

Liberalisation of Education Widened Caste Inequities

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Education as a process of assimilating and disseminating knowledge is one of the important factors that has civilised groups and nations. Interestingly, it has been used as a tool to socially exclude some groups like castes to enter the mainstream society. It is once again proved that the same old traditions are prevailing in India in making the benefits of education inaccessible to socially and educationally backward people. The NGO Pratham's 10th annual survey report released recently has brought out some startling but expected results. The learning outcomes of children in the rural schools particularly in the government schools is very poor as majority of the children in V class are not able to read a paragraph of II class and similarly fail to do simple division and multiplication in Mathematics. This is happening when the nation is said to be growing at a faster rate of growth than before due to further liberalisation of the economy. This brings in to focus the age old dichotomy of growth on the one hand for the few and decay and degradation for the underprivileged. Is this a manifestation of our traditional values re-emerging or getting new lease of life despite the absence of the mlecchas who were once were considered as responsible for our troubles or the same old story continuing in different garb?

Indian caste system based on occupational reservations had been subjected to disparagement from the time of Buddha was structurally confronted in the nineteenth century by providing representation to the unrepresented castes in bureaucracy in certain princely states. It was formalised by the British India government in the admissions of schools through the recommendations of Hunter Commission in 1882. Thus, the struggle for equality of opportunity initiated in the education sector is again brought under the regime of exclusion through public policy of liberalisation and privatisation. Two decades of planning from 1990s and remorseless response to needs of the underprivileged brought the education system at a stage where Mahatma Phuley left it. Dalits, OBCs and Muslims are not adequately represented in quality institutes and disciplines though government claims achievement of universal enrolment in elementary education to satisfy UN MDGs.

The social reform movements and the so called communal representation popularly known as reservation in admissions and public jobs have substantially improved the Human Development Indices in the South. In two of my publications in the 1990s I have provided empirical data how it has happened. The World Bank and the UNDP in their reports noted the positive contributions of reservations in India and compared them with that of preferential representation to Bumiputras in Malaysia and similar policies in other countries. Yet, people keep on referring to this simple measure as an aberration without knowing the size of caste-based reservations of let us say (15%) scheduled castes. There are 175 lakh jobs in government (state, union, local body, public sector) where the caste –based

reservations are observed. It means that there will be 26 lakh dalits in all categories of jobs if the policy is implemented without distortions. This is around one per cent (1.3) of the 20 crore dalits in India. Does the country not afford to contribute this paltry amount to call itself a civilised nation or Viswaguru? The amount of sacrifices and the contributions of these groups in the form of remaining illiterate, sick and jobless for 6 decades after independence are greater than what was stacked in Swiss Bank or Mauritius or Singapore. Yet, both the politicians and the policy makers have remained silent on this important issue making the forward castes educated at their cost and migrated to the West and now open the system to market. It is now openly admitted by Economists like Prof Kaushik Basu and others that markets have failed the masses and inequalities are widened.

Inequalities in education sector and the divides and despairs that it has created in post independent India is seen everywhere. Though some of the "Paid Intellectuals" refuse to probe in to the factors responsible for the inequities now, the fact remains that education particularly technical education provides the necessary competencies to enter the job market which the reservation communities are missing. It is common sense knowledge of everyone that the Government schools and colleges have become dumping grounds for SC, ST,OBC and poor to get admission in to B.A, B.Sc., B.Com etc while the rich and those who can meet the opportunity cost get in to technical institutes. Privatisation of higher education has created caste cleavages of institutions that thrive on public money in the name of fees reimbursement. But, the underprivileged and poor who fail to pay the remaining cost of institutional cost drop out or remain unfinished or thrown out due to caste prejudices in states like Andhra Pradesh to which our media pay little attention.

It is in this context the 10th ASER survey report evoked some interest as it has reported that the levels of learning like reading a ii class text by a iii class student is limited to only 25 per cent and so on. Though some of the findings are not reckoning with NCERT survey due to conceptual issues, it is declared that enrolment in 6-14 age elementary education is 96 per cent or almost universal. It is also reported that the enrolment in to tuition fees paid private schools is 30.8 per cent and in cities like Hyderabad 54.8 per cent. However the differences in the performance of dalits and others persist. For instance, reading of a text is performed by 58 per cent of dalits while it is 69 per cent for forward castes in private schools while the difference in government schools is large 42per cent and 65 per cent for dalits and others respectively. It is reported in some studies that government schools are considered as schools for reservation folk and therefore neither the teachers nor the public servants are bothered and they slowly perish. Perhaps like the Public Sector enterprises that are designed to make losses to be confiscated by crony capitalists, the education system is perhaps heading towards that goal. But, the situation in countries like USA, Pakistan and China with whom we always compare is different. There the state takes the responsibility of 'no child left behind' unlike India that makes an RTE Act and forget.