

Caste is an irreverent marker of the state of well-being

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We should focus on segments that continue to be disadvantaged and impoverished in terms of access to resources, infrastructure and economic well-being, rather than caste

Caste continues to play a dominating role in the politics of the nation. Against the backdrop of two decades of economic growth and affirmative action programmes taken by successive governments, how have different caste-based communities been impacted? Is there reason to believe that ‘well-being’ markers are more prominent among the upper castes than the communities who belong to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy? Is the weightage given to caste issues justified and what are the implications? Let’s consider some of the takeaways from the ICE 360 study.

The first question that arises: Is deprivation caste-coded? Of a total 270 million households, the biggest group is that of OBC (other backward castes) with 105 million households, followed by the general category (83 million). There are 55 million SC (scheduled castes) and 27 million ST (scheduled tribes) families. The occupation-wise breakup shows that there are a significant number of lower-caste households that are dependent on agriculture wage labour and non-agriculture wage labour for their incomes—nearly 13% and 30%, respectively, among SC households and 15% and 24% among ST households. The share for OBC households is lower at 12% and 23%, respectively.

A significant proportion of households among lower caste groupings are also engaged as cultivators—29% among STs, 20% for OBCs, 15% for SCs. However, the general category figure is also 17%, which indicates that poor households, irrespective of caste, are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.

In recent years, research papers and articles in the media have pointed towards the trend in entrepreneurship and self-employment among these communities. Our findings too support this heartening trend—of the 40 million households that claim to earn their income as shopkeepers and petty business, 14 million are OBCs, 7 million are SCs and 3 million are STs. Among general category, there are 16 million such households.

Of a total of 55 million salaried-employee households, 22 million households are in the general category, 19 million among OBCs and 10 million among STs. The survey findings show that while STs are more marginalised among all the communities, the disparity between other groups at similar kinds of occupations is not very stark. Similarly, if we consider income disparities, the households that earn the least are those engaged in non-agricultural labour and agricultural labour. However, the variation in income by communities is not very significant. For example, against an all-India index of 100, the average household income for grade 4 employees is 112 for SCs, 115 for STs, 115 for OBCs and 112 for general category. Similarly, employees working in mid-to-senior level executive positions across SC, OBC and general category communities are more than twice that of the all-India index at 233, 254 and 299, respectively, while for STs it is 143.

How do lower-caste communities fare in terms of education disparity? Of the 270 million households, 98 million (or 36.2%) households have at least one graduate in the family. The graduate household breakup across communities is as follows—nearly 37 million out of 83 million in general category; 36 million out of 105 million among OBC households; 5 million out of 27 million among ST families; and 16 million out of

55 million SC family units. The incomes of graduate-and-above households across the four categories when compared against an all-India index of 100 indicates that SCs score 146 against 187 for general category, 165 for OBCs and 134 for STs. Evidently, there is some measure of income disparity and the most disadvantaged group is the ST. Significantly, illiterate households across all communities fared equally badly on income rankings—35 for SCs, 42 for STs, 43 for OBCs and 44 for general category—thus indicating that the caste equation has negligible impact in this situation.

Does the location of lower-caste communities make a difference to their well-being? Increasingly, it has been observed that caste, though important, carries less weight in the cities. This is evident in our findings as well. The annual average household incomes of SCs and STs in metros is almost on par (at about Rs 2.8 lakh) and that for OBCs and general category is around R3.17 lakh and R3.5 lakh, respectively. However, the percentage of SC, ST and OBC households, at 7.8%, 2.9% and 5.6%, respectively, living in metros is quite low. Those living on the fringes of cities (or Developed Rural) too have better incomes when indexed against the all-India score of 100.

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Distribution of households by the level of highest education (%)

Level of education	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Illiterate	5.1	9.5	4.8	1.8	4.1
Below primary	7.7	8.0	5.5	4.2	5.6
Primary	20.8	25.5	17.3	11.4	16.3
Matric	16.8	16.8	15.0	12.5	14.5
Higher secondary	20.7	21.0	23.2	25.0	23.3
Graduate and above	28.8	19.2	34.2	45.0	36.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of households (million)	54.9	26.8	105.3	83.1	270.1

The level of household earnings (All India = ₹100)

Level of education	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Illiterate	35	42	43	44	41
Below primary	49	59	58	64	57
Primary	70	74	69	75	71
Matric	87	82	89	102	92
Higher secondary	105	100	116	124	116
Graduate and above	146	134	165	187	170
Total	84	79	97	122	100

Source: ICE 360° Survey (October 2014) from People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE)

In contrast, a majority of such households are to be found in the dark underbelly of rural areas—including the Emerging Rural and Underdeveloped Rural areas. The incomes of these households are significantly lower than those located in Developed Rural areas. Compare the index ratings (against an all-India score of 100) for these four groups—while SC household's income score is 62 in Underdeveloped Rural, it is twice that figure at 113 for a similar household in Developed Rural. The same pattern repeats for the other three groups.

Clearly, then, these numbers indicate that while as a group the STs continue to be more disadvantaged than the others, overall it can no longer be said that lower caste equals desperately poor people. Nor can it be assumed that lower caste communities continue to be discriminated against. Perhaps the best indicator of this comes from the self-reported claims of the respondents in our survey. When asked if they felt discriminated on the basis of their caste, nearly 66% said 'never' while 4-5% reported they did so sometimes.

The way forward then is to focus on segments that continue to be disadvantaged and impoverished in terms of access to resources, infrastructure and the economic well-being. The effort should be to provide support in the form of financial inclusion, more job opportunities and specifically-targeted affirmative action schemes to the general populace in underdeveloped areas rather than on the basis of their caste. Once the benefits of economic development set in, the caste factor will lose its significance in the scheme of things, as has already been evidenced across the country.

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