

Caste cauldron

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Whether it is honour killings or Census, we never seem to be able to get away from caste. In part, that is because public policy is predicated on caste. If one divides the population into upper castes, OBCs, SC-s and ST-s, the presumption is that upper castes are relatively advantaged and there must be open-ended positive affirmation in favour of OBCs, SC-s and STs. Any equitable society must have positive affirmation in favour of the disadvantaged. The debatable point is whether deprivation is best captured through collective categories like caste or whether poverty is a household-level characteristic. Since it is conceptually and factually the latter, an equation with caste commits the double mistake of assuming everyone in a backward caste is deprived and everyone in an upper caste category is not. Consequently, because caste is politically acceptable while non-caste identification of poverty is not, we have gone round and round in circles since the Ninth Plan, avoiding decentralised identification of the poor through household-level characteristics. Since the 1991 reforms, growth rates have picked up, though the spatial spread of trickle-down varies.

ST-s tend to be spatially concentrated, but OBCs and SC-s are not. Clearly, in faster growing regions, rural Bharat is becoming integrated with urban India.

Three questions arise. First, while there is no denying that OBCs, SC-s and ST-s are relatively disadvantaged, have their absolute conditions (a function of the indicator) improved since India moved to a higher growth trajectory? Second, has relative inequality between forward and backward castes increased or declined? Third, in understanding deprivation and poverty, how important is caste as a characteristic? Unfortunately, most of the discourse occurs in absence of data. That's also the context in which caste as part of the census needs to be understood. In a progressive society, caste should have no role to play. But if we are stuck with caste in public policy formulation, we might as well have better data. This book is based on NCAER's National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure (NSHIE) and throws up quite a few surprises. The only complaint is the time-lag, since data are for 2004-05. This goes beyond the simple time-lag issue. Anecdotally, based on some yet unpublished work by Devesh Kapur and his colleagues in UP, one understands that improved transport connectivity (roads and more than NHDP) has completely transformed the lives of "Dalit"s.

This volume is descriptive and factual. It stays away from the normative. It is also statistical rather than econometric, meaning there is no estimation of functional forms to control for various variables (in a *ceteris paribus* sense) to determine the impact of caste once other variables have been controlled for. (That will no doubt be done by other researchers using this dataset.) However, judging from the correlations, one arrives at something that should be obvious to all those who are not fixated on caste. Development and poverty removal is a function of access to education, access to integration with urban India (roads have a role in this), access to financial services, access to land markets and access to salaried wage employment (as opposed to subsistence -level self-employment). (There are some State profiles too.) One shouldn't form the wrong impression. The case for relative deprivation stands established.

However, the public policy implications for removing relative deprivation are quite different. One needs to remedy this exclusion and it is logically possible that exclusion is also due to caste. But that case doesn't stand established. What is established is that beginning with caste amounts to grasping the wrong end of the stick. The crux is access to physical and social infrastructure.

A book that should be read, and certainly used, by everyone interested in the caste debate, though the price is way out of line with the size of the volume.