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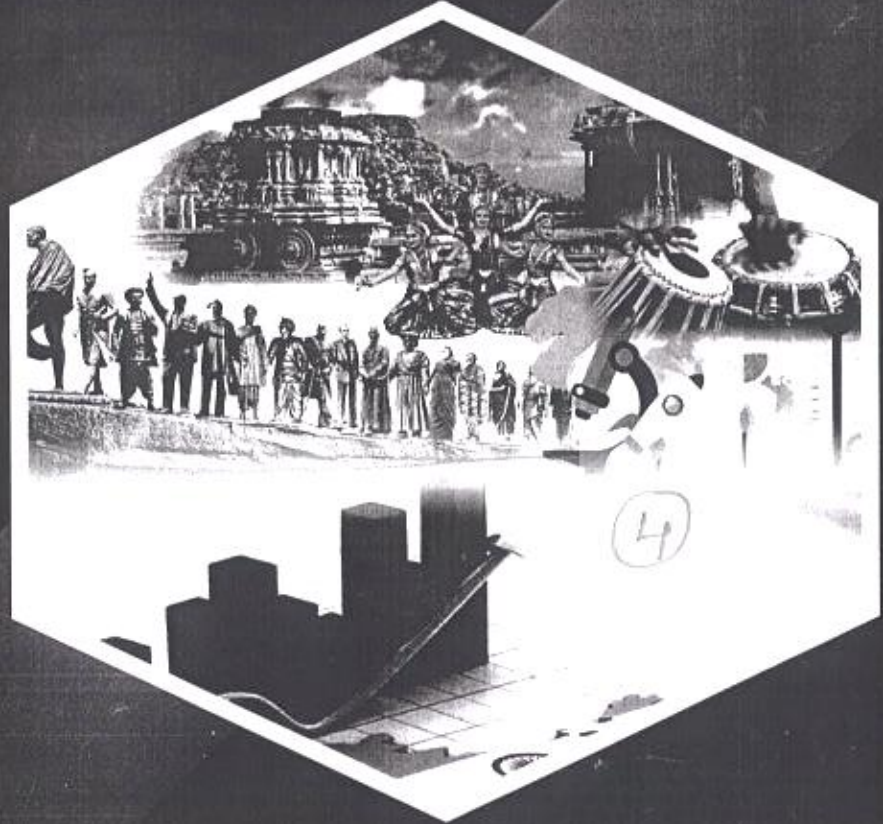
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The Backward Class Aspects of Socio -Economic Changes:

Dr. M. G. Meenakshi¹

The term class' signifies a form of social stratification. It is defined as a stratum of people who share a similar socio-economic status or position. It is relatively open as compared to other forms of stratification like caste. A class is considered to be backward if its members are economically and educationally less privileged compared to the other classes in that society. The backward classes in India can be understood only when we understand the basic character of Indian society which consists of a number of closed status groups. The backward classes' do not constitute one single whole but a multitude of social groups with varying position and socio-economic standing in the social hierarchy of Indian society. They suffer from disadvantages and disabilities which are age-old and which derive their sanction mainly from the caste system. Low status, poverty and illiteracy are social problems, which they have inherited due to their ascribed status of being born in a low caste or tribe. The backward classes constitute a large and mixed category of persons. Their composition was not known earlier. Today they comprise roughly one-third of the total population of the country. They are made up of (i) the scheduled tribes (Adivasi's); (ii) the scheduled castes (the Harijan's), and (iii) the other backward classes. The scheduled castes (SC) and the scheduled tribes (ST) are well defined categories in the Indian Constitution. The other backward classes are not listed and defined. The problems of this category of people are, therefore, diverse and complex.

The problems of the backward classes came to be more sharply focused during the British rule. The policy, the British government followed towards the backward classes, was partly humanitarian and partly political. The Government desired to do away with certain disabilities of the traditional social structure, which went against the Western principle of social justice and equality. They also extended economic benefits to low castes by encouraging certain occupations or trades such as liquor, hides and so on. The British policy, however, also emanated from another dimension. The Indian national movement was gaining momentum. Its leadership was provided by the new intelligentsia which came from the upper castes. The British government did not look at them with favor. The perpetuation of cleavage between the high castes and the low castes was in their interest. This they ensured by extending economic and political benefits to the low castes. In this way the wedge was maintained between the high castes and the lower castes during the British rule.

The term backward class was first used in Madras, in the department of education in payment of stipends to students coming from illiterate background. The number of backward classes which was 39 in 1895 grew to 113 in 1913, 128 in 1920, 152 in 1950 and 253 in 1994. Unfortunately, more and more castes became as the years passed. It only showed that more and more castes learnt to demand and receive special concessions on the basis of several backwardness rather than individual merit. It was made that among the qualified applicants for any job, preference should be given to those belonging to the least represented community. The recruitment to services on the communal basis was regularized and a definite quota for different communities in vacancies under the Government was prescribed. The Indian Constitution is silent on the definition of the backward classes. What one finds, however, is the characteristics of backwardness described and spread over the different articles of the Constitution. Article 15 (4) speaks of social and educational backwardness. In Article 16 (4), mention is made of backward classes and their inadequate representation in services. Article 23 speaks of forced labour. Article 46 refers to Weaker section of the people in which the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are included.

The traditional Indian society was highly segmented and hierarchical in character. The segment within were separated from one another by clear cut boundaries of marriage, restriction in interdining and other forms of social interaction. Social separation between different segments, each pursuing its own style of life could be kept intact so long as the society was fairly closed. In the traditional society, mobility-vertical or horizontal-was slow and limited. The expansion of transport and communication, spread of modern education, new economic opportunities of political articulation ushered in during the British rule brought about significant changes in the traditional social structure. This led to the system being more open, allowing for greater mobility. Of the many changes taking place among the backward classes, two in particular deserve special attention. They are (i) changes in their style of life, and (ii) changes in their relation to the political system. Of course, both are intimately related with changes in their economic life.

The changes in the style of life have followed two trends. They are Sanskritisation and Westernization. Sanskritisation is defined as a process by which a caste or social group moves up the social hierarchy by adopting the style of life associated by tradition with the upper castes. These upper castes can be Brahmans, Kshatriyas or even Vaishya's. Westernization in the Indian context, on the other hand, refers essentially to the process of social change introduced by the British rule in India. Individuals and groups began to respond and adopt to British ideals, relating to politics, economy, education, dress, manners customs and so on. This follows from their taking up western education and getting into a modern occupation. The process of Sanskritisation was at work even before the advent of the Europeans, however, it was slow and gradual. The reason being that the economy was relatively static and political movement very limit. Over and above, there was strong legal and ritual sanctions, which acted against the large-scale movement of people from one region to another. Nobody in the traditional system could

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take over the occupation of another caste and as such, they could not give up their own caste occupation and go away to another place unless and until they were allowed to in special circumstances. The pace of Sanskritisation was accelerated during the British rule due to factors mentioned earlier. Both the processes of Sanskritisation and Westernization led to a change of life-style among the backward classes in India.

The backward classes have been deprived of many social, economic, political and religious privileges. They were subjected to extreme forms of exploitation. The colonial power accentuated the disparities in the distribution of the economic power. The atrocities invited the lower castes against the Upper castes. Some of the important backward class movements which came up were the Satya Shodhak Samaj and Nadar movement which consolidated the masses along the caste line. E.V. Ramaswamy started self-respect movement against Brahmins in south India. The other backward classes occupied a low position in the traditional society but were above the line of untouchability. Many of the castes included in this category also enjoyed a measure of economic and political dominance. A good example of this is provided by the Okkaligas of Mysore. These castes (classes) or a section of them were, therefore, the first to seize the new opportunities offered during the British rule in comparison to the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes. They drew maximum benefits from new economic opportunities. And they were also the ones most interested in Sanskritising their style of life in order to get social acceptance of their material success.

Yet they experienced considerable gaps between themselves and the upper castes who were rapidly westernizing themselves. The upper castes such as the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and the Vaishya not only adopted the western lifestyle but took up western education with all seriousness. And because of their tradition of education they did not find it very difficult to do so. The result was that western education was mostly confined to them. In view of this, only the members of these castes could get the jobs, in the government services and could further increase their prestige. This increased the cultural, social and economic distance between them and the other backward classes even more. Thus, the social inequality was perpetuated in the new system to a large extent. The lower castes realized that mere Sanskritisation was not enough to improve their social condition. It did not provide them the avenue to obtain well paid and prestigious jobs in the administrative services. So they desired to get themselves educated through the English medium in order to qualify for these jobs. In fact, the demand for educational concessions was the major objective of the Backward Class Movement, which started in the early part of the twentieth century. The movement was strongest in Madras, Mysore and Maharashtra where Brahmins had almost total monopoly in higher education, professions and government employment.

Hence, they formed associations and federations to advance and protect the interest on the non-Brahman especially in south India. Reservation of seats in professional courses, post-graduate studies, and in government services, became their major demands. The opposition to Brahman dominance thus did not come from the low and oppressed castes but from the leaders of powerful rural dominant castes such as the Kamma and Reddi of Andhra Pradesh, Vellala of Tamil Nadu, Nayar of Kerala, Okkaliga and Lingayats of Mysore. There is considerable debate regarding the reservation policy to uplift the backward classes. This has become more pronounced after the publication of the Mandal Commission Report. The controversy is not on whether or not to have reservation but on the criterion of reservation in the context of social change. To put it differently, the question centers around the criterion of backwardness in the wider perspective of social change. There are those who view that reservation should be in terms of economic class instead of castes. They say that the caste based reservation is against the basic spirit of the Constitution. The Constitution promised equality and non casteist and non-communal society. They also argue that the caste system is disintegrating. The relationship between caste and traditional occupation is breaking down. The definition of backwardness is altered with change in its form and basis. Under the changed situation, no group can be called forward or backward.

The controversy has thus centered around the determination and delineating the backwardness. The national and the regional upper caste elites are in favor of individual as the unit. Accordingly, they prefer deprivation in income or education as the sole criterion of backwardness. As against this, the backward caste elites, both national and regional, emphasise caste as the unit as well as the sole criterion in determining the backwardness

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