
BOOK REVIEW- DALITS IN INDIA: SEARCH FOR A COMMON DESTINY

✉ **Bawa Karwal**
Junior Research Fellow,
Department of Sociology,
Panjab University, Chandigarh

This is a study conducted by Sukhadeo Thorat which presents the status of Dalits in India, also studies the change in their status. It provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the status of Dalits in contemporary India. It explores the status of Dalits in the country by presenting all-India and state-level analyses of various human development and socio-economic indicators. This book provides a comprehensive understanding of the processes and dynamics that exclude Dalits from mainstream development.

In introduction part, he introduced who are Scheduled Castes? He explained the history of social legislations in India. He discusses the protection given to scheduled castes in past and in present. He discusses that the educational development of Scheduled Castes is a major area of thrust for the government. At the core of the Scheduled Castes' educational problems are a low literacy rate; a high dropout rate at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels; and the existence of highly discriminatory and exclusionary practices, which sometimes deny Scheduled Castes' access to education altogether.

2nd chapter explains the caste system as a social organization of Hindu society, which is based on highly unequal entitlements to economic and social rights. Indian constitution provides protection against social dogmas, economic exploitation and enhances specific financial allocations to expedite the socio-economic, political and cultural development of Scheduled Castes. Government provisions have been influenced by two main considerations:-

- (a) To overcome the multiple deprivations that Scheduled Castes have inherited from exclusion in the past and to the extent possible, to bring them at par with others.
- (b) To provide protection against exclusion and discrimination in the present by encouraging their effective participation in the general economic, social and political processes in the country.

In chapter 3rd, demographic profile of Scheduled Castes' is discussed its gender dimension and level of urbanisation. The Scheduled Castes account for nearly 16 percent of the population of India. Approximately 55 percent of them are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Although the vertical concentration of Scheduled Caste's is smaller in several states such as Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Punjab and Tripura, this social group comprises more than 15% of the respective state populations the sex ratio of country's Scheduled Caste population is heavily in favour of males (936) except in few states like Kerala (1048). By and large, the sex ratios of both the total and the SC populations follow a similar pattern. The all-India share of the Scheduled Caste urban population in the total SC population is 20.18 percent; the corresponding figure for non-SCs/STs is 31.57 percent, indicating that the level of

urbanisation of Scheduled Castes is much lower than that of non-SCs/STs. In nearly all the states, the proportion of Scheduled Castes living in urban areas was less than that of the non-SC/ST population.

In chapter 4, occupational pattern of Scheduled Castes is discussed. The possession of land in India is not only a source of livelihood but also considered as a status symbol. The perpetuation of the elite through control of land has been a historical fact in this country. Scheduled Castes have faced selective and historical discrimination as far as the ownership of land and land assets are concerned. In 2001, only 27 per cent of the Scheduled Caste rural workers had access to land as against 54 per cent STs and 47 per cent non-SCs/STs. Due to lack of education and technical skills, their absorption into other jobs than agricultural labourers has been difficult. living in urban areas are in a relatively disadvantageous position compared to non-SCs/STs because the percentage of self-employed Scheduled Caste workers is much lower (by about 9 percentage points in 1999-2000) and of casual labourers much higher (by 14 percentage points) than non-SC/STs.

Chapter 5, probes further into the issue of inequitable land distribution among social groups in India. In this chapter, the nature and extent of inequality in the ownership of agricultural land among different social groups and to evaluate the comparative position of Scheduled Castes. The pattern of land ownership is highly skewed against Scheduled Castes. Nearly 70 percent of Scheduled Caste households either do not own land or have very small landholdings of less than 0.4 ha. A very small proportion (less than 6 per cent) consists of medium and large farmers. The scenario of landownership among Scheduled Castes is even grimmer in Bihar, Haryana, Kerala and Punjab, where more than 90 per cent o Scheduled Caste households possess negligible or no land.

In chapter 6, the incidence of wage labour among rural Scheduled Caste household is revealed. Across the social groups, the proportion of rural labourers was much lower among non-SCs/STs -22.69 and 31.82 per cent during 1974-75 and 1999-2000, respectively pointing towards the inter-social group disparities. Such disparities existed almost uniformly across all states. The disparity index was relatively higher in Assam, West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, in that order. The disparities of landownership between Scheduled Castes and non-SCs/STs underline the issue of caste-based economic distribution. Due to limited mobility and lack of access to choice of occupation and physical capital, Scheduled Castes get segregated into the wage labour class. Unequal and exploitative labour relations also invariably make them vulnerable to economic exploitation and deprivation.

Chapter 7 highlights the levels of disparity in employment and unemployment among different social groups. The rural unemployment level of Scheduled Caste males (5 per cent) and females (2.1 per cent) was higher than that of non-SC/ST males (3.4 per cent), indicating relatively limited employment opportunities for Scheduled Castes. Despite a larger decline in the CDS (current daily status) unemployment rate of Scheduled Caste (1983-1999/2000) relative to their non-SC/ST counterparts, the former social group had a higher level of unemployment. The unemployment situation in the urban areas was no better. The unemployment rate of Scheduled Caste males was 5.2 per cent in 1999/2000 about 2 percentage points lower than in 1983.

Chapter 8 examines the progress of reservation policy and its consequences on public employment. The data collected from the annual reports of government ministries elucidates the fact that the intended benefit of the reservation policy have not percolated down to Scheduled Castes, despite the constitutional reservation in government jobs. The percentage share of the Scheduled Caste population to total employment falls short of the stipulated 15 per cent mark, specifically in the higher-cadre Group 'A' and 'B' jobs, although the Scheduled Caste population is fairly represented in the lower-cadre Group 'C' and Group 'D' job. Scheduled Caste public servants are largely concentrated in Group 'D' jobs, followed by Group 'C', Group 'B' and then Group 'A' jobs. The representation of Scheduled Castes in the lower categories of jobs is symbolic of the fact that forms of social mobility such as the implementation of the reservation policy have been untenable for them. Another worrisome trend that has been observed is that the adverse impact of the NEP (National Employment Policy) on the job market, particularly in government jobs, has affected Scheduled Castes more seriously than non-SCs/STs. In recent years (2000-03), the absolute average number of Scheduled Castes employed has reduced in several government organisations. The reduction of government jobs has been faster for Scheduled Castes (-7.25 per cent) as compared to non-SCs/STs (-0.7 per cent). Due to shrinkage of employment in public sector banks, non-SCs/STs have been shifting themselves to the private sector while Scheduled Castes are on the threshold of unemployment. Hence, together with reservation, other policy instruments are equally important for the upliftment of socially-disadvantaged groups.

Chapter 9 assesses the status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) with respect to poverty in the rural areas, captures the impact of the past exclusion of Scheduled Castes in India by conducting an inter-social group poverty analysis and identifies the economic factors associated with the persistently high poverty among Scheduled Castes. The analysis of the economic characteristics of high and low-poverty states revealed that with respect to most of the indicators of rural poverty, the states with high poverty lagged far behind the states with low poverty. The high-poverty states were generally characterised by lower access to capital assets such as agricultural land and non-farm business, low urbanisation, low sectoral diversification, lower employment and educational level, and high proportion of agricultural and rural labour. The analysis further revealed that within the high-poverty states, the situation of Scheduled Castes with respect to these indicators was worse as compared to the situation of non-SCs/STs. The lack of access and deprivation with respect to all relevant indicators was, in fact, the main reason for the persistence of high poverty among Scheduled Castes in the poverty-prone areas. In 1999-2000, the percentage of the landless and the near-landless among the Scheduled Caste households was more than 70 per cent, and that of agricultural labourers was about 55 per cent. Thus, a severe lack of access of fixed sources of income like agricultural land and heavy dependence on low-earning casual wage labour in agriculture seem to have been the primary causes for the persistence of high poverty among Scheduled Castes.

Chapter 10, attempts to present and account of the current literacy and educational scenario of Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Castes lagged significantly behind their non-SC/ST counterparts. The goals of universal elementary education remained distant as

fewer than 45 per cent of Scheduled Caste female children and one-third of Scheduled Caste male children aged 5-14 continued to remain out of school in the rural areas. One of the major impediments in realising the goals of universal elementary education among Scheduled Castes was the presence of high school dropout rates among them. The participation of Scheduled Castes in higher education was also very limited. In 2001, little more than 5 per cent of Scheduled Castes aged 20-24 were reported to be attending post-higher secondary education. Their presence in vocational courses was miniscule. The pattern of enrolment in higher education indicated that Scheduled Castes were in a highly disadvantageous position compared to non-SCs/STs. Educational deprivation among SCs and the social inequalities they are subjected to, are largely attributed to the historical and cumulative socio-economic and structural deprivations they have suffered for centuries.

Chapter 11 presents an overview of the health conditions of the Scheduled Caste population and its comparison with that of Scheduled Tribes and non-SCs/STs. The health conditions are assessed using indicators of mortality and nutritional status, broadly called 'health outcomes', and access to and utilisation of preventive, promotive and curative services, broadly called 'healthcare'. It was found that the health conditions of Scheduled Castes are quite poor in India, and that they are more deprived than the other sections of the population. In spite of an improvement in survival levels, infant and childhood mortality among Scheduled Castes is unacceptably high (83 and 40, respectively) in terms. The anthropometric measures show that nearly half the young SC children are 'undernourished' or 'stunted' and more than half are 'moderately' or 'severely' anaemic. Despite the free provision of maternal healthcare facilities, the coverage is lower for the SC/ST groups. Since reliance on private delivery care is high, they can't afford professional assistance. The socially weaker sections also tend to be economically weak, which is why the public health services are supposed to help them to access essential health services.

Chapter 12, based on the census data on housing and household amenities, examines the quality of housing stock across social groups in order to obtain the magnitude and nature of inequality in access to housing and household amenities. The access of rural households, especially Scheduled Castes, to civil amenities is very poor. A substantially higher proportion of Scheduled Caste households (8.1 per cent) reside in dilapidated houses as compared to the non-SC/ST household (94.8 per cent). In rural areas, only about 65 per cent of the SC households and 75 per cent of non-SC/ST households used *pucca* materials for the roof. The access to safe drinking water was more or less the same for Scheduled Castes (78 per cent) and non-SCs/STs (74 per cent) in rural areas. The state of access to toilet facilities was deplorable for both the Scheduled Caste and the non-SC/ST households, especially in rural areas. According to 2001 census, about 85% of the Scheduled Caste households and three quarters of the non-SC/ST households did not have access to toilet facilities at all.

Chapter 13 discussed that caste system is characterised by three interrelated and intertwined principles. These are the ascription of social, cultural, religious and economic rights for each caste; the unequal and hierarchical division of these rights between the castes; and the provision of string social ostracism mechanism supported by social and

religious ideologies. This chapter highlights the violation of civil rights, forms of untouchability in public life, and the incidence of crimes and atrocities against Scheduled Castes using official statistics on atrocities based on the national crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Violence, overt and covert, inflicted on Scheduled Castes, is rooted in the social structure and in societal relations, which condemns the Scheduled Castes to a life of indignity and subordination. The violent opposition by the higher castes to the efforts by Dalits to seek common rights acts as a major deterrent on their right to development and their seeking equal treatment and an equal share in the country's progress. It is important to draw a multi-prolonged strategy which deals with the problems pertaining to discrimination and violence against Scheduled Castes. There is a need to create an overall framework of rights that confers equality of status to Scheduled Castes and enables them to remove all disabilities which the customary relationship of the caste system places on them.

Chapter 14 discussed the policy directions. The deprivation of Scheduled Castes is associated with the historical processes of economic and social exclusion and discrimination based on caste status involving the historical denial of civil and cultural rights, the right to property, education and quality employment. Recognising the special problems of the group, the government has, over the years, continuously introduced policies and programmes to build their human capacities and capabilities. Constitution guarantees equality before the law (Article 14); makes provisions to promote the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Castes and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Article 46); provides for special measures through reservation in government services and also demarcates seats in democratic political institutions (Articles 330 and 335); abolition of untouchability (Article 17).

The objectives of this book have been to present the economic and social status of Scheduled Castes, study the changes in their status with respect to important indicators of human development and to provide a policy direction for the empowerment of Scheduled Castes in India. The study has attempted to address the government initiatives leading to a more protective socio-economic milieu against the discrimination and empowerment of Scheduled Castes. The analysis has also incorporated the demographic profile of Scheduled Castes in terms of population growth, their regional concentration, gender dimensions and pattern of urbanisation. The social and economic status of this group (Scheduled Castes) has been examined in terms of its occupational pattern, access to land and capital, magnitude and characteristics of rural Scheduled Caste labourers, employment and unemployment rate in both rural and urban areas, and the incidence of poverty among them. The pattern of employment under reservations in the public sector has also been given due attention. The analysis has also covered social development covering literacy and educational levels, health status and access to basic amenities such as housing, water and electricity. The study comprehensively brings out evidence of atrocities on Scheduled Castes and the prevalence of discrimination against them in various spheres of public life, and suggests measures for the all-round upliftment of Scheduled Castes in India.

Reference

1. Thorat, S. (2009). *Dalits in India: search for a common destiny*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. Pp. 344