

Development of the Scheduled Castes: A Systemic View*

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I am grateful to the organisers of this seminar for inviting me to participate in the seminar and give the keynote address. I intend to share with you the perceptions I have on the theme of changing development status of the scheduled castes and the prospects in this respect in the coming years. As constituents of a developing society, the scheduled castes suffer from the double handicap of low social status coupled with low occupational status. The low social status has been an outcome of their exposure over a historical past to domination by the mainstream castes – particularly by the rural landowning elites – in the economic and social spheres. The distinguishing feature of the Indian society is the variants of untouchability which separate the scheduled castes from the mainstream castes and, also to an extent, from each other. This feature has the effect of excluding the scheduled castes from the networks which help the mainstream people to participate in the growth and development processes activated by the market and the government. Not surprisingly, the scheduled castes have been pushed down to the lowest rung in the social ladder and have found little help and opportunity in the past to move upwards. In fact, it was not unusual for the other sections in the society to view with apprehension any sign of improvement in the conditions of the scheduled castes. The scheduled castes formed a pool providing cheap labour and undertaking tasks regarded as polluting. It is common for the human societies to have groups of poor subject to severe deprivations of different kinds. But the scheduled castes in India could be regarded as being far worse off than the poor elsewhere in terms of the miserable living conditions and the loss of opportunities, freedom and dignity suffered by them over generations.

The breakdown of traditional village society in India in the recent decades owing to modernisation of agriculture, spread of market economy and growing rural-urban linkage has been a source of some major changes in the conditions and status of the scheduled castes and of the lower strata in general in the rural areas. The most notable change has been the emergence of dalit political formations having a clout strong enough to put the mainstream parties on the defensive. The rapid change over in the nomenclature of the scheduled castes from Harijan to Dalit in just about a decade or so is of enormous significance for the Indian polity. The change reflects a shift in the political initiative in the modernisation of scheduled castes from the paternalistic groups in the mainstream society to groups belonging to the scheduled castes themselves. More important, the polite – almost meek – Harijan eager to be admitted into the fold is getting transformed into a militant Dalit seeking to change the system itself. Behind what might appear to an urban observer as a sudden appearance of the Dalit on the political scene lie complex processes of rural change triggered by the lower caste protest movements of the pre-Independence decades which spread widely and gathered considerable thrust in the decades after Independence. It is enough for our purpose to note that the scheduled castes are no more as helpless and voiceless as in the past. The militancy observed in the parliament and assemblies is not mere rhetoric. It has strong ground level support,

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