

### **Book Review**

L.N. Venkataraman, *The Social Construction of Capabilities in a Tamil Village*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2021, pp. XIX + 190, Price not mentioned.

This book is the outcome of D.Phil. study of Sripuram village in Tamil Nadu. It is a social anthropological *re-study* of Andre Beteille's (1965). The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a South Indian village, pseudonymously named Sripuram. Beteille studied this village in 1960s by conducting social anthropological fieldwork on the caste, class and power dimensions. This book attempts to analyse them after five decades. As the research work has been conceptually influenced by the capabilities approach, its primary aim is to highlight the complex interactions of human agency and social structure. This book conceptualises the social construction of capabilities on the basis of literature and the anthropological study of Sripuram village. It is an in-depth analysis of human capital, social capital and the capabilities approach in terms of individual and social terms. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (1999) focused on individual abilities whereas this book focuses on the social abilities for creating capabilities of the person. It deals with poverty and education, capital and capabilities, and social changes with conceptualising capabilities approach in terms of social capital.

Chapter I (Introduction), starts with India's social system. Its unique social stratification is based on ascriptive status as per the classification of *varnashrama dharma* which is determined by birth. It stratifies people as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras which is based on the Hindu scriptures. In this fourfold division of labour, Brahmins i.e. the 'higher' caste is placed above other castes and the 'lower' castes are often addressed as Shudras. According to Beteille's description, the threefold caste blocs in the 1960s generally corresponded to the three principal economic classes, namely the landowners who were predominantly Brahmin, the tenants known as non-Brahmins and the labourers were Pallars (scheduled caste). Today one can find changes in this scheme which have been wrought mainly by education. Over the years the Brahmins have given up their absentee-landlordism due to socio-economic as well as educational factors. Non-Brahmins became new landowners or neo- Mirasdars. Though most Pallars are still dependent on neo-Mirasdars, education has played a significant role in these changes.

Chapter II deals with the complexities of poverty. It highlights the role of social structure on issues of exclusion. It focuses on absence of sociological works on educational functioning from capability's perspective. There are shared traditions through which economists comprehend indices of human development as the problem of poverty mostly goes hand in hand with social exclusion. Taking a clue from existing literature, Venkataraman shows deprived status of the

scheduled castes and tribes in almost all spheres including education. This historical deprivation reinforces the poverty trap in the process of capabilities formation. Considering the socio-economic mobility of the poor, the intersectional analysis on caste and class in educational outcomes adds a fresh dimension to the understanding of the developmental processes in India.

Chapter III on 'intersectional implications of capabilities formation' conceptualises the intersections of primordial identities. It underscores how the differential outcomes in both functioning and capabilities are influenced by the intersectionality of caste, class and gender in both education and employment. Their interaction in education is conceptualised to delineate the social construction of capabilities. Though caste is increasingly theorised as a backward division of labour, most of the villagers consider it as their social identity. Further, caste hierarchy and occupational hierarchy are not parallel. He mentions, "...the 'lower' the caste, greater the chances of being socio-economically poor in the country" (p. 33). The anthropological analysis on caste-based class determinism shows that the relative deprivation of individuals within the family was not the same as that of its class position in the village whereas Beteille's description Beteille (1965) deals with "... 'people belonging to the same group of castes live together, but not necessarily people belonging to the same class' " (p. 34). As for social discrimination, there is a remarkable difference in discrimination along caste lines and racial exclusion experiences in India and the US respectively. Racial discrimination is often based on physical appearance such as skin colour whereas caste discrimination is inclusive of physical as well as social status.

Chapter IV deals with educational quality, employability and capabilities. Major arguments point out that the intersectional social factors are influential in both functioning and capabilities formation. Though there is growth in education, there has been a decrease in enrolment in the government schools over the years in Tamil Nadu. Even the poor are increasingly emigrating out of fee-free government schooling for quality reasons due to the lack of quality education in government school and the establishment and advertisement of private schooling in Tamil Nadu. The scheduled castes also follow the trend seen among the upper and middle castes. For example, Pallar households are now increasingly sending their children to private schools. It seems that the gaps in their education, mainly in literacy and numeracy skills, are setting the stage for inferior capability formations. On the basis of existing literature, the author argues that despite quality being an important factor of employment, the system often fails to provide employment to the poor. In addition, the inferior quality of the fee-free government school most of the time adds to the burden of unemployment to the poor people's future. It has doubled the burden in the case of the girl child. Employability becomes a crucial factor for functional outcomes in education. The employment-centric quality pressures from the macro-economy push the non-poor, especially Brahmins, to private English medium schools whereas the poor and marginalised people become the worst sufferers of this vicious cycle of inferior schooling.

Chapter V deals with poverty and education. The ethnographic study of the lives of the poor in the village underscores that although education is seen as one of the essential means of upward mobility, the Brahmins approach it to sustain their social status as well as economic mobility. Inversely, others including the OBCs and scheduled castes think that education gives a chance for economic mobility. It supports the view of Jha and Jhingran (2005) who pointed out that there is no uniform trend regarding the demand for education among poor and deprived groups (p. 60). Though some Brahmins are poor, they are better placed than the economically deprived persons belonging to other castes due to the structural influences where individual preferences are institutionally shaped. The educated unemployed and underemployed are noticed among all social groups. Though the youth hold a qualifying certificate, they often do not have the functional literacy or skills in their field of study.

Chapter VI analyses caste, class and education of the educated underemployed youth. It examines the role of education and its outcome across diverse social groups. Men from the higher caste have better chances of enhancing additional skill sets due to the family habitus as well as socio-economic capabilities. Failures of functioning formations highlight the complexities of capabilities deprivations among the educated unemployed youths to emphasize the intersectional social factors in education along with the employment.

Chapter VII deals with capitals and capabilities. The perspective of the capabilities approach can conceptualise how these spheres could decide the capabilities alternatives. Theoretical engagement between capitals and capabilities can enrich sociological contributions in development studies. Almost all caste groups treat education as instrumental of human capital formation, hence the employment-centric approach provides resistance to the conversion of the human capital approach to the capabilities approach. Pallars specifically stand at the margins of development due to the vicious circle of educational deprivations and inferior cultural capital. For instance, given the same level of education, most of the Brahmin youths work with stable jobs in cities, but still youth from the middle and lower castes await further opportunities. The educated unemployment negatively influences others in the village for instance, if the educated unemployed youth roam around the village aimlessly. The poor instantly rationalise not sending their children to school at the cost of available economic opportunities. In India, economic deprivation of the poor is generally conceptualised in terms of social exclusion. Though the erstwhile lower castes are at the developmental margins, the poor people irrespective of caste background, often do not have the necessary social capital. For avoiding the deprivation trap, few small economic opportunities such as rearing cattle and casual labour in the agricultural fields are inadequate. Social capital by family, caste and even politics plays a complex role where patriarchy is often reproduced. Also, the quality of education and reservation policy play significant roles in individual expansion of the avenues of mobility. Regarding the demand for education, the author has noticed that "...Brahmin girls are often advised by the elders 'to study further to get a good husband'. By

contrast, the other castes do not face such demands because their preferences are focused on occupational outcome to retain primordial privileges” (p. 113).

Chapter VIII deals with social changes. Beteille (2009) pointed out that historically changes in social institutions have been qualitative and divergent rather than cumulative and unidirectional. In this framework, changes can broadly be understood in terms of caste as well as education. The caste-based residential segregation is changing with a change in class positions. There is an increasing entry of non-Brahmins in the village. Brahmins who are better educated than others are generally interested in buying houses outside the village. The settlement pattern in the village is no longer consistent with caste categorisation. The current forms of caste and class, because of the social changes, must be contrasted with the earlier descriptions. Regarding the intersectionality of caste and class, the first noticeable change was that of the working relationship between the OBCs and Pallars. This runs counter to the caste-based economic interdependence of earlier times when Pallars as agricultural labourers worked for Mirasdars who were predominantly Brahmins. Now they have almost given up their landholdings due to their increased economic mobility- emigration to the cities. The OBC neo-elites have replaced the old order. The result is that Pallars work under the OBC Mirasdar but are gradually buying agriculture lands.

Finally, chapter IX concludes this book. The nature and form of the caste system are no longer the same as earlier due to the political economy of the anti-Brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu. However, it still exists in a new form. The division of labour in the village is not only due to an economic arrangement but also dependant on an inheritance-based social structure. The author has raised many issues regarding the low-quality education, high poverty, unemployment and poor social capital among lower caste communities. Though the increasing levels of education are changing the landscape of this ascriptive status, the generational disadvantages of Pallars do not allow them to break the cycle of economic deprivation and social exclusion. Overall, this book would be useful for students of social sciences and policymakers.

## References

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