Introduction

The caste system in India is a system which was transformed by British Raj and which is today based on reservation in India. The British raj made the caste system more rigid making the caste organizations a central mechanism of administration between 1860 and 1920 the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper castes. Social unrest during 1920s led to a change in this policy from then on the colonial administration began a policy of positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes.

New developments took place after India achieved independence, when the policy of caste-based reservation of jobs was formalized with lists of Scheduled Castes (Dalit) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi). Since 1950, the country has enacted many laws and social initiatives to protect and improve the socioeconomic conditions of its lower caste population. These caste classifications for college admission quotas, job reservations and other affirmative action initiatives, according to the Supreme Court of India, are based on heredity and are not changeable. Discrimination against lower castes is illegal in India under Article 15 of its constitution, and India tracks violence against Dalits nationwide.

India is a welfare State, committed to the welfare and development of its people and of vulnerable sections in particular. The preamble, Directive Principles of State Policy, Fundamental Rights and specific sections, viz., Articles 38, 39 and 46 in the Constitution of India, stand testimony to the commitment of the State to its people. Socially disadvantaged groups of Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes have received special focus over the years for their social and economic advancement. Government has taken several steps for framing appropriate policies needed to design and implement various welfare programmes for achieving the objective of creating favorable environment to ensure speedy socio economic development of SCs/ STs. For the well being of these communities, special target-oriented programmes are being implemented by earmarking funds, providing subsidies, offering reservations in employment and educational institutions etc. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are two groupings of historically disadvantaged people. From the 1850s these communities were loosely referred to as the "Depressed Classes". The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes make up around 15% and 7.5% respectively of the population of India, or around 24% altogether, according to the 2001 Census. The proportion of Scheduled
Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the country's population has steadily risen since independence in 1947. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 lists 1,108 castes across 25 states in its First Schedule, while the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists 744 tribes across 22 states in its First Schedule.

Under the Backward Classes Bureau, the Ministry is mandated to look after the welfare of Backward Classes by implementing the schemes for Backward Classes. The Ministry also deals with the National Backward Classes Commission (NCBC), which was set up in 1993. The Commission tenders advice to the Ministry related to castes, sub-castes, synonyms and communities for inclusion in/from the central list of other Backward Classes. The National Commission for the Economically Backward Classes has been reconstituted with a mandate to submit its report within six months from the date of appointment of its Chairperson with specific terms of reference. The Backward Classes are those castes/communities that are notified as socially and educationally Backward Classes by the State Governments or those that may be notified as such by the Central Government from time to time. The affairs of the Backward Classes were looked after by the Backward Classes Cell (BCC) in the Ministry of Home Affairs prior to 1985. With the creation of a separate Ministry of Welfare in 1985 (renamed as Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on 25.5.1998) the matters relating to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Minorities were transferred to the new Ministry consequent upon the creation of two separate ministries for Scheduled Tribes and Minorities, the subject matter pertaining to these two categories were transferred to the respective ministries. The Backward Classes Division in the Ministry looks after the policy, planning and implementation of programmes relating to social and economic empowerment of OBCs. It also looks after matters relating to two institutions set up for the welfare of OBCs: National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation (NBCFDC) and the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC). Religion returns in Indian census provide wonderful kaleidoscope of the country's rich social composition, as many religions have originated in the country and few religions of foreign origin have also flourished here. India has the distinction of being the land from where important religions namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism have originated at the same time the country is home to several indigenous faiths tribal religions which have survived the influence of major religions for centuries and are holding the ground firmly Regional co-existence of diverse religious groups in the country makes it really unique and the epithet unity in diversity is brought out clearly in the Indian Census. Ever since its inception, the
Census of India has been collecting and publishing information about the religious affiliations as expressed by the people of India. In fact, population census has the rate distinction of being the only instrument that collects the information on this diverse and important characteristic of the Indian population.

The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment is the nodal Ministry to oversee the interests of the Scheduled Castes. Though the primary responsibility for promotion of interests of the Scheduled Castes rests with all the Central Ministries in the area of their operations and the State Governments, the Ministry complements their efforts by way of interventions in critical sectors through specifically tailored schemes. Efforts made by State Governments and Central Ministries for protecting and promoting the interests of Scheduled Castes are also monitored.

Another policy initiative for the development of Scheduled Castes is Special Central Assistance to Special Component Plan, in which percent assistance is given as additive to Schedules Caste Sub-Plan of the States/UTs on the basis of certain criteria such as SC population of the States/UTs, relative backwardness of the States/UTs percentage SC families in the States/UTs covered by composite economic development programmes in the State Plan to enable them to cross the poverty line, percentage of SCP to the Annual Plan as compared to SC population percentage of the States/UTs.