

# An Analysis of Social Exclusion and Educational Deprivation of Mahadalits in Bihar: Challenges and Prospects

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## *ABSTRACT*

This paper seeks to understand the socio-economic marginality of mahadalit children in Indian education system. It also aims to understand how students from the most under-privileged social group i.e. mahadalit, overcome their marginality in accessing and obtaining education. Achieving access and equity in education has been the foremost priority of policy-makers and the planners. It is in this light, a deep and nuanced understanding of their socio-economic position and strategies for overcoming marginalities among mahadalits by focusing on educational and equalizing programs have been undertaken. Moreover, the social stigma faced while pursuing education and finding space within their social network, is dealt with in this article.

**Keywords: Mahadalits, marginality, social exclusion, inclusion, ethnicity, equity**

## **Introduction:**

“Mahadalits”, a term that was coined in 2007 by Government of Bihar to denote a conglomerate of 22 scheduled castes, in the state under the category of Mahadalit, who constitute to be the most disadvantaged and marginalized section of society.<sup>1</sup> They are socially, economically and politically excluded groups of the mainstream development discourse and they have been struggling to realize their participation in the larger society. At one hand, the growing generation-children and youth are largely exposed to discriminatory world without being equipped with how to effectively respond to these practices. On the other hand, there is limited or no opportunities in certain cases, which in turn makes difficult for non-excluded children and youth to engage with the context and concerns of the excluded people.

Scheduled Castes constitute nearly 16 percent of Bihar’s population of 104 million.<sup>2</sup> A government commission has identified 22 of the 23 scheduled castes as Mahadalits. In 2007, Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission was set up and in 2008; it undertook the task of implementing the programmes for Mahadalit as

classified under the category, of which 31% of Bihar Scheduled Castes population in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Education for mahadalits forms a critical component for promoting dignity, development and socio-economic mobility in increasing rate of children enrolment in schools. This achievement has emerged through a long struggle in the past. The 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2007-12) and 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2012-17) on inclusive and sustainable growth rightly recognize that “better levels of health and education are, in fact, pre-conditions for sustained long term growth” and that “expansion, inclusion and excellence in higher education” is the path to human resource development.<sup>4</sup> It is in this light, government has enacted certain provisions to provide a Right-based social justice to marginalized and deprived section of society.

Mahadalits (the most downtrodden caste), like many other scheduled castes, have remained poor, landless, marginalized and excluded, with no possibility of upward mobility by the caste group. Accordingly, the central as well as the state government have always pursued affirmative action,

implemented various programmes and introduced policies of positive discrimination to uplift them. However, despite all efforts by the government, their overall condition has hardly improved. The dimensions of caste, religion, ethnicity, class, disability, gender status and much other complex intersectionality hinder their access and benefits. These gaps need to be consciously included and addressed through legislations, policies and provisions.

According to Article 45 of the Indian Constitution “the state shall endeavor to provide for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years”. Similarly, Article 46 of the Indian Constitution declares that “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.”<sup>5</sup> However, for children belonging to this section, survival and meeting basic amenities itself remains a challenge, given the high level of child malnutrition, infant child mortality and maternal mortality. Moreover, in such situation they depend upon the state provision in education where the quality, inclusion and equity measures are poorly envisaged and implemented.

### **Challenges faced by mahadalit children:**

#### **Economic barriers**

Provided their economic background, mahadalits are mainly engaged in manual scavenging, construction sites and as agricultural laborers. Meeting daily ends are challenging for them, as they are employed on daily wages. The children from this community are also forced to take up works in agricultural fields, construction areas, roadside dhabas or on streets, that compel them to drop out from schools.<sup>6</sup> Children at very young age being lured by false promises of employment in urban cities, by the agents, fall prey to the human trafficking and their life worsens. Mostly, this is found in the case of girl child, where the recruiting agency promises them job of domestic helper in metropolitan cities, the desperate need for money and employment drags them into the circle of prostitution and bonded labor. Article 21-A of the Indian Constitution provides for free and compulsory education to all children in 6 to 14 years

age group. Every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in formal school which satisfies the norms and standards as mentioned in the Act. This act also prohibited child labor in any form.

#### **Social barriers**

Even at household, due to gender based discrimination, the girls of Mahadalit community, are forced to undertake domestic chores and take care of their siblings when parents are away. Prevalence of traditional mindset of investing money in educating girl also aggravates the situation. Girls from this community get married at early age even before completing the 18 years.

It is evident from the census of India 2011, the Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6% of Bihar’s population. 93.3% of the SCs population resides in rural areas.<sup>8</sup> The overall sex ratio of SCs population in Bihar is 923 females per 1000 males, which is marginally higher than the sex ratio of Bihar (919 females per 1000 males). However, literacy rates among the Schedules castes are dismally low. In the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate in Bihar was 63.3% against all India 74%. The literacy rate among Scheduled Castes was 48.6% and that of Scheduled Tribe was 51.1%. Enrolment from Grade 1 to 12 in 2020-21 in Bihar was 266,35,416 (Boys and Girls) under which 50.94% boys enrolled, 49.06% girls were enrolled. At primary level enrollment was 51.54% and upper primary was 26.39%, 13.22% and 7.03% students were enrolled at secondary and higher education respectively.<sup>9</sup> The enrollment of Scheduled Castes was 19.41% of total enrollment and 2.57% of Scheduled Tribes students, which reflects decline in upper primary and at higher levels of education. The high dropout pushes them into despair and helplessness, thus retaining them within poverty cycle.

#### **Institutional barriers:**

Further, the presence of caste discrimination and fear of social stigma also pulls them back from attending schools. Several instances of this practice have been narrated by the victims, wherein, separate class arrangements for scheduled castes students and upper castes students’ were found to be undertaken, bullying, humiliation and violence from peer groups, preventing access to drinking water and sanitation, problems in

accessing mid day meals within school premises, etc, that took heavy toll on the aspirations of mahadalit children.<sup>10</sup> While various policies speak of elimination of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, still its presence and practice is a sad reality.

### Prospects:

The governments at the Union and States must adequately address social exclusion and ensure dignity and provide opportunities to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them grow equitably and ensure their right to development. In order to attain these rights based framework has been evolved such as National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) and UN Convention on the Rights of Child, the NCF lays emphasis on the Preamble of the Constitution as the objectives for education: “Justice-social, economic and political; Liberty- of thought, expression, belief, and worship; Equality- of status and of opportunity and promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation.”<sup>11</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) is the first legally binding international law to incorporate wide range of human rights-civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. The CRC envisages the basic human rights that children globally have: the right to survival, to develop to the fullest, protection against abuse and exploitation and participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the convention are non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the right to life; survival and development and respect for the views of the child. By agreeing to abide by the obligations of the convention, India has committed to protect and ensure children’s rights. It is in this light, the Government of India passed its landmark judgment of “Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act”, 2009 through 86<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002.<sup>12</sup> The provisions mentioned under the Act ensures that economic barriers of the children does not hinder them from getting admitted in School, it also prohibits discrimination in school education, also provides for child mapping at habitation level to track attendance and ensuring completion of elementary education. Further, provision of 25% reservation is yet another step towards promoting equity and social inclusion.

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights act as independent body to oversee and redress institutional grievances in child protection. All the legal frameworks developed along with other human rights mechanisms were evolved to solve the issues of social inclusion and equity in education.

One such initiative was in evolved by International Organization was “play for peace” which utilizes the use of games in promoting peace in conflict situations. Its adoption in India was led by Mr. Agyatmitra and Ms. Swati bhatt, which is named as “Khel se Mel” and is undertaken across regions of Gujarat, Orissa, Andaman, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra.<sup>13</sup> It provided a novel way to engage with children in schools through energetic games and activities that promoted the values of non-discrimination, diversity, empathy, tolerance and cooperation. Participation of mahadalit children in these activities will not only boost their self-confidence but will also help them in building better self-images, aspirations and self-esteem, thereby diluting the barriers of caste-class-gender biases and inhibitions.

As per the UN Convention, children have the right to be consulted and involved in all matters relating to their education. UNICEF, in this respect introduced a concept of Bal Sansad or Children’s Parliament in school as a means of incorporating children’s participation and introducing them to democratic ways of functioning.<sup>14</sup> This would also keep a check on child rights violation under Right to Education Act. Though this concept remained bleak and children from socially excluded group failed to participate in these bodies due to lack of orientation on the part of school authorities.

To overcome the challenges they experience in their day to day lives, the community requires a role model with whom they can relate and can be motivated in life irrespective of hurdles faced. In this case, Baba Saheb Ambedkar is an important role model for children from marginalized communities as they can connect their lives with him, who despite odds present in the society emerged as a great leader . They felt extremely proud that Dr.B.R.Ambedkar-

a member from their own community wrote Indian Constitution and was in favor of casteless society, where everyone would be treated equal irrespective of their caste and gender. They emulate his stories in their life to keep themselves motivated. It is in this direction they have formed Ambedkar Students Forum (ASF), a platform for scheduled castes' students to enhance their leadership and find space within their own social network.<sup>15</sup> This forum has played a major role in raising awareness about educating children and government provisions and entitlement, ensuring students to not drop-out, monitoring schools under RTE, Act and most importantly promoting self development.

At state level in Bihar, the government has introduced inclusive and equity focused initiatives for universalisation of education upto secondary level. Mukhya Mantri Balika Bicycle Yojana, Mukhya Mantri Poshak Yojana, Pre- matric Scholarship and Post-matric scholarships, Mid day meal, etc to retain attendance in schools. Under newly launched Samagra Shiksha Scheme, effective from 2018-19, elementary education was consolidated holistically without any segmentation from class 1 to 12.<sup>16</sup> This was adopted with broader goal of improving school effectiveness in terms of equal opportunities for schooling and equitable learning outcomes.

### Conclusion:

An equitable and socially inclusive education process not only needs to focus on making education accessible to all, rather it goes beyond enrollment and seeks to find out the reasons of dropout and retentions among students from socially disadvantaged community. To address this issue, apart from right based legal frameworks and policies undertaken by the state government, community-led organizations can play a vital role at grassroots level in ending discrimination and non-participation. Ambedkar Student Forum (ASF) needs to be strengthened in Bihar, as it provides a forum to socially backward community to- Educate, Agitate and Organize for their rights. Reaffirming community confidence in education and generating awareness among the community of the benefits of education can provide stimulus in achieving the growth in education.

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