# Community Participation and Social Inclusion in India To-day

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**Abstract**

Indian society is organized on the basis of caste system which has resulted in structural inequalities. The government has adopted the policy of protective discrimination to ensure integration of weaker sections of the society into the national mainstream. Many empirical studies indicate that inspite of reservations and social welfare programmes, the practice of untouchability still continues in private sphere. This paper draws attention towards the patterns of discrimination prevalent in Indian society and attempts to identify the factors which obstruct the social inclusion of weaker sections.

**Keywords:** Social inclusion, untouchability, caste system

## Introduction

The idea of community participation and social inclusion arises from the fact of structured social inequalities characterizing social formation of a society. Indian society is one such society in the world. It is basically organized on the principle of caste system. Among several other features, following four are significant-

(i)   Segmental division of society

(ii)  Hierarchical arrangement of these segments

(iii) Determination of social place in the hierarchy on the basis of birth of an individual, and

(iv)  Lack of possibility of vertical social mobility of an individual or a group in the structure of the society.

In the context of social inclusion the above pattern of social organization prevented several castes and caste like groups to participate in community affairs although they were recognized as the members of the community. This situation prevailed in traditional set-up and its continuance is remarkably visible to-day as well.

Sociologically speaking a community is a particular kind of territorial group (Davis: 1969: 310). It has a physical criterion and a social criterion. The physical criterion implies that members of a community live together in clusters in a given geographical area. They identify with it and consider it as a place of origin. The social criterion implies that a community embraces all aspects of social life of its members. As a local group a community covers all the major institutions, all the statuses and interests that make a society (Davis: 1969: 312). In similar sense a community cannot be partial, cannot be identified with any particular group or an

institution by which it is constituted, for it consists precisely in the inter-institutional and inter-group connections that give to the whole its cohesion.

Thus, tribal societies; villages; towns and cities including metropolis and mega-cities are the examples of communities. These are all territorial groups the members of which, in the past remained together, engaged in economic and political activities and who essentially constituted a self-governing social unit with some common values and experiencing fillings of belonging to one another (Mitchell, G., D.: 1981: 31). In the Indian context caste-system had its stronghold preventing community participation on egalitarian principles but strong sense of belongingness prevailed in the life and activities of the members.  S.C. Dube in this study of the Rural Community Development Project observed that the people of the village are always conscious of the prestige of the village as a result thereof whenever a project official visited the village the residents did everything possible to impress the official in order to uphold the dignity of the village. (Dube: 1958: 121)

What prevailed in the case of a village community remained equally true in the case of other communities referred to above.

The social background of an Indian community briefly referred to above influence the levels and forms of participation in community affairs. The stronghold of caste-system in every aspect of community life recognized and regulated the mode of participation on the basis of ranking of each caste in the caste-hierarchy. This means that the inclusion of lower-castes and the scheduled castes remained to the extent of "thus for and not futher". Professor Ghurye has noted in his work "Caste and Race in India" that the castes put on the lowest rung of social hierarchy were assigned some special tasks on the occasion of a significant ceremony in the family of high caste. Until that task was performed by the concern client family the ceremony couldn't proceed further. Ghurye remarked that due to such institutionalized set-up the lowest castes also felt that they were indispensability.

<div align="center">II</div>

Now, let us, turn to the idea of social inclusion. In simple words it implies that accessibility granted to each and every member of the community to the things; positions; and symbols etc. which are considered important, prestigious and rare in the society.  Absence of such a possibility in a community eventually creates a condition of 'structured inequalities' to use a formulation by Cellia Heller.

Before, the independence of India the traditional dictates imposed and regulated by the social values and norms led to exclusion of the scheduled castes and other backward classes form their participation in the areas and affairs which were considered sacred, prestigious and significant in the community. These social realities are extensively documented by Professor G. S. Ghurye ;  J. H. Hutton; Kingsley Davis; M. N. Srinivas;  Yogesh Atal and several other scholars from India and abroad. M. N. Srinivas's  formulation of "sanskritization" attempted to trace the  fact of collective vertical mobility by lower-caste, however, latter scholars

claimed on the basis of empirical realities that such efforts ultimately culminates into "cultural change" rather than "structural change" in the society.

Since independence the constitution of India provides a framework for reconstruction of the society on the principles of equality, freedom, liberty and social justice. The article 38 of the constitution says that the state shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may, a social order in which justice, social, economic and political shall inform all the institutions of national life. Further, under a set of separate provisions the constitution also provides for protective discrimination in favour of the weaker sections i.e. the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. Articles 330,332 and 334 etc. thus, provide for political reservations and article 335 ensures reservations in Government services. Moreover, special programmes are implemented through the five year development plans for socio-economic and educational development of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. The State Governments are also advised to promote special programmes for the amelioration of their conditions. State should also ensure all round development and welfare of weaker sections free from direct or indirect exploitation by the dominant elements of the society. Under the provisions of policy protective discrimination, the weaker sections are given rights of reservation and several welfare programmes by way of special measures to ensure their integration with the main stream of society. The reservations are given in the following areas-

(i)   the political reservations

(ii)  the reservations in government services as well as in the institutions and organizations supported by the government funds, and

(iii) the reservations in educational institutions


## III

In the light of these provisions for 'a desired society' what do we see amidst social reality after the independence of more than six decades in relation to community participation and social acceptance of the lower castes and the scheduled castes by the then higher castes?

Answer to this question is not at all encouraging. This is amply proved by the empirical studies conducted by scholars in cities, towns and villages. We will cite only a few studies.

(i)   Herold Isaacs (1966) on the basis of the study of educated scheduled castes respondents from Mumbai and Bengluru noted that under the conditions of urban anonymity the scheduled caste persons finds it convenient to hide their identity so as to enjoy the rights of equality and freedom. The present author also observed similar pattern in Surat city in his study of "use of public utilities and facilities by the sweeper caste. (Harish Doshi: 1974)

(ii)  N. Rajaram in his study of milk co-operative societies in Central Gujarat observed that in the villages where Patels & Thakores are dominant caste

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groups, the scheduled caste members do not enjoy effective participation in the affairs of the co-operative societies.

(iii) I. P. Desai in the study of 'untouchability in Rural Gujarat' found that the practice of untouchability in private sphere of life continues whereas it is not practiced in the public sphere of life (Desai, 1976). Similar, social realties were noted by the present author in a study of 500 savarnas and 500 scheduled caste respondents from Surat city.

(iv) I. P. Desai in the study referred to above found that more than 50% of the scheduled caste persons have been able to change their occupation but the new occupations they have entered into are those which can be learnt by little skills and experience rather than education and / or capital investment.

(v) The scheduled castes persons are not given houses either on rent or sale in savarna housing localities and neighborhoods.

(vi) K. L. Sharma notes that they continue to suffer because they work under the command of the dominant castes and landlords (Sharma, 1987).

Similar observations are made on the study of the scheduled castes succinct remarks in relation to observable conditions in that as far as community participation and social inclusion is concern the scheduled castes have been able to alter their position in the public sphere of life but their life in private sphere in a community living continues to a large extent as it was before independence.

What are the major factors which have obstructed the social inclusion of the scheduled and perhaps other weaker section who were socially excluded from the main stream community participation? It is not very difficult to trace followings from the observable social reality.

(i) Absence of political leadership and lack of concern for the improvement of the conditions of the scheduled castes and other marginalized groups. The associations of political leaders with these groups remain primarily for seeking political support rather than social acceptance.

(ii) Lace of change in the minds of common-man. Due to legal rational set-up to- day caste-system has lost its stronghold, but 'caste' has strengthened its existence in political and social spheres.

(iii) Poor quality of education has worsened the perception of the members of other caste-groups about the performance and expertise of the scheduled caste personnel and other sections traditionally placed in the identical conditions.

## IV

It is also observed that a new form of social exclusion amounting to deprivation in secular sense is visible on the horizons of emerging social reality in India. If a poor lady does not possess 'adhar card' she is likely to be deprived of the benefit of government welfare programmes; she does not possess an ID card indicating her permanent residential address; she cannot buy a cell phone, nor she can have the privilege of a saving account in a bank; she doesn't have a ration

card as a consequence she cannot by grains and fuel at the reduced price for her sustenance, nor she possess a BPL card, as a result she does not get the medical services in a government hospital free of charge and finally her name is not registered in the voters list, hence she is deprived of voting right. It is amply evident from this narration that although a fully eligible person for certain rights and privileges to live a life with human dignity and social justice is grossly deprived of all these benefits due to a set of prevailing legal rational norms. The plight of such members of the society further aggravates due to relative deprivation resulting from the fact that several among them put in the similar or even worst conditions enjoy such benefits precisely because they happen to possess the proof of identification required under the legal norms.

Chundawat (2014) observes that amidst several other forces distribution of economic and other resources also determine the process of social exclusion in our society. He says "The major problems which Indian society in particular and other societies in general are facing are the problems of Poverty, Unemployment and illiteracy. This results in differential or unequal distribution of resources and fruits of development. As a result our society is sharply divided between rich and poor. Large number of people in India live below poverty line that are suffering from low income and engaged in low profile jobs. They are for all practical purposes excluded from the mainstream of our society. Poverty is a serious handicap for them to successfully compete and participate in various opportunities available in society. This situation has created a vast gap between what one has and what one doesn't have. This situation has created one section of the society more affluent and other section of the society more deprived and excluded in terms of status, power, prestige, dignity, income etc".

## V

The present scenario offers a source of some systematic studies with sociological perspective. Such studies can be articulated on the following themes.

(i)   How do the scheduled castes and other weaker sections feel to-day about their community participation in public and private spheres of life?

(ii)  What is the pattern of diversification of occupation among them? What obstacle do they experience in this regard? In words, their achievements in market place by improving their skills and enriching fortunes, obtaining political positions and power have altered their social accessibility in different aspects of community living.

(iii) Those who have been successful in integrating themselves with the community affairs, how could they do so? And what are their experiences?

(iv) What are the problems which are experienced in seeking education with excellence and expertise?

(v)  The problems and comforts which they experience while participating with other members of the community?

The studies on these themes and several others need to be conducted in village, town and city settings with sociological perspective warranting the understanding of the influence of prevailing societal forces shaping social action of the participants in a given social situation.

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