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Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of Karnataka: A Sociological Perspective

Venkataravana R¹ and Prof. B C Mylarappa.²

¹Research Scholar, ² Professor

Department of Sociology, Bangalore University, Bangalore

Abstract:

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) of Karnataka constitute a significant segment of the state's population, representing some of the most marginalised and historically oppressed communities. This paper examines their socio-economic conditions, historical background, constitutional safeguards, and the ongoing challenges in achieving social justice and equality. It further explores the role of government policies, social movements, and internal reservation debates that shape their contemporary status.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Communities, Articles

Introduction

Karnataka is one of the most socio-culturally diverse states in India. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes form an integral part of its demographic structure. According to the 2011 Census, SCs constitute around 17.1% and STs about 6.9% of the state's population. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, these communities continue to face barriers in education, employment, and social mobility due to historical discrimination and structural inequalities.

Historical Background

The caste system in Karnataka, deeply rooted in the Varna hierarchy, relegated

certain groups to “untouchable” or “tribal” status. Communities such as the Madigas, Holeyas, Bhovis, and Chalavadis were historically treated as outcastes, performing menial or stigmatized labor. Similarly, tribal groups like the Soligas, Jenu Kurubas, Koragas, and Irulas lived in forested or remote regions, maintaining distinct socio-cultural identities while being excluded from mainstream development processes.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

The Constitution of India provides strong safeguards for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) through

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several key provisions. Articles 15(4) and 16(4) enable reservations in education and public employment, while Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections. Articles 341 and 342 empower the President to specify the official lists of SCs and STs. Additionally, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 serves as a crucial legal mechanism to prevent caste-based discrimination and violence. In Karnataka, these constitutional and legal provisions are operationalized through targeted welfare programs, scholarships, hostels, and the Special Component Plan aimed at improving socio-economic conditions of SC/ST communities.

Socio-Economic Conditions

Despite notable progress over the years, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Karnataka continue to face significant socio-economic challenges that limit their overall development. Literacy levels among these communities remain below the state average, with SC literacy at around 64% and ST literacy at about 59%, reflecting persistent educational barriers such as poor school access, high dropout rates, and limited support systems. Employment patterns also show vulnerability, as a large proportion of SCs and STs continue to work in the unorganized sector, agriculture, daily wage labor, and other forms of manual work that offer low wages and minimal

job security. Land ownership is another critical concern: landlessness is widespread among SC households, leaving them economically dependent, while ST communities frequently struggle with displacement and loss of traditional lands due to deforestation, development projects, and industrial expansion. The urban–rural divide further aggravates these disparities—urban SC populations benefit from relatively better access to education, employment opportunities, and public services, whereas rural SCs and STs still experience social exclusion, discrimination, and limited mobility. Overall, these socio-economic conditions underline the need for sustained policy attention, targeted welfare initiatives, and inclusive development strategies.

Internal Reservation Debate

Karnataka has witnessed intense debate over internal reservation within the Scheduled Castes. The aim is to ensure equitable representation among different sub-castes, as relatively advanced groups (like Bhovis or Chalavadis) have benefited more compared to the Madigas and Holeyas. The Justice Sadashiva Commission (2005) studied this imbalance and recommended internal classification, dividing SCs into categories to distribute reservation benefits more fairly. The discussion continues to shape caste politics and affirmative action in the state.

Social Movements and Empowerment

Despite notable progress over the years, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and

Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Karnataka continue to face significant socio-economic challenges that hinder their overall development. Literacy levels among these communities remain below the state average, with SC literacy at around 64% and ST literacy at approximately 59%, reflecting persistent educational barriers such as inadequate school access, high dropout rates, and limited academic support. Employment trends also reveal continued vulnerability, as a majority of SCs and STs are concentrated in the unorganized sector, agriculture, daily wage labour, and other manual occupations that provide low wages and minimal job security. Land ownership remains a major concern: widespread landlessness among SC households keeps them economically dependent, while ST communities often face displacement and loss of traditional lands due to deforestation, infrastructure expansion, and industrial projects. The urban–rural divide further deepens these inequalities—urban SCs generally have better access to education, employment opportunities, and public services, whereas rural SC and ST populations continue to experience caste-based exclusion, limited mobility, and fewer development resources. Overall, these socio-economic conditions highlight the need for sustained policy attention, targeted welfare interventions, and inclusive development strategies to ensure equitable growth for SC and ST communities in Karnataka.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Key challenges include:

SC and ST communities in Karnataka continue to face several challenges that hinder their social and economic advancement. Persistent social discrimination and caste-based violence remain major barriers to achieving equality and dignity. The benefits of reservation policies are often unevenly distributed, with certain sub-groups gaining more access than others, leaving smaller and more marginalized SC/ST communities behind. Political participation among these smaller groups also remains low, limiting their ability to influence decisions that affect their welfare. In addition, poor implementation of development schemes, delays in fund allocation, and weak monitoring mechanisms reduce the effectiveness of government initiatives aimed at upliftment. Addressing these challenges requires stronger enforcement of protective laws, equitable distribution of benefits, greater political inclusion, and improved efficiency and transparency in developmental programs.

Policy recommendations:

To address these challenges, several policy measures are essential for the effective upliftment of SC and ST communities in Karnataka. Strengthening internal reservation mechanisms can ensure that benefits reach the most marginalized sub-groups within these communities. Improving access to quality

education and expanding skill development programs will enhance employability and reduce economic dependence on low-paying, unorganized sector jobs. Effective enforcement of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is crucial to curbing caste-based violence and ensuring justice for victims. Additionally, promoting greater representation of SCs and STs in decision-making bodies at local, regional, and state levels will empower these communities and ensure that their concerns are adequately addressed in policy formulation.

Conclusion

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of Karnataka reflect the state's ongoing struggle for equality and justice. While constitutional safeguards have enabled notable progress, true empowerment requires both structural reforms and social transformation. Addressing internal inequalities and ensuring inclusive growth will be essential to realize the vision of an equitable Karnataka.

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