

Economic Development of Scheduled Castes in Rural India: Rhetorics and Realities

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This paper makes a comparative analysis of the aspects of the economic development of the scheduled castes in rural India across the major states. The results show that the scheduled castes continue to be the economically disadvantaged communities and there has been hardly any improvement. The perceptible changes in certain respects in some states are not due so much to the progressive measures of planning but to the scheduled caste movements and organizations. Therefore, the author argues that the entrenched dominant castes never allow the benefits of economic development to percolate down unless forced to.

The members of the scheduled castes mostly reside in the countryside under enfeebling socio-economic conditions and are assigned traditional caste-specific stigmatised manual labour. In view of their perpetual socio-economic disabilities and deprivations, concerted efforts have been made for their overall development ever since the beginning of the planning era. The economic development of the scheduled castes along with the other weaker sections is treated as an integral part of Indian planning and avowed goal of development. It has been in operation in all the five year Plans though with varying degrees of emphasis. In the early phases of planning, welfare programmes were drawn up for their educational and economic development, and emphasis was laid on the effective implementation of the community development programmes and land reforms. Subsequently, to avoid expenditure being diverted away from these groups as had often happened in the 1950s and 1960s, the Special Component Plan was formulated during the Sixth Five Year Plan. As a result, the earmarked allocations were made for their overall development, apart from the general programmes of economic development undertaken by the Central and State Governments. A number of commissions, committees and study groups were appointed from time to time to look into their progress and to suggest appropriate policy guidelines. Hence, it is imperative to examine the extent to which these efforts have contributed to the economic development of the scheduled castes as it is an issue of major policy concern.

Recently a few attempts have been made to assess the development of the scheduled castes (Murdia, 1975; D'Souza, 1990; Thorat, 1997; Chakrabarty, 1998; Jodhka, 2000; Pai, 2000; Mohanty, 2001a). However, the analysis in most of these studies is confined either to the all-India level or to specific states and regions as also to selected facets. In fact, studies involving a comparative analysis of the economic conditions of the scheduled castes in rural areas across the states are almost non-existent. In the light of

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The earlier draft of the paper was presented at the National Workshop on the Economic Development of Scheduled Castes with Special Reference to the Agricultural Landless Labourers held at Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, in March 16-17, 2001. The author is thankful to the participants for their comments. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referee of the journal for his critical comments and suggestions. The usual disclaimer applies.