

Reservation and Anti-Casteist Practices as Instruments of Social Protection in India?

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An important debate brought about by De Haan (2013) concerns how the very concept of the nation in India and China depends upon providing equitable instruments for the economic inclusion of segments of the population trapped in backward positions. Whereas in China social exclusion is more related to ethnic minorities (non-Han people), in India it is embedded in the historically-produced identity-poverty-trap of casteism, such exclusion affects a majority of the country's population. The latter is based upon cognitive practices consolidated in all levels of social interaction: from a macro-institutional level to meso-level of unruly practices.

De Haan (2013) refers to the debate about whether caste inclusive policies in India overshadow other vulnerable identities. There is evidence that suggests that this is not the case, as the fight against casteism cuts across and includes other fragile identities as constituents of casteism in a broader sense. Thorat and Lee's (2006) exploration of casteism and food distribution programmes revealed less exclusion and distortion where Public Distribution System (PDS) and Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MMS) counted on the support of grassroots movements such as the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA) in Andhra Pradesh, to plan, implement and review such programmes. In that particular case, much bigger take-up rates for backward castes (BC) and tribes (BT) were observed along with fewer incidences of meso unruly casteist practices despite Andhra Pradesh being a state with a strong casteist culture which lacked the financial resources of other states analyzed in the study.

Similarly, Das Gupta and Thorat (2009) argue that sometimes the very recognition of other identity-based inequalities demands a caste-based framework. Assessing the possibility of BCs and BTs achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2 and 3 (addressing both educational gender equality and women empowerment), the authors show that gender inequality among BCs and BTs is much larger than the aggregated national figure.

The waves of economic liberalization throughout the 1990's by way of the New Economic Policy (NEP), caused severe setbacks to the targeting of vulnerable castes and tribes by flagship social programmes under the 10th and 11th Five Year Plan. In India, social protection programmes are in general dependent on the state to promote equality through policies that reserve seats for targeted groups—which does not apply to the private sector.

The liberalization of social services brought about by the NEP adversely affected the social inclusion of BCs and BTs in two ways:

- Firstly, by reducing the total amount of job opportunities which could be reserved for such groups and act as a social lift to help them out of existing poverty traps; and

- Secondly, by handing such services to the private sector the State lost its authority to prevent unruly discriminatory practices, which could be otherwise achieved if the active implementation of social policies was operated by BCs and BTs themselves and monitored by civil society and/or state-level organizations.

In her report to UNICEF on casteism and anti-casteism within the National Rural Health Mission (NHRM), Kaveri Gill mentions the *Ragi Kalyan Samitis* – RKSs (Patent Welfare Committee) and the Village Health and Sanitation Committees (VHSCs) as examples of arrangements that can assure BCs and BTs inclusion not only as recipients of social protection services, but also as vital agents/providers of such schemes.

In their study of the prospectus of achieving the MDGs for backward groups in India, Das Gupta and Thorat (2009) reached the worrying conclusion that, until 2015, most MDGs and the goals set domestically by the Indian government through the 10th and 11th FYP will likely not be achieved. If in most cases the bad performance of BCs and BTs seems to be the main force preventing India from achieving such goals, it is all the more shocking that even in the areas where India is performing relatively better than other periods, like in the case of MDG 1 (tackling poverty and hunger), disaggregated data reveals that Scheduled Castes (SCs) living Below the Poverty Line (BPL) have actually increased since the 1990s, and, as per 2004-5 data, SCs alone account for 39.8 per cent of the 25.7 per cent of the Indian population living BPL.

Such observations suggest that an anti-casteist framework being built by India as a central instrument of social protection, though still weak, is nevertheless indispensable. Such policies play a similar role as that of "land" in the case of China. Whereas (Liu, 2013) argues about land in China—as a means for promoting social protection—the anti-casteist benchmarks and the advanced reservation policies of India, along with its blossoming local experiences of state and civil society cooperation, can and should be considered a prime form of inclusive growth promotion. Evidence emerging from present discussions about the future 12th FYP suggest that liberalizing measures in India should not be conceived of without first measuring the destructive effects they tend to have over the targeted structure of social protection.

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