
UNIT 21 STATUS OF DALITS

Structure

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21.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- Define Dalits;
- Give total number and percentage of their population;
- Understand their status in traditional caste hierarchy;
- Know various social movements for their emancipation; and
- Recall constitutional provisions, and know their changing position.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this unit is to understand who are the Dalits and what is their status in the contemporary Indian society. It is a fact that the Indian society consisting of numbers castes and sub-castes, and religious and ethnic communities has remained highly stratified. The Hindu social system of which the Dalits are largely a part is stratified on the basis of caste hierarchy. The Hindu social order made the distinction between high castes and lower castes, pure and impure castes. In common parlance, the former untouchables or the lowest castes are labelled as Dalits. The constitution of India has termed these castes as Scheduled Castes. But the social activists started calling them as Dalits and now the term is widely used by scholars in their writings.

According to the 1991 Census Scheduled Castes is 16.73% of the total population in the country. The population of SCs is concentrated in five states, viz. Uttar Pradesh (21.44%), West Bengal (11.77%), Bihar (9.21%), Tamil Nadu (7.84%) and Andhra Pradesh (7.76%). At all India level the major Dalit castes are Chamar and Bhangi, while certain castes are numerically greater in their states, for example, Mahar and Mang in Maharashtra, Mala and Madiga in Andhra, Namashudra in West Bengal, Pulayan in Kerala and the like.

21.2 STATUS OF DALITS IN TRADITIONAL CASTE HIERARCHY

The status of Dalits in the traditional caste system was at bottom in the social hierarchy. A number of social restrictions were imposed on them. They had no choice of occupation. Their entry into temple was barred. They had to live on outskirts of the village. The social restrictions varied region to region. But those were more rigid in the southern states.

Activity 1

Try to ascertain the numerical strength of Dalits in your home state with the help of relevant census documents. Make an entry in your notebook in this regard.

In post-Independence period, the Constitution guaranteed various social, economic, educational and political rights to Dalits. By article 17 of the constitution the untouchability is abolished and its practice is forbidden. The Dalits are identified as lowest castes in traditional caste hierarchy who were former untouchables who were socially exploited by the caste Hindus.

Check Your Progress 1

1) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F)

- i) Dalits are referred to lower castes.
- ii) Dalits are exploited only economically.
- iii) Scheduled Caste are called Dalits.

2) Complete the following statements:

- i) Dalits are at the of society.
- ii) Dalits have status.



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar took up the cause of the status of the Dalits

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

The Indian society is segmentally divided on the basis of caste. The status of person is dependent on the caste in which he is born. In traditional caste system, the lowest castes were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were subjected to various caste disabilities.

They were not allowed to use public roads, wells, ghats, etc. They were forbidden from entering Hindu temples, attending public school. Servitude was proclaimed to be a permanent condition of Dalits. Dalits had to maintain distance from member(s) of the pure caste(s).

The Dalits were also not allowed to change their caste occupation. The extent of disabilities was such that they were made to live on the outskirts of villages and towns. It is recorded that under the Marathas and Peshwas in Maharashtra the Mahars and Mangs were not allowed to enter gates of Poona city during 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. because in the morning and afternoon their bodies cast a long shadow which was considered defiling.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Briefly mention the disabilities of Dalits. Use about three to four lines for your answer.

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- 2) Mention the names of some social reformers.

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21.3 SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

To fight against untouchability and various forms of injustice, social reformers launched social movements in pre-independence India. Mahatma Phule's (1827-1890), 'Satyashodhak' Chhatrapati Shahu's (1871-1922) 'non-Brahmin', Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde's (1873-1944) 'Depressed Class Mission' and Babasaheb Ambedkar's (1891-1956) 'anti-untouchability' in Maharashtra, Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalana in Kerala, Periyar Ramaswami Naicker in Tamil Nadu are the examples of some social movements and social reformers.

The downtrodden Dalits raised various struggles to fight their social exploitation in all forms. Two factors had made deep impact on caste system which also brought social upheaval and an awakening among Dalits. First, the western impact with its ideas and values of liberality of thought, individual freedom and equality started making inroads into the traditional matrix of the Hindu social system and the caste and other institutions. Second, the British administration with equality before law and introduction of modern technology created the necessary intellectual and psychological climate for the emergence of social reforms movements.

Box 21.01

The innovations of British system of a common code of law for all castes, the extensions of modern communications and education helped to wane the caste system. The renaissance began with Rajaram Mohan Roy in Bengal who ushered in the social and religious revival. The Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj movements started in Bengal and Punjab. In Maharashtra, movements were started by Jambhekar and Lokhitwadi, Justice M.G. Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Agarkar and Bhandarkar.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule formed the Sayta Shodak Mandal in 1873 with the aim of liberating non-brahmins from the clutches of Brahminism. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur started Satya Shodak Mandal in 1912 and carried forward the movement started by Phule. In the pre-independence period, the Dalit movements comprised of a strong non-Brahman movement against Brahmanism in Maharashtra, the Adi Dravidas movement in Tamil Nadu, Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalan movement in Kerala, Adi Andhras, movement in Coastal Andhra and the like. Phule tried to formulate a new theistic religion. Periyar promoted atheism. There

were, of course, reformist trends in some of the movements. In 12th century, Mahatma Basweshar launched a crusade against caste in Karnataka. Religious reformers of the 19th century were influenced by the work of Christian missionaries in India. The Brahma Samaj (1828), the Prarthana Samaj (1867), the Ramkrishna Mission, and the Arya Samaj (1875) are the examples of such institutions founded with a view to fight against social evils practised by the caste Hindus. Ambedkar, on his part turned to Buddhism. In Tamil Nadu, non-Brahmin movement tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion although both Ayyapan proclaimed no religion, no caste and no god for mankind. All the above movements led to, some extent, the social upliftment of Dalits.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Complete the following statements
 - i) introduced common code of law.
 - ii) Satya Shodak movement was started by
 - iii) proclaimed no religion, no caste and no god for mankind.
 - iv) promoted atheism.
- 2) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F).
 - a) The British started religious movement in India.
 - b) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar led the social reform movement at all India level.
 - c) The Brahma Samaj was started in Maharashtra.

21.4 CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

The Constitution of India has played important role in the overall upliftment of the Scheduled Castes. In Part IV of the Constitution, certain fundamental rights are guaranteed to the citizens. Article 15(2) states that no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth be discriminated with regard to (a) access to shop, public restaurants, hotel and public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tank, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resorts. Under Article 15(4), the State is permitted to make any special provision for advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

Box 21.02

According to the Article 16(1), of the Constitution there shall be equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 330 and 332 provide reservation of seats for scheduled tribes in the House of the People, legislative assemblies of the states respectively.

In the field of education, there is reservation of seats in admission of the Scheduled Caste and tribe students in schools, colleges and university. Also, there is a provision of scholarship for the students belonging to SCs and STs categories. All these constitutional provisions have helped the members of various scheduled caste groups to make progress in every sphere of life. Since independence, the ethos of Indian society has also vastly changed. The education as a means of achieving upward social mobility has proved to be very useful to the Dalits and there is conscious effort on their part to get their children educated. Educational institutions provide indispensable avenues of mobility to a large number of individuals from Dalit community. Without education all the constitutional safeguards including reservation in services would be infructuous. The government policy of reservation in employment has played an important role for Dalits. The policy broadly envisages representation of Dalits in proportion to their population in all the government services as well as the institutions which receive grants from the government.

Activity 2

Ascertain the grass roots perspective on reservations for people in the area where you live. Find out their views on reservation and note it down in your notebook.

21.5 IMPACT ON SOCIAL MOBILITY

The Reservation policy has been an aid for the development of Dalits in the area of education, employment, political representation, entrepreneurship, etc. But the policy has lacked effective implementation in education and employment sectors. Those Dalits who have received the benefits of reservation in education and employment are relatively better off and have emerged as a new middle class. In spite of all constitutional safeguards, the caste atrocities are an integral part of Dalit life. Atrocities are inflicted on Dalits since they have started asserting for their rights. The reality of Indian society is that caste still dominates every sphere of life and the Dalits are the worst sufferers in the caste system though, like others, they also live with it.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Briefly mention Article 330 of the Constitution. Use about three to four lines for your answer.

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- ii) Briefly mention the benefits of Reservation Policy.

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21.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit brought to you who are Dalits and what life they led in the traditional caste hierarchy. We also mentioned the various socio-religious reform movements organised in different regions of India. Further are noted the constitutional provisions for upliftments of Dalits; the reservation policy has been partial aid for improving life and has resulted in the emergence of new middle class. The caste atrocities of various forms inflicted by caste Hindus are an integral part of Dalit life.

21.7 KEY WORDS

Dalits	: refers to Scheduled Caste.
Socio-religious movement	: movement organised for social and religious upliftment and to create equality.
Constitution	: Radical document to bring social change in the post-independent India society.

21.8 FURTHER READINGS

Omvedt Gail, 1994 *Dalits and Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publication, New Delhi

Omvedt Gail, 1976 *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Bombay

The Constitution of India. GOI Publications

Census, 1991. GOI Publications

21.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) i) True ii) False iii) True
- 2) i) Bottom, ii) Lower

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The disabilities of Dalits are that they were not allowed to use public roads, wells, enter temples, attend school, and there was severe punishment for violations of such restrictions.
- 2) The names of social reformers are Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, M.G. Ranade, G.H. Deshmukh, Mahatma Gandhi, Shahu Maharaj.

Check Your progress 3

- 1) i) British, ii) Mahatma Jyotiba Phule
 iii) Ayappan iv) Periyar
- 2) i) False ii) True iii) False.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Article 330 provides reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People (Lok Sabha).
- 2) The benefits of the reservation policy are available in education, employment and political spheres. In education institutions, seats are reserved for the Dalit student and scholarships and freeship are available. In employment, there is reservation of jobs.