

Land Ownership Structure and Literacy among Scheduled Castes in Rural India: An Exploratory Data Analysis

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The review of issues that bring out the historical and regional dimensions complements the analysis on land ownership structure and literacy among Scheduled Castes (SCs) in rural India in early 1990s. The various scenarios help us better understand the composite index that combines inequality in land distribution (Gini) and illiteracy. If literacy is a potent tool and an alternative to landlessness then from the correlation exercise one can infer that it has been less effective for SCs than for total population. While giving policy prescription, a little detour is inevitable, rather necessary. Given the limits to land, propagating literacy a tool with intrinsic and instrumental value and providing alternative income generating assets in the rural non-farm sector becomes essential. Till that materialises one proposes the need to work out the viability and modality of giving illiterate, landless, and assetless agricultural labourers (females and males) property rights to water.

I Introduction

Today, unlike physiocratic economic thinking, one does not consider agriculture as the only productive activity¹, but its relevance for all those involved in its production and in providing food to all persons still remains. This central role increases in agrarian societies and with it the emphasis on land or as Robb (1997, p. xi) points out "for much of human history" what mattered is "the manner in which land is controlled - that is, in accordance with local power, rural property or taxation and agriculture." In the Indian context the control of land to a large extent brings in the caste dimension - the landowning dominant castes and the landless agricultural labourers dominated castes - thus, making land-based hierarchies intertwined with caste-based hierarchies².

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¹ In fact, such a position was also not evident in the writings of ARJ Turgot, contemporary of Quesnay who was the main proponent of physiocracy; Adam Smith had also pointed out the problem with physiocrats considering manufacturing as sterile (Hollander, 1987).

² Intertwining of land and caste hierarchies in rural India is put succinctly in *The Remembered Village* surveyed in 1948 by Srinivas (1976, p. 211) where it is mentioned that: "There was a two-way relationship between landownership and caste rank. Traditionally, ownership of land conferred respectability and prestige, and this was translated into caste rank in course of time, and contrariwise, high ritual rank unaccompanied by landownership produced anomalous situations. As mentioned earlier, the secular Brahmin commanded more prestige than the priestly Brahmin who was frequently poor and dependent upon gifts from those who were better off." In fact, Srinivas (1987B) considers a dominant caste of a locality/region to be one that owns land, has a numerical strength and takes to education - numerical strength becomes relevant in a post-colonial democratic India and education, besides its intrinsic value, opens up avenues for new opportunities. The intrinsic and instrumental role of literacy/education has been put forth in a very convincing manner in Sen (1998A). For intertwining of class and caste in early twentieth century along with an analysis of literacy and gender see Chaudhry (1998).