

Empowerment of the Weaker Section of the society – Tribulation and Reforms

Abstract

The Weaker or Marginalized or Backward section of the society is generally defined as differentiated group by others with negative connotations, thereby leaving such section without power, education and awareness which subjects the discriminative group to certain exclusions, prejudice and other differential treatments. Though, intense effort has been made to guarantee equality to the disadvantaged sections of the population through constitutional provisions aimed at preventing discrimination and promoting social justice, the plight of the weaker section still stands as a biggest challenge to democracy and equality. The current situation invokes the concept of empowerment in several contexts: namely, human rights, basic needs, economic security, capacity building, skill formation or the conditions of a dignified social existence. This idea is also used in the context of the upliftment of the discriminated, unorganized and other disadvantaged sections of society.

Keywords: Scheduled Caste, Scheduled tribes, Other Backward classes, Poverty, Unemployment, Education, Health, Labours, Constitutional Reforms

Introduction

The minority issues or in other terms, the issues pertaining to the economically weaker sections have occupied a very important place in the politics of countries the world over. Weaker section, in a broad sense, is generally defined as a group of people differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or language. Such discrimination creates an imbalance in the ecosystem of a society, thereby creating a largely disproportionate and unequal society. Social inequality in India is the byproduct of Hindu caste-ridden society in India with almost two-third of the Indian population is socially and educationally backward. Since time immemorial, Indian social system has been maintaining social and economic inequality among the people. Because of this practice some people (so called higher castes) who are advanced socially, economically and educationally exploited the so called weaker sections (backward people) that suffered from historical exploitation and went on becoming more backward and weaker with the passage of time. This section of the population is known as weaker section. Amelioration of their living condition, protection of the rights of the weaker section and provisions for their social justice has been a serious concern for all of us.

The concern in turn leads to the need of empowering the weaker section. Despite of being classified as oppressed groups such as unorganized workers, poor peasants, tribal people, dalits and women, this section of society is engaged in a struggle for power and development. Empowerment, in such a scenario, acts as a tool which provides them with hopes and dreams for a social environment free of inequalities disfavoring them in different spheres of life. The deprived people and their organizations at grassroots level have been striving relentlessly to realize their dreams and hopes for a better future and empowered life. This study focuses on the disparities and hurdles faced by the economically weaker section and the initiatives taken by the government in empowering them. The article also focuses on the role that education plays in upliftment of the deprived section.

Aim of the Study

The paper focusses in the issues faced by the weaker section and the constitutional reforms developed to counter the same. It further evaluates the current scenario and gives suggestions to remove the roadblocks in the path of attaining the vision for equality and empowerment.



Ved Kumari
Officiating Principal,
Deptt.of Political Science,
V.V. P.G. College,
Shamli

Hypothesis

Due to spread of the idea of democracy, equality, social justice and human rights people to a large extent have come out; from the nasty idea of inequality, oppression, injustice and violation of human rights.

Tools and Methodology

This paper is strictly descriptive and analytical in nature. In this paper an attempt has been taken to analyze the empowerment of weaker section in India. The data used in it is from secondary sources according to the need of this study.

Review of Literature

The term "Weaker Section" in ordinary sense refers to the socially, economically, politically and educationally backward section of the population that has been suffering from different kinds of disabilities due to their presumed backward status. According to Government of India Act, 1935 "weaker section implies to those sections of society who are either because of traditional custom of practice of untouchability or because of tribal origin, tribal way of living or other backwardness have been suffering from educational and economic backwardness and some aspects of social life." On the basis of their overall status in a view to their socio-economic and cultural life and for the convenience of effective administration of development and welfare programmes with special focus to their socio-economic stands, the weaker sections have been grouped basically into three distinct categories by different resolutions of Government of India, namely Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class. In addition to the major groups, there are also some vulnerable groups like women, destitute children, and handicapped people etc who are generally considered as weaker members of the society.

Traditionally Indian society was based on Hindu Varna system which was crafted in the later Aryan era. When traced back to its origin from the vedic period, that is, the period when Aryans came to India during 2500B.C. to 2000 B.C., and from the writings of Rigveda which was written during 1200B.C. to 1000 B.C., it was believed that, all men and women were equals and there was no trace of untouchability as we see it today. According to Rigveda, in those days, perfect brotherhood was prevalent. In course of time, when the Aryans, having grown in overwhelming numbers scattered and colonised throughout the whole of Aryavarta they divided themselves into four divisions; namely, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra; according to their different qualities and actions in order to organise their society and set it upon sound basis. The four divisions or varnas were arranged in hierarchical order with top position occupied by Brahmana followed by Kshatriya, and Vaishya whereas at the bottom of that vertical order were the Shudras whose rights and duties were ascribed. No one could move either downward or upward and since then, this four-fold division has been a pre-dominant feature of Hindu social fabric. A bulk of population was called untouchables in this system. They lived in caste based professions and were also

suppressed in their social status. In the Varna system majority people were and are still far away from being educated, having property, human dignit, thereby resulting in low economic and political status. Continued for a long period this system has turned a majority into depressed class, also termed as untouchable or as per the present political system as scheduled castes.

Classification of the Weaker Section

In India, the weaker section is broadly classified into three defining groups, Schedules Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.

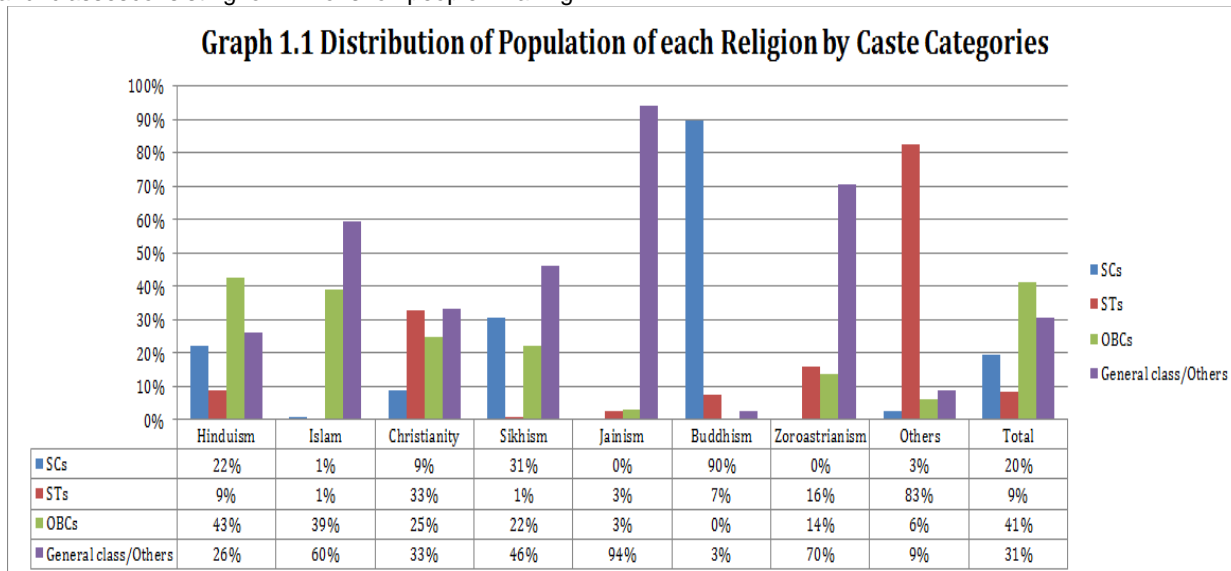
The scheduled castes are the people who occupy the bottommost rung of the Indian social ladder. They are generally regarded as "untouchables" and popularly known as "harijans". According to the census report of 2011 they constitute more than 19.5% of the Indian population. They are economically backward, socially depressed and educationally neglected section of the Indian population. The people who are known by the name of scheduled caste at present were identified with different names during different points of time in the past; namely "panchamas" or the fifth varnas for they were out of the "chaturvana" system in the Varna System, "chandals" and "asprushas" or untouchables or "Dalits" in the Vedic Era ; terms such as "outcastes", "exterior caste" and depressed caste were coined by Britishers while the government of India Act, 1935 designated them as "scheduled caste". Our constitution after independence also recognized them in this name. They are commonly addressed as "Harijans", salutation coined to them by Gandhiji who addressed them as "harijans" which he meant people of God

Schedule tribes are generally classified as a group of people who usually stay in jungle areas or in a small locality and are illiterate and poor. They are also distinguished in their physical appearance as they are hardly seen clad in clothes, are dark and frail, and live completely within their community with intra community wedlocks. Professionally they are engaged in hunting and searching for roots, shoots and fruits as their vegetarian food and roasted animals as non-vegetarian food. A striking characteristic of such groups is that they are completely oblivious to country's political and economic condition, resist all efforts of development and have a strong dislike for strangers and educated modern community. The number of such tribal community is very large e.g. Santhals, Kora people, Kol, etc. Most of the projects and efforts for uplifting their health, education and economic condition have failed both for their own unwillingness for change and absolute non-cooperation as well as lethargy, dishonesty and corruption of the intermediaries.

The Other Backward Classes, the third worst vulnerable group of people in Indian population, categorically constitute roughly the largest i.e. more than one third of the country's population. The term "other backward class" has not been defined properly either by sociologists or by the constitution makers. The backward classes are a large mixed group of

persons with more unclear and elastic boundaries. The other backward class consists of a large number of educationally and economically backward people. The term "other backward classes, is often considered as vague as it includes a wide variety of lower castes and classes consisting of millions of people. Having

sad that despite of the huge contribution to population in terms of numbers, those who are said to be falling in the ambit of this group suffer from many deprivations and disabilities due to their backwardness for whatever reasons.



Facts and Figures

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes comprise about 16.6 percent and 8.6 percent, respectively, of India's population (according to the 2011 census). The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 lists 1,108 castes across 29 states in its First Schedule, and the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists 744 tribes across 22 states in its First Schedule. According to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders (Amendment) Act, 1990, Scheduled Castes can only belong to Hindu or Sikh or Buddhist religions. There is no religion bar in case of Scheduled Tribes. The Sachar Committee report of 2006 revealed that scheduled castes and tribes of India are not limited to the religion of Hinduism. The 61st round Survey of the NSSO found that 90% of the Buddhists, one-third of the Sikhs, and one-third of the Christians in India belonged to the notified scheduled castes or tribes of the Constitution. The OBCs were found to comprise 52% of the country's population by the Mandal Commission report of 1980, a figure which had shrunk to 41% by 2006 when the National Sample Survey Organization took place. In the Indian Constitution, OBCs are described as "socially and educationally backward classes", and the Government of India is enjoined to ensure their social and educational development — for example, the OBCs are entitled to 27% reservations in public sector employment and higher education. The list of OBCs maintained by the Indian Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is dynamic, with castes and communities being added or removed depending on social, educational and economic factors. RTI data showed in 2015 that in spite of these 27% reservations in jobs, only less than 12% OBCs are in these jobs (in some departments only 6.67% of OBCs were given employment under these 27%

reservations). As of 2015, in educational institutes also funds meant for OBC student reservation policy are not utilized properly or are underutilized in case of upgrading infrastructure as well as violation of faculty recruitment according to OBC 27% reservation policy.

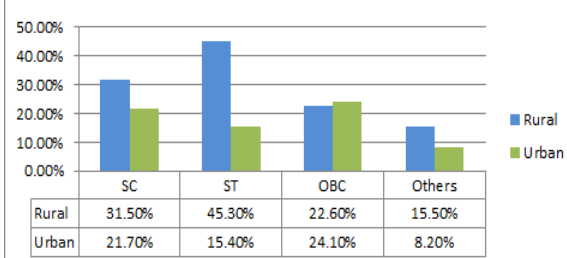
The plight of the Weaker Section

The term "Weaker" comes from the word "weak" which itself refers to a problem. The weaker or marginalized members of the society are called such since their problems are in a way a consequence of their weak economic, social and educational status. According to Government of India Act, 1935 "weaker section implies to those sections of society who are either because of traditional custom of practice of untouchability or because of tribal origin, tribal way of living or other backwardness have been suffering from educational and economic backwardness in some aspects of social life."

Poverty is the central factor of the socio-economic and educational backwardness among the weaker section. It acts like a viscous circle; they are backward because they are poor, and they are poor because they are backward. More than 91 percent of the Scheduled Caste people fall below the Below Poverty Line in India. Poor economic condition is one of the main aspects in the life of Scheduled Caste (Harijans) in India. Plethora of welfare programmes has not been able to bring them up to the desired level of living condition. Owing to the large scale social rejection and socio-economic deprivation in the past, people from the Scheduled Caste were left far behind the process of development. Even today they restricted from practicing the occupation of their choice which prevents them from taking a better prospects which could lift their economic status. The denial of own land in the past has made them landless labourers today. Moreover such

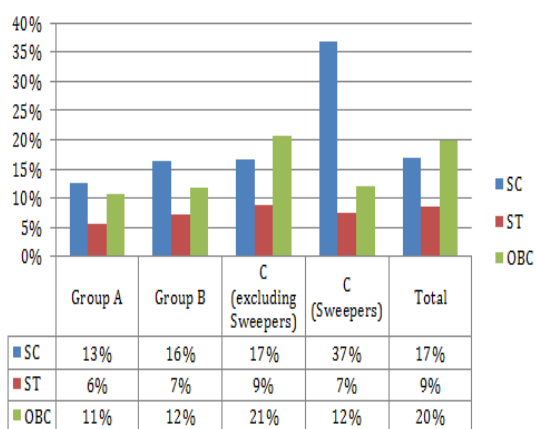
discrimination has instilled in them an internalized sense of inferiority with moral demoralization, lack of motivation for economic development and lack of self-confidence, as a result of which they have become hesitant towards the welfare programmes implemented by the government for their upliftment thereby leading to abject poverty. As for the schedule tribes, with most of the tribal families living below poverty line, poor economic condition has become their striking characteristic where inwith a limited source of income, they are struggling to manage the basic needs of life. For instance, unable to afford the expense of modern health facilities, they are the victims of premature deaths. They are known to be the most marginalized section of our population. They are deprived of their basic rights making and more than six decades of concerted effort from different fronts could not change their long deplorable lot. The factors responsible for their long standing economic backwardness are many such as primitive methods of production, social taboos influencing their production, community based production, ignorance and indifference to Government schemes and programmes, corruptive nature of development officials and lack of effective Planning.

Graph 1.2 - Social Group wise Percentage of Population below poverty line



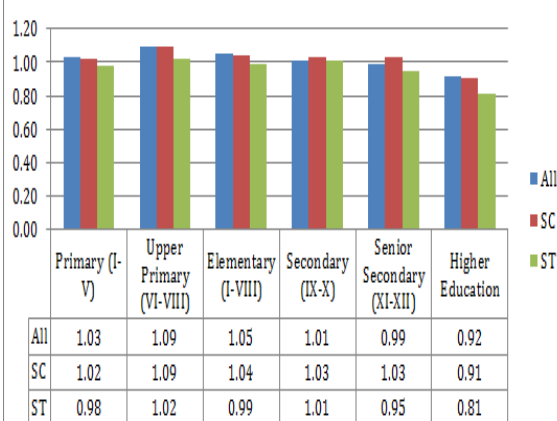
Unemployment is another major problem of the Scheduled Castes in India. More than 70 percent of the SCs are unemployed or underemployed and illiteracy is found to be the major reason for their unemployment. Even after having the legislation in their favor with several laws safeguarding their right, they are seen struggling with discrimination in the process of recruitment and promotion in both government and private agencies. Also, due to illiteracy and ignorance about various government schemes and programmes, they are unable to avail facilities provided for their self-employment and income generation. Moral degradation and lack of awareness plays a major role for their unemployment.

Graph 1.3 - Social group wise Employment percentage

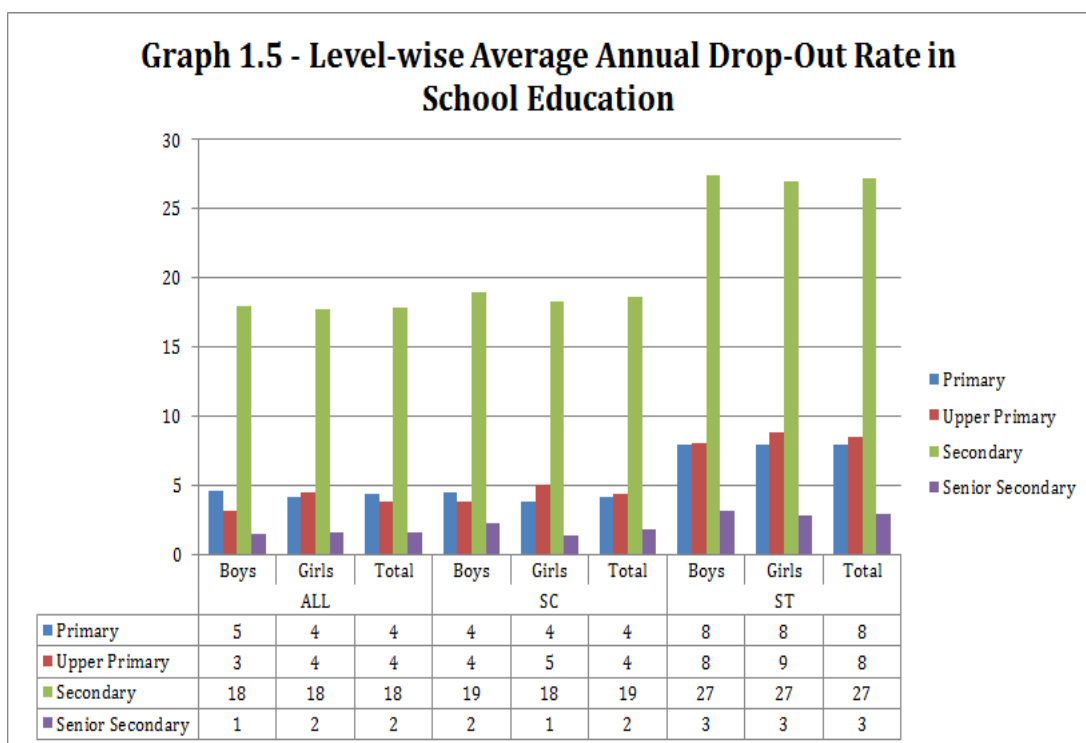


Education greatly contributes to all the dividends of development of a person and the society. In the past, the SCs children were denied access to schools and education that led to mass illiteracy and deviances among the Scheduled Castes in the previous generations which, in turns resulted in lack of zeal and interest for education of their children. Even today, the children from SC families are often the victims of rude and unnatural behavior of the teacher and other students; thereby ensuing large scale drop out among the SC students. Moreover, the lack of conducive environment in their families for studies due to poor standard of living leads to low performance and finally dropping out. The existing educational programmes due to various reasons have failed to meet their actual needs for quality education. For tribals, being a section with peculiar style of living characterized by segregation from mainstream society, traditional dialects, unique accent of language, different culture, different value system etc.; the present formal system of education they are put to has little relevance to their way of living.

Graph 1.4 - Gender Parity Index



Graph 1.5 - Level-wise Average Annual Drop-Out Rate in School Education



Lack of Education is a very strong contributor to the backwardness of the Other Backward Classes in India with high cost of education widening the gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups, thus, the rich became richer enjoying power and position in the society while on the other hand, the poor became poorer being deprived of even the basic needs of life. In the current days, the OBCs as economically backward are not able to afford for the best education for their children. The representation of OBCs in higher and professional education is very low. There are many other factors like lack of awareness, lack of suitable family environment, lack of effective support and guidance, lack of inspiration responsible for the educational backwardness of the Other Backward Classes in India.

Health, defined as the complete physical and mental well-being of an individual, is most important asset for the development of a person. In terms of MMR and IMR, the weaker section has abysmal status of health. Malaria, TB, Typhoid, malnutrition led Anemia, are the most common diseases they suffer, eventually succumbing to premature deaths. These are curable diseases but due to lack of awareness and finance, they are thrown unto death. Their ignorance about the existing health facilities also is a major cause of their high rate of mortality. The poor standard of living often makes them careless about health, with poverty driven diets and temptation to consume alcohol, tobacco etc which are injurious to health. The SCs are mostly engaged in scavenging, sweeping, carrying human and animal carcasses those are known as dirty as dirty occupations. These occupations also make them more vulnerable to health hazards as they are not conscious of cleaning themselves properly after their work.

Shelter is one of the three basic needs for life. The SCs live in very poor housing condition which is neither safe nor conducive for healthy human living. They lack land or money to construct a house for their families. There are instances of destitute SCs spending their nights in public buildings like schools, panchayat buildings etc. in the rural areas and in bus stands, railway platforms and other public places in the cities. The OBC's too do not have proper house to live. Their houses do not have the minimum facilities like urinals, latrines, kitchens, windows or drains in them. In some cases, they live in a single room with their domestic animals like cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep which leads to the infection of many animal borne diseases in them. Practices such as usage of Open Street for their urination and defecation, utensils cleaning invite many of germs and other micro-organisms into their food and body.

Bonded and child labour are also an alarming issues faced by the weaker section. Various studies reveal that incidence of child labour is highest among the lowest caste i.e. scheduled caste due to their poverty and undesirable condition of life. With the majority, around 70% employed in agriculture, some of them work in low-skilled labourintensive sectors such as sari weaving or as domestic helpers, which require neither formal education nor training, while some others in heavy industry such as coal mining. Owing to their accessibility to the money lenders and other exploiters, their presence across the higher caste, their indebtedness, illiteracy, lack of employment opportunity, OBC's are adversely affected with bonded labour with indebtedness also as a major reason of bonded labour. According to the Annual survey of NSSO the incidence of bonded labour is highest among the tribal population. More than 3.5% of the total tribal population is victim of

bonded labour due to large scale land alienation and displacement of tribal people which has in turn impoverished them and made them unable to possess any surplus income or saving.

Constitutional Provision and Safeguards for Weaker Section

While formulating the constitution of India, B. R. Ambedkar, managed to include certain provisions in the Constitution of India for empowering lower castes. He also stressed on the point that rights are nothing unless remedies are provided whereby people can seek to obtain redress when rights are invaded. Within this background, constitutional remedies have been arranged in the Constitution of India. Article 32, declared as the basic structure of constitution by Supreme Court, provides the right to all citizens of the country to approach the Supreme Court, if their fundamental rights and constitutional privileges are violated by any state institution or individual. Article 39 (A) Equal Justice and free legal aid assigns the State a responsibility secure that the operation of the legal system, promote justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities. Constitutional makers provided the different safeguard in the Constitution of India to the weaker classes. Article 14 provides that States shall not deny any person equality before law or the equal protection of laws within the territory of India. While Article 17 abolishes untouchability, article 15 operationalizes the concept of equality in a manner which specifically touches upon the conditions of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes. Article 24 provides that no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any hazardous employment. Article 46 provides that State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of the people and, in particular, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Reservation of seats in Village Panchayats, Zilla Parishads has been made for Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population at respective level in direct election under Article 243(D). Acts such as Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955; Bonded Labour System (Abolition), Act 1976; The Minimum Wages Act, 1948; Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986; had helped in economically safeguarding the weaker section whereas land reforms laws, Debt Relief Legislations and formulation of human rights commission had aided in curbing unequal distribution of Economic Assets. Article 15(4) empowers the State to make special provisions for advancement of any socially and economically backward classes or citizens and for Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. This provision has enabled the State to reserve seats for Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in educational institutions including technical, engineering and medical colleges.

Discussion and Suggestions

The origin of marginalization in Indian context is deeply rooted in the social structure of Indian society where discrimination based on caste, class and gender is largely prevalent from time immemorial. After India's achievement of independence several attempts were made to remove socio-economic imbalances existed between the backward and forward classes and to stamp out the unjust social order through various protective discrimination measures and other promotional measures. There is a need of Social empowerment which is aimed at social change from a hierarchical to a democratic society where the equal rights of all individuals are recognized. An economically backward society lacks dynamic qualities that support and sustain economic growth. This is true with regard to the plight of disadvantaged sections of society who are kept away from the ownership of economic resources. Though society, social groups, NGOs etc can play a major role in economic development, there is no doubt about the key role of the state as the most effective and suitable agency of sustained economic development. It acts as the biggest agency which manages and mobilizes resources including infrastructural and others for promoting and sustaining growth in the economic sphere. However, even the state-sponsored, supported and supervised process of development has made only a slight dent in the dense structure of inequality, exploitation and oppression that have played havoc with the lives of marginalized people for centuries. This situation calls for empowerment of the weaker sections sought within the framework of democratic process, as a remedy for them to get their due share in public economic resources. Since the core of the idea of empowerment itself is its political dimension which highlights the concept of power, it is important to equip the weaker section with political resources and enable them to actively participate in the shaping and sharing of power. As discussed earlier, the weaker section is suffering with lack of access to education in India for generations. For a quite long time Dalits were not allowed to enter to the doorsteps of educational centers and institutions. With different policy in India working for bringing education virtually to the door steps of several disadvantaged sections including Dalits and women, the brighter days are coming. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts is needed in order to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society. Empowerment of the Weak could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This is possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of such depressed groups and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.

Conclusion

Empowerment of the weaker section is the key to inclusive democracy. As per the current perspective, we can easily say that it is indeed very important to have a system where the participation of different communities should be appreciated. However, given the current scenario, we have policies

but the implementation is very poor. Owing to the large scale social rejection and socio-economic deprivation in the past, people from this depressed and marginalized section of the society has been left far behind the process of development. A conducive social environment is highly essential for economic upliftment where as these people were deprived of it since invisible past. What is the need of the time is to work for that. We should not always rely on the government for the work but our duty is to do something what is in our hand. Empowerment in this regard can do a tremendous job. The goal of inclusive growth as envisaged by the government cannot be achieved without the effective participation all sections of society and hence we need to create awareness and empower the weak in order to achieve the goal of an equal society.

References

1. KaradeJagan (2008), *Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing
2. Kar P.K (2006), *Indian Society*, Kalyani Publishers
3. Naval N R (2004), *Legally Combating Atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*, Concept Publishing Company
4. Justice Narayana P.S (2011), *Commentary on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act & Rules*,Gogin Law Agency
5. Rao, C.S. And Francis (1999) *Development of Weaker Sections*, RawatBooks Sellers
6. HusnainN (1997), *Weaker Section the Psychosocial perspective*, Gyan Publishing House
7. *Official website of Ministry of Human Resource and Development*
8. *Census Report, 2011*
9. *DOPT Annual Report 2015-16*