

Assessing Multidimensional Relative Deprivation of Sub-castes in India

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The holistic aim of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is “to leave nobody behind” through the focus on equality of opportunity, equality of outcomes, no discrimination before law, policies and programmes, participation in social and cultural practices, and inclusive socioeconomic development shows global commitment for achieving the good for all (SDGs, 2017). Nevertheless, so far, the notion of “all” is discussed widely in the context of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status. Caste which is specific to the Indian sub-continent did not receive much attention under SDGs (SDGs, 2017). The discrimination or injustice based on the caste affects one-fifth of the global population and mostly in the regions of South Asia and their diasporas (Mosse, 2018). India provides an interesting setting with the complex intersecting nature of poverty and identities in terms of caste, class, and religion to examine the role of caste (Kumar, Fahimuddin, Trivedi, & Goli, 2020; Mosse, 2018). Caste groups, as the individual born into, remained the most significant determinants of a lifetime opportunity, source of embarrassment, and social and economic discrimination (Mosse, 2018; Roohi, 2019). The inequality in socioeconomic development across the caste groups has not improved significantly, rather worsened when measured through Caste Development Index (A. Deshpande, 2001).

Broadly, there are five social groups in India: “Hindu Upper Castes” “Other Backward Classes (OBCs)” “Scheduled Castes (SCs)” “Scheduled Tribes (STs)” and Muslims that are often used for all administrative and governance purposes by the Government of India (GOI, 1956; Lamba & Subramanian, 2020). The constitution of India granted special status or reservations in employment and education for SCs and STs to break the caste hierarchy in social and economic status. This special status was extended to OBCs in the 1990s (Fontaine & Yamada, 2014). Though no special status has been awarded to minority religious groups, like Muslims. As documented widely, the history of the origin of the caste system largely refer to the Hindu religion, but over the period this social evil has been assimilated or diffused into other religion as well. There is sufficient literature to back the existence of caste hierarchy in Muslims, although empirical evidence for the same is limited. A wide range of social science literature (Momin, 1975; S. S. Ahmad & Chakravarti, 1981; Bashir & Wilson, 2017; Sikand, 2001) has indeed claimed that a section of the Muslims in almost all the South Asian countries continues to be treated as untouchable, within the Muslim communities as well as by their upper caste patrons from the majority (Hindu) community, thus experience a “double” disadvantage. Very recently, a few studies have identified and documented empirical evidence on caste-based untouchability and occupation segregation in Muslims (Kumar et al., 2020; Trivedi, Goli, Fahimuddin, & Kumar, 2016a, 2016b). However, in absence of its legal recognition, their exclusion and marginalities have not become a part of the policy agenda in the state system.

The growing demand for quotas based on this report is questioned academically (Ali, 2012; Rahman, 2019) due to the limited empirical data and poor methods of assessment. Also, the sub-caste level investigation becomes critical as despite the cohesiveness in the broad socio-religious groups, there exist layers of social stratification within this group (Roohi, 2019). Within caste, inequalities can further cause and exemplify between-caste inequalities. Goli, Maurya, and Sharma (2015) have reported that 80 to 90 percent of total inequalities in wealth and education are due to within-caste inequalities in Uttar Pradesh, although they failed to explain which specific castes are advantageous and disadvantageous. The dearth of unit-level data on multidimensional developmental indicators such as education, employment, income, wealth, and household amenities at different sub-caste levels acts as an important barrier to rationalise the growing demand for quotas for some of the influential castes as mentioned above.

Against this background, the objective of this article is to provide empirical data-driven evidence for assessing the multidimensional relative deprivation of different sub-castes in terms of poverty, wealth, and financial inclusion. The study contributes to the emerging literature (Anderson, Francois, & Kotwal, 2015) of identity politics, social and economic development of marginalised communities within broad social groups. Alongside using a uniquely collected robust dataset and standard econometric tools for the analytical purpose, the contribution of the paper lies in detailing the intra-caste disparities across a spectrum of socio-economic dimensions using unique survey data. The justification for the paper is clearly empirically premised on the investigation of sub-caste-wise disparities in the economic situation going beyond the typical socio-religious divisions: Upper Caste, SCs, STs, OBCs, and Muslim. Specifically, for the first time, we have examined the sub-castes level disparity in poverty, wealth inequalities, and financial inclusion. Measuring financial accessibility across social groups is also important as identified in other studies (Hong, Kubik, & Stein, 2004; Boñte & Filipiak, 2012). Financial access can also differ across social groups alongside individual factors, as it also depends upon social capital and political associations. For instance, in the case of Uttar Pradesh, “Jatav-Chamaars” is a dominant Dalit community in SCs politically associated with Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), while Paasi and other Hindu Dalits are associated with Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Within major social groups, different sub-castes hugely differ in terms of social capital and networks depending on their historical associations and occupations (Trivedi et al., 2016b; Kumar et al., 2020). In addition, this study explores a seminal question whether the ability to earn economic resources solely depends upon households and individual-level factors like family composition, occupation, education, place of residence, and state welfare policies, or continue to depend upon some attributes that are attached from birth like caste hierarchy and group identity. Findings reveal that within-group inequalities across broad social groups are huge across the multidimensional economic indicators. A study such as this could create a ground for such recognition of within-caste inequalities in both Hindus and Muslims and become a source for affirmative policy initiative, provided there is the political will to do so.