Caste Based Discrimination on Dalits Residing in India- A Critical Review

Rajan, Rimli

Research Scholar, CMR University, Bangalore

Abstract

Caste is not confined with values and ideas alone in this present world. It showcases the behavioral attitudes of the people towards it. Caste system is conceived as a purposive rationality. At present there are many contemporary changes that have reshaped the caste system. This can be seen in the reservation policies on the basis of caste. There was a severe cast violence on Dalits as they faced a severe discrimination. The Dalits were considered as stereotyped and people who were involved in menial jobs. Most of the Dalits had to face atrocities from the upper systems of caste community. An important thing to address over here is that during the colonial period, there were caste associations, caste- based violence and caste divisions. The upper most level is occupied by Brahmins followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and finally the lower level is allotted for the Shudras. The Brahmins enjoyed a high social status, wealth and education. The SCs had a low socio-economic position in the society. Even the STs have not been included into the mainstream of the society. This paper highlights the history of caste system in India. It relates to the present caste system followed in India and the various kinds of caste discrimination taking place against the Dalits. It also showcases the impact of caste system on other religions as well and also highlights the reservation policy introduced to uplift the lower castes in India. The paper finally concludes by relating to the drawbacks of caste system in India.

Keywords: Caste, caste discrimination, upper castes, lower castes, reservation policy, religions.

1.   **Introduction:** The caste system can be comprehended in several ways. But this is always considered as an important concept on Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes and Other Backward Classes in respect of the political domain. Caste is not bound to

communicate alone in India nor limited to the Hindu society[1].Caste system has focused on contradictions and inner inconsistencies on one hand and its interpretation with the culture, economy and polity on the other. Caste has encompassed the political relations with socio-economic concepts. There has been a necessity to reconceptualize the caste system in India. Caste is not confined with values and ideas alone in this present world. It showcases the behavioral attitudes of the people towards it[2]. Caste system is conceived as a purposive rationality. At present there are many contemporary changes that have reshaped the caste system. This can be seen in the reservation policies on the basis of caste. Those people who are still living in the villages continue to follow the practice of caste system but this is absent for those people who have gone far away from their cultural and social roots[3].In India, the Dalits were considered as the untouchables in the caste system. In the starting of 1970s, there were cast violences which led to the massacres of Dalits in most of the parts of India. Examples of massive massacres of Dalits were Kilvenmani in 1968 at a place situated in Tamil Nadu, Belchi of Bihar in 1977 and Karamchedu of Andhra Pradesh in 1985. In the late years of 1990s, there was a serious debate on the caste systems which was focused as a concept at the national level and international level. There was a severe cast violence on Dalits as they faced a severe discrimination. The need of the Dalits for enrolling in the elections and identification of Jati in the community-led to a severe impact on social churning in the society [4]. Most of the Dalits had to face atrocities from the upper systems of caste community. The Dalits were considered as stereotyped and people who were involved in menial jobs. An important thing to address over here is that during the colonial period, there were caste associations, caste-based violence and caste divisions. So, this was not a new concept in India. There are some new actions taking place in India against Dalits after India attained Independence. There were severe massacres amongst the Dalit communities, there was a horizontal mobility taking place amongst the Dalit castes, electoral alliances taking place on the basis of castes and several struggle amongst the Dalits for their dignity against the tag "untouchables" being bestowed on them. Thus, on the basis of changes in the functioning and its system, we can study the decline and transformation of the caste system[5].

2.   History of the caste system

The Jati system and caste system existed even in the Indus Valley Civilization also. The time period of this civilization was during 3300 BCE to 1700 BCE. S.C. Malik states that during this period, this civilization could see "perpetuation of caste status by birth" and "caste-class patterns" in the Indian society. Romila Thaper stated that jatis originated from the Indus Valley Civilization's clans itself. Even Archaeologist M K Dhavalikar have stated that caste system existed in the Indus Valley Civilization. During the Rigvedic period (1500-1200 BCE) there existed two varnas namely dasa varna and Arya varna. Arya varna referred to Vedic tribes and dasa varna referred to rival tribes. By the end of the Atharvaveda period, there emerged a new distinction in the class. The dasas were renamed as Shudras referring to a slave. The Kshatriyas and the Brahmins were considered as a new category of the varnas. The Kshatriyas and the Brahmins performed rituals thereby separating them from both the Shudras and the Vaishyas. The Shudras were considered as "beaten at will". The Vaishyas were considered as "oppressed at will". In most of the texts related to Buddhism, Kshatriyas and Brahmins were considered as jatis and not as varnas. These jatis were considered to be of high status. The low rank jatis were called as chandala involving in various occupations such as sweepers, chariot-makers, hunters, bamboo weavers. The people belonging to high kulas were employed in occupations relating to a higher rank such as accounting and writing, computing, cattle-keeping, trade and agriculture. The people of low kulas were involved in occupations such as sweeping and basket-weaving. The gahapatis employed hired laborers and slaves to till the land. The main taxpayers belonging to the State were the gahapatis. The Brahmins had the right to get the service done from the low castes. When India got liberated from the Britishers, there were reservation especially for SCs and STs in the context of jobs. In 1989, there was an Act passed to uplift the SCs and STs Tribes that prohibits and punishes those people who discriminates and creates violence against the SCs and STs. Forcing the lower castes to consume or drink dirty substances, dump the excreta, sexual abuse and humiliation were considered as an atrocious behavior towards the lower castes which was not acceptable according to the law. In India, the caste system involves two concepts namely Jati and varna. The caste

system evolved through the developments which took place by the fall of the Mughal rule and the emergence of the British rule in India. Between the periods of 1860 and 1920, the Britishers employed the caste system of India into their administrative system. The Britishers assigned the administrative jobs involving senior appointments by considering only Christians. This was resented by Indians in 1920s. After the period of 1920s, the Britishers reserved the government jobs only for the people belonging to the lower castes. In 1948, there was a law that banned the caste system which was based on the negative discrimination. This was also implemented in the Constitution of India in 1950. In India there are 25,000 sub-castes and 3000 castes. After India achieved independence in 1947, the Indian government introduced certain policies for uplifting the marginalized sections. These policies fixed a quota for those depressed classes for providing government jobs and involving in getting higher educational opportunities. All social scientists have accepted that the main feature of the Hindu clan is the caste. Many Indians have lived for many years based on the social framework of the caste rituals. Since ancient period, the main system of social organization is the caste. At present the caste system is viewed as a hereditary where the people gain it through their birth, it is considered as endogamous where the entities involve in marrying the counterparts within their own circle, all the members engage in their respective same occupation and also the members do not indulge in having food with the people of other castes and even shy away from having contact with other people belonging to different castes. The standing committee or council's controls the castes by enforcing rules by excommunication and penalties. If there are subdivisions in castes, then the members belonging to an elite class say Brahmin caste can involve in marrying any brahmin girl only. Thus, the caste system has remained for over 3,500 years in India.

3. Present situation of caste system in India

Caste has achieved a meta-legal acceptance because it has engaged the people. Caste system does not come into a category of a simple ritual hierarchy. This was mainly due to the complex matrix of socio-economic and political relationships existing in the society. It was felt that there is a necessity to reconceptualize the caste system. Caste mainly focused on its role

where it was a concept of interpretation and not on substantializing. At present the caste system has different forms of structural processes of change and social mobility. Under these circumstances, the "individual" and "family" are thriving as those agencies for reproducing equality or inequality. There are many contemporary changes in the caste system. There is a system of reservation policy which have kept the caste system vibrant and alive. There are many protests raised against the reservations on the basis of castes. Those who have moved away from their socio-cultural roots, caste has turned out to be elusive for them. But it is enduring for those individuals who are residing at towns and villages**.** Caste system at present has become very inflexible and rigid in India leading to casteism. Due to this, the problems such as untouchability and superior hierarchy still exist in India. This acted as a barrier for mobility in the society and elevated the caste conflicts to attain the level of supremacy. Caste is an integral part in any society. Since ancient times, especially during the Vedic period, Hindu society was mainly based on caste system. After independence, the Constitution of

India introduced special privileges especially to uplift the backward castes. The Mandal Report showed how these backward castes were severely condemned in the society by upper castes. The Mandal Report stressed that the people belonging to the backward classes should be given reservation especially in the Central Government jobs. But this was resented by the upper castes. Though the government has introduced several legislations, still to monitor casteism, it has become very complex to the Indian government to provide equality to all sections in the society. So, to abolish the untouchability and existing case system, it can be considered only as a dream to overcome this issue. The Dalits find difficulty even for fulfilling their basic needs. They also face dangers from private and state actors collectively towards their security physically. When we review the socio-economic, cultural and political status of Dalits, we find that the State Government has failed in their obligation to ensure, protect and respect all the individuals in their jurisdiction. In India, the privileges and rights are denied for Dalits. According to 2011 census, the SC/ST communities are migrating towards cities and are getting better educational opportunities. But on the other side, there is a fall in the sex ratio and women are not allowed to

attain education. In the same report, 41 new Tribes and 20 new castes were added from 2002 to 2008. The SCs increased from 1,221 to 1,241 and there was a hike in STs from 604 to 705 from past ten years. In 2011, the population of STs was 104.2 million from 30.1 million in 1961. Since these people have migrated to cities, there is a hike in the population of SCs and STs in urban areas. The figure 1 depicts the percentage of households belonging to different classes based on religions. It was found that 24 percent of SCs were Hindus, 10 percent of them were STs and 43 percent of OBC were Hindus. 22 percentage of SCs were Christians, 29 percent of them were STs and 23 percent of the OBCs were Christians. 3 percent of Muslims were SCs, 1 percent of them were ST and 44 percent of them were OBCs. 41 percent of SCs were Sikhs, 1 percent was ST and 15 percent of them belonged to OBC. Amongst all the households, 22 percent of them were SCs, 10 percent were STs and 42 of them belonged to OBC category.
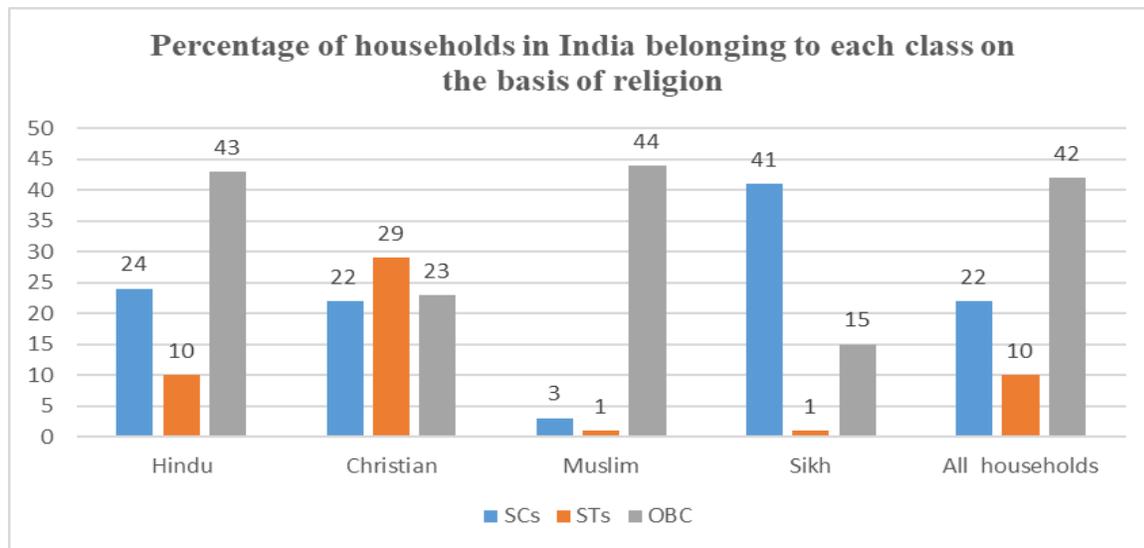

Fig 1: Percentage of households in India belonging to different classes on the basis of religion

Source: National Family Health Survey, 2019-21

4.   Caste discrimination in India

Caste discrimination has been defined as "discrimination based on work and descent" by

the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. Discrimination on the basis of work is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on inherited status such as caste, including present or ancestral occupation, family, community or social origin, name, birth place, place of residence, dialect and accent that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life". India's culture is based on the system of caste hierarchy. Caste in the Indian context is a socio-religious concept. There are four kinds of caste groups present in India. The upper most level is occupied by Brahmins followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and finally the lower level is allotted for the Shudras. The Brahmins enjoyed a high social status, wealth and education. The SCs had a low socio-economic position in the society. Even the STs have not been included into the mainstream of the society. 9 percent of STs and 20 percent of SCs, make up India's population. Both SCs and STs have experienced several kinds of discrimination in the caste system of India [6]. In 2012, there was a revolt by Dalits against the Government who failed to stop from the atrocities implemented on them. The campaigners protested against the horrific rapes against these Dalit girls and women in Haryana. They also opposed against the inhuman activities of manual scavenging that affected them very badly. The report of The Asian Human Rights Commission stated in their report, "The State of Human Rights in India 2012 that India is still ruled by the caste system; we all know this truth. It is plagued with discrimination, gender inequality, untouchability and feudalism, which is reason why there is little hope for the society or for its social institutions to make any real effort in creating a system that is based on equality and social justice."

5. **Socio-economic status of Dalits in India**

● Though a series of laws have been implemented to uplift the Dalits, still their progress has been shockingly very low.

● Even now, there is rampant discrimination against these Dalits in the field of health and educational sector.

● Many states could not allocate as per the percentage of SC population. They have been denied annually around US$5.2 billion

as per the policies required for them to improve.

● Dalits are deprived of participating in the political set up and the legal measures which are required to improve them is very weak.

● Majority of Dalit women in India face various kinds of discrimination such as rape, naked parading, domestic violence, sexual assault and even verbal abuse as well. Sometimes these young Dalit girls are forced into having sex with men belonging to an upper caste. Thus, they are forced to work as sex workers.

● Around 1.3 million people under Dalit community involve in manual scavenging making them particularly vulnerable.

● Whenever there are disasters, Dalits are not included in rehabilitation centers. The existing policies, laws have failed to capture the problems which these Dalits are facing.

● Around 64 percent of girls and 50 percent of Dalit children are dropping out from school because they face discrimination in school. Compared to SC youth and all youth of India, this difference has raised from 4.39 percent to 16.21 percent from 1989 to 2008.

● According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, it was found that in the year 2000, the Dalits had to face 25,455 crimes against them. In every two hours, the Dalits are sexually assaulted. But many of these crimes would not be reported because the people fear about reprisal or not having the ability to pay bribes to the police. Around 68,160 complaints were filed in that same year against the policemen due to their atrocious behavior against these Dalits. The table 1 depicts the crime rates amongst the SCs and STs in India in three different years.

● Though the laws have been introduced to help and protect these Dalits, still it is not present in most of the regions in India. Still there is a practice of untouchability amongst those people who are living in the villages. Most of the untouchables are facing severe oppression and are reeling under poverty and illiteracy. Most of them work as bonded laborers.

Table 1: Crime rates amongst the SCs and STs in India

Crime rates amongst the SCs and STs				
	Scheduled Castes		Scheduled Tribes	
Year	crime rate	incidence rate	crime rate	incidence rate
2014	23.7	47064	11	11451
2015	22.7	45003	10.5	10914
2016	20.3	40801	6.3	6568

Source: Census of India, 2021

6. The reservation policies of the caste system in India

In 1901 Shahu Maharaj introduced reservation policy in Maharashtra. He introduced free education to all and also constructed several hostels in Maharashtra to make the people to attain the free education. He did not discriminate them on the basis of social class to provide suitable employment opportunities to them. He fought against the practice of untouchability. He wanted India to be class-free. The main intention of providing the reservation policy was to enrich the political, socio-economic equality for SCs and STs and OBCs. Taking this view point, the leaders who came to the power in India was very much determined to abolish the root cause for inequalities amongst the different classes in the society. So, to promote this, the Indian Government introduced various commissions to impart the quota system[7]. Since independence, there is a reservation policy in the caste system. According to Article 15 in the Indian Constitution, it prevents discrimination on the basis of caste. Article 17 considers that the practice of untouchability as a serious offence. A reservation policy for SCs and STs with respect to jobs were imbibed in India. In 1995, as a result of this policy, nearly 17.2 percent of the SCs and STs were able to acquire jobs. Since 1959, there has been a tremendous increase in job opportunities from 1.18 percent to 10.12 percent in 1995 especially for the lower castes. In 1979, the Mandal Commission was introduced by the Indian Government. The main aim of introducing this commission was to find out the socially deprived classes and ensure different ways to improve them. This commission stressed that since 52 percent of India's population consisted of OBCs, efforts should be made to

provide government jobs to 27 percent of them. In 2006, the Central Educational Institution Act was passed to evaluate the reservation policy in the caste system. In order to uplift the socio-economic status of the weaker communities, there is a need for the reservation policy[8]. In India, the main thrust for introducing the reservation policy was to uplift the weaker sections by imparting equal rights to all the sections in the society. The reservation policy uplifts the mobility and social equity amongst the weaker sections. Through imparting the reservation system, the weaker sections were allowed to attain education and also enter into politics. The history of the reservation policy in India dates back to the exclusion of the high status of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India, opposed and declined the Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Act. The reservation policies should see that those who are truly in need of the policies, must be imparted to them only and not on various communities. We can see a system of discrimination and inequality prevailing amongst the untouchables. For a period of 10 years, there was a reservation policy for SCs, STs. But still, the problem of social discrimination has not been completely stopped. Thus, there arises a need for reservation system in India[9]. Since the marginalized sections are deprived of an access towards educational facilities, there is a need for reservation policy. To increase the living standards, education plays a pivotal role. The reservation in the educational sector tries to attain the social justice. According to Article 46, "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular of the SCs and the STs and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." The government is introducing numerous programs to hike the educational sector of the categories which are reserved. Though the reservation policy has been implemented for uplifting the weaker sections in the society, still it has not improved at all in qualitative wise[10]. The Indian Constitution seeks that there is no form of discrimination amongst different sections in the society. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste/race/religion/color and sex. Reservation is considered as an antidiscrimination feature in India. It allows under-privileged groups to get into jobs, educational sector to attain higher

education. But it failed to achieve this objective. To ameliorate the socio-economic status of the weaker sections, various Articles have been implemented such as Article 15(4) and Article 16(4)[11].India's reservation policy entails for a betterment and elevating the weaker sections against discrimination on the bias of castes. This policy of reservation involves a major conflict between non-reserved and reserved communities. Though the reservation policy has been introduced in India, still it is not known to those individuals who are really in need of; instead, the people in the creamy layer are taking too much of benefits from this policy and the politicians are using this as an opportunity for vote bank during elections. So, in the present world, there is a necessity to reimplement the reservation policy to cater to the needs of the people belonging to the weaker sections. For a proper growth and development of a country, there has to be a reservation on the basis of meritocracy because just by filling the jobs will never contribute towards developing a country[12].

7. Impact of caste system on other Indian religions

Caste system in India has been linked with Muslims living in India. They practice hereditary occupations, hypergamy, avoid social mixing, endogamy and has also been stratified. The Sikh Gurus opposed the hierarchial level of caste system which existed in the Sikh religion. The dalits living in Punjab established their own gurudwaras to attain some amount of autonomy in culture. According to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee out of the 140 seats, 20 seats were reserved for those Sikhs belonging to the low castes. The Jainism caste system existed in India since centuries. There was social stratification for Christians who existed in India. It was in Kerala; the first caste conception came into existence amongst the Indian Christians. Figure 2 shows the distribution of different classes in India. Amongst all the religions, 89 percent of Buddhists were SCs and 3 percent of Jains were SCs. 24 percent of Christians were STs and least percent of them were found amongst the Sikhs. 43 percent of Muslims were OBCs and least of them were found amongst the Sikhs and the Buddhists. The general category was most amongst the Jains and least were found in Buddhists.
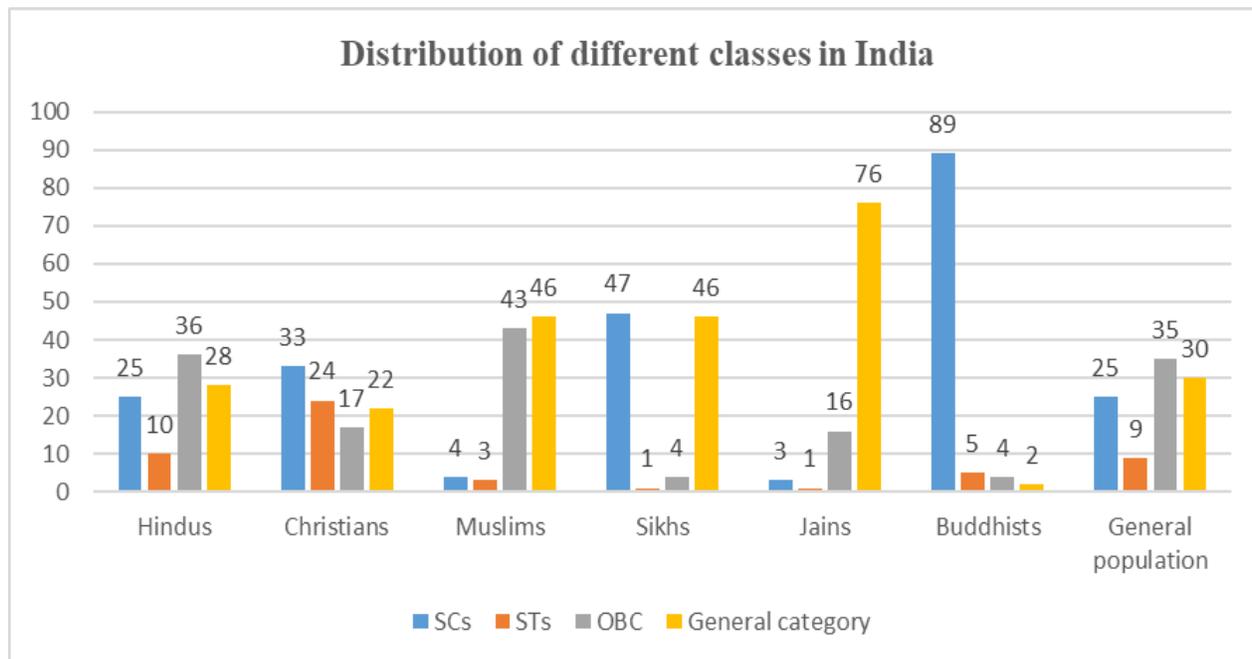
Fig 2: Distribution of different classes in India

Source: Survey conducted on March 23, 2020

8.   Drawbacks of the caste system

1.   Negative impact on economic activities

Due to caste prejudices, there was a negative impact on the economic activities of the backward classes.

2.   Impairs production on a large scale

Since caste system promotes self-reliance for independent workers, it impairs the production on a larger scale.

3.   Existence of social inequality

Due to caste system, there arises a social gap in the society. The people of high caste always expect that the people of low caste to give them respect with the sense of pride and dignity.

4.   Manual labor

The people of high caste have a strong aversion performing manual work. They feel that this has been destined for those workers belonging to the lower castes.

5.   Low competition

Based on the restrictions under the caste system, the forces of competition fail to work properly.

6.   Restrictions in labor supply

Most of the people adopt the profession on the basis of their heredity. As demand increases, their supply will not increase at the same rate.

7.   Prohibits mobility of labor

Due to caste system, there is a very low percentage of mobility amongst the labors. It obstructs the labor moving from one job to another job. Mostly there are unequal wages being given to workers belonging to

different professions. Figure 3 depicts the migration of SCs and STs amongst the different States in India. In 2001 it was 42 million which rose to 62 million by 2011. In 2001, the migration of STs amongst the other States were 21 million and by 2011 it was 31 million.
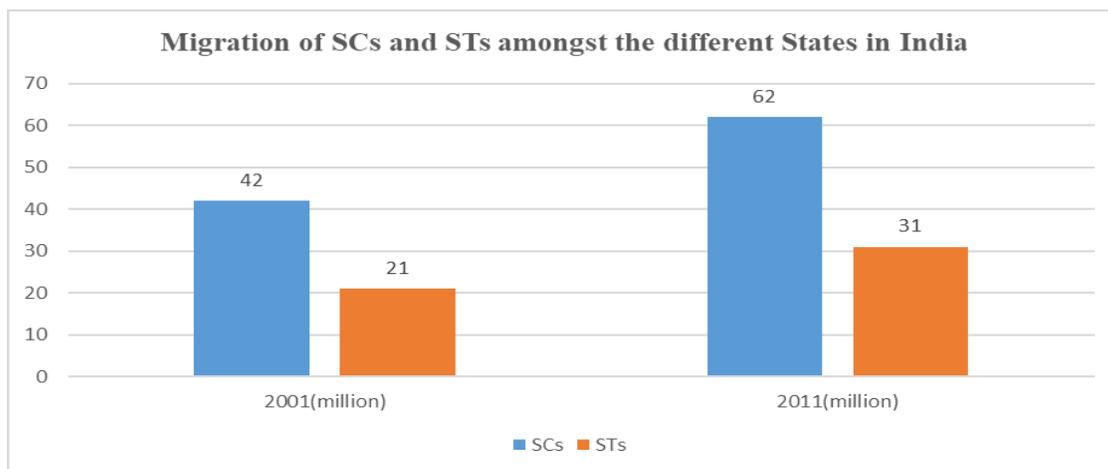
Fig 3: Migration of SCs and STs amongst the different States in India

Source: Census 2001 and 2011

9.

Conclusion

The system of caste which is prevailing in India, lacks socio-economic equality. The SC population is found more in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. Dalits have been facing several atrocities in our country. There are several kinds of social discrimination taking place against the dalits. To end the severe discrimination against the dalit, it is a

serious issue in India. Though the Government of India has laid down certain schemes to uplift the dalits, still it has not been satisfactory. We can only hope that there might be a time when all the citizens are treated equally irrespective of caste, creed and religion in India. Only then people can live harmoniously thereby contributing towards the socio-economic growth of our country.

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