

PART 1

POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION FOR INDIA'S
SCHEDULED CASTES: A REVIEW OF THE PROBLEMS 1950-1970

Mathew Zachariah
Institute of Education, University of Calgary

Summary

Reference: Vol.2 (1969) A19 (p.11)

Scheduled castes and tribes comprise nearly 20% of India's population of 470 million. Traditionally they have been outside the social and caste system with access to very little of the benefits and security provided by the institutionalised religion. In 1950 when the Constitution of India was promulgated special guarantees were worked in to effect social justice to this sector of the population. As has been remarked, "India is the only country where government employment quotas and educational benefits have been established right across the board in order to speed the economic and social elevation of specific groups from the lowest levels of the country's population".

Reservation and special quotas in education, employment in parliament and legislatures were designed to enable the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (some 500 odd castes and tribes) to participate and integrate with the rest of society. The constitution specified a 20 year period for this process. Zachariah in his analysis points out the undoubted social justice and gains by positive discrimination which has been achieved. At the same time there has developed a class of persons who have benefited from 'discrimination', and now seem to have a vested interest in a continuation of the special facilities. In a country where poverty is the greatest disability the time has possibly come when section wise preferences should be replaced by positive discrimination on the basis of economic deprivation and need.

Note: The report that follows is a slightly amended reprint from Comparative Education Review Vol.16, No.1 (February 1972)

Report

Background

The term "Scheduled Castes" is a legally created classification which makes sense only "in a context of statutory provisions, government programmes and politics". The Scheduled Castes, unlike other backward classes, "are specified by the President of India in the first instance and can only be amended by an act of Parliament."

The first official term for some of the disadvantaged groups in India was "Depressed Classes" which at that time included untouchables and a few other groups. In the 1931 Census of India, the government made a special effort to draw up a "schedule" of castes which were entitled to benefit from certain special arrangements. The 1935 Government of India Act used the complete term "Scheduled Castes" for the first time. They form part of the "backward classes" mentioned in the 1950 Constitution, the others being Scheduled Tribes, Denotified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes and other Backward Classes. This study deals only with the Scheduled Castes. The term "Scheduled Castes" still means what was meant in the 1930's: those groups in the Hindu social order traditionally regarded as untouchable for ritual, i.e., socio-religious, reasons.

Indian social structure bears very little relation to the traditional philosophical division of society into groups. In fact, the practice of caste is meaningful only in specific localities and in terms of specific subcastes. Despite this, the groups which have been called untouchables have suffered extremely severe discrimination in every part of India. They performed very necessary social functions (such as nightsoil removal) which, however, were defined as ritually impure. As the result of such a socio-religious definition, members of these groups were marked off as people whose touch pollutes other persons and many regulations were created to keep such groups socially separate. Whereas, within the caste structure, some subcastes could move up the social scale by imitating the upper castes in food habits, dress and so on, untouchables were absolutely forbidden to aspire for such upward group mobility.

Scheduled Castes, then, are by and large the former untouchables. I say "by and large" because the concepts of untouchability and ritual pollution are so complex that they have evaded simple and clear legal formulation. The reference to former untouchables or ex-untouchables takes note of the legal abolition of untouchability (Article 17) in the 1950 Indian Constitution.¹ Indeed untouchability is punishable on the basis of the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955.

Positive Discrimination

Most constitutions of the modern world contain statements to the effect that there shall be no discrimination based on race, colour, religion, etc, with additional provisions regarding the State's responsibility to promote the general welfare of the people. Some constitutions or countries, for historic or other reasons, have justified preferential treatment for certain groups: war veterans in the United States have been the beneficiaries of such treatment; after gaining independence, Malaysia established a policy favouring Malays in matters of employment. But, as Harold R. Isaacs points out (in India's Ex-Untouchables):

India is the only country where government employment quotas and educational benefits have been established right across the board in order to help speed the social and economic elevation of specific groups from the lowest levels of the country's population.

¹ Gandhi introduced the term 'Harijan' which means 'children of God' to refer to untouchables. Although he meant well and caste Hindus still use it, ex-untouchables resent the implied condescension. See Isaacs, pp.39-42; Duskin, p.632.

It is some comfort to think that although the practice of untouchability made India quite unique among social systems, the attempt to eradicate it has also made the country unique.

The Legal Basis for Positive Discrimination

L.M. Shrikant points out that children from Scheduled Castes did not attend schools at all in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Concern about the status and disabilities about these castes, he goes on to say, is "an essentially modern phenomenon due to the renaissance of Hindu Society which came in the wake of its contact with the west." The first legal breakthrough came in 1858 when the Court of Directors threw open government schools to members of the Scheduled Castes despite bitter and active opposition by many caste Hindu groups. A detailed description of events since 1858 falls outside the scope of this paper but it is important to note that, between the period 1858 to 1950, many government regulations had very slowly, and in limited ways, discriminated in favour of Scheduled Castes. What the Republican Constitution of India did was to extend the scope of these provisions.

There are two aspects to the legal provisions in the Constitution. The first is that under Part III, "Fundamental Rights," several articles explicitly state that everyone is equal before the law and discrimination by the State or citizens on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth is prohibited. In the same spirit, untouchability is abolished. The second legal aspect is that several articles in other parts of the Constitution require the State to discriminate in favour of certain "backward classes". The spirit of these legal provisions is perhaps best expressed in Article 46 which occurs in part IV entitled "Directive Principles of State Policy" which are "not enforceable by any court" although "it shall be the duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws." Article 46 states:

The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

These contradictory postures of the Constitution have given rise to many court challenges and I shall refer to some of them later.

Implementation of Policy

The federal and state governments of India carry out the policy of positive discrimination in three specific ways. First, in every state or federal election, only members of the Scheduled Castes or Tribes may contest from certain electoral districts. In addition to these "reserved" districts, members of Scheduled Castes or Tribes may contest from any other "general" electoral districts. This policy guarantees that these castes and tribes will have their own representatives in the Lok Sabha ("The House of the People," which is the lower house in the Indian Parliament) and in every state legis-

lature.¹ Secondly, a certain percentage of jobs in government services is set apart for members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

A reservation of $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the vacancies filled through the Union Public Service Commission or by competitive examinations is made for Scheduled Castes. If the vacancies are filled up in any other manner - by interview, for example - the reservation is $16\frac{2}{3}$ These reservations relate to appointments to posts which attract candidates from all over the country, namely Class I and II (supervisory) services; for Classes III and IV which attract candidates from local areas, reservations in general are made in proportion of the population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes....²

The third prong of the policy of positive discrimination is aimed at education. Pupils from Scheduled Castes and Tribes are entitled to special scholarships and maintenance grants while pursuing their studies. Furthermore, in professional colleges where academic competition for admission is extremely high, a certain percentage of places is set aside for those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Problems associated with implementing the policy of positive discrimination in education for Scheduled Castes is the concern of this report although the nature of the subject will compel me to touch on the policy of job reservations.

The Policy in Education

The state and federal governments have encouraged the admission of Scheduled Caste children in schools. Specifically, government financial support is withheld from schools which discriminate against members of the Scheduled Castes. Despite regional variations, Scheduled Caste enrolment in the first two levels of education is quite substantial in every Indian state.

This is clearly shown in the following Table 1 taken from L.M. Shrikant "Education of the Backward Classes," The Second Indian Year Book of Education: Elementary Education. (New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1964). p.181.

¹"The reservation of seats in the legislatures is the only item in the entire system that has a time limit on it". The 1950 Constitution specified a ten year time limit; The Eighth Amendment in 1959 extended this limit by another year; in 1969, the limit was extended for another ten years. For an informed discussion on this subject see C.P. Barthwal "Representation of Scheduled Castes in Parliament and State Legislatures". Economic and Political Weekly (September 6, 1969), pp.1451-1454.

²Lok Sabha Debates, vol.20, No.15 (September 2, 1963) col.3902. Directory and Yearbook Including Who's Who 1968 (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1968), p.222; India: A Reference Annual 1966 (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966, p.122.

Table 1: Enrolment of Scheduled Castes (1960-61)

	Proportion of Sched. Castes to Total Pop. (%)	Enrolment of Scheduled Castes in					
		Primary Schools		Middle Schools		Total	
		% to Enrolment Total	% to Enrolment Total	% to Enrolment Total	% to Enrolment Total	% to Enrolment Total	% to Enrolment Total
Andhra Pradesh	13.8	4,28,119	16.0	32,325	9.2	4,60,444	15.2
Bihar	14.1	2,66,396	9.8	61,423	7.6	3,27,819	9.3
Gujarat	5.7	43,379	6.1	1,04,234	6.8	1,47,613	6.6
Kerala	8.4	1,96,212	10.9	65,235	8.5	2,61,447	10.2
Madhya Pradesh	13.1	1,57,087	9.3	39,446	8.1	1,96,533	9.1
Madras	18.0	4,24,175	17.0	1,29,037	11.6	5,53,212	15.3
Maharashtra	5.6	1,78,086	10.0	2,48,196	10.2	4,26,282	10.1
Mysore	13.2	1,34,326	10.5	73,305	6.3	2,07,631	8.5
Punjab	20.4	1,22,004	12.3	29,297	9.2	1,51,301	11.6
Rajasthan	16.7	38,659	4.4	11,248	3.6	49,907	4.2
Uttar Pradesh	20.9	5,65,822	14.3	67,197	12.2	6,33,019	14.0
West Bengal	19.9	4,59,803	17.4	27,490	12.2	4,87,293	17.0

State governments, out of their own budgets and with financial help from the federal government, have given to students from the Scheduled Castes the following types of assistance: "(1) free tuition at all stages; (2) ad hoc grants for purchase of books; (3) provision of hostels where board and lodging (are) free of charge; and (4) where necessary grant of stipends." Although most of these grants are for studies beyond matriculation, i.e., after high school graduation, many students also receive pre-matriculation scholarships. Beginning in 1954-55, the Government of India also introduced a scholarship scheme to enable Scheduled Caste students to study abroad. Table 2 which reports the growth of post-matriculation scholarships gives an indication of the remarkable expansion of this scheme.

Table 2: Increase in Scholarships for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

Year	Total Number of Scholars Benefiting from the Scheme	Total Amount of Expenditure Incurred on the Scheme
		Rs.
1947-48	655	5,39,307
1948-49	731	4,98,303
1949-50	1414	8,56,804
1950-51	2181	12,69,456
1951-52	2834	15,40,942
1952-53	6444	30,52,267
1953-54	11934	61,55,267
1954-55	20658	107,89,000
1955-56	41451	150,53,936
1956-57	39485	187,28,382
1957-58	44962	223,11,674
1958-59	49962	223,11,674
1959-60	61962	257,37,302

Source: National Council of Educational Research and Training, Review of Education in India: 1947-61, Ministry of Education. (New Delhi, 1961), p.35.

The only differentiated statistics I have seen indicates that the greatest number of these scholarships are awarded to members of the Scheduled Castes. Table 3 is taken from an earlier (1960) Government of India publication, and despite discrepancy in figures quoted for the years referred to, it is worth comparing with Table 2.

Table 3: Number of Scholarships Awarded

	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Other Backward Classes	Total
1956-57	21,525	3,505	14,230	39,260
1957-58	25,400	4,400	12,400	42,200
1958-59	31,250	5,000	12,500	48,750
Total	78,175	12,905	39,130	130,210
Source: Government of India, Planning Commission, Second Five Year Plan: Progress Report, 1958-59. (Delhi, 1960), p.140.				

Article 338 of the Constitution requires of the President of India to appoint a special officer to keep track of the problems of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and to publish reports on them periodically which shall "be laid before each House of the Parliament." In 1951, Mr. L.M. Shrikant, a caste Hindu, was appointed as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and remained in that position for ten years. His annual Reports of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Schedules Tribes are veritable gold mines of information and have done a great deal to keep the problems of these castes alive in Parliament.

Legal Problems

The central issue out of which almost all the legal problems arise is this: The Fundamental Rights which are placed in Part III of the Constitution are enforceable in courts and are inspired by classic liberal principles. The constitutional justifications for positive discrimination in education rest in Part IV of the Constitution which are not enforceable in courts and are inspired by socialistic precepts.

Two matters which are highly significant in this context may be mentioned. In 1951 the Madras Government issued a Communal Government order (G.O.) establishing a policy of admission to the engineering and medical colleges of the state based strictly on a communal basis. It is necessary to quote Donald Eugene Smith at some length on this matter:

Out of every fourteen seats, six were to be allotted to non-Brahman Hindus, two to backward Hindus, two to Harijans, two to Brahmans, one to Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians, and one to Muslims.

A lady candidate complained that she was denied admission to the medical college on the ground that she belonged to the Brahman community. The Madras High Court gave judgment in her favour, and the government appealed the case to the Supreme Court. In *State of Madras vs. Sm. Champakam Dorairajan*, 1951, the Supreme Court declared the G.O. unconstitutional inasmuch as it distributed seats among communities according to a fixed ratio. The court found that the classification made in the order constituted a clear violation of the fundamental right guaranteed to citizens under article 29(2) (which prohibits Caste discrimination in admission to state-aided educational institutions). This right is a right conferred on a citizen as an individual and not as a member of a class. The denial of admission to a qualified Brahman cannot be defended under the Constitution on the plea that there is no exclusion of Brahmans as a class. The article is not concerned with the rights of classes but of individual citizens.¹

This decision created a problem for the state which was solved by the insertion of a new clause in the Constitution. Article 15(4) protected the right of the state, where deemed necessary, to make special provisions for the advancement of socially or educationally disadvantaged groups. There are several other cases which must be omitted for reasons of economy.²

The other interesting fact is that according to a ruling of the Union (Federal) Law Ministry, Christian, Muslim or Buddhist converts of Scheduled Caste origin are not eligible for and should not get favourable discrimination even though their social and economic situation remains the same. The rationale is that untouchability is a peculiar disability of Hinduism, and that an individual who formally forsook Hinduism for another religion is not a member of a Scheduled Caste. This, however, has been frequently challenged and is still a matter of controversy.

Administrative Problems

The problems associated with enabling legislation and administrative law are complex matters in every country. Positive discrimination in India is no exception. Unlike the scheduled tribes, who live in isolated forests and hills, Scheduled Castes live among the rest of the population. "They have been segregated rather than isolated." This geographical scatter of Scheduled Castes adds to administrative difficulties in implementing special programmes.

¹ Donald Eugene Smith, *India As a Secular State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.122.

² "The Mysore Government reserved 68 per cent of the places in technical colleges for certain castes on the grounds that they were backward classes. This was held unconstitutional". Gledhill, p.184. See also Lok Sabha Debates, vol.20, No.15 (September 2, 1963) col.3414 on Kerala High Court decision.

There are procedural delays in releasing funds for expenditure. For example, students often do not get their scholarships in time, even when authorized. In spite of decentralizing the sanction procedure in 1958-59 to minimize these delays, large amounts are never used and lapse every year. This is often attributed to officers "who have neither interest (in) nor knowledge about" the problems of Scheduled Castes. The same kind of criticism is levelled against the federal and state advisory committees concerned with the welfare of Scheduled Castes.

Although the central and state governments are committed to the abolition of separate schools and separate student residences for Scheduled Castes, real fiscal policy encourages their continuation or even expansion. Orissa spent Rs.300,000 in 1963-64 for the construction of 15 new student residences for members of the Scheduled Castes. This inconsistency is the result of an uneasy compromise. On the one hand, state governments are committed to providing more educational opportunities for Scheduled Castes, while on the other, there is still considerable, though varied, opposition from caste Hindus against policies which bring them physically closer to members of Scheduled Castes. These counter pressures have led some state governments to construct separate schools and student residences since their maintenance is not against the law so long as there is no overt practice of untouchability. From one perspective, this is definitely progress in that these students are now getting an opportunity for education even if it is on a segregated basis. However, such governmental actions will only delay the integration of members of the Scheduled Castes with the rest of society.

G.N. Ramu in a report on untouchability in rural areas points out that "whenever there is red-tapism a new class of people, who may be called middlemen, emerges. The middlemen exploit the constitutional amenities, granted to the untouchables, for personal ends." Although Ramu's article does not specifically claim that middlemen exploit grants of scholarships etc., the matter should be explored.

Social and Political Problems

The most critical factor in the successful implementation of positive discrimination is the attitude of the non-scheduled castes. Basically, the Scheduled Castes are economically dependent on the upper castes; this is especially true in rural areas where most of the Scheduled Caste members live. On the other hand, non-scheduled castes which are just above the line of untouchability but are economically not very much better off, feel quite resentful of the privileges that Scheduled Castes receive. A caste Hindu agricultural worker in a village may have a son who had completed high school but cannot go to university because of lack of money. If the son of a Scheduled Caste individual in the same village is able, however, to go to university because the government gives the young man a scholarship, the caste Hindu is simply baffled and angered by this turn of events which has converted a commonly accepted social disability into an advantage. This, incidentally, is the main reason for the previously unheard of clamour among several castes to be classified as belonging to "Other Backward Classes." Several observers have pointed out the inherent dilemma in the government policy of positive discrimination which Isaacs states succinctly:

All the programs and quotas are intended to help the ex-untouchable shed his identity but the effect has been to make his identity more visible than ever ... (The individual) has to certify that he is an ex-untouchable before the government can help.¹

One result of the government policy, among other factors, has been to increase communal consciousness in India as the careful studies of political scientists like Myron Weiner have shown.²

The groups we call Scheduled Castes who numbered 64.5 million people according to the 1961 census, constitute "a diverse population ... born into numerous communities, each with its own identity, tradition and problems." They are not a united force; indeed they practice various degrees of untouchability among themselves. The higher castes have occasionally exploited this fact skillfully to maintain old practices. The 1961-62 Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes notes that "In certain areas ... separate wells have to be provided by the government for different classes of Scheduled Castes living in the same village" ³ Given the tremendous backwardness of Scheduled Castes, their lack of unity, and resistance to change, any general increase in communal consciousness in the country may only work to their disadvantage. They would be unable to hold their own in inter-caste struggles to receive a fair portion of the resources of a scarcity-ridden society.

Several observers have noted that the system of reservations of government jobs has had the unintended effect of taking the educated people among Scheduled Castes out of positions of community leadership and putting them in safe jobs where civil service rules will keep them silent for the rest of their lives. The political leaders of Scheduled Castes have usually been drawn from the more educated people. If we must name one person as responsible for the policy of preferential treatment of Scheduled Castes, it is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who was a member of the ex-untouchable Mahar community of Bombay. He worked hard from the early 1930's for the uplift of untouchables and as the father of the Indian Constitution and as the first Minister of Law of independent India, was able to push through the kinds of legislation and regulations I have discussed here. ⁴ Since his death in 1956, there has been a leadership vacuum which has not been filled.

Another relevant factor is that the system of reservations has developed a class of entrepreneurs who have learned to use positive discrimination to their own advantage. They now appear to have a vested interest in maintaining positive discrimination for their own reasons which are often detrimental to the welfare of the groups.

¹Isaacs Indias' Ex-Untouchables (New York: John Day, 1964) p.114.

²Myron Weiner. The Politics of Scarcity (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963)

³Cited in Isaacs, p.52; Lok Sabha Debates (September 4, 1963),col.4409.

⁴A. C. Paranjpe, "The Life History of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Social Psychological view" in R.D. Suman, ed., Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Commemorative Volume (in press).

A General Evaluation

If one reads the speeches in the Lok Sabha on the effectiveness of positive discrimination, one gets two views. The government spokesmen, understandably, claim that despite many problems, the economic, social and educational progress of Scheduled Castes in the past two decades has been remarkable. Members of Parliament from the Scheduled Castes, however, claim that progress has been minimal and spotty. I find it difficult to accept this latter view with one important exception: untouchability in rural areas still appears to be quite common. The following items of evidence may be of interest here.

The higher castes appear to have accepted the notion of education under one roof for children of all castes. Table 4 gives the results of a 1964-65 interview study of the attributes of Caste Hindus toward untouchability in the village of Hosur in Mysore State.

Table 4: (Showing the Responses of Caste Villagers on Various Aspects of Untouchability)

	YES		NO		TOTAL	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Interdining	-	-	47	100	47	100
Social distance	45	95.7	2	4.3	47	100
Permission for temple entry	-	-	47	100	47	100
Permission to use public wells	-	-	47	100	47	100
Permission to enter schools	47	100	-	-	47	100

(Source: G.N. Ramu, "Untouchability in Rural Areas," Indian Journal of Social Work 29 (July 1968), p.149).

Santokh S. Anant's questionnaire surveys of populations from Scheduled and Non-scheduled Castes in areas in and around Agra, Delhi and Varanasi in Northern India confirm these findings on education,¹ although he found that Caste Hindus (especially in urban areas) were resolving the dilemma of conflicting legal and caste rules by:

conforming to legal provisions in those spheres of interaction in which the ideas of ceremonial purity are not terribly challenged and which are public, e.g., physical contact, admission to temples, use of the well, etc. but abiding by the caste rules in spheres of intimate contact, e.g., interdining, acceptance of food, marriage, etc.²

¹ Santokh S. Anant, "Inter-Caste Relations and Legislation: Attitudes Toward Special Privileges For Scheduled Castes", especially Table 8. (Unpublished). By courtesy of the author.

² Santokh S. Anant, "Caste Hindu Attitudes Toward Harijans: A Study of Inter-Caste and Urban Rural Differences", *Psychologia* 13 (1970), p.43.

Andre Beteille points out that "modern education acts in a very special way as a solvent of the barriers between different communities ... In the village of Tanjore district, for instance, it is a new experience for Harijan children to sit with children of their Brahmin masters in the same room and study and play together." He also points out how the 'midday meals scheme' in Madras State which results in children being served food in school irrespective of caste "... is likely to have considerable significance for the future."

Two other studies found that members of the Scheduled Castes have become very aware of the importance of education and are sending their children to school in greater numbers than ever before.

All through the 1950's and early 1960's there was considerable controversy about the policy of reserved vacancies for Scheduled Castes because allowed quotas were not being filled. Government spokesmen claimed that the reason was unavailability of suitable candidates; spokesmen for the Scheduled Castes claimed it was a result of Caste Hindu prejudices. Controversies aside, Table 5 shows that there has been some increase in Scheduled Caste representation in government services, while Table 6 indicates that the quotas in the highest Class I category began to get filled beginning in 1963. Government spokesmen have attributed this progress to "enough educated ex-untouchables (coming) out of the universities to produce enough applicants with the necessary qualifications."

Table 5: Number and Percentage of Permanent and Temporary Posts in Government Service Occupied by Members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 1956 and 1963

Class	Year	Total Number of Employees	Scheduled Castes		Scheduled Tribes	
			Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
I	1956	6,233	44	0.71	6	0.10
	1963	14,117	250	1.68	29	0.20
II	1956	14,455	290	2.00	56	0.39
	1963	23,756	707	2.98	53	0.22
III	1956	642,651	45,181	7.03	3,990	0.62
	1963	916,452	84,714	9.24	9,906	1.08
IV	1956	759,570	167,239	22.02	18,497	2.43
	1963	881,556	151,176	17.15	30,890	3.50

(Source: P.M. Menon "Towards Equality of Opportunity in India," International Labour Review 94) (October, 1966), p.368.

Explanation: Class I: Highest executives

Class II: Supervisors with some clerical responsibilities

Class III: Clerks

Class IV: Manual workers, messengers, etc.

There is a fifth category called "sweepers".

Table 6:

Vacancies						
Indian Administrative Service			Indian Police Service			
Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Castes			
Total	Reserved	Filled	Total	Reserved	Filled	
1961			64	14	7	
1962	99	22	73	17	10	
1963	87	11	68	16	15	

(Source: Lok Sabha Debates, Vol.20, no.17 (September 4, 1963), col.4508.)

Poverty or Untouchability?

The most important theoretically significant and practically useful question which is emerging now is whether the disadvantages of the Scheduled Castes are primarily due to poverty or untouchability. One finds assertions supporting the view that the greater disadvantage is one or the other. However, of late, more scholars and politicians are beginning to express the view that poverty is the greater disability. I would like to indicate the theoretical significance and practical utility of this question.

If untouchability is still the greater disadvantage then we are dealing with a social system which is more or less "closed". If poverty is the greater disadvantage then we are dealing with a more or less "open" system. This is another way of asking whether India is moving under the impact of modernization processes from a caste to a class system. There is quite respectable evidence to support this. I shall cite one author:

Graduates in India earn considerably more than matriculates and, similarly, matriculates earn more than primary school leavers. It is not clear, therefore, whether a degree is better rewarded because it has prestige or whether it has prestige because it is better rewarded. Indeed, it is characteristic of modern societies that prestige and income are highly correlated, and in this sense India is a modern society. ¹

If this is indeed so, we may have to break the "terminological habit" of speaking in terms of caste and class and focus more on questions concerned with differential access to power and status of societal groups. Such a theoretical framework may also make it possible for us to compare in many nations the importance of education for groups which have more power or status with groups which have less power or status.

The practical utility of the issue of poverty vs. untouchability is this: Has the time come for the Indian government to carefully phase out positive discrimination on the basis of caste in education? If so, should it introduce positive discrimination on the basis of carefully worked out criteria of economic deprivation and need?

¹M. Blaug, P.R.G. Layard, and Mr. Woodhall, *The Causes of Graduate Unemployment in India* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1969). p.3.