

Original Research Article

Dalits and Tribals in India and Their Empowerment

J. Cyril Kanmony

In history, it is reported that Dalits and Tribals in India were treated worse than animals and subjected to all extreme forms of humiliation and degradation. Even now, in the era of human rights, their conditions have not changed much. They are not free from atrocities. Though violations meted against them are less in urban areas one can see all types of violation in rural areas. They are treated as outcastes or exterior castes. They are politically powerless, socially untouchable, culturally inferior, ritually unclean, educationally illiterate and economically backward. Most of them, who are subjected to human right violations, are poor; less educated and have less income generating sources. They can be empowered only if and when they are educated and their socio-economic conditions improve. Hence it is the right time to take appropriate steps to empower them. Then only India can have an inclusive growth.

Keywords: Human Rights, Avarnas, Savarnas, Caste, Untouchable, lynched.

Author's Affiliation

PG & Research Centre, Department of Economics, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil, India.
Email: jcyril@dataone.in

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INTRODUCTION

Violations against a particular race of people, the poor and the marginalized are common throughout the world. For example in the United States of America, violence against the black people is widespread. But the caste-based violations are unique in India. Dalits (Schedule Caste) and Tribals (Schedule Tribes) in India were treated worse than animals and were subjected to all extreme forms of humiliation and degradation for generations. Even in the 21st century, in the era of human rights, the conditions of Dalits and Tribals have not been changed much (Jacob 2002). Though India is the largest democratic country, there is no equality. The Indian Constitution provides equal status to all, but in real terms, all are not equal. India is a country where people are lynched even for what they eat (Pragati 2020). Prior to Independence, the society particularly in south India stood fragmented into many caste- or religion-based subdivisions (Thuston 1907; Aiya Nagam, 1989). On the basis of religion, they were divided into Hindus and non-Hindus. The Hindus were further subdivided into the Savarnas, called the high caste Hindus or the Caste Hindus and the Avarnas, called the low caste Hindus or the non-Caste Hindus (Menon 1985). The caste system that existed bestowed many privileges on the upper castes. But at the same time the system also sanctioned many repressive measures on the low castes. Religiously, the Rig Veda emphasised on the equality among the four groups of human beings, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. In the course of time, this Varna system degenerated into caste and even among these four groups, the Shudras were highly discriminated. The people who fall outside this Varna system are called the Avarnas

or Varna Sankaras. They are treated as outcastes or exterior castes and are called the Harijans (Gandhi used this term in 1932 to regard them as 'children of God' and it was used in three languages, English, Hindi and Gujarati), Chandalas (the term is used to refer to a mean or low person, who deals with the disposal of corpses and the term is in practice in the Bengal Residency), Panchamas (used to denote the 5th Varna, excluded from the four fold Varna system), Antyaj (specifically in practice in Maharashtra and has the meaning 'last-born') and Avarnas (in practice in the formerly Princely State of Travancore) (Kanmony 2010a; Online). They lost their identity, dignity and self-respect due to the suppression made by the upper caste people over the past 3000 years (Kanmony 2010b). All these mean that Dalits and Tribals in India are in an inhuman condition.

Dalits' Rights in a Human Rights Perspective

All human beings are born free and have all rights to enjoy a dignified life. Everyone should be treated equally irrespective of caste, religion, age, area, sex, education, income and occupation. But globally in some countries including India, there is widespread discrimination. Hence to protect human rights a number of Covenants, Conventions and Declarations have been adopted both at the global level and at the national level. The most important at the global level is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations through resolution 217 A (III) on the 10th of December 1948 and at the national level the Indian Constitution promulgated on the 26th of January 1950. The UDHR provides equal rights to all, irrespective of caste, religion and race. Of the 30 articles of UDHR many of them (1-7, 10, 13, 16, 17, 19, 23 & 26) are very specific against caste-based violations (Dev et al., 1996). The Preamble to the Constitution and parts of Part III on Fundamental Rights and Part IV on Directive Principles constitute the core of the Indian Constitution. The Indian Constitution ensures equality before law (Article 14), prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15), equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 18) and abolition of untouchability (Article 17). All these reflect the basic principles of the UDHR (Thavamony and Kanmony, 2007).

In India, in spite of these regulations and laws and constitutional provisions, there are numerous incidences of caste-based discrimination against the low caste people, particularly the Dalits and the Tribals. They are often neglected, humiliated and abused. They do not have access to healthcare services, institutions of higher education, temples and puja-pandals. They are discriminated against even in employment. They live in segregated hamlets, where even basic facilities such as drinking water are not available. Hence they suffer from many diseases. They are denied jobs other than scavenging, sweeping, tanning and other sanitary

works. They have less income generating sources. Their income is also lower than the high caste people. Their enrolments in schools and higher educational institutions are very low. They are discriminated in educational institutions also. They are regarded as being too polluted to touch, to sit together, and to enter all common places. But their women and girls are eve-teased, sexually assaulted, molested, raped and sometimes gang raped. They are not in the path of development along with the high caste people. They are far behind high caste people in all walks of life. The widespread violations existing in India impinge their civil, political, religious, socio-economic and cultural rights and their rights to freedom of choice to develop as individuals. Hence, they are politically powerless, socially untouchable, culturally inferior, ritually unclean, educationally illiterate and economically backward. It is, thus, the bounden duty of researchers, to expose the real socio-economic conditions of them to the whole world and force both the Central and State governments to take appropriate steps to empower them. This article tries to focus on aspects such as their occupations, income, income-generating sources and educational attainment and suggestions for their empowerment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is explorative in nature. It tries to explore both the past and the present state of affairs of the Dalits and the Tribals, and also suggest a number of steps to empower them. This article makes use of both primary and secondary data. Secondary data have been collected from reports, books and newspapers. In the discussion part, the secondary information is used to substantiate the statement that there are caste-based violations in various parts of the Indian peninsula. Primary data have been made use of to support the argument that there is widespread caste-based violence even in a highly literate district like Kanniyakumari. Primary data have been collected from a sample survey conducted in Kanniyakumari district. The district is the southernmost district in the Indian sub-continent. It is one of the tiny districts, but the most literate district in Tamil Nadu. The district came into existence as a part of Tamil Nadu only on the first of November 1956, i.e., after the constitution of the State Reorganization Commission. Before that it was a part of the erstwhile Princely State of Travancore. The district is divided into six taluks, namely: Agasteewaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam, Killiyur, Thiruvattar and Vilavancode and nine Panchayat Unions, namely: Agasteeswaram, Thovalai, Rajakkamangalam, Kurunthancode, Thuckalay, Thiruvattar, Killiyoor, Melpuram and Munchirai. Figure 1 shows the map of the district.

Historically the district is a strongly caste-based one. For instance, in the District, Nadars, a group of Backward Caste (BC) people, had kept a distance of 36 feet from Brahmins

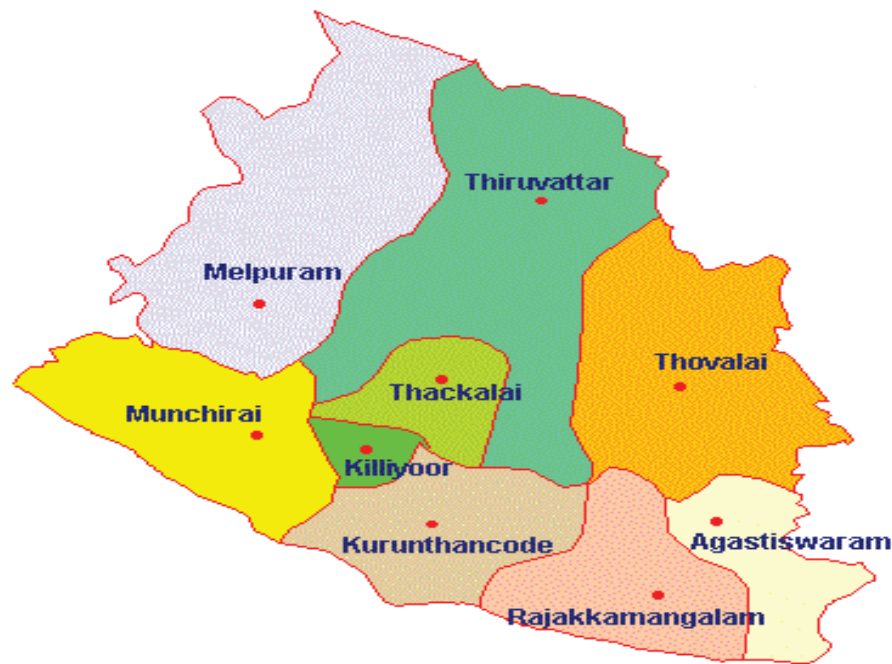


Figure 1. The map of the Kanniyakumari District.

and 12 feet from Nairs (both are high caste groups of people). But the low caste people, Shudras, had kept a distance of 96 feet from Brahmins and 60 feet from Nairs (Mateer 1991). The district saw a number of revolts and movements like 'upper cloth revolt', in Tamil 'Tholcheelai Poraatam'. Even then, there were incidents of caste-based violations. Hence the investigator purposively selected this district for his study. The size of the sample is just 100. Out of 502 Dalits/Tribal victims identified by an NGO dealing with human rights, 100 sampling units were selected by applying random sampling procedure for this study. Only very simple statistical tools such as percentages have been used to analyse the collected data. Correlation coefficient is also calculated for certain variables. Tables, pie-charts and map are used to present important information, which are very useful for easy and better understanding of this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Though there are human rights violations in both the rural and urban areas, it is much more in rural areas than in urban areas. A survey report (Darapuri, 2012) says that in 48.4 per cent of villages, Dalits are not allowed to fetch water from common water sources such as wells, ponds and lakes. In shops too, they have to keep a distance. It is observed in 38.5 per cent of villages that have been surveyed. Even in well developed states like Tamil Nadu, there is a two-cup system. They are not allowed to occupy seats in teashops. In 70 per cent of villages, they are not allowed to enter the

houses of non-Dalits and to eat with non-Dalits in functions. Public roads are also denied for wedding processions of Dalits in 47 per cent of villages. Temple entry is forbidden to Dalits in 64 per cent of villages. It is as high as 94 per cent in Karnataka. Healthcare services are also not available to Dalits on par with non-Dalits. Health workers are not ready to visit areas of Dalits. It is reported that 33 per cent of public workers refused to visit houses of Dalits. In 30.8 per cent of Self Help Groups and Cooperatives and 29.6 per cent of Panchayat Offices, separate seats in floor are assigned to Dalits. In certain cases the high caste children are not allowed to take mid-day meals prepared by Dalit cooks. In 14.4 per cent of the villages, Dalits are barred to sell their produce in the local market. In 25 per cent of the villages surveyed, Dalits are paid lower wage than the non-Dalits.

The Dalits do long hours of low grade works and get their wage delayed with physical and verbal abuse, though reservation is in existence for nearly 70 years. Their representation in high positions such as Chief Justices, Justices, managerial executives and high administrative officers is very low against a high representation in low-graded posts like class 'D' jobs. Many seats meant for Dalits in educational institutions for carrying out their studies as well as in various departments for providing jobs are still vacant (Roy, 2005). The reasons are: firstly they are not allowed to assume high offices and secondly they are also hesitant to occupy their positions. Dalits and Tribals themselves suffer from an inferiority complex. They think, they are weak, vulnerable and destined only to be subservient to others. It is due to the age

old caste-oriented discrimination and suppression. Most of them are coolies/labourers and so their income is very low. They have less income generating sources. Their enrolments in institutions of higher education are very low in comparison with the high caste people and their educational attainment is also low.

In India, the Dalits/Tribals are in a large percentage of the workforce in low-paying occupations while they are under-represented in high-paying occupations. The representation index, which refers to the share of a particular caste in an occupation compared to the share of that caste in the entire workforce, shows that in elementary occupations, it is as high as 1.5 for SC and 1.3 for ST while it is only 0.5 for FC people. On the other hand, in the posts of senior officials and managers, their representation shows an opposite trend, 0.4 for SCs, 0.3 for STs and 1.5 for FCs. As far as technical and associate professionals, the respective rates are: 0.6, 0.6 and 1.5. These rates for professional groups are: only 0.4 for SCs and 0.4 for STs, while for higher caste people it is almost 2, the maximum (in Data Point, The Hindu, 2018).

Survey data also support this view. As the Dalits/Tribals are not/less educated, they have less chances of occupying a high post. Among the 100 respondents, no one is in an officer post in the government. Among the respondents only six are employed and of the employed only three are government employees and all the three are class III employees. The remaining victims (85) earn their living by working as agriculture labourers/coolies. These details are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Occupation of the Informants.

Occupation	Persons Affected
Housewife	1
Farmers/ Coolies	85
Studying	1
Business	7
Employed (private)	3
Employed (government)	3
Total	100

Source: Primary Data

Here the course of action for their empowerment is reservation not only in higher post and but also in promotion. Though there are reservation policies, they are not strictly implemented. Hence the need of the hour is that they should strictly be implemented in all categories of jobs. Then only they can have a better future.

Lack of income generating assets and heavy dependence on the high caste landlords for wage employment are the major reasons for caste-based rights violations. Over the

generation, the Dalits have been landless and have fewer resources and so they depend on others for their livelihood. Almost all cultivable and irrigated lands are owned by the upper caste people. The lands of Dalits are mostly barren, uncultivable or rain-fed. Even the lands gifted by the government are taken away by the upper caste people or the most powerful backward caste people. In 2017 alone, the number of cases registered relating to compulsory occupation of their lands is 99 (GOI NCRB, 2017). According to the Land-Livestock Holdings Survey 2013 (Kumar, 2019), in India, about 60 per cent of households have no farm land. Even for the land that they tilled they have no ownership right as the State governments have failed to regularise their ownership. The persons in power also do not like to do justice as they belong to either forward caste or backward caste. To present it in plain words, Dalits and Tribals lack all required resources, particularly land, which is very necessary for their livelihood.

Survey data presented in the Table 2 shows that only seven per cent of the respondents have a land area of more than one acre and 10 surveyed households have a land area of less than one acre of agricultural land. The remaining 83 families have no extra land for agricultural purposes other than their house sites. It is also presented Figures 2 and 3.

Income is considered as one of the indicators of economic status and the standard of living of the people. In general, rich people are highly respected by the society and low income people are subjected to all types of torture and harassment. It is true in the case of Dalits and Tribals. Table 3 shows the monthly household income of surveyed Dalits, who are affected by human rights violations.

The data presented in Table 3 further gives an insight into the monthly income of the 100 Dalit/Tribal victims surveyed. The monthly household income of the respondents, except 21 persons, is less than 6000/- rupees (INR). It means that 79 per cent of the respondents belong to a very poor economic category.

The average monthly household income of the sample respondents is calculated by simply dividing the total household income by the average number of households. Monthly income per person is calculated by dividing the average income by the average size of the family. The per-capita per day income is calculated by dividing the per head monthly income by 30. The monthly household income of the Dalits is 3721 INR and the daily income per head is 31 INR. All these details are presented in Table 4.

This poor economic situation can be changed only by providing free land and free house sites to them. Free land of enough area can give enough employment and income to them and there will be no dependence on the high caste landlords. The free land scheme introduced by the previous Tamil Nadu government and the present government's free goat and cow scheme have their own positive impact in the course of time. However some more solid steps are the need

Table 2. Important Assets Owned by the Surveyed Households.

House	Households	Agricultural Land	Households
Thatched	13 (0)	No land	83
Tiled	56 (5)	Less than 1 acre	10
Terraced	31 (4)	More than 1 acre	7

Source: Primary Data, Figures in parentheses denote the number of families in rented house.

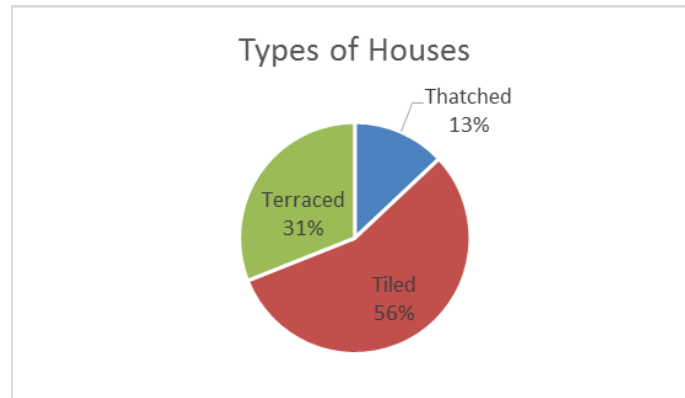


Figure 2. Pie Chart showing the Nature Houses.

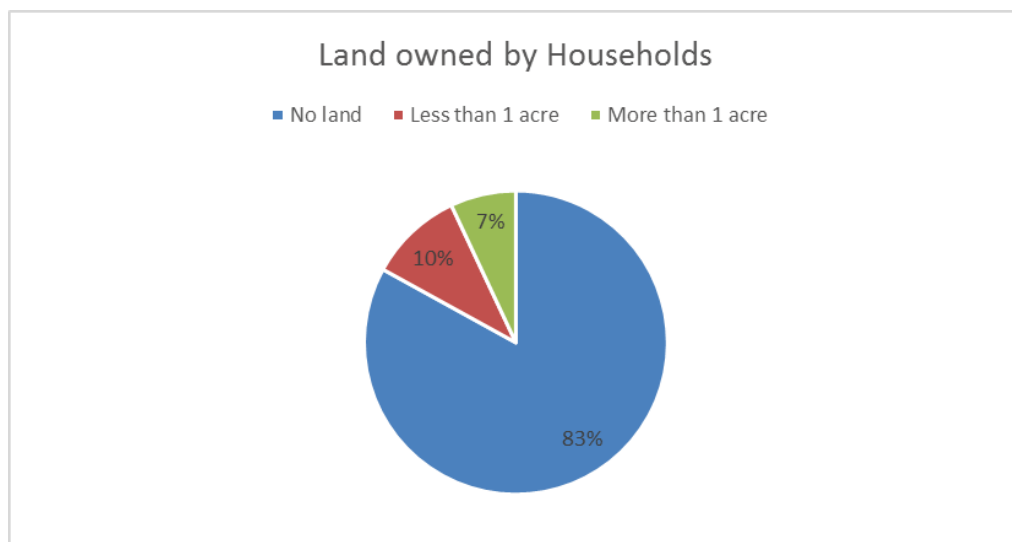


Figure 3. Pie Chart showing Land Owned by the Surveyed Households.

of the hour.

The data collected by the author regarding educational attainment indicate that the Dalits are mostly illiterates. Table 5 gives details about the level of education attained by the respondents. It is very clear from the Table 5 that among the 100 respondents belonging to the Dalit/Tribal community, 13

are illiterates, 38 have completed only primary education and 31 have completed secondary education. The number of persons who have completed higher secondary level of schooling is five. In total, there are nine graduates or persons who have completed technical courses. There are only four post-graduates or professionals. It means that as educational

Table 3. Monthly Household Income of the Surveyed Dalit Victims.

Monthly Income (in INR.)	Persons Affected
500 – 1000	10
1000 – 2000	13
2000 – 3000	18
3000 – 4000	15
4000 – 5000	13
5000 – 6000	10
6000 – 7000	7
7000 – 8000	7
8000 – 9000	4
9000 – 10000	3
Total	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 4. Average Income of the Victims of Human Rights Violations.

Category	Income (in INR)
Households (Monthly)	3721
Per Head (Monthly)	955
Per Head (Daily)	31

Source: Primary Data

Table 5. Educational Status of the Respondents.

Level of Education	Persons Affected
Illiterate	13
Primary	38
Secondary	31
Higher Secondary	5
Graduate & Technical	9
Post Graduate & Professional	4
Total	100

Source: Primary Data

qualification increases, the number of persons afflicted to violence decreases. Figure 4 shows the education-wise subdivision of victims.

From the correlation values calculated, it is easy to understand that there is significant negative relationship between occupation and violence (-1.0), income and violations (-0.85) and education and violence (-0.90). It means that human rights violations are more among low paid

employees/wage earners and in economically backward, illiterate or less educated families.

The reason for this state of affair is that the Dalits have less chances of pursuing higher education or professional courses or taking up prestigious jobs. Table 6 shows the enrolment of Dalits and Tribals in various levels of education. Dalits and Tribals enrolled in schools and higher educational institutions are fewer in comparison with the 'all' category.

However it is noted that their strength in the total population is less and so their numbers are less. One can exactly know the real position only if it is represented in percentage and this is given in Table 7. From the table it is clear that enrolment of Dalits and Tribals in schools is good. However, in institutions of higher education, it is much lower than the 'all' category. It is only 19.1 per cent for Dalits and 13.7 per cent for Tribals against a rate of 24.3 per cent for the group 'all'. It is only 13.9 per cent if only post-graduate courses are taken for analysis (GOI, 2016).

It is still worst in engineering and other professional colleges. For example in Tamil Nadu, 44 per cent of the engineering seats assigned for SC students were vacant in 2012 against only 37 per cent in 2009 (Ramakrishnan, 2012). At present almost all seats in engineering colleges meant for them are vacant.

The dropout rate of Dalit students in all categories is much higher than the dropout rates of the general population. Details are illustrated in Table 8.

From Table 8 it is clear that the dropout rate is as much as 18.66 per cent for secondary category for Dalits and 27.20 for Tribals against only 17.86 per cent for the group 'all'. In senior secondary level, it is only 1.54 per cent for the general population but it is 1.81 for Dalits and 2.94 for Tribals (GOI, 2015).

The details regarding both literacy and adult literacy rates of various groups (GOI, 2015) are depicted in Table 9. It is very clear that while for the general category the literacy rate is 73 per cent, for the Dalit group it is only 66.1 per cent and for Tribals it is as low as 59 per cent. The adult literacy is 60.4 per cent for Dalits and 51.9 per cent for Tribals against 69.3 per cent for the general population.

M J Phule, the father of the modern oppressed India, said that the Shudrans perished mainly due to illiteracy and the only feasible solution is imparting of education to all Dalits and Tribals. Education is vital for the smooth and non-violent transition of the Dalits/Tribals from the category of depressed class into the class of the prosperous and empowered (Sharma, 2004). Dalits generally live in segregated areas. Hence, there is no chance for mingling with the upper-caste and the other backward caste people. If they have a chance of living with other people without any segregation, then there is good chance for elimination of caste-based violence. It is proved to a certain extent in Tamil Nadu by the 'Samathuvapuram Scheme' (hamlet of equal status) introduced by the former Chief Minister Karunanidhi, M. The

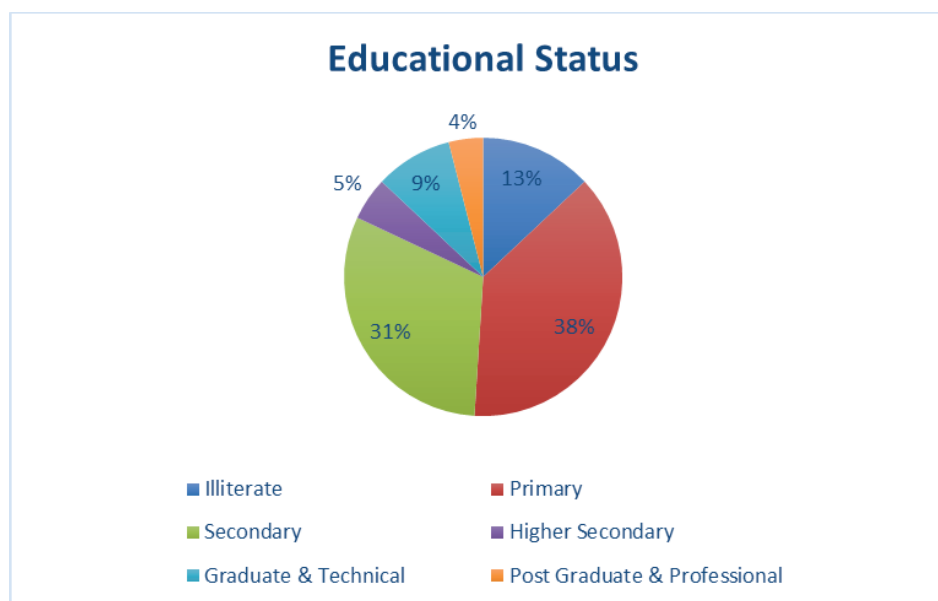


Figure 4. Pie chart showing Educational Status of the Respondents.

Table 6. Enrolment of Students in Educational Institutions in India in 2014-'15 (in '000).

Category	All	Dalits	Tribals
School (I – XII) Education	259,468	50,426	25,454
Higher Education	34,211	4,607	1,641

Source: GOI, All India Survey of Higher Education 2015-'16.

Table 7. Gross Enrolment Ratio at various Levels of Education in 2014-'15.

Category	All	Dalits	Tribals
Primary	100.1	111.9	109.4
Upper Primary	91.2	101.0	94.1
Secondary	78.5	82.7	72.2
Senior Secondary	54.2	54.3	38.8
Higher Education	24.3	19.1	13.7

Source: GOI, All India Survey of Higher Education, 2015-'16.

Table 8. Dropout Rate in 2013-'14 (in %).

Category	All	Dalits	Tribals
Primary	4.34	4.14	7.98
Upper Primary	3.77	4.38	8.43
Secondary	17.86	18.66	27.20
Senior Secondary	1.54	1.81	2.94

Source: GOI, MHRD, Education Statistics at a Glance, 2014-'15

Table 9. Literacy and Adult Literacy Rates of Various Groups in 2011 (in %).

Social Groups	Literacy	Adult Literacy
All	73.0	69.3
Dalits	66.1	60.4
Tribals	59.0	51.9

Source: GOI, MHRD, Education Statistics at a Glance, 2014-'15

primary data collected also proved that if they are united, economically uplifted and educationally improved there will be less number of right violations against them. It is very limited in large families while widespread among the members of small families. There is negative relationship between family size and caste-based violations. There is also significant negative correlation between educational attainment of family members and right violations. High graded jobs also reduce caste-based violence. It is also proved that among the rich persons belonging to Dalit and Tribal communities, violence is less.

Further, it is also reported by agencies such as Human Right Watch, Madurai that people in authority particularly the police, fail to take action against violators and have connivance with the high caste people and unleash various types of violence on the Dalits and the Tribals. Many violators are acquitted due to lack of evidence or connivance of authorities including the police. For example, the murderers of the Kilvenmani massacre (Tamil Nadu, 1968, 44 Dalits were killed), Tsundururu massacre (Andhra Pradesh, 1991, 8 Dalits were murdered), Bathani Tola massacre (Bihar, 1996, 21 Dalits were killed), Laxmanpur Bathe massacre (Bihar, 1997, 58 Dalits were killed) and Shankarbiga massacre (Bihar 1999, 23 Dalits killed) were acquitted without having strong witnesses; i.e., freed on the ground of doubt. The list goes on if a systematic investigation is made (Sampath, 2018). Hence, police personnel and officers of judiciary must understand their role in protecting the low caste and marginalised people, who are also contributing to the development of the society. They are excluded from the benefits of development. The upper caste people are of the view that they have enough rights to suppress and oppress the Dalits and the Tribals. This mind-set should be changed and they must be given education in such a way that they should be treated as brothers and sisters. Very often, during small caste-based riots, politicians and media add fuel to the fire. They neither try to remove the misconceptions or to calm down excitement and anger or to promote goodwill and understanding, nor try to give assistance to the affected and solutions to the existing problems. This attitude must be changed and every step must be taken in the positive direction.

Further, Dalits/Tribals can be empowered when they are united politically, religiously or socially. If there is unity among

all Dalits and other depressed castes, then they will get good chances for their empowerment. Due political representation both in assemblies and parliament may pave the way for political empowerment. Though Dalit movements started earlier, there has been no coordination. They are divided and disintegrated. Hence, the next course of action is to bring all the low caste people under one banner. It could be done by an able, objective oriented and relentless leader like Ambedkar.

CONCLUSION

Dalits/Tribals are economically poor. Their enrolment in schools and colleges is low. The dropout rate among them is higher than that of the other caste people. They are less qualified than the upper caste people. Most of them are illiterates and do menial jobs like coolies and scavengers. They have only limited income generating sources. Their income is very much lower than that of both the Backward and the Forward Caste people. They depend on high caste people for their livelihood. Human rights violations among them are common. People in authority are united in suppressing them. But these people are divided and disintegrated. However there are so many ways to empower them. If they are strictly implemented, certainly Dalits and Tribals will be empowered and moved along others in the path of development.

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