

India Exclusion Report 2013-2014 – Selected caste extracts

(Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi, 2014)

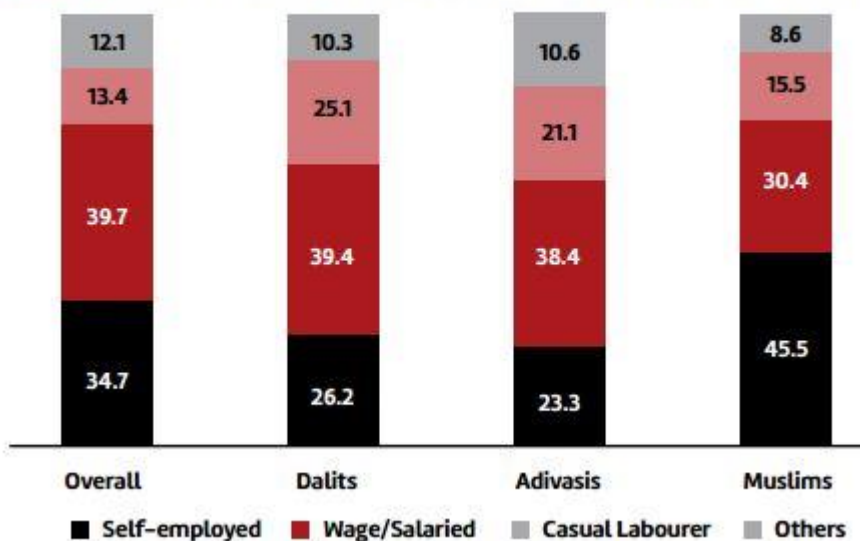
The India Exclusion report references caste-based discrimination comprehensively throughout the report. Below are some of the most noteworthy references ordered along thematic lines.

“The consistent exclusion of these communities from just and equitable access to diverse public goods suggests that both in their design and functioning state institutions, policies and laws tend to mirror, produce and reproduce discrimination and exploitation based on gender, caste, class, religion and disability. The report finds that exclusion is deeper when the multiple layers of these diverse forms of exclusion occur within an individual, household or group; for instance, a Dalit woman seeking work or a disabled Muslim child attending school.” (p.8)

LABOUR

For instance, as Figures 1.3 and 1.4 show, there is a preponderance of Dalits in casual labour. In 2009–10, 59 per cent of SCs in rural areas were engaged as agricultural or non-agricultural labourers, compared to an overall average of 40.4 per cent; in urban areas too, 25.1 per cent of SCs worked as casual labour, as opposed to 13.4 per cent of the overall population. **Along with Dalits, Adivasis make up a substantial part of the workforce engaged in casual labour, in both rural and urban areas.** (p. 11)

Figure 1.4 ‘Employment Status for Various Groups in Urban Areas, 2009-10 (%)’



Historically, Dalits have either been landless or marginal landholders, and due to the lack of adequate land reforms, this trend continues even today. NSSO data for 2009–10 shows that 92.1 per cent of Scheduled

Castes (SCs) in rural areas were landless or had land holdings of one hectare or less. This has led to a preponderance of SCs in casual labour. As Table 4.2 highlights, in 2009–10, 59 per cent of SCs in rural areas were engaged as agricultural or non-agricultural labourers, compared to an overall average of 40.4 per cent; in urban areas too, 25.1 per cent of SCs worked as casual labour, as opposed to 13.4 per cent of the overall population.

Today, caste lines have somewhat blurred in the social landscape of India, but caste remains a key determinant of a person's future. This is perfectly reflected in India's labour market, which is more governed by laws of social origin than by statutory legislation. Moreover, violation of caste rules by Dalits seeking to break caste-related employment barriers is prone to severe punishment from dominant castes, including economic boycotts and even physical violence. (p. 116)

“The relevant question now, it seems, is no longer the classification of the forms and origins of labour exploitation, but the determination of the extent and degree of labour exploitation. In earlier sections, arguments have been put forward suggesting that the labour market in India is inherently prone to exclusion practices that make large quantities of people extremely vulnerable to a sliding path towards destitution. The excluded almost exclusively belong to the suppressed castes, religious minorities and tribal groups. Within these categories, women are perhaps the worst off. It has also been argued that the state has been colluding with the private sector in accordance with its faith in economic growth as the engine of the economy, leaving labour behind in a state of deprivation despite a number of responsibilities towards workers, summarized as decent work obligations.

Every person counts and each individual is entitled to a life of dignity, and this cannot be achieved as long as workers have no access to decent working conditions.” (p. 126)

The reservation policy is an instrument of job security for many Dalits and Adivasis, but certainly not an instrument promoting the upward social mobility of these groups. Most jobs created under reservation are low-valued jobs, for which little skills or education are required. Downsizing of staff in the public sector has diminished employment opportunities for Dalits and Adivasis.

To compensate for this loss of job opportunities, the Dalit community, in particular, is calling for similar job reservations in the private sector. This call for reservation in the private sector is not about numbers. The demand for reservations is more related to quality employment for Dalits.

Ashwini Deshpande writes that ‘in the last two decades of liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy, there seems to be scant evidence of a break in patterns of caste inequalities’. (p. 132)

BONDED LABOUR

Bonded labour relationships in India are embedded intricately in systems of patronage or coercion, and are a product of caste hierarchies, class relations, a colonial history and persistent poverty. (p. 206)

3.1 Demographic and Social Identity of Bonded Labourers

Traditional caste rules mandate forced labour from certain communities. Caste is one of the foundations of the bonded labour system and remains a key feature of bondage even in non-agricultural industries today. The lack of access to their own land, combined with this expectation to perform free labour and the threat of violence and economic boycott against those who challenge their expected social roles, keeps many Dalit families in bondage and a perpetual state of poverty.

There is a strong overlap between the community of Dalits and Adivasis and victims of bondage.

According to the Gandhi Peace Foundation and National Labour Institute survey, 87 per cent of bonded labourers were from the Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities.²⁰

A survey commissioned by the Planning Commission in 2009 also found that nearly 83 per cent of rehabilitated bonded labourers belonged to SC or ST communities. In Punjab, it is estimated that nearly three-fourths of bonded labourers are from the same caste—the Mazhabi Sikhs. A study by Aide et Action of three districts of Orissa, to which a high proportion of people migrate to work in brick kilns, stone crushing and construction, found that about 84 per cent of the surveyed households were SCs or STs. Those 'who are considered as most backward and vulnerable community in Odisha constitute higher percentage of migrant families'.

On the other hand, government officials and contractors of bonded labourers generally belong to the higher castes. Some members from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have also been known to be owners of brick kilns, stone quarries, etc., and recruit labour in bondage.

Regardless, creditors and employers are almost invariably literate, comparatively wealthy and relatively more powerful members of the community. It would not be an exaggeration to say that labour bondage draws greatly upon feudal social relations and the caste system. (p.208)

EDUCATION

Negative teacher attitudes exhibiting class, caste, religious and gender biases manifest themselves as discriminatory behaviour and exclusionary practices that thwart diversity and plurality in a classroom. They create an environment of fear and non-participation among children, with the result that they restrain themselves in their learning efforts.

A major manifestation of discriminatory behaviour by teachers is corporal punishment. Children from marginalized groups often perceive and report that they are punished more often, punished more severely, punished unjustly when it is not their mistake or punished for offences for which others are condoned. Teacher bias against students is reflected in verbal abuse, which relates to their caste or religious identity. (p. 21)

Teachers tend to discourage hard work among Dalit and Adivasi students, either unfairly stereotyping them as beneficiaries of reservations or questioning the value of education for such children, who they presume will only undertake menial, traditional, caste-based occupations later in life. (p. 21)

Often teachers consciously do not give children from marginalized backgrounds a chance to come and write on the blackboard or lead the reading in the classroom. Another prominent process of discrimination in the classroom is differential or segregated seating. This can lead to a range of difficulties—such as lack of teacher attention, inability to read from a distance from a badly maintained or lit blackboard, being stereotyped as uninterested in studies or not sharp—which have a negative impact on their learning and development.

Similarly, children from marginalized communities complain of not being recognized or selected for leadership in schools and extra-curricular activities. Discrimination also occurs in the task allocation related to cleaning and maintaining school infrastructure and facilities. Often it is Dalit children who clean the playground, verandah, rooms and toilets in school. Teachers tend to differentiate between neat and clean children and those who they regard as untidy or 'dirty'. (p. 21)

In an atmosphere where their identity, based on caste, religion, tribe, gender or sexuality is unaccepted and mocked, the school, instead of being a nurturing space, can become a place that is feared for its divisive environment. They drop out without accessing minimum levels of learning, reading and writing skills, or the confidence to move ahead in life. Many return to the occupations of their parents, or enter the unorganized sector with a high degree of insecurity and vulnerability, continuing to live on the margins of society. The perception that they lack opportunities beyond their given surroundings also acutely constrains their sense of agency. (p. 24)

Appreciation of diversity and respect for all can be best learnt in school. Processes of exclusion run counter to the philosophical purpose of a school as a place of nurturing children's full potential. Ill-treatment of children, practice of caste segregation and insensitivity towards children with special needs breeds a school and classroom environment that discourages active participation, critical thinking and the development of social awareness among children. (p. 24)

Pre-service training, in-service training and all other areas of teacher education must include special modules on diversity and inclusion so that teachers are sensitized to the challenges faced by marginalized communities and they can address their own caste-based, religious and class biases, and other stereotypes that act as barriers to children's learning. (p. 31)

Distance from school also serves as a barrier for Dalit children, against whom caste bias and widely prejudicial societal beliefs often lead to objections and harassment by dominant communities when they walk through the village roads to reach school. Such concerns become pronounced when there may be other social or economic conflicts between Dalits and the dominant community. (p.55)

Discrimination has often been reported in the task allocation related to cleaning and maintaining school infrastructure and facilities. The MoHRD study found that usually it was SC children who cleaned the playground, verandah and rooms in school, although there were instances where OBC and sometimes general caste children also did the cleaning, as long as it did not involve cleaning the toilets. In many places, cleaning tasks were reserved for SC girls, as boys did not touch the brooms or mops. The study further reported that the condition of toilets was extremely bad, with many of them being dysfunctional. But even in the few cases of functional toilets, these were being cleaned by SC children. (pg. 58)

Exclusion in Mid-day Meals Programme

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme originated in 1982 to promote children's attendance and retention in school, as well as to reduce hunger and malnutrition. Today, it ensures a meal a day for more than 100 million children across the country. The project lies on the fault lines of caste discrimination, a fact that is gnawing away at its social fundamentals.

In 2006, a study by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies extensively documented discrimination against Dalit children and cooks in the mid-day meals programme across Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Despite a Supreme Court directive in 2004 to give preference to Dalit and Adivasi women as cooks and helpers, their numbers continue to be limited. Dominant caste communities object to their children eating food cooked by Dalit women. In addition, Dalit children report segregation during the meal, being served after others were served, not being given a second helping and other similar forms of discrimination. These findings are repeated in the MoHRD study across six states in 2012, which found a range of exclusionary practices against children from marginalized groups.

For instance, Dalit children were found to bring their own plates and were not allowed to use the plates in the school as other children objected. Teachers suggested that Dalit and Adivasi children came to school to partake of the mid-day meal and not to study. It is also common practice that children do not stay in schools after the mid-day meal and teachers spend considerable time in the preparation and serving of mid-day meals, eating into their teaching time. In many tribal areas, the scheme is implemented with delays in the delivery of funds and stock, and poor guidance to cooks and their poor monitoring.

For children with disabilities, difficulties can arise when a child has specific needs, for instance when he or she requires assistance while eating, or is unable to move easily to the place where the mid-day meal is served. In the absence of suitable arrangements, such children are often unable to access the meal. While the social benefits of the mid-day meal were a primary consideration in the development of the scheme, they are thus undermined in a variety of ways. (pg. 60)

Teachers often discourage hard work and good grades among Dalit and Adivasi students, unfairly presuming that the 'privilege' of reservations in education and employment makes them work less hard. Teachers also perpetuate caste-based discrimination by questioning the value of education for children from 'low' castes, who they (teachers) will end up undertaking menial, traditional, caste-based occupations. (pg. 61)

Additionally, Dalit and Adivasi children face discriminatory attitudes from fellow students and the community as a whole, in particular from 'dominant caste' members who perceive education for these children as a waste and a threat to village hierarchies and power relations, and believe them incapable of being educated. (pg. 61)

Recommendation: Further, there should be a scrupulous attempt to increase and utilize allocations under the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP), Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and Multi-Sectoral Development Programme (MSDP) for SC, ST and Muslim children, respectively, to eliminate educational disparities between them and other children. These funds should directly benefit children and not be used for general functions already mandated, such as construction, school facilities and infrastructure. (p. 69)

EXCLUDED CHILDREN

2.1.1 Girls

The female literacy rate, as per the Census of 2011, stood at 64.6 per cent, below the national average of 73 per cent and much below the male literacy rate of 80.9 per cent. (p. 46)

2.1.2 Dalits

The literacy rate for SCs in 2011 was similarly below the national average, at 66.1 per cent. In 2012–13, the drop in enrolment of SC children from the primary (classes I–V) to upper primary (classes V–VII) level was 54.4 per cent, compared to an overall dropout rate of 51.8 per cent.⁷

Accompanying such trends of lower participation in school education among SC children are lower educational achievements. A National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) Baseline Survey in 2005 in 43 districts in the country found that 58.2 per cent of SC children were able to read and write, compared to 72 per cent of children from non-SC/ST/Other Backward Classes (OBC) households. Similarly, the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) National Achievement Survey (NAS) of class V

students, conducted in 2012 across 6,602 schools in India, revealed that while girls and boys performed similarly when tested in reading comprehension, mathematics and environmental sciences, SC and ST students consistently under-performed with respect to other caste students in all three subject areas. (p. 46-47)

HOUSING

Housing quality indicators from the 2011 Census also indicate significant differences based on caste and tribal status. SCs and STs, and among them, female-headed Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) households, have lower quality housing on average. SC households are more likely to be built of grass, thatch, bamboo or mud than the average household, for example. ST households are more likely to have walls of mud or unburnt brick—only 22 per cent of ST households have walls made of brick or concrete. While 53 per cent of all households nationally do not have a latrine within the premises, the figure rises to 66 and 77 per cent for SCs and STs, respectively, and within them, to 78 and 88 per cent for female-headed SC and ST households, respectively. (p. 10)

Additionally, studies have found pervasive discrimination in housing access to Dalits, people living with HIV, transgender and Hijra communities, and people with disabilities. What seems to emerge, underscoring the argument of this report, is the overlapping of familiar disadvantages in the housing space: gender, caste, religion and ability. (p. 10)

What is clear from the data is that housing poverty is widespread in India and that it is deepened by gender and caste in almost every case. This confirms one of the key findings the present report—that multiple exclusions aggregate along particular fault lines of, for example, gender and caste. (p. 83)

In studies in low-income and slum settlements in India, phenomena such as preference for male tenants, or exclusion of tenants of certain regions of the country, and even a binary inclusion of a particular community, etc., were found to be common. This experience is mirrored in access to housing finance, for example, that has clear exclusions along religious, caste and class lines, marked most notably by periodic outcry over banks declaring minority-dominated neighbourhoods as ‘no-lending zones’, officially and unofficially. (p. 85)

A further point worth mentioning here is the continuing prevalence of identity-based discrimination based on caste, religion, ability, gender, sexuality and linguistic lines, among others. Here, even the presence of economic demand cannot offset artificial supply constraints caused due to prejudice. When combined with income poverty, this results in multiple vulnerabilities for the poor and a deeper set of housing exclusions that cannot be solved by increasing demand and supply alone. (p. 98)

MUSAHAR DALIT COMMUNITY

India has been conspicuously less successful than many other emerging economies in the scale, speed and depth of its reversal of poverty. However, it is widely accepted that whatever one’s measures of poverty, young people on average have better educational and economic prospects today than did their parents and grandparents.

While this is perhaps true for many indigent Indian people, there are also entire communities that have been unable to escape the trap of desperate poverty from generation to generation.

One of the starkest examples of this is of the Musahar community of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. There is a strong need to inquire why the destinies of this community remain unaltered, even as people of other impoverished Dalit castes have accomplished small but visible improvements in their educational and economic conditions. For instance, female literacy among the Musahars is a shockingly low 2 per cent (9 per cent for the community as a whole).

A third of Dalit children in the five- to 14-years age group are in school, but less than 10 percent of Musahar children study, while dropout rates are nearly 100 per cent. Drawing from research conducted with the Musahar community in Muzzafarpur district in Bihar, the report finds that the enduring power of exploitative institutions, particularly caste, is largely to blame. Even today, poverty and inequality are embedded in the social structure, with upper castes controlling much of the assets and opportunities.

At the heart of this predicament is landlessness. Most Musahar families do not even own the land on which their tiny huts stand. Each Musahar family is linked to a dabbang (literally 'strong') uppercaste household in a highly unequal symbiotic relationship. Some escape to Punjab to work in farmers' fields or entire families toil for a pittance in brick kilns or construction work. These are situations of semi-bondage, very hard labour, little savings and bodies debilitated by poor nutrition.

At the same time, the lack of assets, capabilities and skills severely restrict the ability of Musahars to switch to alternative forms of employment, both in agriculture and elsewhere.

The poor implementation of the numerous pro-poor laws, policies and development programmes, many of which are of vital importance to Musahars and others in similar circumstances, further hampers their development efforts. The report argues that this failure is not due to any oversight, poor resources or bureaucratic incapacity. Rather, it is a deliberate act by those responsible for development to deny it to Musahars (and communities like them), thereby perpetuating the unequal order where the Musahar serves and the upper caste master rules. At the same time, the report documents significant recent efforts towards developing a 'voice' among Musahars, through building their capacity to organize themselves, articulate their views and demands, ask for and access information, and acquire the self-confidence to stand up to officials and oppressive forces in the struggle for their rights. Such community-level initiatives have had a very positive impact on the empowerment of Musahars. (p. 35) – Full description of the study on Musahars can be found in chapter 9 on p. 222-233 of the report.