

How Dalits live

The book provides insights into the living conditions of Dalit households in different parts of the country. BY C.T. KURIEN

ALTHOUGH there is growing awareness about the plight of Dalits in our society, it is largely in terms of aggregates even when, or particularly when, data are presented to document it. This is mainly because the data come from sources such as the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Useful as they are for many purposes, they do not help much in getting a feel of the actual living conditions of a large segment of Indians. There are case studies that give vivid descriptions of the life and struggles of Dalits but none that place before the readers a combination of their general and specific socio-economic conditions. The collection of papers brought together in the volume, edited by V.K. Ramachandran and Madhura Swaminathan, is a rare one of that kind.

The Indian Constitution has declared untouchability illegal. So, has untouchability ceased to exist after more than six decades of the founding of the Indian republic? The volume opens with a long list (five pages in small print!) of the variety of ways in which untouchability is practised in different parts of the country, which is shocking indeed.

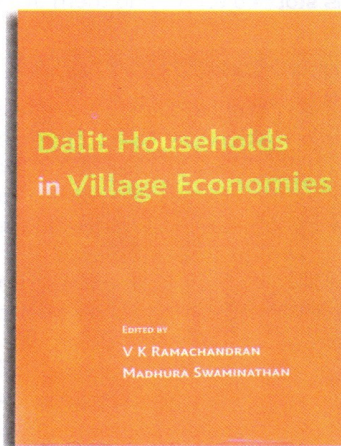
This traditional social disadvantage is compounded by economic factors, the chief among them being the lack of assets, especially landholdings. One of the findings of the studies conducted in various villages in different parts of the country is that in the vast majority of them 70 per cent of Dalit households had no landholdings. In terms of other assets, too, Dalit households have a low position. Their access to credit is limited. The educational levels of Dalit households are in general low. The general level of literacy has shown improvement in recent years, but the village studies show some distressing figures. In the great majority of the villages under survey, the median number of years of

schooling among Dalit women was zero. Thus, whatever may be the constitutional mandates and policy objectives, a combination of cultural, social and economic factors exclude Dalit households from getting a share of the benefits of economic development that has been taking place in the country. Not surprisingly, therefore, Dalits constitute the majority of the poor in the country.

The purpose of the volume under review is to bring to light this fact and the living conditions of Dalit households in different parts of the country. The volume is based largely on village studies titled Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI) conducted by the Foundation for

Agrarian Studies between 2005 and 2010 in over 20 villages. These were not sample surveys done to draw generalised inferences but were aimed at providing a realistic picture of the conditions of life of Dalits in different parts of the country. One of the papers reports on the variations in landholdings and assets in 15 of the villages that were studied. In all these villages, the average value of asset holding of Dalit households was substantially lower than that of the other castes. In fact, Dalit households were concentrated in the bottom four deciles of the distribution of assets. In most villages, the share of Dalits was the lowest with respect to agricultural land, and the proportion of landless households was the highest among them. The landlessness among Dalits was not compensated for by higher ownership of any other type of asset.

Another chapter compares the asset position and level of poverty in two villages in Uttar Pradesh. It may be noted that assets are potential income generators and can also provide a cushion against income fluctuations. Hence, they can have a bearing on poverty indicated by the level of income. In both the villages, income earned by virtue of ownership of productive assets (other than labour power) was much lower for Dalit households. An interesting finding is that between 1983 and 2001, while the income poverty declined by 11 per cent, asset poverty increased. Typ-



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DALITS LINE UP for MGNREGA work after caste Hindus stopped employing them at Jampad village in Bidar taluk in Karnataka.

ically, it indicated that the period of time a household could survive at the poverty level of consumption using funds obtained by selling assets declined, showing growing vulnerability. This shows that figures that indicate levels of poverty in terms of either consumption or even income do not provide a true picture of the well-being of those considered to have been “lifted out” of poverty.

A related aspect emerges from another chapter of the volume. What is the impact of high “growth” on the living conditions of the poor? It is often claimed that “growth” is not only a necessary condition for reduction of poverty but even a sufficient condition.

This general assumption is put to test through a study of eight villages in four States. Sample surveys and complete enumeration (as in the case of a census) were conducted in these villages. And the findings are that in three of the villages characterised by higher productivity, inequality was higher and that, where such is the case, the tendency is for increase in income to benefit

those at the top. The point is not that case studies in a few villages disprove (or prove) observations at the national or international level, but that when income increases, it cannot be assumed (or asserted, as usually happens) its distribution will benefit all sections.

The distribution of an increase will depend very much on the state of the initial distribution itself. To put it differently, an increase in income in the context of inequalities cannot be claimed to benefit all sections of the population; the chances are that it will accrue largely to those at the top, thus further increasing inequality.

Three chapters in the volume are based on the study of the same villages over a period of time, two in Tamil Nadu and one in Maharashtra. A distinguished foreign scholar studied the economic and social conditions in a few villages in Coimbatore district in 1980-81, 1996, 2003-04 and 2008-09. As is well known, this region has experienced enormous changes in the past four decades in terms of agriculture, industry, infras-

tructure, and so on. And witness what has happened to Dalits: (i) Dalits in these villages in Tamil Nadu had very little agricultural land and the situation had changed very little in the period under review; (ii) they had got considerably more land for house sites; (iii) they were only slowly reducing their dependence on agriculture, much more slowly than other caste groups; (iv) within agriculture, they were still predominantly labourers; (v) to the extent they were entering the non-agricultural economy, they were doing so as employees rather than as self-employed persons; (vi) they lagged behind other groups of employees in that they were manual and/or semi-skilled workers rather than non-manual workers; (vii) Dalits were not getting anywhere in self-employment, either in trade or in other forms of business; (viii) their educational record was very poor until recently; and (ix) they were still suffering severely from the practice of untouchability though less severely than was the case in 1981-82.

The volume also carries three studies of the struggles of Dalits themselves, their supporters, political parties and even governments to improve their condition. One of the studies is of the Malabar region (earlier part of Madras Presidency under the British, now part of Kerala) roughly from the mid-19th century, but mainly in the 20th century. The second is of the struggles of peasants and Dalits in east Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu) from the 1940s to the 1990s. And the third is of the struggles of Dalits in West Bengal in the 20th century for access to land. All three of them emphasise the crucial significance of land reforms—the struggles of Dalits and their supporters finally resulting in public policy. The study on Malabar makes the following assessment of land reforms: “Land reforms changed the conditions in which labour power was sold; it freed the workers to sell their labour power to employers of their choice. It hit at the very basis of caste-based atrocities by undermining not only feudal landlordism, but also the traditional base of upper caste domination.” So, if there is to be a single solution to the complex problem of Dalits, it is the old slogan of “land to the tiller”.

The volume is the result of the collaboration of many scholars, agencies and institutions and they all deserve thanks for making available so much of information and insights to those interested in the conditions of life of a major section of the national community. □