

## The plight of Dalits and the news media



*The Hindu* S. Viswanathan, Readers' Editor, *The Hindu*

The new chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), P.J. Punia, has begun his tenure by making a spirited appeal to the Central government to provide job reservation for Dalits in the private sector. He did not agree that reservation in private sector was a “misnomer.” He argued that the “private sector depends on the government, nationalised banks and state-owned financial institutions for its survival and thus cannot insulate itself from reservation.” Besides, he contended during a recent meeting with journalists in Hyderabad that the private sector also had a “social responsibility” to uplift the weaker sections of the people.

The next item on the NCSC chief's agenda is to streamline the implementation of the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan (earlier known as the “Special Component Plan for Scheduled Castes”) in respect of budget allocations and put an end to the diversion of funds allotted to the plan. The Commission has prioritised its tasks: ensuring reservation for Dalits in the private sector and maximising the benefits of sub plans to Dalits.

### Major concern

It is not surprising that in a country in which a substantial section of the people, accounting for one-fifth of the population and segregated for centuries, remain poor, ill-treated, humiliated, and discriminated against, state intervention is the only antidote even after six decades of democratic governance under a republican Constitution. A major concern for the state is how to address the alarmingly rising unemployment among this section of society.

The Constitution provided for reservation in education and government employment for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their share in the population. This provision was made as part of the social strategy of affirmative action (or positive discrimination) to offset extreme historical discrimination and social oppression. If reservation, despite its existence for over 60 years, has failed to improve the lot of Dalits, the fault is to be seen not in the reservation system, but in the tardy way it has been implemented by the state. Disturbingly, there has been no concerted effort to take quality education to this section of the people.

The state's failure in this respect along with a flawed reservation system restricted to the entry point only helped 'caste-Hindu' bureaucrats to fill most of the higher posts on the ground that “qualified, eligible and fit” persons were not available among the Dalit claimants. Yet, if the establishment claims that Dalits have been appointed in government service in greater proportion than their share in population, it is because vacancies at the lowest levels are filled with Dalits, because, perhaps, no one else might be willing to offer himself for such jobs. It is surely a scandal that despite developments in technology, and in violation of a Supreme Court order, the central and State governments have failed to bring to an end the practice of manual scavenging and to rehabilitate those engaged in it in decent alternative employment.

While reservation has benefitted Dalits in general, it has not done much to elevate the majority of them to any higher position in society, mostly because of the state's failure on other fronts such as education and public health. And it must be remembered that a considerable number of these people remain outside this safety net. Over 70 per cent of Dalits live in villages and are dependant on agricultural activities.

Government policies have put severe pressure on employment in scores of public sector undertakings. Disinvestment, dismantling of public sector units and steadily falling state investment in employment-generating industries are posing serious challenges to the system developed after Independence. The policy trend of stopping or delaying recruitments has made matters worse. The policies of the governments welcoming foreign corporate bodies, very often on the investors' terms, have also contributed to the diminishing of job opportunities.

### Time for another initiative

It is in this context the NCSC Chairman's decision to press for extending reservation for Dalits to the private sector needs to be viewed. A few years ago, when a demand to that effect was raised, there was a positive response from at least some industrialists, but the global economic slowdown put an end to that. Now that the position has improved in many industrial and service sectors, it is time for another initiative by the government. It needs to remind private entrepreneurs, domestic and foreign, that they have a historic responsibility to help the state implement its social commitments. The question raised by the NCSC chairman is relevant: “When the deprived sections are taken care of, even in developed countries like the United States, why can't we have the same provisions here?”

The second item on the agenda of the NCSC is to get the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan, which provides for each Ministry to allot special funds from its annual budget allocation for the benefit of Dalits, in proportion to their share in the population. The scheme, introduced in the early 1980s, has not been properly implemented for three decades. The Ministries are often charged with diverting funds under this head to other purposes.

The news media, which have recently been giving serious coverage to major Dalit problems and related issues in a complex situation, can make a real difference by bringing a new focus on the issues of reservation and the Sub-Plan. In addition to exposing atrocities against Dalits, the press, television, and radio should investigate systemic oppression, exploitation, and discrimination in greater depth.

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### More about Dalit hopes and despair



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Last week's column, "The plight of Dalits and the news media" (October 25, 2010), has generated a lively and interesting response from several readers. The column was about the prioritisation of the tasks before the National Commission for the Scheduled Castes (NCSC) by its new Chairman, P.L. Punia (not P.J. Punia as erroneously mentioned in the column.) The concern of most who wrote was over the failure of successive governments to achieve the empowerment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the most vulnerable of the country's poor, 63 years after Independence. This reveals not only their awareness of the pain of these victims of anti-human oppression, but also of official and bureaucratic indifference to their predicament. Readers are also aware of the lack of political will among those in power to help find a way out of this shameful situation. This is a far cry from the situation prevailing, say, 15-20 years ago, when reports that untouchability was still being practised in many parts of the country as harshly as ever carried little credibility among readers.

As recently as in 1990, political leaders tended to deny that discrimination was practised against Dalits in teashops, where the beverage was served to Dalits and non-Dalits in two different sets of tumblers. These leaders asserted that it might have happened in one or two remote villages. It was as though they believed, and wanted others to believe, that the constitutional ban on untouchability had abolished it on the ground. The atrocities against Dalits were depicted by most political parties and much of the media as 'inter-caste clashes' and the outcome of some needless provocation, usually from the Dalit side. Further, there was a marked tendency to equate the perpetrators of oppression and violence with the victims. Policemen, the overwhelming majority of whom were 'caste-Hindus,' almost always threw their weight behind their kin. Dalits thus became the victims of both caste oppression and hatred and the custodians of law.

It was only during the first decade of the present century that large numbers of newspaper readers apparently began to see the Dalit question in fact-based perspective. In turn, there was a perceptible improvement in the media's approach to, and coverage of, what may broadly be termed the Dalit Question, a critical challenge facing rising India. Unlike the previous decade, when reader ratings of Dalit-related reports were generally poor, the past decade has seen a spurt of lively responses to reports and editorial articles on poverty, caste-based oppression, and social injustice. Young men and women entering the field of journalism after being sensitised to the issue by good teachers in serious journalism schools or departments began writing on Dalit issues boldly and with élan. At least a few of the mainstream newspapers turned their focus on the plight of the poor and the oppressed. This is a heartening trend in agenda building, which in turn has sensitised and influenced readers.

The responses to last week's column on Mr. Punia's appeal to the central government to provide job reservation came from readers with different backgrounds. Almost all of them showed great concern for the victims. The NCSC has prioritised the tasks ensuring reservation for Dalits in the private sector and maximising the benefits of such plans to Dalits.

#### Speedy and effective action called for

A former Governor of Mizoram, Dr. A. Padmanaban, who now lives in Chennai, pointed out in his comment on the column that reservation for Scheduled Castes in the private sector had been discussed and debated over a long period: "The Bill introduced in Parliament some years ago was deferred and not dropped on the assurances and promises given by leading industrialists led by Mr. Ratan Tata in the form of a statement for affirmative action. This statement and proposal were given to them, on the initiative of Mr. Ratan Tata, to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Social Justice and others on 25/5/2005. This proposal includes training, scholarships, reservation in private sector companies etc." He added that it was on the basis of these assurances and in good faith that the Government of India deferred the Reservation Bill. Dr. Padmanaban's assessment is that "the measures taken by private sector to implement their affirmative action plan have been tardy and unsatisfactory." He has been in correspondence with the Prime Minister, the Minister for Social Justice, Mr. Ratan Tata, and organisations such as CII-Assocham and FICCI on this matter. "Speedy and effective action is called for. The Indian industrialists have to be more liberal and discharge their social responsibility effectively," Dr. Padmanaban concluded.

The Bill on Reservation, pending before Parliament, seeks to provide job reservation for the weaker sections of society in view of privatisation of several public sector units in the country. The assurance was part of the electoral commitments made by UPA-1 (2004-2009) in its National Common Minimum Programme. According to some newspaper reports, the representatives of the industry chambers recently conveyed their "inability to implement" the suggestion made to these organisations by the Union Commerce and Industry Ministry to reserve five per cent of jobs for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In turn, Mr. Punia has recently at a meeting with the press at Hyderabad served notice on the private sector that it "will ... have to do something for the disadvantaged sections," failing which he would press for legislation to bring this about.

Another reader, Mr. Punitha Pandiyam, who edits a popular Tamil magazine, *Dalit Murasu*, referred in his letter to the diversion of funds meant for Dalit welfare projects under the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan to the Commonwealth Games. He regarded this as a notable omission in this column. A report in *The Indian Express* of August 26, 2010 cited by Mr. Pandiyam said that the government admitted in the Rajya Sabha that over Rs. 670 crore meant for Scheduled Castes welfare projects was diverted to CWG work by the Delhi Government. Explaining the diversion of funds, Home Minister P. Chidambaram told the House that from 2006-2007 to the current fiscal, out of Rs. 7,062 crores (under indivisible funds) Rs. 678.91 crores were given for CWG projects. He further said while the divisible funds had to be necessarily used exclusively for SCs, money from the indivisible pool could be used for projects such as building stadiums, bridges and flyovers. In Mr. Pandiyam's view, this diversion of funds amounted to a breach of trust.

This reader also cited a report dated October 15, which said that Mr. Punia took serious note of the Delhi Government's alleged diversion of funds meant for the welfare of the Dalits to the Commonwealth Games and "demanded refund in case it had happened." He was quoted as saying: "As a Chairman of the Commission, I would not allow any government whether of the Congress-ruled States or the Opposition-ruled States, to divert the funds meant for the Dalits to other purposes." Mr. Pandiyam wanted Mr. Punia to take action to get the money refunded, in the light of the August 26 statement of the Union Home Minister.

Another reader, M.N. Sanil from New Delhi, contended in his e-mail that "reservation in the private sector is linked to the cultural capital (in the Bourdieuan sense) of Dalits, which they acquire from education and families. The oppression they face in the education system and outside the system discriminates and excludes them in a conscious-brutal fashion." He expressed optimism in his belief that "contemporary Dalit struggles that are non-ngoised in nature can challenge the diverse and existing ideological forms of caste."

**Feudal foundation**

S.V. Venugopalan of Chennai was clear about the root of the problem: "The feudal foundation of this vast nation is too deeply entrenched and the roots of social discrimination lie embedded in our genes...When people of various social strata play an equally important role in building a nation and nourishing it, [the] casteist perspective has no place in any modern society." Another reader, S. Raghavan of Chennai, commented: "If only our governments had organised a massive education programme for Dalit children from the primary stage, the problem might have been largely solved by now." This progressive observation has some truth in it but the challenge is clearly not as single-track or as simple as this assertion suggests.

This discussion on one of India's vital national questions must continue.

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