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Inequitable development

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The tragedy about data collection in India is that by the time primary data is converted into useable information, it may be too late to aid policy intervention. This is true of data collected by not just government agencies such as the National Sample Survey Organisation but also think tanks such as National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

One of the criticisms of Human Development in India: Challenges for a Society in Transition — a report put together by NCAER and Institute of Maryland, US — is that it is based on data collected in 2004-05, and it does not capture the impact of the changes of the past few years when the economy grew at more than 8% on an average every year.

That, however, should not mean that the report should be dismissed. It brings out various dimensions of human development to understand social inequalities, based on survey of 41,554 households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban blocks across 33 states and Union territories. Many of its findings are an eye-opener, while some others a reaffirmation of conclusion of other independent studies.

Consider social inequities and income disparity. Conventional belief holds that growth has percolated to the lowest denominator. But this was not so, at least five years ago, when the survey was conducted. The disadvantaged continued to suffer. This was seen in the disparities based on caste, ethnicity and religion. It was found that Dalits and adivasis continued to be at the bottom of most indicators of well being, Muslims and other backward classes (OBCs) in the middle, and forward caste Hindus and other minority religions at the top.

Indicators used to measure development were household incomes and poverty rates, land ownership and agriculture incomes, health and education. In terms of household incomes, adivasis and Dalits were the worst off with annual incomes of Rs 20,000 and Rs 22,800 respectively. OBCs and Muslim households were slightly better off, while forward castes and other minorities (Jains, Sikhs and Christians) had median incomes of Rs 48,000 and Rs 52,000, respectively.

Disparities between social groups can be attributed mostly to historical reasons, as also to difference in access to livelihood. Salaried jobs traditionally pay better than casual labour or farming. But permanent jobs elude the disadvantaged classes for reasons ranging from living in rural areas, lower education and fewer connections for job search.

Affirmative actions such as reservation in colleges have not helped the disadvantaged to join the mainstream due to inequities at the primary school level.

So, it is not surprising that forward castes dominate salaried jobs. The report illustrates this: more than three out of 10 men from forward caste and minority religions (other than Muslims) have salaried jobs against about two out of 10 Muslims, OBCs and Dalit men. The disadvantages classes — Dalits, adivasis and Muslims — have fewer social network ties, and this gets translated into lower access to education and jobs.

Efforts at inclusive growth had not really paid off, seen from the continuing regional and gender inequalities. Women earned less than men for the same job, and the inequality was more accentuated in rural areas. For instance, a woman in rural areas earned 54 paise for every rupee earned by a man and in urban areas, a woman earned 68 paise.

Many indicators would have improved by now, particularly as GDP and per-capita income have almost doubled since the survey. But disparity is unlikely to have narrowed much. Policymakers could draw inference from the findings to improve targeting of programmes aimed at inclusive growth.

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