

## Chapter-V

### **SCHEDULED CASTES' MOVEMENTS - SEARCH FOR IDENTITY**

#### **Colonial Rule**

Scheduled Castes had little hope of outside sympathy or support. The British Government in India took no interest in Scheduled Castes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in keeping with the post-1857 desire to win the support of the traditional leaders of Indian society; it adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the caste system and did not interfere. Hindu social reformers did not evince much interest in campaigning against the eradication of social evils pertaining to caste systems which severely affected the Scheduled Castes. It was left to Jotirao Phule who opened two schools in Pune for Scheduled Castes. In 1873, he organised *satya-sodhak* (Search for Truth) *samaj* to save 'the lower castes from the hypocritical Brahmins and their scriptures'.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the overwhelming majority of the Scheduled Caste population lived in hopeless conditions. By virtue of their *Jati* membership they were placed socially economically, culturally and politically at the bottom of a hierarchical society.

#### **ORIGINS OF THE TERM SCHEDULED CASTES**

The term Scheduled Caste was first used by the British in the Government of India Act of 1935. Prior to this, some of these castes were included among the depended classes a category used for the first time in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghan Shyam Shah. (ed.) Dalit Identity and Politics cultural subordination and the Dalit Challenge, Vol. II, Sage Publications, New Delhi

The term *Harijan* has been widely used by caste Hindus as a substitute for *achchuta* untouchable. Many Scheduled Caste people also began to call themselves Harijans hoping that the caste Hindus would change their behaviour towards them. But the new nomenclature hardly enthused most SCs except a few who followed the path of Sanskritisation to cultivate the virtues of upper castes. It did not provide a new-world view, symbol or path to attain equal status which they began to demand. In fact Gandhi felt that the name *Harijan* given to SCs would aim at persuading caste Hindus to express repentance. By doing so they were expected to change their heart and behaviour towards untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar and his followers did not find any difference in whether they were called *Achchuta* or *Harijan* as the new nomenclature did not change their status in the social order.<sup>2</sup>

### **Regional Variations in Nomenclature**

SCs are called by different names in different parts of the country. These names were given by the caste Hindus as expressions of contempt. They include: *dasa*, *dasyasa*, *rakshasa*, *asura*, *avarna*, *panchanama*, *chandala*, *dalit* and *untouchable*. Each of these names has a history and background. Besides these names, there are a number of other titles or names which have been given to them at the level of the regional language.

Thus, *chura* in Punjab (North-West India), *dalit* or *lal deghi* in Hindi (North India), *mala*, *madiga* in Telugu, *paraiya* in Tamil and *pulayam* in Malayalam (South India).

These names carry the two-term contrast of “we, the pure” and “you, the impure”. In response to these insulting labels, the untouchables have chosen to give themselves the

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1.

name *dalit* which refers to the hardships of their life. This name is a constant reminder of the age-old oppression. The term is also an expression of their past self-identity.

By the British, the Dalits were named the “Depressed Classes” and the Scheduled Castes in the 1935 Government of India Act. Mahatma Gandhi named them *Harijans* which means “Children of God”. But this term was not welcomed by the SCs because it did not adequately describe their conditions.

### **History of S.C. Movements**

S.C. movement is a protest movement of SCs against the society to undo the injustice done to them over a considerable period of time. In fact, for thousands of years they were subject to humiliation and untold miseries. They were looked down as ‘untouchables’ spreading pollution and were assigned menial works, scavenging, digging graves in burial grounds dealing with dead animals taking out leather from caracas etc.

### ***Bhakthi* cult**

The *broken men* who were deliberately degraded as untouchables by the Brahmanic forces had never accepted their position. They began to protest against it. In the beginning their response to untouchability came in the form of *Bhakthi Cult*. The *Bhakthi* cult which originated in the 12th century was an antithesis of the *Vedantic* philosophy propagated by Shankaracharya who believed in *Dhyan* (Meditation) and *Karma* as the only two means to achieve salvation.

The caste Hindus, particularly the Brahmins had the monopoly over both the ways of salvation. The saints belonging to the *Bhakthi* cult revolted against *Vedantic* philosophy: they never believed in spiritual equality and *Bhakthi* or devotion in God as

one of the means to achieve salvation. They substituted songs, music, dancing and waving of lights for Vedic Mantras. They preferred vernacular languages for prayers in place of Sanskrit *slokas*.

Of all the saints of Bhakthi cult Ramanujacharya, Madvacharya, Kabir, Tukaram, Meerabai and Chaitanya were most prominent.

The untouchable saints like Ravindra Chokamela, Kanaka, Nandanara and several others were attracted towards the Bhakthi cult. It is said that Ramanujacharya opened the Narayana temple for the untouchables. The temple of Jagannath at Puri was also opened for the untouchables. However, the untouchable saints like Chokamela and Kanaka were not allowed entry into the temple of Vithal at Padharipur and the temple of Krishna at Udipi respectively. Thus, they made efforts to claim their right of spiritual equality but in vain.

### **Untouchables Join Army**

The untouchables had no right to join martial services. However, during the Muslim rule they were recruited to the army. Some of them converted to Islam in order to acquire good positions in service so that they can take revenge on caste Hindus and rescue the untouchables from the tyranny of the caste system.

Some of them rose to be rulers. Kala Pahad, a Bengali untouchable ruler became a terror for the Hindus in those days.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conversion to Islam**

Malik Kafoor who served under Allauddin Khilji, trounced the Yadava Kingdom

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<sup>3</sup> Satyanarayana, A. "Dalits and Upper Castes: Essays in Social History", p. 45.

of Devagiri (Daulatabad) in 1307, was once a slave brought from Gujarat. Khushru Khan, an untouchable convert became the ruler of the country in 1390. They were mainly instrumental in the spread of Muslim rule in India.

However, when the untouchables were disappointed with the indifferent attitude of the Muslims, they preferred to join the forces of Maratha warrior Shivaji and helped him to establish his own kingdom. They continued to be recruited to Maratha army subsequently. Naghak Mahar became prominent during the reign of Rajaram.

Later on when the untouchables became dissatisfied with the Peshwa rule, they left the Maratha forces to join the East India Company. The untouchable Periahs, who joined the British Troops, fought heroically the Battle of Arcot in 1751 and secured victory for the company. The untouchable Mahars fought against the orthodox Marathas and the oppressive rule of Peshwas in 1818 at Koragaon and won the victory for the British East India Company.

### **Religious Conversions**

The untouchables joined Islam as they were getting disgusted with their all-sided oppression in the hands of caste Hindus and thought the way out is conversion to Islam whose Philosophy is fascinating because of its monotheism and egalitarianism in addition to being a religion of the ruling community. The rise of Sufism and the preaching and propagation of Islamic principles by the Sufi saints played its part to attract the untouchables towards Islam.

### **Conversion to Christianity**

European Christian missionaries also attracted the untouchables by their

principles of monotheism, egalitarianism and liberalism. Saint Xavier and Father Stephens came to India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and began to spread Christianity. The untouchables who were subjected to different forms of untouchability, especially in South India became Christians in majority and uplifted themselves with the help of missionaries. The *Churha* untouchables from Punjab were attracted towards Sikhism during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were later on called *Mazhabis*. The *Chamars* also followed them. They were called *Ramdasiyas*. However, these converts were not treated on equal terms with the high caste people.<sup>4</sup>

### **Process of Conversions**

To get rid off untouchability and caste system, some of the untouchables, especially the sweeper and scavenger *Bhangis* belonging to *Lalbegi* and *Malkana* castes converted themselves to Islamic religion. They thought that they would get the treatment of equality. But they were disappointed. They could not discard their earlier practices even after becoming Muslims. They adopted Islamic names and rituals, and at the same time they also followed their Hindu rituals and ceremonies which made the Muslims reluctant to establish blood relationship with them.

### **Role of Missionaries**

The Portuguese Missionary St. Francis Xavier attempted large scale conversion of lower castes in the coastal areas of Western India. Later on the Church of England became active in conversion among the lower castes. The untouchables who were victims of aggravated forms of untouchability especially in Travancore (Thiruvananthapuram) became Christian converts *en masse*. According to 1891 census

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

there were a total of 22,84,172 Christian converts in India, out of whom 14,91,458 were in British Provinces and 7,92,714 in native states.

### **Retention of Caste Status**

Caste status was retained even in the new faith due to the caste consciousness of high caste converts. Therefore, the Bishop of Calcutta, Daniel Wilson issued a circular in 1823 to all the Anglican missionaries in India, saying that “the distinction of caste must be abandoned, decidedly immediately, finally”. In 1848, Spencer, the Bishop of Madras and 84 missionaries decided to abandon caste as it was opposed to Christianity. Further, the Madras Missionary Conference held in 1850 resolved to abandon caste *hierarchy* in Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

The above account reveals that on the one hand the caste status was retained by the high caste converts and on the other serious attempts of the missionaries to abandon the same were going on. The missionaries attempt had an educative value which brought an awakening in the Indian society in general and among the Christians and lower castes in particular.

The process of conversion increasingly exerted threatening pressure on the high caste Hindus to accommodate certain new values and to make adjustments according to the new challenging situation.

More and more members of SC community, both from the elite and cross sections of society prefer to identify themselves in the public sphere as SCs only.

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<sup>5</sup> Uma Ramaswamy (1963). “Self Identity among Scheduled Castes: A Study of Andhra in EPS, Vol. 9, No.47, p. 196.

## **Multiple Identities**

Like everyone else SCs too have multiple identities as they belong to different regions, religious communities, linguistics groups and castes. What is important is that with these identities they have began to use SC as a suffix, i.e. one is a Hindu, Muslim or Christian SC as well as a Chamar, Mahar, Mala, Madiga, Jat and also a Gujarati, Maharashtraian or Bihari SC. In recent years, SCs in Andhra Pradesh, both Malas and Madigas began to add their caste status to their names like other castes such as Reddy, Naidu, Choudary as suffix.<sup>6</sup>

The new identity, however, cannot be forged too easily. They vacillate between their traditional and new identity, particularly when the new identity is used by a small section to dominate others and corner economic and political benefits. They tend to prefer the new identity in all to get tangible and non-tangible benefits. Those who are late commers in the process remain often wondering about what the advantages of acquiring a new identity are. They fear that they are the losers today and may continue to be so 'tomorrow'. This is so where material interests are at stake.

## **Mala Vs Madigas**

The conflict between Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh over the issue of reservation of jobs is a case in point. The former emphasise 'SCs unity' and SC identity whereas the latter prefer to maintain traditional Jati identity. Madigas fear that 'SC unity' means accepting the perpetual dominance of Malas, so that they can capture political power and corner economic benefits. They therefore say, "we Madigas want our identity but Malas want to destroy our own identity. This is not possible".

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<sup>6</sup> Ghan Shyam Shah, (ed.). Dalit Identity and Politics Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge, Vol.II, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

The traditional *Jati* identity and the new identity in the making are in conflict. At present, the conflict is not so much on the cultural level of subscribing to Brahmanical social order as much as for material interests.

Is the conflict between Malas and Madigas, the result of caste ideology? Do the ex-untouchable castes share and practise the main principles of Hindu social order?

### **Hierarchical Stratification**

It is true that SCs in contemporary India are neither socially nor economically homogeneous. There are more than 400 *Jatis* among the Scheduled Castes in India. Like all other social groups including Christians and Muslims, SCs are hierarchically stratified so much so that they also practise untouchability. Malas do not like to have any blood relationship with Madigas. They treat the latter with contempt. Thus, the scholars who follow the culturological structure-function paradigm assert that SCs share 'cultural consensus' with upper caste Hindus.<sup>7</sup>

### **Reform Movements**

A new awareness began to spread among the SCs since the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A number of reform movements were launched by socio-religious leaders such as Ramdeo Panth, Satnamic Panth, Kabir Panth, Naval Dharma, Warkasi Panth, Narsaiah Sect, and Mathva Sect.

The main theme of all these socio-religious reform movements is to preach that God is one and formless, to believe in equality of all human beings, to maintain good and moral conduct and lead an ideal family life.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

These sects were the natural reactions to the orthodox Hinduism. The founders and propagators of these various sects have played a significant role in bringing about a new awareness, separate identity, self-pride and self-confidence among the Scheduled Castes. They attempted to introduce radical changes in the Hindu social systems. They became successful to a great extent.

### **SCs under Colonial Rule**

For centuries, the upper castes enjoyed social, economic and political power and did not concede anything to the Scheduled Castes. The British rulers introduced the western legal system in India under a capitalist economic structure and liberal ideology. With the change in politico-legal structure, movements by SCs were launched in different parts of the British India demanding rights such as admission in schools, walking on public roads, wearing footwear entering temples and dressing like caste Hindus.

During 1880s and 1890s, they pressed the Indian National Congress to take up the cause of untouchables. But the Congress did not support the demand till the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909 when the issue of “communal representation” became important. Caste Hindus were alarmed by the demands and apprehended that time is not too far when the untouchables might ever be weaned away from the national movement if nothing was done urgently to assure them support and cooperation in the removal of their disability.<sup>8</sup>

### **Demand for Separate Representation**

There were no safeguards for the depressed classes in the 1909 Government of

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<sup>8</sup> Gupta, S.K. (1985). “The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics”, Munshiram Manmohanlal, New Delhi, p. 93.

India Act. The demand for separate representation and protection measures for them continued. SCs were agitated over their plight and felt that the British government was favouring only the upper caste Hindus. Hence they were dissolute with the Indian National Congress.

### **Opposition to Congress**

Some of their leaders opposed the Congress and supported the British rule. Kambale of Poona, T.N. Nair of Madras opposed the Home Rule demand of the Congress and pleaded before the Montague-Chelmsford committee that the British must remain in power and continue to provide protection to the Depressed Classes, instead of leaving them at the mercy of the upper castes. They feared that once the British leave India after handing over the country to the upper caste leaders, their (SCs) position becomes worst and vulnerable. Hence they sided and supported the British rule in India.

Consequently in 1917, the Indian National Congress confessed for the first time its concern over the issue of untouchables. It appealed to the people to understand “the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by caste and custom upon the Depressed Classes”. Beyond making this general appeal, the Indian National Congress did not articulate any concrete demands or programme to protect the interests of the depressed classes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Plea before The Franchise Committee**

The Franchise Committee of 1918-19 recommended nomination from the Depressed Classes in Provincial Councils. The Act of 1919 accepted the recommendation

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

but Dr.Ambedkar opposed nomination and pleaded for the extension of the principle of election to the Depressed Classes. He treated that under the influence of caste Hindu leaders nomination of inconsequent persons serve the government rather than the interests of their fraternity.

M.C. Rajah, a nominated member in the Madras Legislative Council, demanded reservation of seats for all *Panchamas* in Government schools and colleges and nomination of suitable men from the Depressed Classes as members of various local bodies and municipalities. On his insistence, the Council passed a resolution issuing instructions to district collectors asking them to nominate suitable men from the depressed classes as members of various local bodies and municipalities.<sup>10</sup>

### **Demand for Separate Electorate**

Demands for separate electorate, reservation of seats to the Legislative Councils and local bodies and reservation of posts in Government jobs gathered momentum in the late 1920s. Dr.Ambedkar pleaded for separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. The Simon Commission rejected the demand for separate electorate. It recommended that in all eight provinces there should be some reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes. The number of such reserved seats in all general constituencies should be three-quarters of the proportion of the Depressed Classes' population to the total population of the electoral area of the province.

There was no unanimity among the leaders of the depressed classes on the issue of a separate electorate. M.C. Rajah of Madras and many others were not in favour of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

separate electorate. On the other hand, they wanted more representation to Depressed Classes. The All India Depressed Classes Association strongly opposed the stand taken by M.C. Rajah and his followers and mobilised the Depressed Classes in support of a separate electorate. Representations were made to that effect before the Franchise Committee.

### **The Communal Award**

In 1932, the British Government announced the Communal Award. It offered a separate electorate to Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians but not to the Depressed Classes. The latter were given a double vote, one as a caste Hindu and another as a depressed caste. The then British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald contended that their main objective in the case of Depressed Classes had been that while securing to the spokesmen of their own choice in the Legislative Council of the provinces where they were found in large number to avoid separate electoral arrangements which would perpetuate their segregation. Accordingly, all depressed class voters would be entitled to vote with caste Hindus in general constituencies. In addition, they would be entitled for a period of 20 years to an extra vote in Special Depressed Classes constituencies numbering 71.

### **Poona Pact**

Gandhi and the Indian National Congress opposed the Award. Many high caste leaders also opposed it. They feared that separate communal representation would destroy the country's unity and integrity and strength of the Hindu society. It would weaken the national movement.

Meanwhile two meetings were held between Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar to reach any compromise formula but without any success. Consequently, Gandhi went on a fast

unto death against the Communal Award. The political atmosphere was charged against Dr.Ambedkar and he was under pressure to give in. Finally, Dr.Ambedkar yielded to Gandhi's demand and gave up his insistence for a separate electorate. Gandhi on his part, conceded reservation of 148 seats for the Depressed Classes for 10 years. It was accepted that there should be a referendum at the end of this period. This is known as the Poona Pact. The Government of India Act, 1935 incorporated the agreement and guaranteed reservation to Scheduled Castes in various legislatures of India. It also provided few safeguards against discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, race, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The Poona Pact had a far reaching impact on the framing of the Indian Constitution and the Scheduled Caste politics of post-Independence India.

### **Politico-social Transformation of SCs in Independent India**

SCs worked out their own distinctive world-view during the first six decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a perspective that did not exist earlier, but emerged in 1920s and slowly acquired concrete shape between 1940s and 1960s. Ultimately, it is a perspective that shapes today and influences different groups of SCs.

The SC movement under the leadership of Dr.Ambedkar was actively involved in politics by the late 1920s. Political power, Ambedkar believed, could help Scheduled Castes solve their socio-economic problems. They have followed two paths in the political arena for asserting their demands.

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<sup>11</sup> Suresh, K. (1996). "The Dalit Movement in India", Satyamurthy, T.V. (ed.). in Region Religion Caste Gender and Class in Contemporary India, Vol. III, New Delhi, pp. 364-65.

One is agitational politics or direct action through struggles and the other is participation in parliamentary politics through elections and holding offices in various decision-making institutions.

Various struggles were launched by the SCs protesting against the practice of untouchability and perpetration of atrocities for demanding minimum wages, land rights, employment, self-respect and dignity and political representation. They have also aimed at the raising consciousness among SCs about the need for political participation in order to bring about social transformation leading to an egalitarian social order.

The Madras in South India launched struggles in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century demanding temple entry and that their women are allowed to dress like Nair and Christian women.

### **Conversion to Buddhism**

The major SCs movement in the post-Independence period is conversion to Buddhism. This was not an attempt for individual salvation but a quest for collective emancipation. Its message went far and wide in the country, though a large number of SCs did not formally become Buddhists.

The movement nonetheless boosted their spirit to revolt against caste-based discrimination and socio-economic injustice in day-to-day life.

The SC movement has revolted against oppression and had the potential to provide a new paradigm of development and social order. But unfortunately, of late, it has been reduced to the level of a pressure group and is confined to a few isolated micro-

struggles within the present political framework. It has failed to show the way to transformation. This is the major challenge that the SCs movement is facing now.<sup>12</sup>

### **All India Scheduled Castes Federation**

Dr. Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour party in 1936 so as to have a broad alliance of peasants, workers and SCs. But the party was dissolved in 1942, before it could make any visual impact. Dr. Ambedkar also formed the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) in 1942. But the AISCF could not make any dent in electoral politics.

### **Republican Party of India**

Again in 1957, Dr. Ambedkar's close associates formed the Republican Party of India (RPI). It too did not do well at the elections. It won three seats in Lok Sabha in 1962 elections and one in 1967 elections. Its influence is confined to a few pockets of Maharashtra.

### **Bahujan Samaj Party**

The Bahujan Samaj Party, founded by Kanshiram in 1978 has slowly emerged as a political force to reckon with at both the regional level - Uttar Pradesh - as well as at the national level. Presently under the leadership of Mayawati (Chief Minister) BSP is the ruling party in Uttar Pradesh.

BSP strives to build an alliance with OBCs, Muslims and SCs. Initially, the party displayed its anti-Brahminism. But in order to gain political power in the last Assembly elections held in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP chief Mayawati forged a broad alliance giving

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<sup>12</sup> Ghanshyam Shah. *op. cit.*, pp.10-11.

party tickets to Brahmins and other upper castes also. In her cabinet, Brahmins are given representation. This way one may conclude that BSP is not an exclusive party of SCs platform to Scheduled Castes only. It does not cater to the needs of SCs only. Electoral compulsions have made the BSP dilute its anti-Brahmin and caste Hindu prejudice to a greater extent.

### **Individual Agenda**

Under Article 330 and 332 out of 540 seats, seventy eight seats are reserved for SCs in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, respectively. Initially, the reservations for SCs were only for 10 years, and they have been periodically extended.

The Scheduled Caste politicians who got party tickets and contested in the elections are educated and engaged in agriculture, business or professions like law. Some of them are comparatively better-off than the fellow SCs.<sup>13</sup>

But they are not powerful enough to do anything to improve the lot of their communities. The elected representatives have not secured effective power even to articulate the problems of their communities. A number of studies relating to the legislative behaviour of the elected SC representatives show that the legislators did not actively participate in the debate in the State Assemblies or Parliament, concerning issues affecting the depressed communities.

The condition of SCs in village level continues to be vulnerable under decentralisation of power. Elected representatives from the SC communities, more often than not, do not have any say in village affairs. Even the special powers and provisions

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

given to SC members to protect the interests of their community are not effectively invoked. They occupy public, political positions, ministers, corporation chairpersons but lack the necessary political courage to question the party leadership. They are afraid of not getting renomination, party ticket or loss of ministerial positions. This highlights the limitation of the parliamentary form of political system.

### **SCs Protest “Untouchable” Status**

As agri-business takes over farming, casual workers are forced to migrate to urban areas. Many SC women are left behind and bear the responsibility of providing food for their families. Those who move to the cities, often end up in export processing zones where they are subjected to pregnancy tests in order to obtain jobs and then work 12-hour shifts standing inside barbed-wire enclosed factories. They are often targeted for government birth control schemes, including forced stabilisation and guinea pig trails of invasive hormonal contraception methods.

Meanwhile, globalisation has pushed many more SC women and children into prostitution as their own means of survival. Asian countries have been encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to develop tourism and entertainment industries in order to make their loan payments. Growth of these industries in developing countries invariably involves the expansion of the sex industry.<sup>14</sup>

### **SCs Movement in Andhra Pradesh**

SCs movement in Andhra Pradesh in the past was mainly to protest against the atrocities and violence meted out to them by upper caste landlords in the villages. In

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mennen. Dalits in India Protect “Untouchable status” – Internet.

recent years, the two major SC castes - Mala and Madiga - have been rival castes, claiming more rights, concession in the form of reservation. While Malas are opposing caste divisions within the SC Community, Madigas are demanding categorisation of SCs into different castes sub-castes and extension of the benefits of reservation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Atrocities and Violence against SCs**

The evolution of Andhra Pradesh has also witnessed quite a bit of caste oppression and the first recorded sign of such brutal practices was in the killing of Koteshu in Kanchikacherla of Krishna district. Arguably this might not be the first case of caste oppression, but this incident in 1968 received the attention of society and there was considerable opposition. This kind of brutality against *Dalits* and downtrodden continued and in another two decades got its response in a great upsurge in the form of Dalit movement. It was after a carnage in which six Dalits were killed in Karamchedu in Prakasam district on July 17, 1985. The ghastly incident was followed by several other cold-blooded incidents in Neerukonda, Chundururu, Timmasamudram, Chalkurthi, Vempenta, etc. These incidents forced the *Dalits* to get organised and wage consistent struggles against all forms of oppression.

However, over the time, the Dalit movement has seen some fissures in it and some sub-castes, including Madiga, started questioning the hegemony of Malas in usurping all the benefits of reservation. *Madiga Hakkula Parirakshana Samithi* holding the banner of *Madiga Dandora* demanded further classification of the Scheduled Castes and provide reservation according to the relative backwardness. Though the demand was

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<sup>15</sup> Baker, C.J. (1975). *The Politics of South India (1920-37)*, Baker, C.J. and Wash Brook, D.A. (ed.). *South India Political Institutions and Political Change (1880-1940)*, Delhi.

democratic and seeking redressal of piled up discontent, nonetheless the movement resulted in fragmentation of *Dalit* movement.

### **Gains Achieved by Scheduled Caste Struggles**

However, it would be too simplistic and too far from reality to say that nothing has changed since Independence. Not that the conditions of SCs have remained as they were before Independence.

Scheduled Castes have become politically more conscious of their rights and more determined to build a better future for themselves. They have become more aggressive and highly volatile in pressing for their demands. Very often they chose the agitational path to draw the attention of the ruling elite.

SCs questioned and rejected categories like untouchables, depressed classes, Scheduled Castes and Harijans that were coined by colonial and Hindu nationalists. This was not merely to contest dominant ascriptions of their identity but also to question the notions of impurity and pollution; attached to their community, identity and history. Various SC communities from different parts of India raised this issue by claiming that they had discovered a pure past and a pure identity.<sup>16</sup>

Through a range of organisations and caste Mahasabhas, Chamars were the first SC community to launch a struggle to redefine their identity in Uttar Pradesh way back in 1910s and 1920s. Their struggle was launched initially to contest the dominant colonial and Hindu narratives of their ‘untouchable identity’ by emphasising the purity of their lives and by demanding a status equal to that claimed by caste Hindus.

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<sup>16</sup> Seminar, Feb. 2006.

Chamars organised the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha and held the first conference on 27 and 28 December 1927 at Allahabad. It was attended by about 25,000 SC delegates from different parts of India, particularly from Punjab, Bihar, Delhi, the Central Provinces Poona, Bengal, Madras and Hyderabad.<sup>17</sup>

The most enduring legacy of the Adi-Hindu movement was the conceptualisation of a separate SC identity which was not merely a political category but also a social and cultural category - a way of thinking not just about SCs but about the entire gamut of Hindu society.

After Independence, SCs have undergone two positive changes. First, crude and blatant forms of social discrimination, at least in the public sphere, are practised far less than in the past. They have not disappeared totally. Second, a middle class within the community has emerged. Besides self-assertion by SCs several factors have contributed in bringing about the changes. They are:

1. Conversion of a section of SCs to Buddhism under Dr.Ambedkar's leadership challenging the hierarchical social order played a catalytic role. Except for a small number of orthodox Hindus, many hesitate, at least publicly, to justify inequality as an ideal social order. The middle class among the upper and middle castes, not withstanding its liberal education, does not shed stereotypes against SCs, not so much on moral grounds, but more out of material considerations and the threat of loss of power. Treating SCs on an equal footing and enabling them to avail of opportunities in the non-traditional sectors imply sharing the national cake of resources with them. Unfortunately that cake is not big enough to meet the needs of everyone.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

2. Occupational diversification, though to a limited extent, has taken place within the SC community. Those who have some assets for investment or marketable skills, have received university education and have become professional, entrepreneurs, white collar employees, politicians, etc. However, the present agenda of the Indian state to pursue liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have made their education, and skills obsolete and consequently educated unemployment is alarmingly rising among the deprived sections of the society.
3. Protective discrimination through reservation in government jobs and admission to educational institutions has paved the way for SCs to enter the middle class. Upward mobility has created hope and being at par with others. Middle class SCs do occupy an important position in the community and function as the vocal section.
4. Competitive politics within the parliamentary framework, with the provision of reservation of seats has created political consciousness among SCs on an unprecedented scale. They have begun to feel that a few of them can occupy political offices and be in a position to change the discourse of Indian politics made them more self-confident and assertive.

But the irony of the present situation is that while the SC politicians, leaders have obtained positions, power for themselves, by and large the SC communities are still lurching under miserable conditions, particularly in the rural parts of many states. They have failed to uplift their community. Hence a great majority of SCs are far away from Shining India.

Parliamentary politics gives them a sense of personal power, some of them get satisfaction that they could do something here and there for their community through welfare programmes. Confrontation with the dominant strata of the society for social transformation hardly appears on their agenda.

However, the movement, which primarily aims at bringing about revolutionary social transformation, has a long way to go. “It has to rise above mere protest and revolt”, as Gail Omvedi asserts: “a broad agenda, a vision of transformation or development, it has to say why it should and what it has to offer”. It is a challenge before the SCs, their intellectuals, political leaders to articulate problems and aspirations of the vast majority of SCs who continue to suffer deprivation even today.

Modern concept of social equality consists in the spirit to uplift the downtrodden to console the frustrated to raise the suppressed, to advance the backward and to protect the weaker sections of the society. Weaker sections of the society is to the weakness arising out of their status, as women, as religious minorities, as members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or other backward classes, a status essentially imposed by birth over which they have no control.

The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, whose reports are far behind the time fixed for submission of Reports to the Parliament for various reasons, mentions cases of non-implementation of ameliorative programmes of Government as well as incidents of untouchability offences and atrocities. There are 125 Members of Parliament – 79 belonging to the Scheduled Castes and 46 belonging to the Scheduled Tribes. They have Ministers belonging to the Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes adopted by different parties. Party discipline smothers their voice, self-interest also plays a part.

Untouchables are hopelessly divided into hundreds of castes and sub-castes. They are engaged in six occupations which were considered despised and polluted according to Hindu religion. Untouchability does not entirely depend on occupation.

The National Human Rights Commission, India, observed at the WCAR in Durban “Despite this, however and the powerful role of the judiciary in ensuring respect for the Constitution, the laws and affirmative action programmes of the country, it is widely recognised that much remains to be done to bring an end to discrimination and inequality that have been practised for centuries . . . There are inadequacies in implementation which are deeply frustrating and painful to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and indeed to all Indians who strive to end the justice that persists in several forms and atrocities that occur”

The Constitutional Review Committee, set up by the Parliament in India, in its report in June, 2002 states: “There is a misconception that the problems of Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Backward Castes are marginal. In reality these are part of the central and core problems of the country. That these categories of the people constitute  $\frac{3}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> of the population of the country and almost the entire physical labour of the country is drawn from them. It is failure to tackle their problems so as to remove their disabilities and secure their full potential for national development that lies at the root of the many weaknesses faced by the post-Independence India to this day.”

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