

Editorial

Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are officially recognised by the Indian Constitution and given a separate status and protection, distinct from groups officially designated as minorities. Although the Constitution classifies SCs and STs in its Articles 341 and 342 and provides for special policies in the form of affirmative action/reservations for these categories in higher education, employment and political representation through its Articles 330, 332 and 334. The list of SCs and STs in each individual state varies across India and is also reflected in the recognition of tribes and castes designated as 'poor'. According to Census (2001), it is estimated that the tribal population of India is about 8.2 percent and SC is 16.2 percent of the total population, which is a huge number in all. Both these groups are at the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI) in India. Although there is a general lack of disaggregated data, per capita total expenditures amongst SC and ST households are generally lower than the average for all states in India. A recently published interim report by the Institute of Human Development in India shows that there is a difference of 32 per cent between the human development indices at the national level and those of the STs. In international comparison, this places the STs firmly in the lowest human development category, akin to HDI of sub-Saharan Africa, followed closely by the SCs. According to UNDP (2010) 37 per cent of the population in India lives below the national poverty line. Of this, 41.8 per cent of the rural population lives below the poverty line; and 80 per cent of the rural poor belong to the marginalised caste and tribal communities. As a consequence, SCs and STs are affected by poor health, have limited access to basic services, and their communities are marked by social disintegration and abject poverty. This inequality is evident in various indicators of level of living such as ownership of land, education and employment. The tribes in India constitute 7 per cent of the landless people in India, which is the second-largest section after the SCs (10 per cent) and they own only 3 per cent of the large landholdings. In 2000, only 16 per cent of all SC households cultivated land as owner-cultivator, as against 41 per cent amongst non-SC/ST households. In tackling the structural dimensions of poverty, it may be more useful to channel resources at the sectors and sectoral issues where indigenous peoples or specified caste communities continue to suffer discrimination.

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