

Nature and Extent of Economic Deprivation among Dalits in Rural India: An Analysis



Social Science

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ABSTRACT

The population of Dalits in India stands at 20.14 crore which constitute 16.66 per cent of the country's population. Of the total Dalit population, 79.8 per cent live in rural areas and 20.2 per cent live in urban areas. The main source of livelihood of the rural dalit family is agricultural wage labour. Dalits have been subjected to various forms of deprivation historically. This paper explores the dimensions and issues related to economic deprivation among dalits in rural India. The study found that the dalits confronted with multiple deprivations- high level of poverty and unemployment, landlessness, and lack of institutional credit support.

The Scheduled Castes or Dalit population in India stands at 20.14 crore which constitute 16.66 per cent of the country's population (Census, 2011). Of the total dalit population, 79.8 per cent live in rural areas and 20.2 per cent live in urban areas. Agriculture and allied related activities would be an important indicator of their occupational mobility since the large majority of dalits are still in the rural areas. Major source of income to dalit families is labour wage, mainly agriculture labour. Despite numerous schemes by the governments (both State and Central) since independence, dalits are one of the most socially, economically and educationally deprived sections of the country. Dalits also face various forms of deprivation and inequality with respect to education, health, and access to different kinds of jobs (Thorat and Newman, 2007). Based on the results of NSS and NFHS, Sadana (2009) concludes that dalits in rural India are economically and socially depressed group, with most of the developmental indicators like nature of occupation/livelihood, employment rates, poverty rates and literacy rates being worse off than for the non-dalits.

Objectives of the Paper:

In this paper, an attempt has been made (i) to analyse the status of Dalit households with respect to workforce, poverty and unemployment, and sources of credit in rural India; and (ii) to provide the inclusive policy framework towards priority to dalits in the rural development process. The paper is prepared exclusively based on the secondary sources of information. The information sources are Census documents, Planning Commission and NSSO reports.

High landlessness among rural Dalit Households:

Access to land in an agriculture-based rural economy is important because land is a primary means and instrument of production. The social distribution of land in a village economy determines the economic position and power relations between different social groups in the village. The share of dalits (SC households) in terms of land ownership has not been rising in proportion to their share in the population. In rural areas the main source of livelihood of SCs is either farming, wage labour or some kind of non-farm business. In 2000, only 16 per cent of all SC households cultivated land as owner cultivator as against 41 percent among non-SC/ST households. Taking both farm and non-farm activities, only about 28 percent of rural households have got access to capital assets as compared to 56 per cent of non SC/ST households (Planning Commission, 2008). The dalits are predominantly agricultural labourers and most of them are landless. According to the Census reports, the dependence of dalits on agriculture has declined from 74.5 per cent in 1991 to 65.6 per cent in 2001. More importantly, the share of agricultural labourers among Dalits came down from 49.1 per cent to 45.6 per cent during the same period. Among the cultivators cat-

egory, the share of dalits was lower (25.4 per cent) than the total (39.7 per cent) in 1991. During 2001 also the share of cultivators among dalits (20 per cent) was lower than the overall (31.7 per cent). This clearly shows that still majority of the dalits are predominantly depending on agriculture for their livelihood, working as wage labourers. Inadequate access to agricultural land and capital leaves no option to Dalit workers except to resort to manual wage labour. Thorat (2002) in his study rightly expressed that due to lack of access to agricultural land and capital, majority of the dalits remains wage labourers. As per 2011 census data, the percentage of cultivators is declining. The percentage of decline again is more among SCs when compare to general population. Figure 1 shows that though Scheduled Castes, who by tradition constitute highest percentage of agricultural labourers (55.2 percent) and still constitute highest percentage than total population (39.3 per cent).

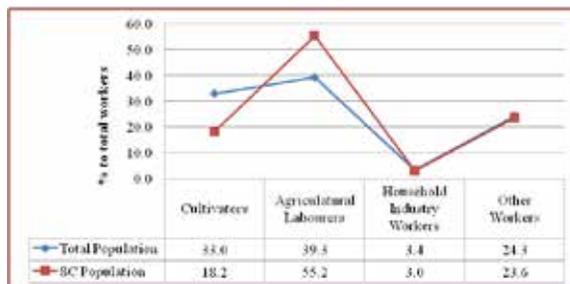


Figure 1: Proportionate of workers in Rural India (2011)
Source: Census of India, 2011

Workforce Participation and Unemployment Rate among Dalits in rural India:

The workforce participation rate refers to the number of persons actually employed as a proportion of the population. Among social groups, the SCs and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are the most marginalized sections in terms of most socio-economic indicators. The work force participation rate (by usual principal and subsidiary status) for SCs in 1993-94 was 71 per cent and for all social groups (68 per cent) in rural areas; similarly, they were higher in 2005. The unemployed are those who are available for and seeking work but have not been able to find employment (Table 1). It may be seen that between 2004-05 and 2009-10, the unemployment rates for SCs have declined by 2.1 percentage points in urban areas while it did not change for rural areas and remained at 1.6 per cent. The unemployment rates for all the social groups in both the rural and urban areas, however, witnessed a decline, 0.1 percentage point in rural areas and 1.0 percentage points in urban areas (Planning commission, 2012).

Table 1: Workforce Participation and Unemployment Rate among Dalits in India (%)

Sl No		SCs			Overall		
		1993-94	2004-05	2009-10	1993-94	2004-05	2009-10
1	Workforce Participation Rate by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status						
	Rural	71.1	68.7	68.9	67.8	66.6	59.5
	Urban	56.8	54.1	49.2	50.9	50.6	47.2
2	Unemployment Rate by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status						
	Rural	1.0	1.6	1.6	1.2	1.7	1.6
	Urban	4.4	5.3	3.2	4.5	4.4	3.4

Source: Planning commission, 12th Five year Plan (2012-17).

High prevalence of Poverty among Dalits in rural India:

One of the dimensions of deprivation is economic poverty. The incidence of poverty varies widely across social groups. Across social groups, the incidence of poverty has been most pronounced among the SCs. The incidence of poverty was higher in every period for dalits in comparison to overall. According to the latest NSS survey data, 355 million Indians live in extreme poverty. Of which, 42 per cent of SC population were below poverty line (BPL) in rural areas as compared to only 33.8 per cent for overall (Planning Commission, 2012-17). The incidence of poverty is not only higher but also chronic among them, despite implementation of various poverty alleviation programmes. Noticeable decline has happened in poverty levels for the all social groups. However visible difference is observed in incidence of poverty for dalits when comparison with non-dalits. In rural areas 53.1 per cent of dalits were poor in 1983; and incidence has declined to 48.1 per cent in 1993 and to 36.8 per cent in 2004-05. Overall decline in the incidence was 16.3 percentage points during the period from 1983 to 2004-05. Among non-SC/STs, the rate of decline was higher than the SCs (17.8 percentage points) during the same period. However, gap between the dalits and non-dalits has narrowed down to 14.1 percent points in 2004-05.

Lack of Institutional credit support for Dalit rural Households:

According to the NSSO (2006) data of All India Debt and Investment Survey, dalit households in rural India obtained more than half of their total debt from informal sources. The share of formal sources in the total debt of these households was only 44.8 per cent, much lower than the corresponding share of 59 per cent for non-dalit households. The dependency of dalit rural households on formal sources was lower as 61.1 per cent than the non-dalits (64.6 per cent) in 1992. Among formal sources,

the largest percentage of debt of dalit households was owed to commercial banks and cooperatives. Among informal sources, moneylenders were the most predominant source of debt for these households. Between 1992 and 2002, the share of formal sources in the total debt of rural dalit and non-dalit households has been declined. But the rate of decline was not equally distributed across dalit and non-dalit households. In this period, debt from formal sources as percentage of the total debt came down by about 16.3 percentage points for dalit households. As against this, the debt from formal sources as percentage of the total debt of non-dalit households fell by only 5.6 percentage points. The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) introduced by Government of India in 1979 and it was an important poverty alleviation programme which dalit households along with many other marginalised sections of the rural population were provided formal finance on a large scale. However, NSSO data clearly indicates that dalits were more marginalised than the rest of the rural population in terms of their access to formal credit. Chavan (2007) concludes based on secondary analysis (NSSO data) that the Dalits are facing exclusion from the formal institutions with respect to access affordable credit.

Conclusion and Suggestions:

The available literature has provided some evidences on deprivation which leads full or partial exclusion of dalits at various segments. On the other hand, secondary data reveals that Dalits suffer from landlessness, limited access to formal credit and employment opportunities, greater dependency on wage labour, higher levels of poverty and unemployment, etc compared with others (non-SCs). Thus, the existence of disparities between dalits and non-dalits are clearly visible and confirmed from the above literature. In order to reduce the disparities between SCs and those from other castes, improvements in asset and income levels among SCs need to take place more quickly.

The Government of India has been positive in addressing exclusion and undertaking policies to promote social and economic empowerment among dalits. These efforts have had little success. Therefore, inclusive policies should be effectively implemented towards giving priority to dalits in access to public facilities, improving the ownership of capital assets; enhancing the business capabilities and skills of dalits, productive assets and employment opportunities, subsidizing credit and input provision to dalit households. This would help in order to reduce deprivation among rural dalits.

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