

Caste Discrimination and Food Security Programmes

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for an understanding with political parties serious and sincere. They are not afraid of political parties working in their areas and were the first to invite them to hold joint rallies in their areas. In their assessment this would allow them to work in urban areas and also help enhance the political understanding of their cadres in the countryside by making them acutely sensitive to how people perceive them and how to work in a situation of competitive politics. Above all, it would enable them to renew the politics of mass agitation and demonstrate their strength. This is a mark of a self-confident, not an arrogant, party. True, the three-month long unilateral ceasefire gives them a much needed breathing space and allows them to re-organise themselves for any eventuality were negotiations to break down. This places the onus on the political parties to show their sincerity about negotiations.

Joint Front

The success of negotiations depends on many imponderables. Outside the circle of the embedded media and the NGOs, this issue of armed struggle does not exercise the Nepali public. But yes, they would not want arms used to coerce people. So short of disarming or surrendering weapons, how can the Maoists ensure that political parties will be provided a level playing field? In return, will they recognise that the CPN(M) exercises authority as a governing party in the "liberated zones"? Will it be possible for the two sides to agree to recognise the reality of dual power, with each governing in their areas, but jointly conduct elections to the constituent assembly? Simultaneously, how can the political parties establish that they are not using negotiations with the Maoists to leverage a better deal with the king? In fact, more than the CPN(M), it is the political parties who inspire doubt. They were instrumental in unleashing the war of suppression, of allowing the king to consolidate his authority by fighting among themselves over crumbs. What measure will ensure that the parties do not renege on their commitment to hold elections to a constituent assembly? Maoist wariness about the political parties' demand for reinstatement of parliament is because they feel that this is a backdoor revival of the 1990 constitution. They also feel the political parties will use the reinstatement of parliament to push outrageous demands in order to escape

holding elections to set up a constituent assembly. True, this Maoists also need the political parties to enable a peaceful democratic resolution, because their chances of winning a popular mandate are rather good. Presumably, it is fear of this happening that scares the traditional leadership of the political parties. So, whereas CPN(M) appears willing for concessions, how far will the political parties go? How far can they go?

The political parties know that they can exploit talks with the Maoists to strike a deal with the king, but this necessitates the king agreeing to become a mere ceremonial head divested of his control over the army while retaining his property and wealth. But will people agree to this when they want to end the monarchy, which is the fountainhead of a decadent system

rather than be satisfied with mere divestment of his control over the army? The radical socio-economic agenda can get subverted. However, the conjunction of political formations today in Nepal is such that those who favour a radical agenda not only outnumber the rest but they are also an organised force. In this sense, a failure of negotiations with the political parties would polarise Nepal, split the political parties and lead to a coalescing of the CPN(M) with other sections of radical left, and nourish the civil war. In short, Nepal is poised at a moment of great importance, which will surely influence the ideological complexion of politics in India as well as south Asia. **EW**

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Caste Discrimination and Food Security Programmes

The findings of a survey in select states conducted in 2003 expose the patterns of exclusion and caste discrimination that afflict the government's mid-day meal scheme and public distribution system. This article investigates dalit participation in these programmes and also measures aspects of physical access, participatory empowerment and community-level access.

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Kalpana, a second standard student of a government school located in the dominant caste quarter of Kamalapur village in Tamil Nadu, was denied food and chased out of school when she tried to participate with the rest of the students in the government mid-day meal programme. The reason was that she was a dalit, while her classmates were from dominant castes.

In villages within an hour's drive of Bihar's capital city Patna, the government public distribution system's fair price shop owners, belonging to the dominant castes, do not distribute goods to dalit customers until they have hung cloth screens in a place to "protect" themselves from the polluting presence of the "untouchables".

These are examples, not sensational exceptions, of relatively common events in the dalit experience of government food-related programmes. The findings of the

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) survey conducted in 531 villages of five states in 2003 expose the patterns of exclusion and caste discrimination that afflict, if not overwhelm, the government of India's mid-day meal scheme (MMS) and public distribution system (PDS). In addition to examining the treatment of dalits in these government programmes, the survey attempted to measure dalits' physical access, participatory empowerment and community-level access to the MMS and PDS. And through an analysis of resultant data, the study also discerns potential ways for an improvement. Given the behavioural aspect of discrimination, qualitative informant responses are also incorporated to supplement the survey's quantitative data.

Following the view that victims of discrimination are their own best spokespeople, the survey was conducted through formal interviews with the dalit communities of 531 villages in 30 districts in five

states – Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, in 2003. The discussion below presents the key findings of the survey.

Mid-day Meal Scheme

Of the states considered in this study, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have implemented the MMS. Children at government schools in these states are provided daily with hot, cooked, mid-day meals, free of cost. Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, on the other hand, have not implemented the MMS, but continue with a programme in which a fixed quantity of dry grain is provided monthly to government school children. Therefore, the discussion related to MMS is confined to three states only – Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Dalit children's physical access to the MMS is first and foremost contingent on the implementation of the scheme by state governments. If we consider the percentage of villages covered by the MMS programme as an indicator, we find that the governments of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have largely achieved the initial step towards facilitating an access. The MMS has been implemented in 98.4 per cent of villages surveyed in these states.

The localities in which mid-day meals are served in terms of village caste geography constitute another important factor in determining dalit children's access. Considering the percentage of villages in which the MMS is held in a locality non-threatening to dalits (i.e., a dalit colony as opposed to a dominant caste locality) as an indicator, we note that Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu have very low percentages: 12 per cent and 19 per cent respectively. Most mid-day meals in these states are held in dominant caste localities. Thus, the vast majority of dalit children must enter an area of heightened vulnerability, tension and threat in order to avail themselves of the mid-day meal. A pattern of incidents documented in the study shows that when dominant caste communities feel the need to reassert their hegemony, they often clamp down on dalit movement in dominant caste localities, including the movement of dalit children. Therefore, where the mid-day meal is served in dominant caste localities, access for dalit children is held hostage to the fluctuating state of caste relations in the village or region.

In contrast, 47 per cent of respondent villages in Andhra Pradesh hold the MMS in a dalit locality. Qualitative data indicate that this goes a long way toward assuring dalit access, and may also help erode dominant caste prejudices against entering dalit localities. Two indicators are used to measure dalits' participatory empowerment in and ownership of the MMS: the percentage of MMS organised/operated by dalits and the percentage of MMS in which dalit cooks are engaged. Considering both indicators, Rajasthan employs the fewest dalits, with 8 per cent of respondent villages having a dalit cook, and not a single respondent village having a dalit MMS organiser. Tamil Nadu hires proportionally more, with 31 per cent of respondent villages having dalit cooks, and 27 per cent having dalit organisers. Andhra Pradesh leads the three states in indicators of dalit empowerment and ownership of the MMS, with 49 per cent and 45 per cent of respondent villages having dalits as cooks and organisers, respectively.

Survey findings with reference to dalit community-level access to the MMS indicate that caste-based exclusion and discrimination of one form or another do in fact plague a significant percentage of MMS across the country. Looking first at the aggregate data, in which all forms of caste-based exclusion and discrimination are considered together, 52 per cent of respondent villages from Rajasthan, 24 per cent from Andhra Pradesh, and 36 per cent from Tamil Nadu (giving a three-state average of 37 per cent) report that there is a problem of caste discrimination in the MMS in their village.

This aggregate data encompasses cases both of exclusion and of discrimination, defined as inclusion with an inequitable treatment. First considering cases of exclusion, six villages in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu report that dalit children are completely barred from the MMS by dominant caste communities on account of being "untouchable". While these six villages constitute only a small percentage of the villages surveyed, the practice of outright exclusion anywhere constitutes an egregious violation of rights, and the persistence of such cases has serious implications for the right to food in India.

Blatant exclusion aside, what are some of the manifestations of caste discrimination that arise in the MMS? Out of the villages that specify the character of the discrimination, the largest portion,

48.3 per cent, reports the problem of dominant caste's opposition to dalit cooks. The second most common issue, at 31 per cent, is segregated seating, in which dalit children are required to sit apart from dominant caste children during the meal. A more intensified practice of segregation, in which dalits and dominant caste children are served separate meals altogether, is reported by 9.2 per cent of respondent villages. Finally, 9.2 per cent report that teachers discriminate among students by giving inferior or insufficient food to dalit children, and 2.3 per cent of respondents identify other problems.

Many survey respondents provide narrative accounts of caste discrimination in the MMS in their villages, furnishing qualitative detail essential for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Making use of these narrative aspects, the following discussion elaborates on the most widely reported manifestation of caste discrimination in the MMS – opposition to dalit cooks.

Opposition to Dalit Cooks

"Opposition to dalit cooks" is actually a blanket term describing several different patterns of specific acts of caste discrimination and exclusion observed in the study. The patterns can be grouped into five, which take place at different points during the process of MMS institution and continuance. First, when local administrators are putting the MMS into place, dominant caste community members intervene to block the hiring of dalit cooks, favouring dominant caste cooks instead. Where a dalit cook has been hired, dominant caste parents then begin sending their children to school with lunches packed at home, or require their children to come home for lunch, in any case forbidding their children to eat food prepared by the dalit cook. In the third stage, dominant caste parents or community members pressure the local administration to dismiss the dalit cook, on any pretext, and hire a dominant caste cook instead. Where this is ineffective, or sometimes without the intervening step, the dominant caste parents campaign to shut down the MMS in the village school altogether. Finally, some dominant caste parents react to the hiring and keeping of a dalit cook by withdrawing their children from the school, and sometimes admitting them in a different school where the cook is not a dalit.

Examples may help briefly to illustrate some of the above patterns. The first is adequately exemplified by a village in West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. In this village, dominant caste women organised in the state government's Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) scheme successfully mobilised community and administrative support to block – on account of their caste – a qualified dalit women's DWCRA group from obtaining employment as cooks in the village MMS.

A village in Ajmer district, Rajasthan, illustrates two of the trends identified above. When the MMS began in this village in July 2002, Sunita (name changed), a dalit widow, was hired to prepare the mid-day meal of 'ghughri'. Dominant caste parents, considering Sunita polluted on account of her caste, ordered their children not to eat the mid-day meal at their school, effectively launching a proxy hunger strike through their children. Alongside this, the dominant caste parents exerted social and economic pressure on the dominant caste headmaster of the school to dismiss Sunita from employment. Ultimately, the headmaster consented, expelled Sunita, and hired a dominant caste woman to cook in her place.

Behind these trends of dominant caste behaviour is the classic Hindu understanding of purity and pollution, according to which food prepared by a dalit – that is, an "untouchable" – is considered "polluted" by virtue of its contact with the intrinsically polluted dalit. On another level, dominant caste opposition to dalit cooks also represents a power struggle over livelihood rights. In the manner of social boycotts, concerted dominant caste opposition to dalit cooks functions to break dalit economic aspirations, i.e., dalit entry into new livelihood domains such as government employment as MMS cooks at the village level. The rural dominant caste establishment, which traditionally enjoys the economic dependence of the dalit community, perceives dalit entries into new economic spheres as threatening, and therefore, responds with a backlash.

Public Distribution System

The central government's Targeted Public Distribution System, in which essential food is made available to the poor at regulated, subsidised costs, functions in all five states surveyed in the study –

Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In terms of physical access, it is to the government's credit that throughout the country, PDS shops are largely up and running. As a five state average, 87 per cent of respondent villages in the study report having at least one functioning PDS shop in their village; 73 per cent of respondents have exactly one PDS shop in their village, while 14 per cent have more than one PDS shop per village. Thirteen per cent of respondent villages, however, have no PDS shop in their village, and the poor in these villages must travel outside to avail themselves of their legal entitlements of subsidised goods.

Most of the villages without PDS shops are in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Taking a look at an interstate variation in the data, Uttar Pradesh shows itself the most recalcitrant in assuring PDS accessibility, with 39 per cent of respondent villages lacking PDS shops and only 7 per cent having more than one shop. Bihar follows with 16 per cent of villages lacking a PDS shop, and only 10 per cent having more than one. Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu score about equally – and adequately – while access appears most assured in Andhra Pradesh, where 44 per cent of respondent villages have more than one shop, 53 per cent have exactly one shop and only 3 per cent have no shop.

A second factor conditioning dalit access to the benefits of the PDS is the location in which the shops are physically situated. As a five-state average, 17 per cent of villages have PDS shops in dalit colonies, while 70 per cent have PDS shops located in dominant caste localities, and 13 per cent of villages have PDS shops located elsewhere. The highest percentage of respondent villages with PDS shops in dalit colonies – 30 per cent – is found in Andhra Pradesh. The lowest is found in Rajasthan, in which not a single respondent village has a PDS shop located in a dalit locality. In terms of participatory empowerment, the preponderance of dominant caste PDS dealers and the paucity of dalit dealers in survey data are equally striking. The five-state average comes to 81 per cent dominant caste ownership of PDS shops, and 17.6 per cent dalit ownership. At the state level, again, Andhra Pradesh stands out as the only state in which dalits have attained a significant degree of participatory empowerment, at 32 per cent, followed by Bihar, Rajasthan, UP and lastly, Tamil Nadu with 9 per cent.

In terms of dalits' community access to the PDS, four forms of discriminatory practices that compromise dalit access are reported – discrimination in quantity, discrimination in price, caste-based favouritism by the PDS dealer, and practices of "untouchability" by the PDS dealer. As a five-state average, 40 per cent of respondent villages report discrimination in quantity, i.e., that dalits receive, for the same price, lesser quantities than the dominant castes receive from the PDS shopkeeper. A discrimination in price, where PDS dealers charge dalit customers extra for the same quantity of product that dominant castes purchase at a lower cost, is reported in 28 per cent of respondent villages.

Favouritism

The third and most commonly reported form of discrimination in the PDS is caste-based favouritism by the PDS dealer in the distribution of goods. Taking the five-state average, 48 per cent of respondent villages report this is a problem. Respondents describe this phenomenon taking numerous forms. In some places, PDS dealers service the dominant castes throughout the week, while only serving the dalit community on arbitrarily designated "dalit days", falling once or twice in a week, often with reduced hours. Preferential order in service, meaning that dalits are kept waiting and served last while dominant caste members are served immediately, is widely reported. Describing the way in which caste-based favouritism works in the PDS in their village, respondents in a village of Ghazipur district, Uttar Pradesh, relate an incident in which members of the dalit community were in severe need of sugar and other goods from the PDS, but the dominant caste PDS dealer flatly refused, saying that his stock had run out. The same day, members of the PDS dealer's own caste had a wedding for which they received "quintal after quintal" of sugar and other supposedly absent goods from the PDS shop.

Fourth, PDS dealers in an average of 26 per cent of surveyed villages in the five states practise "untouchability" in the distribution of government goods to dalits. One classic "untouchability" practice still in currency is the dominant caste dropping of goods from above into cupped dalit hands below, so as to avoid the possibility of "polluting" contact between the "upper" and "lower". Other practices

evidenced in the data include dominant caste PDS dealers in Bihar hanging cloth screens in front of their shops before dealing with Musahar dalits. As PDS dealers are government actors, the practice by more than one quarter of PDS dealers of "untouchability" in the course of their official duty – in blatant defiance of the Indian Constitution, the Anti-untouchability Act of 1955, and numerous pieces of legislation since – has serious legal implications for the government.

Conclusion

Taking a closer look at interstate variation in the data for both the MMS and the PDS, it can hardly escape notice that higher dalit access and participatory power in MMS and PDS correspond with lower incidence of exclusion and caste discrimination. Andhra Pradesh, which has the highest percentage of dalit cooks, dalit organisers and MMS held in dalit localities, simultaneously has the lowest percentage of reported caste discrimination in the MMS. Conversely, Rajasthan, which has the lowest percentage of dalit cooks and organisers and MMS held in dalit colonies, simultaneously has the highest rate of reported caste discrimination. A similar pattern stands out in the PDS data; in Andhra Pradesh, where dalit ownership of PDS shops is high and where greater proportions of PDS shops are accessibly located in dalit localities, levels of reported caste discrimination are lower. While direct causality cannot be proven, quantitative and qualitative evidence from the field suggests that these data trends are indeed interlinked.

To what can we attribute the relatively higher access and participatory empowerment/ownership, and lower levels of discrimination, in Andhra Pradesh? Qualitative data from the study indicate that the state government's willingness to engage with civil society initiatives in implementing its programmes, combined with sustained mass action by people's movements and dalit NGOs, may be the key elements. For instance, when energised and held accountable by vigilant civil society organisations, the state government's implementation of the MMS through local women's groups (DWCRA groups), as opposed to the usual government machinery, appears to have increased the scope for dalit women to make empowered, effective and participatory interventions to

ensure their children's equal access to the right to food and the right to education, as well as their own right to employment (as MMS cooks, organisers or teachers).

Two policies, then, emerge from the data as means to tackle the exclusion/discrimination problem. First, the government can relocate or newly locate MMS centres and PDS shops in dalit colonies or other accessible caste-neutral localities. Second, the government can seek partnerships with dalit women's groups and community to jointly implement and monitor the

programmes. By fostering dalit participatory empowerment in terms of operation and ownership of the programmes, the government can decrease the incidence of discrimination, improve access and begin to make the right to food a reality for dalits on a par with other communities. **□□**

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[The survey was conducted by the National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights. We thank their activists who helped in the collection of data.]

Uttar Pradesh Finances

At the time of initiation of the planning process only three states were ahead of Uttar Pradesh on per capita income; now UP stands above only Bihar. The state economy is growing at less than half of the national growth rate. The growth was 2.3 per cent per annum during 1997-2001 as against 5.2 per cent for the national economy.

KRIPA SHANKAR

At the time of initiation of planning process only three states were ahead of UP as regards per capita income; now the same in UP is the lowest except that of Bihar. The per capita net national product in 2002-03 was nearly Rs 19,000 as against Rs 9,895 in UP. The difference between the two is widening with every passing year. The state economy is growing at less than half of the national growth rate which was 2.3 per cent per annum during 1997-2001 as against 5.2 per cent for the national economy.

What is central to the growth process in the initial phases of development is to accelerate public investment in various branches of the economy as the private savings are low. The massive public investment in infrastructure, in the first instance, is imperative and only the state through its budgetary expenditure can accomplish it. There are, no doubt, competing demands on public funds, more so in electoral politics, but the performance of state finances will primarily be judged in the manner in which it strengthens the productive base. The performance of state budgets has not been commendable in this respect despite the great challenges facing the state economy. The per capita plan outlay in UP is less than half of the national

average which, among other things, explains the lower growth rate. The per capita tax revenue is lowest in UP except Bihar. The per capita state's own tax revenue in UP at less than Rs 900 is nearly half of the national level. The per capita state's own tax revenue as a percentage of per capita state gross domestic product is nearly 7 per cent in UP, whereas it is nearly 10 per cent each in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Gujarat. The successive state governments have taken pride in the fact that no fresh tax proposals are being made although the state has been losing ground to other states in terms of various developmental indices. The state has faulted most in generating its own resources. Between 1980-81 and 2003-04 the tax revenue in UP increased by 22.5 times, but in Tamil Nadu it increased by 24.7 times; in AP by 27.6 times; in Karnataka by 26.5 times and in Kerala by 25.8 times. The combined increase in all the states taken together was 24.7 times. Table 1 shows the recent trends in government finances.

Recent Trends

Till early 1980s, UP used to be a revenue surplus state, but revenue deficit in recent years has been over 15 per cent of the revenue receipts and if the same has been projected at 13 per cent in 2005-06, it is