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Caste, disparity and the future

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Seminal research into how the balance of economic power lies with the so-called "upper castes" even six decades after reservations could also transform our mindsets on the general profile of India's heterogeneous population. Only high scholarship, not political rhetoric, can examine this problem

To even the most casual observer, India's demographic structure is heavily tilted in favour of the upper castes — whether in terms of the incomes they earn, the jobs they hold, the kind of education they receive. The "upper castes", for instance, comprise just 34.1 per cent of the country's population, but account for 45.4 per cent of the total income of the country. The SC comprise 16.8 per cent of the population but earn just 11.8 per cent of the income. The ST are not much better off, making up 8 per cent of the population but only about 5 per cent of the income is earned by them. The OBC are your "average Indians" — they account for about 41 per cent of the population, a figure that's remarkably similar to their share (37.7%) in the country's total income.

While this tells an important story in terms of the caste agitations that have formed the bedrock of India's politics over the years — this is not the complete story. What is needed to be told is the story behind the broad numbers: a story that is largely dependent on the levels of education that members of various communities get, on the types of jobs they are engaged in, and even where they live. In other words, caste politics may have little to do with the way various castes have fared, or not fared, in the period since Independence.

The castewallahs will have you know that you cannot get good jobs without a good education. You can't expect parents without good jobs to either have the money or the temperament to educate their children. Hence, the need for reservations in jobs and educational institutions. While some part of this is undoubtedly true, it is important to interpret the figures with care.

While OBC make up 41.1 per cent of the population, they comprise 35.5 per cent of the total number of graduates in the country. So, the level of discrimination is not as serious as it has been made out to be. Their share in other related categories — 35.8 per cent of the total in the category of 'professional, technical and related workers' and 33.6 per cent of 'administrative, execute and managerial jobs — also provides little evidence of OBC being discriminated against in education or employment.

However, it is different with SC and ST. though they form 24.9 per cent of the population, they make up just 14.2 per cent of graduates, 16.1 per cent of 'professionals' and are engaged in 11.8 per cent of the 'managerial' jobs.

Interestingly, when it comes to the share in expenditure, the caste bias is a lot less strong. With just under 25 per cent population share, SC and ST spend 18.2 per cent of the total spending in the country. OBC, with a 41.1 per cent production share, account for 39.1 per cent of the expenditure. The reason for the lower-caste bias, of course, has to do with the saving patterns. SC and ST spend most of their income and hence account for a mere 13.3 per cent of the country's savings.

Not surprisingly, given their low-income levels, SC and ST form a larger share of the lower income quintiles: they comprise 41.9 per cent of the lower income quintile and 32.1 per cent of the one just above that but only 12.2 per cent of the total in the top quintile (Note: a "quintile" in statistical terms is one of five equal proportions). Showing that OBC are nothing but the "average Indian", their share in each income quintile is roughly the same as their population share. So, they comprise 39.6 per cent of the lowest income quintile, 43.2 per cent of the next one, 44 per cent of the third and 35.7 per cent of the highest income quintile. The upper castes, with 34.1 per cent of the share of the population, comprise just 18 per cent of the lowest quintile and 52 per cent of the topmost level.

Put another way, more than 33 per cent of ST are in the lowest income quintile; the figure is 27 per cent for SC, 17 per cent for OBC and under 10 per cent for the "upper castes." At the top end, 11 per cent each of SC and ST are in the highest income quintile, along with 19 per cent of OBC and 34 per cent of the "upper castes." Given the wide differences in income levels across caste groups (Rs 40,752 per annum for ST vs. Rs 86,690 for the "upper castes"), it would be logical to expect inequality levels to be very high as well. This, however, is not true. Income inequality levels are broadly similar across all caste groups; if anything, they are slightly higher for the upper castes.

Then there is greater inequality across education levels. For instance, the difference between what an upper caste illiterate and an ST illiterate earns is 1.4 (Rs 31,511 per year vs. Rs 22,456) as compared to 3.7 between an illiterate ST and a graduate ST (Rs 22,456 vs. Rs 85,023) and 4.2 between an illiterate "upper caste" and a graduate "upper caste" (Rs 31,511 vs. Rs 1,35,086). Since over half of all graduate households are upper caste, it is hardly surprising that the so-called "upper castes" have the highest income levels.

Interestingly, there are significant differences in the spending levels of each caste even within various types of groupings. So, ST in the lowest

income quintile spend just 4.6 per cent of their income on education as compared to 8.6 per cent for ST in the top quintile. The "upper castes" in the lowest quintile spend 6.5 per cent of their income on education. Given the difference in their average annual household incomes (Rs 40,753 per year for ST vs. Rs 86,690 for "upper caste"), this means the average ST family in the lowest income quintile spent Rs 905 on education versus Rs 2,018 in the case of the upper castes. Similarly, in the category of labour households, the ST family spent 4.1 per cent in contrast to 5.6 per cent by the upper caste family — in absolute terms this means an expenditure of Rs 915 by the ST and Rs 1,708 by the "upper caste".

The "upper castes" spend the most. They earn more than double than the ST and spend a less than double. As a result, "upper caste" families tend to save about 31 per cent of their annual incomes as compared to 26 per cent for ST, 19 per cent for SC and 24 per cent for OBC. SC and ST have the lowest ownership of durables while the "upper castes" show the highest ownership patterns. So, while 6 per cent of Indian households have a car, this varies from 2 per cent for SC/ST households, rising to 10 per cent for the "upper castes". For colour TV, the average for the country is 37 per cent; for ST, it is just 17 per cent, while for the "upper castes" it is a whopping 53 per cent.

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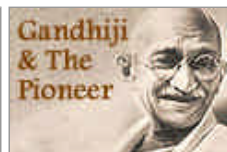
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■ Caste in Census

By Atma Gandhi on 6/26/2010 5:04:57 PM

India should carry out caste based census and such number be basis for reservation, a monster which is here and would live for sometime. With caste numbers, reservation caste or group should be restricted to 50% of of caste/group no. So that total reservation do not exceed 50%. Present system of 27% reservation for OBC have been totally manipulated and enjoyed by small no. land owning castes. This must change.



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