
**Ensuring Equality: Constitutional Provisions and Dalit Upliftment in
India**

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Abstract

The term Dalit, denoting the oppressed and historically marginalized communities in Indian society, is commonly used to refer to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the constitutionally recognized category under Indian law. As per the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6 per cent of the total population, forming a significant socio-demographic group. This paper examines the constitutional provisions and safeguards provided to Scheduled Castes with the aim of ensuring their social, educational, economic, and political empowerment. It also analyses the persistent challenges faced by Dalits, such as social discrimination, inequality, political marginalization, inadequate access to education, lack of awareness about welfare schemes, and deep-rooted structural disadvantages that continue to confine them to the lower strata of society.

The study further traces the historical exploitation of Dalits during the pre-independence period under feudal, colonial, and intermediary systems, and critically evaluates the welfare-oriented approach adopted by the Indian state after independence. Special emphasis is placed on constitutional guarantees including Fundamental Rights, the Directive Principles of State Policy, and reservation policies, along with protective legislations such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Despite these safeguards, atrocities and systemic discrimination against Scheduled Castes continue to persist in many parts of India. The paper argues that while constitutional provisions are crucial for addressing historical injustices and promoting inclusive development, their effective implementation, supported by social awareness and institutional accountability, remains essential for achieving genuine social justice and equality.

Keywords:

Scheduled Castes, Dalits, Indian Constitution, Social Justice, Constitutional Safeguards, Inclusive Development

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Introduction

The term *Dalit* commonly denotes those who are oppressed, broken, scattered, or historically treated as untouchable. However, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes has held that the official use of the term *Dalit* is “unconstitutional,” as contemporary constitutional and legal frameworks prefer the designation *Scheduled Castes (SCs)*. According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6% of the total population of the country. This paper examines the constitutional provisions relating to Scheduled Castes in India and analyses their present socio-economic position.

Despite constitutional guarantees, Scheduled Castes continue to occupy the lowest strata of society due to factors such as overpopulation, persistent discrimination, social and economic inequality, political domination, lack of access to quality education, ecological imbalance, and limited awareness of government welfare schemes that directly affect their lives. In response to these challenges, the Indian state has formulated numerous welfare programmes and constitutional safeguards aimed at improving the living conditions of SC communities. These safeguards are primarily protective in nature and seek to prevent discrimination while promoting educational, economic, social, and political advancement through reservation benefits and other affirmative measures, ultimately contributing to their overall development.

One of the most significant and relevant concerns in the contemporary world is the issue of Dalit development. As society evolves towards urbanization and the formation of metropolitan citizenship, the need for inclusive and equitable development becomes increasingly urgent. Historically, Dalits were subjected to severe exploitation by moneylenders, landlords, traders, middlemen, and later by British colonial rule. In the post-independence period, the welfare-oriented Indian state introduced and implemented various policies and schemes to preserve, protect, and promote the distinct cultural identity of Dalits, who are often regarded as aboriginal and indigenous communities closely connected to nature.

Safeguarding the interests of Scheduled Castes who represent a substantial segment of the Indian population—from practices of untouchability, inhuman treatment, brutal violence, and extreme exploitation has remained a major challenge for both the state and civil society since independence. Although special protective legislations such as the *Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955* and the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989* have been in force for several decades, atrocities against Scheduled Castes continue to be a harsh and everyday reality in

many parts of India. Certain communities experiencing severe social and economic deprivation manifested in practices such as untouchability, primitive agricultural methods, lack of infrastructure, child marriage, and geographical isolation—require special attention and targeted safeguards to protect their interests.

The Constitution of India incorporates a range of special provisions and protective measures for Scheduled Castes through its various articles. Enforced on 26 January 1950, the Constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens of India. As affirmed in the Preamble, “*We, the People of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens*”, the Constitution envisions equality, justice, and dignity for every individual, including historically marginalized communities.

General Safeguards for Scheduled Castes in India

The Indian Constitution is founded on the core principles of social, economic, and political justice liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship equality of status and opportunity; and fraternity that upholds the dignity of the individual and ensures national unity. These ideals form the basis of the constitutional safeguards extended to Scheduled Castes.

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws to all citizens.

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

Article 16 ensures equal opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to public employment.

Article 17 abolishes untouchability in all its forms. To give effect to this provision, Parliament enacted the *Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955* and the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989* to address and prevent discriminatory practices against Scheduled Castes.

Article 23 forbids trafficking in human beings and all forms of forced labor. In furtherance of this mandate, the *Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976* was enacted to identify, release, and rehabilitate bonded laborers.

Article 24 prohibits the employment of children below the age of fourteen in factories, mines, or any hazardous occupations.

Article 25 guarantees freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice, and propagate religion.

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Article 46, a Directive Principle of State Policy, obligates the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of society, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. The Constitution also provides political safeguards through reservation.

Article 243D mandates the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Article 243T provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes in municipalities.

Article 330 ensures the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People (Lok Sabha).

Article 332 provides for similar reservations in the Legislative Assemblies of the States.

Article 334 originally stipulated that these reservations in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies would continue until January 2020.

Article 338 establishes the National Commission for Scheduled Castes to safeguard their constitutional and legal rights.

Article 341(1) empowers the President, in consultation with the Governor of a State, to specify by public notification the castes, races, tribes, or parts or groups thereof that shall be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to a particular State or Union Territory.

Article 341(2) authorizes Parliament to include or exclude any caste, race, tribe, or part thereof from the list of Scheduled Castes specified under Article 341(1), and such notifications cannot be altered except by parliamentary legislation.

Article 366(24) defines the term Scheduled Castes as those castes, races, or tribes, or parts or groups thereof, which are recognized under Article 341 for the purposes of the Constitution.

Safeguards under Various Legislations

In addition to constitutional provisions, several statutory measures have been enacted to protect the rights and interests of Scheduled Castes. These include the *Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955* the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989*; the *Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976* the *Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986* the *Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996*; and the *Minimum Wages Act, 1948*.

Certain special provisions apply exclusively to particular states

Article 164(1) stipulates that in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, there shall be a Minister specifically responsible for Tribal Welfare, who may also be entrusted with the welfare of Scheduled Castes and other Backward Classes.

Article 371A lays down special provisions relating to the state of Nagaland,

Article 371B contains similar special arrangements for Assam.

Article 371C provides constitutional safeguards specific to Manipur.

Article 371F deals with special provisions applicable to the state of Sikkim. These articles recognize the distinct social, cultural, and administrative needs of these states and seek to ensure inclusive governance.

Incentives and Measures for the Development of Scheduled Castes

The Government of India has introduced a wide range of incentives and schemes aimed at the comprehensive development of Scheduled Castes, focusing on educational, economic, and social empowerment.

Educational Empowerment

Several initiatives have been launched to promote access to education among Scheduled Caste students. These include pre-matric scholarships, special pre-matric scholarships for children engaged in occupations involving sanitation and other health-hazardous work, and the *Top-Class Education Scheme* for Scheduled Caste students. Additional support is provided through the *National Fellowship for Scheduled Castes*, *National Overseas Scholarship*, and free coaching programmes to enable SC students to compete in professional and competitive examinations.

Economic Development

To strengthen the economic base of Scheduled Castes, various financial and institutional mechanisms have been established. Key initiatives include the *National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC)* and the *National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC)*. The *Special Central Assistance (SCA)* to the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan, assistance to Scheduled

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Caste Development Corporations (SCDCs), venture capital funds for Scheduled Castes, and credit enhancement guarantee schemes are also aimed at promoting entrepreneurship, employment, and sustainable livelihoods.

Social Empowerment

Legal and institutional measures play a crucial role in ensuring social justice and dignity for Scheduled Castes. Prominent among these are the *Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955* the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989* the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules, 1995* and the *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*. These legislations seek to eliminate discriminatory practices and provide protection against social oppression.

Other Developmental Schemes

In addition to the above measures, several welfare schemes and institutional initiatives have been implemented to enhance the quality of life of Scheduled Castes. These include the *Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAGY)*, *Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhatrawas Yojana*, programmes for the upgradation of merit among SC students, and initiatives undertaken by the *Dr. Ambedkar Foundation*. Institutional landmarks such as the *Dr. Ambedkar International Centre* at Janpath, New Delhi, the *Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial* at 26, Alipur Road, New Delhi, and the *Babu Jagjivan Ram National Foundation* further contribute to preserving and promoting the legacy and empowerment of Scheduled Castes.

Conclusion

Dalits constitute a significant and indispensable segment of Indian society, yet they continue to live without access to the comforts and luxuries associated with the modern, affluent world. Despite the enactment of numerous laws, policies, and protective measures, the assurance of a secure and dignified future for Dalit communities remains inadequate. The erosion of traditional land systems, persistent malnutrition, the impact of extremist movements, reliance on primitive modes of living, and the largely unorganized nature of their social structure have collectively pushed Dalits to the lowest levels of the social hierarchy.

Development, therefore, must proceed in a manner that respects and accommodates their distinct social realities allowing Dalits to progress in their own way. For

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meaningful and sustainable advancement, resources need to be mobilized and utilized effectively, judiciously, and efficiently to ensure the successful implementation of welfare programmers. While government initiatives offer hope for positive change, sustained efforts by non-governmental organizations, the judiciary, and civil society are equally essential. Looking ahead, Dalit development must balance modernization with the preservation of their traditions, culture, and customary laws, ensuring empowerment without cultural erasure.

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