

Valedictory Address*

B S Baviskar**

Mr. Chairman and friends, it is indeed a great honour for me to be asked to deliver the valedictory address at the end of this national level workshop. I remember looking at the Gokhale Institute with a great deal of awe when I was an undergraduate student in the neighboring college in the early 50s. It was a well-known place with high reputation in academic and government circles. We were told how difficult it was to get entry into the Institute as a student or a faculty member. Those who got in must be really bright, we thought. Occasionally, we had a glimpse of young people who were engaged in Ph.D. research in the Institute including Professors N. Rath, N R Inamdar, and M P Mangudkar. We used to listen to them with great respect, whenever they said something. Later on in the early 60's, when I was working on the Co-operative sugar factories in Maharashtra, I used to meet Professor D R Gadgil. This was one of his major interests. He was the chairman of the National Federation of the Co-operative Sugar Factories during those days.

The subject of Scheduled Caste landless labourers is very important and I am glad that Dr. Chahande and the Institute jointly organized this workshop. The more I listened to the various papers, the more I became aware of the gaps in our knowledge in this particular area. It is good that a beginning has been made in this respect. It is politically a very sensitive subject. There are not many occasions when scholars seriously and freely discuss this subject as it has been done during the last two days.

Let us see what we learnt during these last two days. One thing, which came out again and again, is that the Scheduled Castes constitute the poorest section of the population. Second, so far as the rural areas are concerned, they have either no land at all or have poor quality land or it is not cultivated properly because they do not have the necessary resources. Third, the Scheduled Castes also suffer from a great deal of social disabilities. However, this does not mean that no improvement has taken place during the last fifty years. There is some evidence that some changes did take place. Some individuals and groups have advanced during this period. This has been largely done through the reservation system in education and jobs in the public sector. As is well-known, Dr. B R Ambedkar gave the message that they must educate, organize and struggle. I think many Scheduled Caste groups have taken this message seriously and have consequently made some genuine progress.

The Scheduled Castes have also acquired some share in power. They occupy positions in the state assemblies and the parliament in proportion to their population. So also they are given positions in the state and central cabinets, sometimes for token purposes. I think that the most important recent step has been the 73rd Constitutional Amendment pertaining to the Panchayati Raj system. The Scheduled Castes have been given not only a certain proportion in the membership but also in offices like the Gram Panchayat Sarpanch, Taluka Panchayat Samiti Sabhapati, or Zilla Parishad President. I think the impact of this measure has not yet been really assessed. But in the long-run this is going to be very important. We have to wait and watch carefully.

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