

## EMPOWERMENT OF DALITS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

<b>B.M.Rajanikanth</b>	<i>Research Scholar, Centre of Rural Development Studies, Bangalore University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India</i>
<b>Dr.T.H.Murthy</b>	<i>Director, Centre of Rural Development Studies, Bangalore University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India</i>
<b>Dr.Sreekantaiah</b>	<i>Guest Faculty, Babasaheb Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Studies and Research Centre, Bangalore University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India</i>

### PREAMBLE

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*Dalits constitute about 25% of the population in India. The Directive Principles of State Policy emphasize the role of State in the delivery of social justice, distributive justice and natural justice to Dalits and other marginalized sections of society. The State is also responsible for allocating judicious funds under various plan periods for undertaking various welfare and development schemes for the empowerment of Dalits. Since national independence, the governments have been taking certain remedial steps for the upliftment of the socio-economic status of Dalits in India. The state has put in place laws, policies and programmes without which even the modest progress in the overall situation would not have been possible. However, these welfare measures are quite inadequate and have to be more effectively implemented to enable the Dalits to overcome the continued subordination, exclusion and exploitation in India. The empowerment of Dalits in India is amplified in this paper on the basis of qualitative research methodology.*

### POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES FOR DALIT EMPOWERMENT

Dr. Ambedkar devoted his whole life to fight for the annihilation of caste by proliferating a movement against the evils of the caste system. He had advised his people certain strategies for emancipation from multi-faceted oppressions. He found the emancipation of Dalits in Buddhist values, which promotes equality, self-respect and education. Ambedkar believed that Buddha treated Dalits with respect and love, and never tried to oppress them as in Hinduism.

Several policies and programmes were formulated and implemented in the post-independence era to facilitate the empowerment of Dalits who have remained as excluded sections of Indian society historically and structurally. The policy makers, administrators and other stakeholders are sensitized about the development of Dalits in India. Series of welfare measures for the educational, social and economic development of Dalits have been undertaken since the First Five Year Plan in accordance with the constitutional provisions.

The extreme economic backwardness, social retardation and virtual stagnation have aggravated the situation for ages and pushed the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to large scale exploitation. Proper social and economic status is very vital to progress in a caste – ridden society. It is because of this that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have no major say in the politico – cultural activities. Caste plays an important role in Indian society at every stage. Caste is also taken into consideration at every stage of human life and almost all activities revolve round the caste system.

Until Fourth Five Year Plan, the special programmes for Dalits were undertaken under the ‘Backward Classes Sector’. The new strategy for the integrated development of Dalits was adopted in the name of Special Component Plan and Special Central Assistance. The Scheduled Caste Development Corporations were adopted during the Fifth and Sixth Five Year Plans (Chaurasia, 1990:03). During the last six decades of planned development, India’s economy has registered commendable progress in a number of sectors of national development.

**Table : Plan Outlay for SC/ST Communities in India (Rupees in Crores)**

Five Year Plans	Total Plan (Rs.)	Share of ST (Rs.)	(%)	Share of SC (Rs.)	(%)
First	1960	19.93	1.00	6.13	0.35
Second	4672	42.92	0.90	28.56	0.61
Third	8577	50.53	0.60	40.82	0.48
Fourth	15,779	79.85	0.50	72.19	0.46
Fifth	39,426	1157.67	3.00	204.90	0.52
Sixth	1,09,292	3640.25	3.33	3722.97	3.41
Seventh	1,80,000	6744.85	3.75	7233.32	4.02
Eighth	1,81,735	4873.43	2.68	2280.80	1.26
Ninth	3,74,000	9168.12	2.45	10234.28	2.74
Tenth	15,541.28	12136.42	0.78	18148.84	1.17
Eleventh	2562707.53	6874.36	0.27	9538.62	0.37
Twelveth	35,68,626	9342.00	0.26	23342.00	0.65

**Courtesy: National Commission for SC/ST, GOI, New Delhi.**

The data reveals the plan outlay for SC/ST communities in India during various plan periods. It is evident from the data that the Government of India has not played a constructive and responsible role in the empowerment of Dalits in the post-independence era. The plan outlay for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe communities is awfully inadequate. The data clearly reveals that apathy of the State and inadequate budgetary support has brought about the marginalization of Dalits in India. This is also a clear case of gross violation of human rights of Dalits in the post-independence era. Dalits actually deserve budgetary allocation according to their population in the country.

A very large section of Scheduled Castes are engaged in rural and urban informal or unorganized sector. High incidence of landless and near landless households among the Scheduled Castes has created an enormously high level of manual wage labour among them. With high incidence of wage labour associated with high unemployment, under-employment rates, the Scheduled Castes are suffering more from low income, low consumption and high incidence of poverty. This comparative account of the economic position of the Scheduled Castes and others provides convincing evidence on the continuing economic inequalities associated with castes. It is thus beyond doubt that the historical impact of traditional caste based restrictions on the ownership of property and employment of occupation are still visible to a significant extent. The protection against economic discrimination that the Scheduled Castes received in government and public sector is nearly absent in private organized or unorganized sectors. Hence, the extension of protection in the form reservation in jobs or other forms in agriculture and urban industrial sector is necessary (Thorat, 2000:24).

The economic planning in India started in 1951 with First Five Year Plan. In the First Five Year Plan schemes were largely confined to education and allotment of agricultural land. The same policy continued in Second Five Year Plan. In the Third Five Year Plan, education received high priority with additional emphasis on technical and vocational training and education. Among the schemes for economic development, stress was laid on the allotment of agricultural land, special financial support to Scheduled Caste farmers, village artisans, traditional craft and small scale industries.

In the Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plans emphasis on economic and educational programmes continued. In the Sixth Five Year Plan significant modification was made in the strategy and methodology in the development of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Special component plan was adopted to

provide beneficiary – oriented developmental support. In the Seventh and Eighth Five Year Plans, emphasis remained on beneficiary – oriented programmes of socio-economic development. In Ninth Five Year Plan, emphasis was placed on empowering the landless rural SC families and providing legislative support for ownership of land. These measures thus intend to provide some source of income and also to build the human resource capabilities of Scheduled Caste persons (Thorat, 2000:24).

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) and Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) also continued the empowerment – oriented programmes for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India. Several development schemes were also implemented in the country to empower Dalits.

The 12th plan lays special emphasis on the employment and income generation programmes for Scheduled Castes across the country. The National Scheduled Caste Finance and Development Corporation, National Safai Karmacharis Finance and Development Corporation and other agencies are set up for promoting the economic development of Scheduled Castes. Skill development programmes, entrepreneurship development programmes, leadership development programmes and other initiatives are needed to empower the Scheduled Castes economically. The plan document also highlights the need for distribution of surplus government land to landless SC agricultural labors in order to improve their economic status. The government also wants to showcase and market the products manufactured by SC artisans and entrepreneurs through various fairs and exhibitions. The social welfare programmes also received plan financial support from the state sector as well.

The outlay for the empowerment of Scheduled Castes is not in accordance with their population and magnitude of poverty and under-privileged status. The delay in the implementation of welfare measures has adversely affected the developmental status of Dalits in India. The elected representatives of Dalits have not lived up to the expectations of their people mainly due to their loyalty to political mentors and bosses. The representatives of Dalits are not adequately found in the process of implementation of various developmental projects for the empowerment of Dalits in the country. Strict punitive measures are not adopted to punish the erring officials who are responsible for non-implementation of welfare measures and developmental projects. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes are not equipped with necessary powers and privileges to ensure strict implementation of various developmental initiatives in the country.

## **ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION AND DALIT EMPOWERMENT**

After the 1991 reforms, the cozy quasi-monopolies of the license-permit era disappeared and were replaced by fierce market competition. They neglected Dalits and other marginalized sections and caused setbacks to the social and economic equity and justice. Dalit-owned companies have also become important suppliers of components to top automobile companies in India. The rise of Dalit businessmen and millionaires has begun but they have to go a long way in the age of globalization (Kumar, 2001:11).

Despite launching of special schemes / programmes for Dalits in the post – independence era, they are still trailing behind in comparison to other sections of society economically and otherwise (Arles, 2001:01). The outlays for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had remained less than 5% in the Five Year Plans. It reveals the absence of political will and social commitment on the part of the rulers.

A serious lacuna of post-Independence Indian Governance has been its failure to comprehensively undertake Constitution-mandated radical measures essential to bring economic freedom, educational equality of opportunities to the Dalits (Krishnan, 2006:10). Government and corporate houses are required to facilitate an all-round advancement and empowerment of Dalits on the basis of social responsibility.

Dalits are very small in number and in proportion in the field of higher education in India and abroad. Government departments and educational institutions have not contributed judiciously for the educational empowerment of Dalits (Jadhav, 2009:07). Education is the key to the empowerment of Dalits. The State is primarily responsible for the expansion of educational and developmental opportunities to Dalits in order to achieve the goal of mainstreaming Dalits in India.

Dalits have not achieved adequate progress in education and development spheres due to several discriminatory tendencies. Their social status is primarily responsible for economic and political backwardness in the country (Fraser, 2010:05). Development organizations must continue to explore varying levels of incentives and pursue national social equality in India.

Ambedkar wanted the people to cultivate the values of freedom and equality among themselves through education. Ambedkar emphasized on secular education for social emancipation. He advocated that education was the best way for the enlightenment of human beings from ignorance (Nithiya, 2012:14). It is important to understand the caste system in India since it deprived the downtrodden communities' fundamental rights and equal opportunities in all walks of life. Dalits basically belong to the untouchable society which has been deprived of certain protections and affirmative actions (Sardar, 2012:16). Despite India's manifold growth, the Dalits still lag behind, largely due to economic disparity, which is a consequence of the deep rooted caste system. The Dalits issue has its roots in the stratified nature of the Indian society ridden by the caste system whose origins are against the principles of natural and constitutional justice.

Women among Dalits are considered as the 'lowest in the low' and need to be empowered in the same capacity. Ambedkar struggled to achieve fundamental rights for Dalits. Dalits have converted to Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism to overcome untouchability and exploitation by the caste Hindus. Reservation in the private sector will generate jobs for the deprived classes. The major obstacles to

Dalit empowerment are economic, political and social. The most urgent need is to include Dalit voice in policy formation and intervention (Majid, 2012:12). Globalization has led to marginalization of the already marginalized sections of the society. The process of globalization has severely affected the welfare and development of Dalits.

Globalization has seriously affected the socio-economic conditions of Dalits since 1990s in terms of education, employment, access to land, poverty and other welfare programmes. But with the adoption of the policy of liberalization, privatization and globalization the Indian State is giving up its social responsibilities one by one. For improving socio-economic conditions of vast majority of Dalits, implementation of land reforms must be given highest priority as the majority of the Dalits live in rural areas (Mandal, 2014:13). The role of the state becomes crucial for the empowerment of the Dalits under the changed circumstances.

## **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXCLUSION OF DALITS**

In India, social exclusion is practiced on the base of caste system. Dalits are excluded from the mainstream of development because of caste based oppression. The process of social exclusion has made the Dalits dependable on the dominant powers. Dalits are also subjected to social, economically and politically exclusion. Dalits should be actively involved in all developmental activities (Kadun and Gadkar, 2014:08). The vision of Dr.Ambedkar should be translated into a reality to facilitate the empowerment of Dalits in India.

There are a number of Centrally Sponsored Schemes which have been undertaken for the benefit of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the post independence era. Most of these programmes are not implemented properly in the country due to lack of participation of beneficiaries and absence of pro-active role of government in the empowerment of Dalits (Guru et. al, 2015:06). There is a need for a paradigm shift from post-facto to pro-active planning for the empowerment of Dalits in India.

Ambedkar called upon Dalits to sustain the democratic struggle for their empowerment without compromising with the dominant powers which believed in power politics in India (Sharma, 2015:20). Dalits are required to embrace Buddhism to overcome untouchability and caste related indignities and inequalities in the country.

Caste based oppression in India is still a fact of life. The arrival of the competitive market and its creative destruction broke old caste bonds and facilitated the shift of Dalits to new occupations. Urbanization helped the progress of Dalits, since cities did not have the old-style landowners with serf-like attached laborers. Rural Dalits could not progress beyond agricultural labor and miscellaneous occupations. Despite certain notable improvements, Dalits are still discriminated against widely, and are far from achieving equality in status or income. There has been some kind of transformation of the economic and social status of Dalits (Swaminathan and Aiyar, 2015:22). Dalits should launch a nationwide movement for the extension of reservation in the private sector under the changed economic circumstances.

Traditionally, the various Dalit castes did the filthiest jobs due to system related loopholes. Dalits have entered industry, trade and other sectors and emerged as millionaires. There is an unprecedented social revolution in the country. The economic reforms of 1991 helped open up the economy

and let loose the forces of creative destruction. These opened up new spaces that Dalit businesses were able to occupy. There has been a transformation of the economic and social status of dalits, with many starting to run businesses that historically had been upper caste monopolies (Swaminathan and Aiyar, 2015:22).

Dalit women are socially excluded and humiliated for a long period of time. They are denied justice, equity as well as social and political participation. Impoverishment and marginalization of the vulnerable Dalit women have continued despite constitutional provisions and welfare measures. The policies are inadequate to minimize the handicaps and disabilities of the past and in reducing the gaps between them and the rest of the Indian society (Shahare, 2016:18). Dalit women need pro-active and constructive services and facilities to participate actively in the mainstream of development in India.

Elections are regarded as a potential step-ladder to power and success in modern society. The Constitutional Amendment has paved the way for devolution of powers, participatory democracy and decentralization of developmental opportunities for the marginalized sections of society (Roche and Ramanathan, 2017:15). Panchayati Raj Institutions, non-government organizations and self help groups should play an active role in the empowerment of Dalits in rural India.

The dominant powers prefer to encourage Dalit leaders who live like the slaves. The tokenism breeds cynicism. The present NDA government headed by Narendra Modi has selected Ramnath Kovind, a Dalit as the President of India mainly to win back their votes for the next general elections in 2019. This kind of Dalit representation has become a stumbling block in the empowerment of Dalits in India (Kazmi, 2017:09). The rightist political forces have heralded a new era of political fundamentalism and economic oppression which has cost secularism, socialism, democracy and human rights in India.

The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes. Dalit women remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded since they are not aware of the constitutional provisions, development schemes and other opportunities (Bakshi, 2017:02). The government and civil society should create an enabling environment for the empowerment of women and weaker sections of society.

History of Modern India is ripe with examples of marginalization of Dalits, which is against empowerment / Self-respect. There are several factors which are responsible for the marginalization of Dalits in India (Viduthalai et. al, 2017:25). Dalits need multi-faceted support for their empowerment from various stakeholders including the media.

Dalit women face multiple injuries and injustices in India because of gender based and caste based discriminatory practices. Reservation of Dalits in panchayat three-tier systems in the state has made a significant dent in the power relations in modern society (Choudhary, 2018:04). Political leadership opportunities and economic development initiatives would enhance the status of Dalits in India.

Practically, the marginalized sections including Dalits are not transformed educationally, socially and economically since they follow the old path to development. They are receiving government funds directly without intermediaries, loopholes and other disadvantages (Singh and Gautam,

2018:21). The development programmes should be designed and implemented in accordance with the ground realities and requirements of beneficiaries in order to achieve the goal of empowerment of Dalits and other marginalized sections of India.

Industrialization is a prominent means of empowerment of Dalits and other disadvantaged sections of society in India under the changed circumstances. Financial inclusion of Dalits is the need of the hour since it would create job creators rather than job-seekers (Saxena, 2018:17). The State and corporate sector should promote public – private participation for the financial empowerment of Dalits in India.

A microscopic minority of Dalit entrepreneurs has emerged in the age of globalization on the basis of self confidence, skill development, entrepreneurship development and new opportunities in the economy. Some institutions have also supported Dalit entrepreneurs through different innovative and constructive schemes (Shankar, 2019:19). Government organizations, nationalized banks, rural cooperatives and corporate houses should play an active and constructive role in the development of entrepreneurship of Dalits in India.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in India has opened new vistas for better economic and social security to women, Dalits, tribals and other weaker sections of society. The social norms remain a potent source of disempowerment of Dalits in India (Thapar-Björkert et. al, 2019:23). Gainful employment opportunities are required to enhance the social and economic status of Dalits in all spheres of life.

The Government of India has undermined the empowerment of Dalits by minimizing critical schemes such as post-matric scholarship, UGC fellowship, rehabilitation of bonded labour, self-employment of safai karamcharis, land records management services and other beneficial schemes through denial of adequate funds. The budgetary allocation for the year 2019-20 clearly reveals the apathy of the central government towards Dalits. This has adversely affected the effective implementation of development programmes for Dalits in the country. Dalit intellectuals and activists are required to protest against this kind of political discrimination and demand adequate funds for the implementation of various development schemes for the empowerment of Dalits.

## CONCLUSION

Dalits constitute approximately 25% of the total population of India but continue to suffer from varying degrees of slavery, indignity, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, ill-health, malnutrition, discrimination and exploitation. They continue to remain at the bottom of the Indian society in wealth, social status, education, health and overall living conditions. In spite of various constitutional provisions, reservation benefits and welfare measures to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Dalits, they remain excluded, marginalized and oppressed in Indian society. The development of Dalits is thus a part of a continued quest for educational progress, social justice, economic equity and political empowerment in the new millennium.

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