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Discrimination helps perpetuate poverty



The Hindu S. Viswanathan, Readers' Editor

The findings of a major survey, titled "Human Development in India: Challenges for a Society in Transition," reported by Aarti Dhar in *The Hindu* of March 28 are stark: Indigenous groups and Dalits continue to be at the bottom in most indicators of well-being; Muslims and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) occupy the middle rung; and forward caste Hindus and other minority religions are at the top. The data relating to the period 2004-05 are drawn from a survey of 41,554 households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban blocks across 33 States and Union Territories.

Expose inadequacy

These findings expose the inadequacy of governmental efforts to set right centuries-old wrongs done to nearly one-fourth of the population by caste-based oppression, discrimination, and exploitation. It shows India has a long, long way to go in doing justice to the victims of prejudice.

The report found the disturbing pattern to hold in respect of several indicators, including household incomes, poverty rates, land-ownership and agricultural incomes, health, and education. The survey also noticed some variations. For instance, in respect of access to education, Muslims find themselves in the company of Dalits and at the bottom. Similarly, in respect of health care, tribal folk are better placed than Dalits in north-eastern States.

The survey has done a valuable service by demarcating two major aspects of disparities among these social groups.

Two major aspects

The first aspect is that much of the inequality is caused by differential access to livelihoods. Salaried jobs, which account for higher earnings, elude Dalits and tribal people who have no choice but to settle for agricultural labour. They mostly live in rural areas and do not have the necessary education to seek more lucrative jobs. The salaried jobs tend to go to people from upper castes and religious minorities other than Muslims. To quote from *The Hindu* report: "... more than three out of 10 forward caste and [non-Muslim] minority religion men have salaried jobs, compared with about two out of 10 Muslim, OBC and Dalit men, and even fewer Adivasi men." Another disadvantage that makes Dalits and tribal people more vulnerable is their landlessness. Even if a small proportion of them manage to possess some land, they find that this land is less productive.

The second major aspect of the group disparities brought out by the survey is that, as Aarti Dhar notes, "future generations seem doomed to replicate these inequalities because of the continuing differences in education — both in quality and quantity ... social inequalities begin early in primary schools. Thus, affirmative action remedies are too little and too late by the time students reach the higher secondary level."

From discrimination to deprivation

A recent book, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (2010, Oxford University Press), deals elaborately with the linkages between discrimination, more particularly economic discrimination, and the denial of many entitlements to rights, which the victims of such discrimination suffer. Economist Sukhadeo Thorat, who is Chairman of the University Grants Commission, and sociologist Katherine S. Newman, have edited, and contributed sensitively to, this valuable volume.

"In India," they point out in their Introduction, "exclusion revolves around societal institutions that exclude, discriminate against, isolate, and deprive some groups on the basis of group identities such as caste, ethnicity, religion and gender ... Caste/untouchability-based exclusion is reflected in the inability of individuals from the lower castes to interact freely and productively with others and this also inhibits their full participation in the economic, social and political life of the community."

Thorat and Newman point out that the economic organisation of the caste system is based on the division of people in social groups (or castes), in which the social and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary. However, the entitlement to economic rights is "unequal and hierarchical (graded)" and since "economic and social rights are unequally assigned ... the entitlement to rights diminishes as one moves down the caste ladder."

As a consequence of the working of this kind of discriminatory system, those at the bottom-most layer of this unequal society are deprived of their otherwise rightful share in the land, jobs, and wages they are entitled to, and also access to education, public health facilities, free lunch for school children, the public distribution system, and numerous other governmental schemes, including food security programmes which are supposed to be universal. (It seems the only universal programme Dalits can access without difficulty is the immunisation scheme meant for children.)

In health centres

Sangh Mitra S. Acharya explains, in his article (Chapter 7), how certain social and religious groups have been excluded from the health care system and how equitable use of medical services has been discouraged. Incidents of doctors using derogatory language against Dalit children, refusing to touch Dalit patients, showing reluctance to talk to them on the nature of their illness, and keeping them waiting for a long time are not unusual in the primary health centres in several places. All these are not uncommon in rural hospitals. Studies have found that doctors are unwilling to visit Dalit patients at their homes. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Dalits receive little or no care in medicare centres.

The plight of Dalit schoolgirls is even worse. "When Dalit and Muslim children go to school," Thorat and Newman note in their Introduction, "with young people from HC ["Higher Caste"] backgrounds and majority religions, they often face subtle forms of discouragement and ostracism that make school a painful place to be." This explains why a sizeable number of Dalit children, particularly girls, drop out of school.

Caste and religion are factors

Under such circumstances, how can one expect better results in respect of human development indicators? Some chapters in the book provide sufficient evidence to show how continued discrimination practised in the name of caste and religion plays a powerful role in keeping hundreds of millions of oppressed people at the bottom-most layer in all perceivable ways. This applies to education, access to decent and well-paying jobs, possessing wealth in the form of land and buildings, improving their health, and so on. This is the state of the oppressed six decades after the republican Constitution outlawed the heinous practice of untouchability and mandated, through not fewer than 20 Articles, protection against discrimination of every kind.

Slogans like 'inclusive growth' are not going to achieve in the next 10 or even 20 years what independent India has failed to deliver over the last six decades. For those who suffer the double handicap of socio-economic discrimination and denial of entitlement to several rights, 'inclusive growth' sounds like a slap in the face, a mockery of their condition. Unless policies are adopted, backed by massive investments, to radically change the situation on the ground, that condition is not going to change. It means expanding in a big way social opportunity — in education, health, employment, livelihood, ownership of land and other assets, and so on — as part of the process of development, as progressive thinkers like Amartya Sen envisage. It means more effective legal protection against discrimination and exploitation.

Rural India must be the focus

Since nearly 70 per cent of Dalits live in villages, a very strong focus on transforming the situation of rural India is an absolute imperative. This became absolutely clear to me during the course of field visits over a decade (1995-2005), as *Frontline's* Special Correspondent, to study and write about the condition of Dalits in Tamil Nadu villages. My investigation began with the anti-Dalit violence that broke out in the southern districts in 1995 but went beyond that. The realities even in a progressive southern State were shocking beyond words and I tried to convey them in more than 50 articles published in *Frontline*.

As Readers' Editor, I can see that journalists, especially young journalists, working for newspapers, television, and radio can do a lot more to cover both discrimination and deprivation than they are doing today. In this connection, the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, has done commendable work by making the hundreds of young women and men who have graduated from it over the past decade do a required course called "Covering Deprivation," which involves field visits as well as a critical reflection on the issues.

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