

## Inaugural Address\*

Nilakantha Rath\*\*

Professor Rao, Professor Chitre, Mr. Sarangi, Dr. Chahande and friends. I feel a little embarrassed standing here to inaugurate this seminar. I have said this to Professor Chitre and I do not mind and, I trust, he would not mind my telling it to you. I wonder what could have led Professor Chitre to ask me, who has to my mind no particular qualification, to inaugurate the seminar. There are more knowledgeable and informed scholars on the subject present here who would have been more appropriate for the purpose. My major qualification is that I am an old student and employee of this Institute; but I do not know if that is an adequate ground for this invitation. I have of late been editing a journal that has recently brought out a very special number on Scheduled Castes in the states. But, I was not the editor of this particular issue of that journal. We had a very distinguished sociologist of our country who was the guest editor.

I have nothing very profound to suggest and, therefore, I shall not take much of your time. Fortunately for me, what little I had thought of has already been said. Therefore, I shall be brief. I shall indulge in certain generalities that, I believe, at some stage or the other of your deliberations will come up for discussion and comment.

The first thing that strikes me is that the Scheduled Castes constitute a rural population rather than an urban population. In 1991, some 23% of the Indians lived in the urban areas but only 18% of the Scheduled Castes lived there. Thus, it is predominantly a rural problem. Although there are regional differences, there are broad similarities among the Schedule Castes in the country as a whole.

Moreover, they are essentially a landless group. Sixty per cent of the rural SC households are either landless or owned only small area of house site. Only thirty per cent owned more than one acre of land each. And, only twenty per cent reported themselves to be cultivators in the main. This is a broad picture; there are regional variations. In Maharashtra, for example, the landless households as well as those with only small house sites constituted about 46 per cent and those with more than one acre of land constituted about forty per cent of rural SC households. The situation in Maharashtra is worse than in states, like Madhya Pradesh or Karnataka, where near about fifty five per cent of the rural SC households owned more than one acre of land. These regional differences are relevant in understanding the situation.

We often hear talks about giving land to the landless. Because the Scheduled Castes constitute a large landless population, one thinks that land reform should help in giving some resource in the form of cultivable land to the SC households. But, look at a state like West Bengal where land reform is claimed to have benefited the scheduled castes the most. It is true that the purely landless SC households in this state constituted (in 1992) only 11 per cent of the SC households, much smaller than in Maharashtra. But, nearly half the SC households had less than half an acre of land. And, the average land holding of these fifty per cent households was only 5 decimals of land (one-twentieth of an acre, or 2 *gunthas* by the ordinary measure in Maharashtra). It means, the land of these households was essentially a house site. Surely, this was an improvement over the pre-

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