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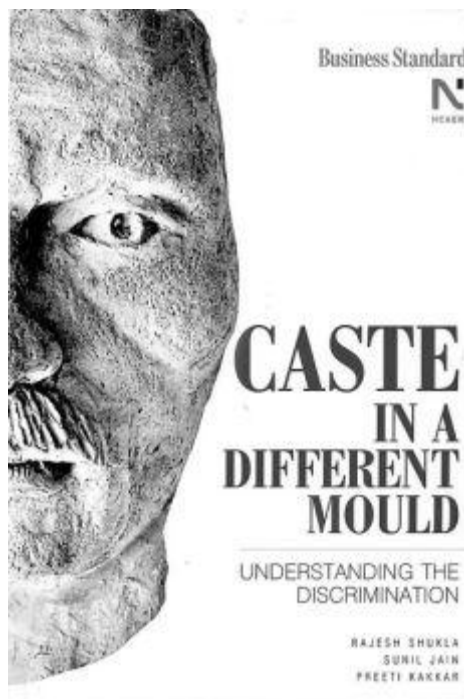
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[Back](#) Caste identities and income inequalities

The BL Review.

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Official surveys on socio-economic conditions of Indians have traditionally followed a politically correct approach to the gathering and dissemination of data: That the poor are poor, 'caste no bar' — to use a phrase made more famous by matrimonial ads in the classified columns of newspapers — and poverty, as the cliché goes, is colour-blind.

It is true that deprivation is no great respecter of caste or creed. But does that also mean that caste ought simply not to count in the analysis of socio-economic situations? Leave aside the fact that in

popular perception at least, caste leaves a strong imprint in practically everyone's consciousness as a matrix of personal identity.

When public policy choices on affirmative action are increasingly expanding the scope of social identities deserving of some special dispensation from what began as a limited classification of groups with a manifest record of discrimination (Scheduled Caste/ Tribes) to a more inclusive one involving groups with real or imaginary notions of deprivation, isn't it time that we bring caste identity out of the research closet and out into the open?

The authors of the book, *Caste in a different mould* (Shukla, Jain and Kakkar, BS Books 2010), seem to think that they do. Using data drawn from a survey of household economic situation from the rubric of caste identity of those enumerated, they have come up with a book that is the first serious attempt at mounting a challenge to the stereotyped official portrayal of deprivation. In the process, they have come up with some startling insights about the nature of income inequalities.

Income inequalities

Consider this: The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) account for roughly 41 per cent of the population. The survey by Shukla et al shows that their share of graduates among the total number of graduates in the country is 36 per cent or roughly about the same proportion as their number in the total head count.

Their share of jobs in the total number of technical/managerial and other professionals — a creamy layer of white collar jobs in the country — is also similarly placed at 36 per cent. The numbers, as the authors imply, doesn't suggest a tremendous degree of deprivation in access to educational or job opportunities in the country.

By far their singular contribution to the debate is their insight that income differentials across different social groups (SC, ST, OBC and the upper castes) narrows quite significantly as households move up the value chain on educational attainments.

As the authors seem to suggest, “fix the problem of educational backwardness among the disadvantaged”, the problem of income backwardness resolves itself. There is a vast treasure trove of data disaggregated along the lines of income, expenditure and savings trends among the households that are useful in their own right.

It should warm the cockles of acolytes of the idea of India always presenting a picture of unity in diversity that the average Indian's propensity to borrow or their scepticism about signing up for a credit card is remarkably similar across different social classes. Every fifth upper caste household has some loan outstanding, a figure not dissimilar to that of Scheduled Tribe households with 22 per cent of them having some loan outstanding.

Even more impressive is their savings habit. A remarkable 80 per cent of the households surveyed, with only marginal differences across all social classes, indicated that they were putting by money for the education of their children. The average American youth struggling to pay off his student loan would perhaps give an arm and a leg to be born to Indian parents in his next life should he believe in the karmic theory of the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Wealth of data

A book such as this with its wealth of data, which must necessarily be arrayed before the reader in close succession to one another, cannot set itself to be a competitor to a Jeffrey Archer novel on sheer narrative pace. While the authors have managed to avoid their offering read like an article in the RBI Bulletin, the reader cannot completely escape the feeling of being awash in a flood of statistical trivia that only grows with every page that is turned over. Statistics, like some strong broad spectrum antibiotic, must be administered in small doses. A combination of analytical insight with some discursive discourse on policy implications on affirmative action would have been just right.

This book should ideally spawn a serious debate on the nature and scope of affirmative action in this country. But one is also gripped by a sense of despair. The idea of affirmative action has long since moved away from one of levelling an unfair playing field for classes that have historically been disadvantaged for a variety of reasons into it being some sort of an entitlement springing from one's distinct social identity.

Mainstream opinion

This reviewer recalls an interview of the leader of a political party that has been at the forefront of a campaign for expanding the vertical and horizontal scope of reservation in employment, published some years ago, in a leading news magazine devoted to current affairs. The interviewer wanted to know whether such an expansion does not do disservice to the economically disadvantaged among a sub-group within the upper castes who now have to compete in larger numbers to the ever shrinking pie of opportunities.

The respondent's rhetorical answer was to suggest that it should be perfectly in order for this group to demand a quota of reservation in proportion to their strength in the total population.

In other words, he was perfectly comfortable with the idea that employment opportunities in the public sector being compartmentalised across different social groups and assigned distinctive proportion to individual segments. And merit, such as it is, be damned. What was a fringe opinion then, has now become mainstream. In such an atmosphere, the authors' attempt might well end up being a cry in the wilderness.