



Social Distancing, Caste Discrimination and Vulnerability amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Addressing the Socio-economic vulnerabilities of the lower caste communities attached with the stigma of untouchability must be prioritized amidst strict Social Distancing measures in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic combined with social distancing norms has unsurprisingly laid bare the fragile livelihood situation of lower caste communities in the midst of massive job loss in the urban locations. As it is evident that people from higher income groups are less likely to be impacted while India's disadvantaged communities with lack of access to resources will be intensely affected in the unprecedented global health emergency situation.

On one hand, massive increase of inequality and the rise of new middle class in India's post LPG (Liberalization, Privatisation and Globalization) era has widened the asymmetric gap between India's rich and the marginalised. On the other, the LPG era has been a blessing in disguise for upper castes as they own considerable social capital accumulated through generations due to their caste location. Many of them migrated to urban cities and settled in the elite areas due to their economic capital. As for lower caste communities, historic marginalisation continues to be an obstacle for any form of upward mobility, especially in the case of occupation. The LPG era coupled with the endemic of ancient caste based social stratifications hit the lower caste harder when they started migrating to the urban cities due to discrimination in the rural areas. The informal sector labour force, majority of whom are from Scheduled caste communities followed by the Other backward castes are moving away from the urban to their villages as the strict lockdown due to covid-19

pandemic has shut their employment opportunities in the urban centres.

Scheduled Caste's (SC), who are at the bottom of the social ladder in India, face the entrenched social discrimination that shapes the current socio-economic realities of the labour market amid the pandemic. According to the 2011-12 NSSO statistics, the share of wage laborers among SCs was 63%. This is significantly higher than the values for other social groups. These figures were 44% for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 42% for upper castes and 46% for the rest. Even among wage labourers, SCs have a much greater share of casual wage workers, which signifies higher job insecurity and bare minimum earnings. In fact, of the total casual labourers in the country, about 32 percent are SC, which is double their population share of 16 percent. The disadvantage faced by SCs extends beyond their disproportionate dependence on wage work. This is because SCs face caste-based discrimination when being hired, they also have a greater unemployment rate than the rest of the population (Thorat, 2018). Now, the situation is much worse than ever for the lower caste informal sector workforce, as an estimated 119 million workers have lost their jobs within the two weeks of lockdown. If we assume half of those who have lost their jobs are primary or single earning family member of an average of 5-member family size (as per census 2011) households, around one-third (60 million households or 300 million people) of India's people or households, could be facing a severe livelihood crisis and around 227 million households are in destitution (Mehta 2020).

Informal labour market has been a major source of income generation for lower caste communities which is not immune to the caste prejudices and social exclusion. Prof T S Papola in a 2012 working paper highlighted, 'A most peculiar feature of the labour market is that a buyer is often influenced in his decision to buy not by the nature and quality of the product but by some socio-cultural attributes of the seller. For example, some high caste Hindus may not buy cooked food from a low caste seller. In a sense, it is also the case of refusal to buy the product of labour, but is indeed a result of the notions of pollutions and untouchability'.

The customs of purity and pollution are reflected even in the midst of the lockdown and social distancing measures. Two men in a quarantine centre of a Uttar Pradesh district refused to eat food cooked by a Dalit panchayat chief (Srivastava, 2020). This is true in most of the urban households too. The lower caste maids are segregated along the caste lines, and rarely allowed to enter into the kitchen. Needless to say, in the outbreak of COVID-19 their entry is even banned due to social distancing.

A survey conducted in over 42,000 households across India by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland, USA asked two specific questions to the respondents, "Does anyone in your family practise untouchability?" and, in case the answer was "No", asked a second question: "Would it be okay for a Scheduled Caste person to enter your kitchen or use your utensils?" The survey found 27 per cent respondents across the country agreed that they did practise untouchability and it was most prevalent among Brahmin respondents (52 per cent) when 24 per cent of non-Brahmin other higher castes respondents admitted to it".

As a result, caste prejudice is clearly regenerated by social distancing regulations as lower caste Indians are historically separated and isolated by centuries old untouchable practises coupled with endogamous norms by the higher castes. Hindu society's stratification of castes on the basis of Varna system practise caste based discriminations that reinforce the lower castes marginalisation at all times and amplify during emergency situations such as this pandemic.

The institutional refusal to recognise the invisible vulnerabilities of the lower caste households' severely impact upon the policy making processes. It is this structural bias that results in insecurity and powerlessness among lower caste rural and urban daily wage earners. Ultimately, this make them susceptible to loss of potential livelihood in the events of emergency

Social vulnerability perpetuated by the practices of untouchability may contribute to the potential rise in ethical concerns amid the national shutdown. "Are the ethical and emotional conditions not important in making the decision of the lockdown successful? The success of the lockdown depends on the ethical principle which for such success would demand a fair distribution of conditions" (Guru, 2020)

The social structure enforced by Brahminical ideas of purity not only traditionally segregated the upper caste from lower caste communities of India but also preservation of physical distance to uphold the notions of purity and pollution. Keeping in mind the historiography of casteism, the Central Government's imposition of social distancing measures to may further intensify the divide between the lower caste and upper caste communities.

The bigger concern during this pandemic is a fair distribution of ration and other essential commodities sanctioned by the centre as well as the states. The hoarding and panic

buying of food and other essential commodities by the privileged upper class and upper caste groups may worsen the situation. Therefore, there is a conformity in the behaviour of the privileged upper class/caste which is directly linked with their social positioning that automatically puts marginalized at the bottom and aggravate the economic gulf.

Hence, the distancing models enforced by the government will intensify the double-edged exclusion of marginalised groups. It can potentially lead to a socio-economic crisis that will exclusively affect them. The fact that the systemic caste structure is immune to an unprecedented event like this pandemic, makes such a crisis certainly inevitable. Finally, In the midst of pandemic, the political and elitist opportunism in subtle promotion of social cleavages reinforce the process of othering of the lower castes. The hollowed solidarities of the entitled caste-class combinations could not bring forth any positive rupture in the already stigmatised lives of the people on the margins. The COVID-19 pandemic will perpetuate caste hierarchy as well as inequality against the lower caste communities, as casteist practice are continued under the guise of social distancing by the upper class/caste. All in all,, the notion of social distance does well fit in the vocabulary of the privileged caste capital.

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