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Ch 6- Education for All: The Situation of Dalit Children in India
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# *Education For All*

## *The Situation of Dalit Children in India*

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### INTRODUCTION

Any effort towards realizing the constitutional commitment of universal elementary education (UEE) for all children must seriously address the constraints that have hitherto excluded large sections of Indian society from basic education. Among the educationally most deprived sections in India are the Dalits,* officially called Scheduled Castes (SCs). According to the 1991 census, there were around 138 million Dalits accounting for 16.5 per cent of the population of India. In the mid-1990s, barely 41.5 per cent of Dalits in rural India were literate and only 62.5 per cent of children in the 6-14 age group had been enrolled in school at some point of time.[1] Attention to the education of their children is, hence, of critical importance. The perspective within which the educational concerns of Dalit communities should be addressed must be one of social justice as Dalit communities have suffered from social discrimination and have traditionally been denied access to learning. A framework of social justice is important in that it goes beyond aggregate concerns of equality in the context of access, participation, and outcomes in education to one which emphasizes qualitative concerns of what educational experiences mean for identity and self-worth as well as for future life chances (see Seceda 1988). It also draws attention to the commitments that educational systems make to the more vulnerable groups and how this bears out in concrete terms.

* In this paper, Dalit is used to specifically refer to Scheduled Caste communities, though today the term is often used to include other oppressed groups as well.

These are literacy and 'ever enrolment' rates from a survey conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

### THE CONTEXT OF DEPRIVATION

The roots of educational deprivation of Dalit communities must be traced back to their position as untouchables in the caste structure of traditional Hindu society. These were the most 'polluted' of castes that were hereditarily assigned the most defiling of occupations. They could own no productive assets and were completely dependant on the higher castes whom they served. A number of norms and taboos restricted mobility of Dalits and proscribed certain kinds of behaviour and patterns of interaction. Access to learning was prohibited and Dalits could not enter indigenous schools that taught elementary skills even to lower castes in pre-British India. Though opportunities for education and new occupations that were untied to caste status were opened to the untouchables for the first time during British rule in the mid-nineteenth century, the magnitude of access to such opportunities was limited and only a few Dalit sub-castes, because of their relatively favourable structural location, were able to avail of them. Thus, even in 1961, more than a decade after India's Independence, barely 10 per cent of the Dalit population was literate.

The Constitution of independent India acknowledged the centuries of social, economic, and educational deprivation suffered by the Dalits and specific provisions were incorporated to protect these communities from discrimination as well as to facilitate their development. Where education is concerned, the Constitution directs the states to 'promote with special care the educational and economic interests' of Dalits and other weaker sections (Article 46). However, even in the 1990s, Dalits remained economically extremely vulnerable relative to

the general population. In 1993-4, as many as 48.1 per cent of Dalits in rural areas were below the official poverty line in comparison to 31.3 of 'others' (other than Dalit and tribal persons). In urban areas, almost 50 per cent of Dalits were below the poverty line in the same year. Further, almost 70 per cent of rural Dalit households owned an acre or less of land and 61 per cent were wage labour households.[2]

Caste dynamics continue to underlie social and economic relations, especially in rural India where Dalits still occupy the lowest position in the village hierarchy in terms of social and ritual status. The fact that the majority of Dalit households in rural areas own little or no land suggests that these communities continue to be economically dependent on upper and dominant castes, and hence, socially vulnerable as well. They also suffer discrimination from higher castes though this is inadequately documented (see Box 6.1). Dalits still reside in spatially segregated clusters at the periphery of villages, are not allowed access to common village wells, and are prevented from entering temples. Oommen (1984, 46-7) says that Dalits as a group continue to be subjected to what he refers to as 'cumulative domination' and experience 'multiple deprivations' that stem from 'low ritual status, appalling poverty and powerlessness.'[3]

Box 6.1

**Dalits and Discrimination**

In village after village in rural Andhra, one finds that the Malas and Madigas are made to live outside the village, normally to the east____The Malas and Madigas find their separate *glasses and plates* in such hotels. They should buy the eatables only if they are prepared to wash their own plates and glasses and keep them in a separate box meant for them____The upper castes do not tolerate it if the lower castes wear good clothes put on good chappals as they have to live what is known as the *ayya banchan* life (living at the feet of the upper castes). (Illaiah 2000, 210-11)

In Akramesi village in Tamil Nadu, where the Dalits are numerically an extremely small minority, 'the Pallars were prohibited from fetching water from this (common community) well on the pretext that their vessels and buckets would pollute the water by their touch. The pond used by the caste Hindus for bathing was not even to be approached by the Scheduled Castes____The Pallars were also prohibited from riding a bicycle'. If the Pallars disobeyed the demands of the caste Hindus, 'the common punishment for such disobedience was nothing less than tying the person to a street lamp post or a tree situated within the village premise and beating him in public till he collapsed'. (Ramaiah 2000, 5-6)

It is, however, important to remember that Dalits are not a homogenous group. There are more than 400 major caste groups that vary in numerical strength, areas of geographical concentration, and occupations followed. Though around 81 per cent of Dalits are found in rural areas, some sub-castes are more urban based. Socially also Dalits differ in terms of ritual status. Dalit castes such as 'Balmikis' (traditional scavengers) are considered among the most polluted of castes while 'Jatavs' (leather workers) have higher social status. As mentioned earlier, some Dalit castes have had the advantage of early access to education and modern educational opportunities. Post-independence developments such as changes in the agrarian economy, limited land reforms, proximity to cities or actual urban residence, as well as access to education have placed some Dalit sub-castes in a relatively more favourable position to avail of opportunities for economic betterment that have been officially targeted at these communities (see Pai 2000).

Changes in the agrarian economy, new occupational opportunities as well as adult franchise have given some leverage to Dalit communities to defy traditional social norms and taboos. Many parts of India are witness to socio-political mobilization of Dalits who are increasingly demanding land, decent wages, and social dignity. There has been retaliation by the upper castes and reported atrocities against Dalits increased thirty-sevenfold during the period 1970-95 (see Francis 2000).

One of the critical factors for economic betterment of Dalits in the post independent period has been formal education. Education has facilitated occupational diversification and mobility, particularly through reservations, for a small section of the Dalit population who are now in public sector jobs. This in turn has lessened their dependence on the higher castes, bringing with it some modicum of social dignity. It has also been observed that the educated Dalits are less willing to accept the domination of the higher castes and have played an important role in the political and cultural assertion of Dalits witnessed in different parts of the country (see Pai 2000). It is in this larger context of the social and economic realities that Dalits confront, as well as the critical role that education can play in their lives, that we now look at the present situation where schooling of their children is concerned.

[2] These are figures from the National Sample Survey (1993-4) cited in Thorat Sukhdeo (1999) 'Social Security in Unorganized Sector in India: How Secure Are The Scheduled Castes?' in *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 451-70.

[3] Of course when compared to the past, the social conditions of the Dalits have improved and, as Deliége says, 'the prohibitions are not as strict as they used to be'. However, caste-based discrimination persists and is most acute where Dalits are economically dependent on higher castes (Deliége 1999).

provided impetus to the spread of education. The implementation of land reform, provision of health care and food security along with setting aside a major proportion of the state budget for education provided the larger political and institutional context in which Dalit aspirations for education have materialized to a far greater extent than anywhere else in the country (see Probe Team 1999, 12–13). Of course, it must be remembered that social movements of Dalit communities such as the Ezhavas and Pulayas played an equally critical role in confronting discriminatory caste structures and raising the demand for education of Dalits well before Independence. The Tamil Nadu government's midday meal scheme has been seen as particularly effective in bringing children, especially from marginalized groups such as Dalits, to school, increasing attendance, and providing institutional space where all children, regardless of caste, could eat together. The success of Himachal Pradesh has also been attributed to effective public policy in a society where class, caste, and gender hierarchies are less rigid, though the actual provisioning of schooling is relatively modest (see Probe Team 1999, 118). However, as mentioned earlier, the significant increase in the attendance rates in schools of Dalit girls merits research attention.

Educational disparities between Dalit castes have not received adequate attention. Some Dalit castes have been able to avail of opportunities for education and new occupations, and thereby, better their social conditions relative to other castes. Castes such as the Chamars/ Jatavs (in Uttar Pradesh), Mahars (in Maharashtra), and Malas (in Andhra Pradesh) are among those Dalits that have been able to improve their educational and economic situations, to a far greater extent than the Balmikis/ Bhangis, Mangs or Madigas in these states. Even within these castes a relatively small section has been able to avail of the benefits of policies and programmes of affirmative action directed at these communities. Pai (2001) speaks of 'new inequalities' that have been created by the present policies of affirmative action and the social conflict that results as the competition between Dalits for scarce resources heightens.

## FUTURE CONCERNS

In the light of both educational policy and actual school participation, what are the major issues for the future where the education of Dalit children is concerned? As has already been discussed, policy interventions in education have been largely at the level of provisioning and providing incentives to encourage schooling. While provisioning is inadequate in terms of physical access even at primary stage, the issue of how socially accessible schools really are for Dalits has never been addressed. This is primarily because policy fails to acknowledge or confront the role of discriminatory caste relations that pervade the educational experiences of Dalit children. As is clear from the foregoing discussion, caste continues to obstruct the access of Dalit children to schooling as well as the quality of education they receive.

Poverty continues to be a major impediment in the education of Dalit children and costs of education, as well as children's contribution to work, remain serious issues to be considered. The present policy of providing incentives to children is unlikely to address the constraint of poverty in relation to education. Where children's work is concerned, the larger issue to be addressed is that of sustainable livelihoods of the poor. On the other hand if schools reach out to these communities with meaningful education that is attractive to young children, allow for flexibility in timings and schedules for children who work, and provide academic support that they invariably need, it is likely that very young children can be prevented from becoming workers by default, and the entry of older children into the workforce can be delayed.

Quality of education is an important issue and one that needs to be seriously addressed in the larger context of what is seen as the breakdown of the government system of 'free education' and the increasing privatization of education even at primary stage.

Dalit households aspire for education of good quality for their children and there are indications that they are looking towards the private sector for such education primarily because the publicly provided system of education has failed to perform. However, not only are the costs of private schooling relatively high, the quality of education provided by these institutions is of concern. Further, the shift of official policy towards alternate and innovative schools for Dalit and other educationally deprived communities merits serious attention. In the larger context of equity, and education without discrimination as a fundamental right of the child, it would be important to ensure that 'alternate', and 'innovative' schools do not become inferior systems of schooling for those who have hitherto been educationally deprived.

The foregoing discussion suggests that the actual educational experience of Dalit children must be factored in when the quality of schooling they receive is being considered. Here it is important to understand the manner in which caste relations influence the usually understood indicators of school quality such as facilities available for education, the nature of the official curriculum (the content of education) and pedagogy, as well the actual process of curriculum transaction in which social processes such as teacher attitudes and peer relations critically define the educational experience of Dalit

children, their dignity, and sense of self-worth. It is here that policy documents, educational programmes, as well as research studies are largely silent. It is true that caste is one of the defining characteristics of the larger social structure and educational institutions are likely to reflect and reinforce these hierarchical social relations. However, a perspective of social justice in education requires that social discrimination is acknowledged and educational institutions intervene to address and confront it. A beginning needs to be made through sensitization of teachers to caste discrimination during training programmes, squarely addressing the issue of caste relations and human rights in curricula, evolving enabling pedagogies, and providing specific academic support to Dalit children. In addition, schools need to reach out to Dalit communities and strengthen school-community relations.

Disparities in education that are becoming increasingly visible among Dalits should also be a matter of concern. Attention needs to be directed to address the special needs of Dalit girls as well as the more deprived Dalit castes, particularly in educationally backward states.

Thus at the end of the 1990s, the gap between the constitutional commitment of education for all children up to the age of 14 years and the actual participation of Dalit children in schools remains large and is likely to continue. The role of effective state policy and political will is critical if the education of all children including Dalits is to be ensured, particularly in the context of the demands being made of education in the last few decades. The changing knowledge and skills package that will increasingly determine future life chances requires that EFA must mean more than basic, and indeed, school education. Education is thus of importance not only because of its critical linkages with human capabilities and empowerment, but also because in instrumental terms, in the globalizing world of today, lack of education will widen disparities between and within societies. The education of Dalit communities in India must hence be of serious concern.

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