backward classes? Is this idea a scientific one? It is with these questions that we turn to the problem of education of backward classes

in Maharashtra.

The greatest weakness of the Hindu society has been its caste system. Its effect has been to divide the house against itself. Among the Caste Hindus those who have been on the higher rungs of the social hierarchy have always tried to wield power and holed those on the lower rungs in social, religious, economic and cultural bondage. The acute feeling of bondage and oppression in the minds of the members of the lower caste Hindus, the untouchables and the outcaste Hindus – all the three known as: Bahujan Samaj in Maharashtra – has been the main cause of distrust in and hatred towards the high caste Hindus. The Division of society on the value system of purity, pollution led the majority population in Maharashtra to oppose the orthodox Hindu rituals and the Brahminical ordering of society at one time or the other since the 11th century. The inhuman treatment meted out to the untouchables or the backward classes by the caste Hindus led them to get themselves converted to either Islam or Christianity in later centuries and add to the graveness of the problem of the minorities in the 19th and 20th centuries and their unity for national purposes.

Even after the advent of the British rule in India and the introduction of European education and modern inventions, no change had come over this orthodox mentality of the high caste Hindus. They did not pay any heed to the very threats to Hinduism because of the conversion of their low caste brothers to Christianity of other faiths. On the contrary, it had proved and is still proving a menace to the unity of the Indian people. The atrocities like the burning of the houses of the untouchables, killing them or even rape of the untouchable women at the present day are examples of the inhuman treatment.

Owing to the conquest of India by the Britishers, the feeling of alienation was very strong among the masses and especially the deposed backward castes. It was modern education which had changed the picture of Maharashtrian society to some extent. During the Peshwa regime the differences between the high caste and low caste Hindus were on the increase. The festivals and fairs of the high caste Hindus and the *Shudras* were quite apart. Thus, on cultural front there was clear cut division between these two. The dire effects of these differences were seen and felt acutely after the assimilation of English education. The condition of the untouchables was very grave. In short, it can be said that the untouchables were backward castes in so far as economic, social and educational aspects of society are concerned. The other

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details of these oppressions will be made clear when we will discuss *Sattiyashodhak Samaj* and Jotirao Phule. Here we come to the problem of education of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the state of Maharashtra, which will we shall discuss the present status of these castes in so far as their upliftment is concerned.

The explicit identification of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes as weaker sections of society and the declaration of a national commitment to their uplift and advance are among the most striking features of the Constitution of India. Equally striking is the determination expressed in Article 46 of the Constitution, to use education as a major instrument to bring about the social transformation required to pull these two sectors of Indian Society out of their traditional backwardness. How far this new education was useful? How far these communities have been benefited by the educational opportunities given to them?

The situation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is roughly similar throughout the country. Here the impact of education on these communities needs to be considered. The impact of education upon these communities in Maharashtra should be regarded as an indicative of the impact it has received elsewhere. It is to be pointed-out here that the state of Maharashtra continues to be backward with respect to its scheduled tribes. But it can be considered to be the most advanced states in India in so far as the progress of the scheduled castes is concerned. Thus the course of education of the scheduled castes in Maharashtra should be looked upon as being indicative of the situation in a state that is relatively advanced, whereas the course of the education of the scheduled tribes should be viewed as being indicative of a situation wherein tribals remain fairly backward.

It is important to recognize that the movement for the uplift of the scheduled castes had an early start in the state of Maharashtra. Efforts to remedy the religious discrimination practised against the untouchables and other low caste Hindus date back to a period prior to the British regime, when the medieval saint poets viz. Dnyaneshwar, Eknath and Tukaram made a bid to de-sanskritized religion and make way for the lower caste to worship the Hindu gods. It was a movement routed in the *Bhakti marg* and sought to make the expression of *Bhakti* or devotion possible for the lower caste by the composition of *Bhajans* and *Slokas* in Prakrit or the language of the people. During the British period, Jyotiba Pule (1827-1890) in Poona and Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj in the adjacent princely state of Kolhapur launched major

movements for the education of the untouchables and other low caste Hindus. Thus, much of the area of the Maharashtra State had the advantage of both religious and secular movements to ameliorate the lot of the scheduled castes long before their cause had been taken-up on a national labour. The other three divisions viz. Nagpur, Bombay and Aurangabad were little away from these movements. Therefore, they had rather late start in this regard. But it was positively launched by the time the country attained independence. Wardha in Nagpur Division enjoyed the advantage of being the location for Sewagram, the headquarters of Gandhiji and the centre from which his nationwide crusade for the cause of Harijans was conducted. Nagpur, the capital of this Division, happens to be the place at which Ambedkar held the massive conversion of Harijans to Buddhism. Bombay city, the capital of Maharashtra and the principal city of the Bombay Division, had, as a metropolitan city and as one of the major centres of social reform movements in the country, been early involved in the movement for the uplift of the scheduled caste. The movement in the Bombay Division was not confined to the city of Bombay. It was at Mahad which now forms part of the Bombay Division that Ambedkar organised in 1927 his first major protest against the exclusion of the untouchable caste from the use of lakes and wells from which caste Hindus drew their water supply. It was at Mahad, again that later in the same year Ambedkar made a bonfire of the *Manusmriti* to register his rejection of the traditional legitimation of castes. The point is that the Poona, Nagpur and Bombay divisions were involved in the Scheduled Caste Movement long before Independence. But the Aurangabad Division lingered behind. However, it was compensated by the work of the People's Education Society at Aurangabad from 1950 onwards. This society, established by Ambedkar and his associates for the purpose of furthering the education of the scheduled castes in Maharashtra, has done outstanding work in promoting education among the scheduled casts of the Vidarbha and Marathawada regions.

Today, Maharashtra stands out as the only state in the country in which the percentage of the enrolment of the scheduled castes to the total school enrolment at each level of school (viz. primary school, middle school and high school) is equal to or even higher than the percentage of the scheduled caste in the total population of the state. Maharashtra is one of the states which is the largest beneficiary of the post-matric scholarship scheme sponsored by the Central Government. Although the

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scheduled castes in the state account for only 3.8% of the total scheduled caste population of the country, they receive about 17% of the amount spent by the Government of India on the post-matric scholarship scheme.

But the state of Maharashtra is not equally advanced with respect to the scheduled tribes. The nomadic and denotified tribes are still lower in educational progress, in fact, prior to Independence very little had been done to improve lots of the tribals. As in other parts of the country Christian Missionaries had made some efforts to carry education and medical facilities to the remote tribal districts, but they had not achieved spectacular success of the kind obtained in Assam with the Nagas for instance. In the post-independence period there have been some major movements among the scheduled tribes of the state. These are largely political in character. The most prominent is the movement led by Godawary Parulekar among the Warlis of the Thane district and more recently by a heterogeneous group of young radicals in the Dhulia district. The thrust of both these movements has been in the direction of awakening the consciousness of the tribals of making them aware of the exploitation they are exposed to and of inculcating in them courage, ability and self-confidence to fight for their rights. It is against the background of these features that we have to discuss the issue of education of the scheduled tribes in the state of Maharashtra.

The constitutional commitment to the education of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes as weaker sections implies the assumption of a weakness that can be overcome through education. What is the nature of this weakness? And how education is expected to help them? In a country, where practically 70% of the population could be described as poor, illiterate and powerless, the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes stood out as being poorer, more illiterate and more powerless than the others. The possibilities of their mobility and advance were more restricted than they were for others. In the case of the scheduled castes, both their backwardness and the constraints on their mobility came from the caste system, which confined them to low-status occupations, denied them access to education and to other opportunities for social or economic advance, denied them entry into temples and places of worship, relegated them to a low ritual status, and made them highly vulnerable to exploitation by high caste Hindus. Added to this was the fact that the scheduled castes were generally confined to the rural areas of the country, away from

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urban centres of opportunity and advance.

The source of the backwardness of the scheduled tribes was different, and so also the source of the constraints on their mobility and advance. Their poverty and ignorance are a consequence of their isolation from the main stream of life. As aborigines of the land they lived in remote areas, allowed themselves to be tucked away in forest districts or equally remote coastal regions. Through centuries they had confined themselves to their own simple, often primitive, cultures, their own tribal languages and dialects, and had at most a marginal relationship with the complex and sophisticated village or city life of the non-tribals. While cultural and physical isolation kept the tribals out of the orbit of development, their simplicity and credulousness, typical of those who belong to primitive cultures, made them highly vulnerable to exploitation by non-tribals. Their exploitation, generally, took the form of their use as cheap labour for forestry and farming. It also involved them in indebtedness, which in turn forced them into bonded labour and obliged them to serve landowning families generation after generation. Their ill-treatment was also evident in that, although outside the fold of Hinduism, they were generally treated as untouchables in the course of their encounters with Hindu society.

The continued exploitation of the scheduled caste and the scheduled tribe, their suppression into inferior secular and ritual status, their inequality and powerlessness were legitimized not only by the caste system and by belief in the doctrines of *karma* and *varnashrama* on the religious plane, but by an overall value-system which accepted inequality and ascription of the status.

With the attainment of Independence and acceptance of the ideals of the democracy, secularism, egalitarianism and integration, the situation of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes stood-out as a dark and ugly blot on the fabric of Indian life. The efforts of social and political reformers throughout the British period had already triggered the process for the removal of this blot. But the declaration of untouchability as an offence and the Constitutional Commitment to provide economic assistance, education, and other forms of protection to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes was a forceful bid to remove it altogether. Thus, the objective behind the promotion of education among them was clear and simple – viz. to uplift and integrate these communities, by equipping them for occupational mobility, economic advance and social and cultural equality with the caste Hindus.

After independence we had First Five Year Plan in 1951 in which we decided to provide special facilities for the education of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. It was expected that their advance would be so rapid that within a period of 10 years protective discrimination would no longer be required. In other words, it was hoped that the gap between the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and the others was expected to be bridged during the space of these 10 years. It is necessary to point out here how these expectations have been fulfilled in Maharashtra. It is also possible to assess the present situation of these communities in Maharashtra and to examine the extent to which their situation has changed since independence. But we will not go in the deeper details of information in this regard. The Government of India had launched various programmes for their education and also instituted a policy of reserving a quota in employment. In Maharashtra 5.86% of the posts in government are reserved for the scheduled castes and 13% are reserved for the scheduled tribes. But their representation in government employment remained poor. To a certain extent this can be attributed to the poor implementation of the policy of reservations. However, the major explanation for the non-utilisation of the positions reserved for them in government service seems to be their failure to equip themselves with education of the kind required to qualify for these positions. The detailed statistics of the Census and the other data collected by various agencies will prove this. Various studies have been conducted. They indicate that the Buddhists among the scheduled castes show greater mobility than the non-Buddhists, the *Mahars* show greater mobility than the *Mangs*, and so on. This indicates that the progress of the different schedule castes in the State is uneven. These studies have also pointed out that if the social environment allows change, they gain mobility. Most of these communities are landless. If their status as landless workers is to be found then the same has contributed to their mobility. One can say that where the landless are educated their chances of vertical mobility are greater. This we cannot find in the case of scheduled tribes.

The tribals in Maharashtra are engaged in cultivation, agricultural labour, forestry, fishing, livestock-raising, and other allied activities. These may be considered to be their traditional occupations. Those tribals who have migrated to urban areas will show a different picture. Dr. Govind Gare has provided specific details about tribals who migrate to urban areas (*Tribals in an Urban Setting*). Gare
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found that tribals who migrate for work gain horizontal mobility without much change in occupational status. But a few do gain mobility of both kinds. As many as 45% from a sample of 140 *Mahadeo Koli's* who had migrated to Poona, and whose fathers were engaged in cultivation, agricultural labour or forestry, found work as unskilled labourers. Another 21% found work in the services normally followed by the lower castes. 11% became unskilled labourers. Thus, practically 77% were confined to low status occupations upon their migration. However, as many as 13% found work at the lower clerical level, and between 2 & 3% each gained entry into skilled supervisory work, higher clerical or administrative work, business and trade or other miscellaneous occupations. The latter, together constitute 23% of the sample, represent those who have made a distinct departure upward from the occupational status of their fathers. Possibly they were able to do so because they were educated. Here we can say that education contributes for their mobility. Data from a study of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe high-school and college students sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science & Research and conducted by The Tata Institute of Social Sciences provide more specific clues to understanding the effectiveness of education in promoting occupational mobility among persons belonging to these communities. This clearly suggests that education positively promotes motivation for mobility. It is necessary to point out here that the higher the level of education achieved, the greater is the inclination to occupational mobility. Many young educated members of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are desirous of mobility, yet they are not confident of seeking this mobility through open competition. Most of the students opted for government service. It is because of the security of reserved employment.

The economic status of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is the second factor in terms of which we may assess their situation. Regarding this some information is available, but not a detailed one. General observation is of some use. The economic situation of the scheduled castes in the State suggests that they continue on the whole to be poorer than the rest of the population. The scheduled tribe cultivators are as good as labourers. They are having larger percentage of cultivators in the total population. This conveys the impression that the scheduled tribes in the State are not only better-off than the scheduled castes, but better-off than the rest of the population as well. However, this impression is belied when we note

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that the quality of cultivation, in which the scheduled tribes are engaged, is so primitive and poor that they continue to be impoverished, and not infrequently, economically worse-off than the non-tribal labourer.

While education was primarily looked upon as a mechanism for promoting the economic uplift and occupational mobility of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, it was also expected to liberate them from the discrimination and social segregation to which they had been subjected over the years. In fact, education was expected to supplement Untouchability Offences Act and to help eradicate discriminatory caste practices altogether. This can be regarded as the most important indicator of their movement towards equality. Here also we can say that the education might have brought about some change in their situation since Independence, they have not yet been integrated as equals in Maharashtrian Society.

In so far as Nomadic and De-notified tribes are concerned, there are many factors responsible for their degradation in Maharashtrian society. They could not achieve the educational level which the scheduled castes have achieved. They strive for their livelihood and move from one place to another, having no stability of any sort. This shows that these communities should be given shelter first, then means of livelihood and education which will help them to solve most of the difficulties and come to the main stream of Maharashtrian society.

So far as the failure to promote equality and integration is concerned there are several inadequacies in the situation of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and nomadic and de-notified tribes also, which can be summed-up as follows:

- 1) The continued backwardness of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the State in the matter of access to education;
- 2) The uneven educational progress of the different sectors of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities in the State;
- 3) The poor performance of students from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities in the State;
- 4) Limited utility of education as a mechanism for status mobility and change.

If education is to function as an equalizer, it is necessary that access to education is equal, but education is not yet as wide spread among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, as among the others. There is a striking disparity. In the enrolment of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes at different levels of

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education in different districts of the State, the fact that the education of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes lags behind that of the others is generally detrimental to their advance towards equality, particularly because this lag is most pronounced in the regions of the State in which industrial or commercial growth is most marked, and where consequently education is most crucial to advancement. The disparities are more pronounced in urban areas than in the rural areas. For example, among all the districts of the state the disparity between the scheduled castes and the rest of the population is most pronounced in Greater Bombay, which is the centre of industrial and commercial activity.

There is one more reason for rapid advance of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It is called as uneven growth of education within these communities. For example, *Mahars* among the scheduled castes and the *Gonds* among the scheduled tribes have advanced far ahead of others. Their representation in school and college enrolment and their utilisation of scholarships, free studentships and other facilities is totally out of proportion to the size of their representation in the population¹. Various causes can be brought out here, but we will not go into the details of the same. For our purpose, it is enough to state here that the progress of these communities is definitely unsatisfactory. The main reason is the poverties of these communities. It is poverty that inhibits education. It is evident that the children from poor homes perform poorly or drop out of school largely because they are unable to combine the demands of school with domestic or other responsibilities that they are required to carry at home. Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes children belong to cultures of poverty, find it difficult to cope with requirements of school attendance and household work. If the objective of assisting the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to obtain mobility through education is to be achieved more effectively, it is necessary to revise the structure of the school system in the State so as to make school more practicable for children from poor homes. Children from poor homes are handicapped by other shortcomings those arise out of their poverty – for instance, mal-nutrition, poor health and susceptibility to illness, inability to afford books, stationery, decent cloths to wear to school and lack of a place to study. In addition to poverty and cultural disadvantages, scheduled

¹ Suma Chitnis, *Literacy & Educational Enrolment Among the Scheduled Castes of Maharashtra*, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, 1974.

caste and scheduled tribe students seem also to suffer from a lack of proper guidance. At the end one can say that the formal education in the State needs to be reformed. It should be changed so as to accommodate the masses and to suit the needs of development. Along with formal education some non-formal ways of education should be incorporated. Here, an urgent action is needed. The State of Maharashtra, which has been considered to be in the forefront in education, could launch a major change and development in the Country, if it takes-up the issue of the education of the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and other disadvantaged sectors of the State in this vein.