PROBLEMS OF DALITS IN INDIA

by India Current Affairs

The caste system contains both social oppression and class exploitation. The dalits suffer from both types of exploitation in the worst form. 86.25 per cent of the scheduled caste households are landless and 49 per cent of the scheduled castes in the rural areas are agricultural workers. The dalits are subject to untouchability and other forms of discrimination despite these being declared unlawful. According to the 2001 census, scheduled castes comprise 16.2 per cent of the total population of India, that is, they number over 17 crore.

The dalits are subject to untouchability and other forms of discrimination despite these being declared unlawful. The growing consciousness among the dalits for emancipation is sought to be met with brutal oppression and atrocities. The assertion by the dalits has a democratic content reflecting the aspirations of the most oppressed sections of society.

Along with the curse of untouchability, the dalits had no right to have any property. They had to eat the foulest food, including leftovers thrown away by the higher classes; they were not allowed to draw water from the common well; they were prohibited from entering temples; they were barred from the right to education and knowledge; they had to perform menial jobs for the higher castes; they were not allowed to use the common burial ground; they were not allowed to live in the main village inhabited by the upper classes; and they were deprived of ownership rights to land and property, leading to the lack of access to all sources of economic mobility. Thus, dalits were subjected to both social exclusion and economic discrimination over the centuries. In one form or the other, this continues even today in most parts of the country.

The caste system contains both social oppression and class exploitation. The dalits suffer from both types of exploitation in the worst form. 86.25 per cent of the scheduled caste households are landless and 49 per cent of the scheduled castes in the rural areas are agricultural workers.

According to the 2001 census, scheduled castes comprise 16.2 per cent of the total population of India, that is, they number over 17 crore. Scheduled tribes comprise 8.2 per cent of the population, that is, they number over 8 crore. Both together constitute 24.4 per cent of the Indian population, that is, they together number over 25 crore.

The six states that have the highest percentage of scheduled caste population are Punjab (28.9), Himachal Pradesh (24.7), West Bengal (23.0), Uttar Pradesh (21.1), Haryana (19.3) and Tamil Nadu (19.0). The twelve states that have the largest number of scheduled castes are Uttar Pradesh (351.5 lakhs), West Bengal (184.5 lakhs), Bihar (130.5 lakhs), Andhra Pradesh (123.4 lakhs), Tamil Nadu (118.6 lakhs), Maharashtra (98.8 lakhs), Rajasthan (96.9 lakhs), Madhya Pradesh (91.6 lakhs), Karnataka (85.6 lakhs), Punjab (70.3 lakhs), Orissa (60.8 lakhs) and Haryana (40.9 lakhs).

Almost every socio-economic indicator shows that the position of scheduled caste families is awful. In many cases their plight is getting worse. Let us have a look at some of the major indicators.

LAND: In 1991 70% of the total SC households were landless or near landless (owning less than one acre). This increased to 75% in 2000. In 1991, 13% of the rural SC households were landless. However, in 2000 this saw a decline and was 10%. As per the Agricultural Census of 1995-96, the bottom 61.6% of operational holdings accounted for only 17.2% of the total operated land area. As against this, the top 7.3% of operational holdings accounted for 40.1% of the total operated area. This gives an indication of land concentration in the hands of a few.

FIXED CAPITAL ASSETS: In 2000, about 28% of SC households in rural areas had acquired some access to fixed capital assets (agricultural land and non-land assets). This was only half compared to 56% for other non-SC/ST households who had some access to fixed capital assets. In the urban areas, the proportion was 27% for SCs and 35.5% for others.

AGRICULTURAL LABOUR: In 2000, 49.06% of the working SC population were agricultural labourers, as compared to 32.69% for the STs and only 19.66% for the others. This shows the preponderance of dalits in agricultural labour. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of agricultural labourers in India increased from 7.46 crore to 10.74 crore, and a large proportion of them were dalits. On the other hand, the average number of workdays available to an agricultural labourer slumped from 123 in 1981 to 70 in 2005.

CHILD LABOUR: It is reported that out of the 60 million child labour in India, 40% come from SC families. Moreover, it is estimated that 80% of child labour engaged in carpet, matchstick and firecracker industries come from scheduled caste backgrounds. The tanning, colouring and leather processing, lifting dead animals, clearing human excreta, cleaning soiled clothes, collection of waste in slaughter houses and sale of toddy are some of the hereditary jobs generally pursued by Dalit children.

PER CAPITA INCOME: In 2000, as against the national average of Rs. 4485, the per capita income of SCs was Rs. 3,237. The average weekly wage earning of an SC worker was Rs. 174.50 compared to Rs. 197.05 for other non-SC/ST workers.

POVERTY: In 2000, 35.4% of the SC population was below the poverty line in rural areas as against 21% among others (‘Others’ everywhere means non-SC/ST); in urban areas the gap was larger – 39% of SC as against only 15% among others. The largest incidence of poverty in rural areas was among agricultural labour followed by non-agricultural labour, whereas in urban areas the largest incidence of poverty was among casual labour followed by self-employed households. The monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) for all household types was lower for SCs than others.

EMPLOYMENT: In 2000, the unemployment rate based on current daily status was 5% for SCs as compared to 3.5% for others in rural and urban areas. The wage labour households accounted for 61.4% of all SC households in rural areas and 26% in urban areas, as compared to 25.5% and 7.45% for other households.

RESERVATIONS: 15% and 7.5% of central government posts are reserved for SCs and STs respectively. For SCs, in Group A, only 10.15% posts were filled, in Group B it was 12.67%, in Group C it was 16.15% and in Group D it was 21.26%. The figures for STs were even lower, at 2.89%, 2.68%, 5.69% and 6.48% for the four groups respectively. Of the 544 judges in the High Courts, only 13 were SC and 4 were ST. Among school teachers all over the country, only 6.7% were SC/STs, while among college and university teachers, only 2.6% were SC/STs.

EDUCATION: In 2001, the literacy rate among SCs was 54.7% and among STs it was 47.1%, as against 68.8% for others. Among women, the literacy rate for SCs was 41.9%, for STs it was 34.8% and for others it was 58.2%. School attendance was about 10% less among SC boys than other boys, and about 5% less among SC girls than other girls. Several studies have observed discrimination against SCs in schools in various forms.
HEALTH: In 2000, the Infant Mortality Rate (child death before the age of 1) in SCs was 83 per 1000 live births as against 61.8 for the others, and the Child Mortality Rate (child death before the age of 5) was 119.3 for 1000 live births as against 82.6 for the others. These high rates among the SCs are closely linked with poverty, low educational status and discrimination in access to health services. In 1999, at least 75 % of SC women suffered from anaemia and more than 70 % SC womens’ deliveries took place at home. More than 75 % of SC children were anaemic and more than 50 % suffered from various degrees of malnutrition.

WOMEN: While dalit women share common problems of gender discrimination with their high caste counterparts, they also suffer from problems specific to them. Dalit women are the worst affected and suffer the three forms oppression — caste, class and gender. As some of the above figures show, these relate to extremely low literacy and education levels, heavy dependence on wage labour, discrimination in employment and wages, heavy concentration in unskilled, low-paid and hazardous manual jobs, violence and sexual exploitation, being the victims of various forms of superstitions (like the devadasi system) etc.

SANITATION: Only 11 % of SC households and 7 % of ST households had access to sanitary facilities as against the national average of 29 %.

ELECTRICITY: Only 28 % of the SC population and 22 % of the ST population were users of electricity as against the national average of 48 %.

ATROCITIES, UNTouchABILITY AND DISCRIMINATION: During 16 years between 1981 to 2000 for which records are available, a total of 3,57,945 cases of crime and atrocities were committed against the SCs. This comes to an annual average of about 22,371 crimes and atrocities per year. The break-up of the atrocities and violence for the year 2000 is as follows: 486 cases of murder, 3298 grievous hurt, 260 of arson, 1034 cases of rape and 18,664 cases of other offences. The practice of untouchability and social discrimination in the matter of use of public water bodies, water taps, temples, tea stalls, restaurants, community bath, roads and other social services continues to be of high magnitude.

With the onset of the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation by our country during the last decade and a half, the problems of dalits, adivasis, other backward castes and the working people as a whole have greatly aggravated. The drive to privatise the public sector has directly hit reservations for the SC/STs. The closure of thousands of mills and factories have rendered lakhs jobless and this has also hit dalits and other backward castes. The ban on recruitment to government and semi-government jobs that has been imposed in several states has also had an adverse effect. The growing commercialisation of education and health has kept innumerable people from both socially and economically backward sections out of these vital sectors.

The most disastrous effects of these policies can be seen in the deep agrarian crisis that has afflicted the rural sector. Rural employment has sharply fallen and this has hit dalits, adivasis and women the most. Mechanisation of agriculture has further compounded the problem. The real wages of agricultural workers, of whom a large proportion are dalits, have fallen in many states. No efforts are made to implement minimum wage legislation even where it exists, and periodic revision of minimum wage is also conspicuous by its absence. The dismantling of the public distribution system has increased hunger to alarming proportions. An overwhelming proportion of the malnutrition-related deaths of thousands of children in several states is from dalit and adivasi families.

To ensure a better life for the crores of dalits in our country following measures are to be taken immediately:

LAND REFORMS: The central and state governments must immediately set in motion a process of land reforms whereby land will be redistributed to the landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants gratis. All loopholes in the present laws must be plugged. All schemes to reverse land reform legislation and give away land to multinational corporations and big business houses should be scrapped forthwith.
RESERVATIONS: All the backlogs in reserved seats and posts and in promotions for SCs, STs and OBCs must be filled forthwith with special recruitment drives. The three Constitutional amendments made to correct the three OMs issued in 1997 diluting reservations for SCs and STs should be implemented. The pre-1997 vacancies based roster should be restored. A comprehensive legislation covering all aspects of reservation for SCs/STs in employment and education both public and private institutions should be enacted.

SPECIAL COMPONENT PLAN: Special Component Plan should be properly implemented in all the states with proper allotment of funds according to the population of dalits. A National Commission should be set up to assess the real position of dalits including reservation. The state level commissions should be set up to oversee the implementation of all schemes connected with the SCs including reservation.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT: Infrastructure development in the scheduled caste areas like road, water, health, culture and other needs has to be given proper importance. When allotting fund for infrastructure development, a separate allotment for scheduled caste areas should be provided.

A comprehensive National Programme of Minor Irrigation for all irrigable but unirrigated lands of SCs and STs through wells, community wells, bore-wells, community bore-wells and tube-wells, bandheras, check-dams, lift, etc., should be immediately undertaken and implemented.

ROOTING OUT UNTOUCHABILITY: All forms of untouchability must be rooted out of the country by strengthening the relevant laws, ensuring their strict implementation and most importantly, by launching a mass movement of the people.

PROTECTION FROM ATROCITIES: The Central Government should amend and strengthen the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, providing for special courts with judges, investigating officers and public prosecutors unburdened by any other work. Social and economic boycott and blackmail should be included as substantive crimes. Full economic rehabilitation of victims and their survivors must be ensured.

EMPLOYMENT: The privatisation drive should be stopped as it leads to loot of national assets, greater unemployment, a curtailment of reservations and also a spurt in corruption. The Central Government should enact a bill to provide reservations in the private sector, which has been a long-standing demand of SCs and STs. Special schemes to provide self-employment to SC youth should be started. The Right to Work should be incorporated as a fundamental right in the Constitution.

EDUCATION: The commercialisation of education should be stopped since the massive fee and donation structure of private educational managements is something that socially and economically backward students cannot afford. For this, the central government must increase its own outlay on education to 6% of the GDP. SC/ST students should be given special scholarships to pursue their studies. The stipends in Social Welfare hostels should be raised and the quality of these hostels improved. Steps should be taken to universalise primary education and expand secondary education. Special measures to curb the drop-out rate among SCs should be undertaken.

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS: The Minimum Wages Act for agricultural workers must be stringently implemented throughout the country. A comprehensive bill for agricultural workers is another long-standing demand and it must be enacted without delay. Homestead land must be provided for SCs, STs and agricultural workers.

RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act must be strictly implemented all over the country by involving the people, their mass organisations and the panchayati raj institutions. It should be extended to all districts and also to urban areas of the country.

PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM: The public distribution system must be universalised to ensure food to all. Until this is done, BPL ration cards must be issued to all poor families, many of whom are from SCs and STs. The grain under the BPL scheme should be made available at Antyodaya prices.
CREDIT: Agricultural credit to peasants and agricultural workers must be made available at 4% rate of interest. For SCs and STs in both rural and urban areas, credit facilities should be expanded and the credit given at concessional interest rates.

BONDED LABOUR AND CHILD LABOUR: The total liberation and full rehabilitation of bonded labourers must be ensured. The pernicious practice of child labour must be abolished and children properly rehabilitated and educated. Similarly, total liberation and full rehabilitation must be ensured for Safaqi Karmacharis who are engaged in scavenging.

SCAVENGERS: Ensure total liberation and full rehabilitation for scavengers (safai karamcharis), ban engagement of contract labour in safai services and other services where SC and ST numerically predominate and instead introduce necessary improvements by involving such Karamcharis; and reactivate the Central Monitoring Committee for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Safai Karamcharis and State, Municipal and District Level communities.