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Hard, warm data

In the sea of opinions, we've always had a drought of data. Politically, this has, of course, suited everyone. And nothing mirrors the proverbial five blind men feeling around an elephant more than the political discourse forever whirling around the issue of caste and its accompanying clanging noises about providing quotas and more quotas to socially empower those categorised in various 'oppressed' or 'backward' caste capsules.

Caste In A Different Mould takes the theoretical cart and latches it firmly behind the bull of hard, empirical data — data that, unsurprisingly, was left behind so as to suit the purpose of having 'guesstimates' and further one's preferred brand of caste-politics. The data used in this landmark volume is from the National Council of Applied Economic Research's (NCAER) annual survey of household income and expenditure that's been around since 1985.

As Centre for Policy Research's Pratap Bhanu Mehta writes in his introduction, "There is no doubt that in a society like India, some strong form of affirmative action is required. But whom should affirmative action target, why should they target them, and how they should target them requires more disciplined discussion than public discourse allows."

And it is here, by providing numbers and facts across the spectrum of upper castes, other backward classes, scheduled castes (which includes dalits) and scheduled tribes that the editors statistician Rajesh Shukla, journalist Sunil Jain and researcher Preeti Kakkar have brought us arguably the handiest tool to enter the 'caste policies' debate.

What this slim book crackling with data — from estimates of household income by occupation and ownership pattern of select consumer goods by households engaged in agriculture to distribution of surplus income and distribution of expenditure by highest level of education — brings to the table is the raw materials that opinions should be built with.

What we make of the data may not always tally with the interpretations of the editors. But their real task is not so much to tell us how to 'understand the discrimination' — as the book's subtitle rather dramatically tries to pitch it as — but to look at a sturdy, non-airy-fairy way of seeing the landscape before commenting about it. The relationship between economic well-being and caste identities is not causal, but it is correlational. Earlier this week, the Supreme Court announced that it will look into the matter of lifting the 50 per cent cap in quotas for SCs and STs after "more data" is provided.

Before deciding to bring food to the kitchen, one should know what to feed how many mouths so as to not perpetuate a scam or fall short. This book provides such information that can lead us to something more meaningful than the endless sideshow of magic tricks in the form of caste politics.

O.P. Sinha is a Delhi-based writer

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