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**“An Impact of Developmental Programmes for Social Transformation of Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes”**

**Book No-2**



**EDITOR**  
**Dr. CH. VENU BABU**

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S.No	Title & Author	Page No
1	An Evaluative Study of Developmental Measures for Tribes in Meghalaya, <b>Jarline T Sangma</b> , Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science & Public Administration, Annamalai University & <b>Dr. J. Subramanian</b> , Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science & Public Administration, Annamalai University	1-4
2	Tribal Development Through Five Year Plans in India, <b>Lukkumanul Hakkim S</b> PhD Research Scholar Department of Economics, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chdambaram, Tamil Nadu-608002	5-9
3	Socio Economic Condition Affected on Tribal Women Education Opportunites and challenges, <b>Jyothirmayi Talaparathi</b> , Research scholar (Ph.D), Department of education, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, AP-530003, Jyothirmayi777@gmail.com	10-13
4	Economic Mobility of Tribal Community in Jammu and Kashmir: A Case Study of Gujjar Community, <b>Mohd Abdullah</b> , Research Scholar, Department of Economics, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University Lucknow, Vidya Vihar Raebareli Road, Lucknow, Utter Pradesh: 226025, Mob. 7006313206	14-18
5	A Study on Awareness among SCs and STs Parents on Educational Schemes for SCs and STs in Dindigul District, TamilNadu, <b>K. Gangadhara Chary &amp; Dr.K.K.Murugan</b> , Department Of Education, Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed To Be University), Dindigul Dist, Tamilnadu.	18-21
6	The Impact of Developmental Programs on the Socio-Economic Conditions of scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, <b>Mr. M. Gandhi</b> , Research Scholar, Department of Economics, Kakatiya University, Warangal,	22-26
7	Socio-Economic Status of Physically Disabled: Special Reference to SC's and ST's, <b>Maresh K S &amp; Prof. M Gurulingaiah</b> , Department of Studies and Research in Sociology, Kuvempu University Jnanasahyadri, Shankaraghatta Karnataka-577451 & Formerly Member, Karnataka State Commission for Backwardclasses, Govt. of Karnataka, Bengaluru, Mob: 9481846276,	27-30
8	Impact and Effectiveness of Various Developmental Programmes among SC/ST Population of Puducherry, <b>S. Arulazhagan</b> , Assistant Professor of Economics, Arignar Anna Government Arts and Science College, Karaikal - 609605. Mobile:8903747592,	31-35
9	An Analysis Of Policy Framework For Development Of Sc And St Communities, <b>Smt. Tripti Sao, &amp; Dr.Tapesh Chandra Gupta</b> , Professor- Commerce, Govt. J. Yoganandam College, Raipur, tapesh_48gupta@yahoo.in	36-38
10	Demographic and Health status of Scheduled Tribes in Visakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh <b>K. Murali</b> , 9515471776 & <b>Prof. D. Pulla Rao</b> , Department of Economics, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam-53000, A.P.	39-43
11	An Awareness and Impact of Developmental Programs for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes, <b>K. Vijay &amp; B. Anne Sumalatha</b> , Asst. Professor, Department of Business Administration, P.B. Siddhartha College of Arts and Science, Vijayawada, AP.	44-46
12	Impact Of Mgnregs On Socio-Economic Development Of Scheduled Caste Women In Rural Andhra Pradesh, <b>M.SwarnaLatha &amp; V.Venkateswarlu</b> , Associate professor, Dept of Sociology and Social work, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur	47-50
13	Educational Status Of Scheduled Tribes, <b>Mahendrababu Dhulipudi</b> , Research Scholar, Department of economics, Acharya Nagarjuna University.	51-53
14	Socio – Economic Development of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe through DEDs in India, <b>Smt C. Sumangali</b> , HOD Department of Commerce, D.R.N.S.C.V.S. College, Chilakaluripet, Guntur Dist. Andhra Pradesh. 522616, Phone No.7981446129	53-54
15	A Micro Level Study On Tribal Health In Anantagiri Mandal Of Visakhapatnam District, Andhra Pradesh, <b>K. Srikanth &amp; Prof. D. Pulla Rao</b> , Department of Economics, Andhra University.	55-58
16	Demographic profile of Tribal women in Nagarkurnool District of Telangana State, <b>K.Spandana Deepika &amp; Dr.R.Geetha Reddy</b> , Ms.S.L.Kameswari & <b>Dr.P.Sreedevi</b> Professor Jayashankar Telangana State Agricultural University, Telangana, India.	59-63
17	A Theoretical Study On Developmental Programmes For Economic And Social Empowerment Of Scheduled Castes In India. <b>Mr. Rajesh Pasala &amp; Mrs. Nagalakshmi Veeram</b> , Assistant Professor, Andhra Loyola Institute of Engineering and Technology, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India, e-Mail: nagalakshmi.veeram@gmail.com	64-67
18	Empowerment Of Rural Women Through Entrepreneurship – (With A Special Reference To Scheduled Caste Women). <b>M.Anuradha &amp; Dr.Bharathi</b> , Assistant Professor, Dept. of Economics, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.	68-71
19	Socio-Economic And Educational Status Of Scheduled Castes: A Study Of Ummalada Village Of Munagapaka Mandal In Visakhapatnam District Of Andhra Pradesh. <b>M. Anuradha &amp; Prof. D. Pulla Rao</b> , Dept. of Economics, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam	72-76
20	Empowerment of Tribal Women through ITDA in Andhra Pradesh: A Case Study of Godavari (East & West) Districts in Andhra Pradesh, <b>N.Nagalakshmi Devi &amp; Dr.M.Ravishekhar</b> , Assistant Professor, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Cell Number. 9640590212	77-80
21	Costs And Revenues On Tribal Lands In Andhra Pradesh: A Study Of Visakhapatnam And Vizianagaram Districts, <b>N.E. Jyothi</b> , Research Scholar, Dept. Of Political Science and public Administration, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam	81-85
22	Access to Digital Infrastructure and Socio-Economic Exclusion: Inclusive Policies for STs and SCs in Andhra Pradesh, <b>Dr. Ramesh Babu Para, Dr. A. Samuel Dayakar</b> , Head, Department of Political Science, Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, Email: polscience.alc@gmail.com	86-90
23	Developmental Programs for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes and its Impact in India <b>Dr. D. Ashalatha</b> , Department of Economics, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. & <b>M. Yamuna</b> , Department of Economics, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam	91-93
24	Solutions for the Problems of Tribal Communities through Monitoring Mechanism, <b>Vemuri SreeRekha</b> , Lecturer in Computer Science, Sri Durga Malleswara Siddhartha Mahila Kalasala, Vijayawada.	94-96
25	Economic Status, Nutritional Norms and Poverty Levels among Scheduled Tribes in Andhra Pradesh: A Study of Jatapu Tribe in Seethampapeta Mandal of Srikakulam District, <b>Y. Ramakrishna &amp; Dr. D. Pulla Rao</b> , Senior Professor, Department of Economics, Andhra University.	97-99
26	Social Mobility Among Scheduled Castes Women In India, <b>Syamala Devarapalli</b> Research Scholar Department of Economics Acharya Nagarjuna University Guntur.	100-102
27	Socio-Economic Status of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribals in India, <b>G.Jhansi &amp; Dr.B.Sundara Kala</b> , Dept. of Economics (PG), S.R.R & C.V.R GOVT. Degree College, Vijayawada -520004.	103-106

28	"A General Overview, in Terms of how the Tribal Community Affects the Travel and Tourism Industry in India: A Case Study of Telangana State" B.Shanthi, Lecturer in Commerce, TSWRDC (W) Maddulapalli (V), Khammam (Rural), Telangana.	107-109
29	Caste and Social Discrimination in India: A Comment, Dr.D.Rajyalakshmi, Head, Department of History. AG&SGS Degree College, Vuyyuru,Krishna (Dt) AP.	110-112

### Caste and Social Discrimination in India: A Comment

Dr.D.Rajyalakshmi.Head, Department of History. AG&SGS Degree College, Vuyyuru,Krishna (Dt) AP.

A popular belief about the cast system is that the present day inequalities are a result of past discrimination, primary confined to rural areas. In urban areas, focus has mostly in the formal sector that is viewed as essentially meritocratic, especially the private sector. Also, given to the difficulties of identifying caste in the relatively anonymous urban settings, the view is that bulk of caste discrimination occurs mainly in rural, traditional parts of the country. Within the social science literature more precise elaboration of the concept of discrimination has come from the economics in the context of race and gender. The mainstream economic literature throws more light on discrimination that works through markets, and non market truncations and depends the concept of market discrimination with some analytical clearing. It is also necessary to recognized that in "Group Exclusion" people are excluded because of their group identity and not because of indivisible attribute. Therefore we need to recognized diction between exclusion of an "Individual and Exclusion of Group". Individual often get excluded from various reasons specific to individual. In India, exclusion revolves around the social institution the excludes, discriminate, insolate, and deprive some groups on the grass of group's identities like caste, ethnicity, and religion, gender and others. The nature of exclusion associated with institution of the caste system particularly needs to be understood and conceptualized as it has been the gas's of quall opportunity policy of reservation for scheduled caste and tribe and for other background caste and the same is used as justification for growing demand to extend it to similar group like religious minority such as Muslim and low caste converted to Islam and Christianity also women. Hence, in this back ground the present study has been made to exam the caste based social exclusion and discrimination in India. In the process, equality of opportunity is denied. The discriminatory process can extend beyond access to information to processes of selection in which attributes with have little relevance for the performance of job, but tend to favour candidates with better social and economic endowment.

#### I. Social Exclusion and Discrimination: Concepts and Context

The phenomenon of social exclusion has existed in all societies and at different stages of their development. But its perception and forms have varied. In the European context of the later part of the

nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, the concept was viewed primarily with the prism of welfare state (Saith-2001). While all citizens were treated equal and discrimination on the basis of colour, race and religion was not supposed to exist, yet certain categories of people were excluded from the provisions of the welfare state. These provisions had their origin in social security and welfare measures introduced in the case of factory workers (Bhalla and Lapeyere, 1999). Socially excluded were those not protected by these welfare provisions due to their not being eligible as they were not workers due to being mentally and physically handicapped, aged and invalid. Subsequently, of course, they were all covered by other provisions of the welfare state.

The concept of 'social exclusion', however, seems to continue to be associated with employment status, as the starting point in the European context, even in more recent periods. While initially ineligibility for social protection due to not being in the labour force and, therefore, in employment, was seen as social exclusion, in later years especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, lack of work (unemployment) and vulnerable (low paid casual and informal employment without social protection which sharply increased in the wake of globalisation, was seen as a form of social exclusion (see e.g. a study of Paugam (1995) on France). Attempts have also been made to extend the concept further to relate it with poverty and social relationship, besides the labour market (e.g. Paugam (1996) in a multi country comparative study), and make it multi-dimensional incorporating lack of participation in what would be considered 'normal activities' – participation in consumption activity of at least a minimum level, productive activity by engaging in economically and socially valued work, political activity including voting and membership of political parties and social activity in terms of social interaction and membership of social-cultural organisation (see, e.g. a study by Burchardt *et al*, 1999) on Great Britain). An European Commission document, "Observatory on National Policies to Combat Social Exclusion, Report of 1992") defined social exclusion "in relation to social rights of citizens – to a certain basic standard of living and to participation in the major social and occupational opportunities of the society" (Gore, *et al*, 1995, p.2).

Debate on social exclusion in the European context has led to the advancement of the concept in two directions: first, focus on factors, processes and dynamics that lead to poverty, and second, encompassing a multidimensional concept of living conditions, going beyond the notion of income shortage (Berghman, 1995). This is also a significant advance from the 'exclusion from the social protection', 'exclusion from welfare state' and 'exclusion in relation to employment' approaches developed earlier. Universal application of any of these – old and new – concepts of social exclusion is, however, fraught with serious difficulties, especially in the case of developing countries. The criterion of non-availability of social protection would place a large majority of workers

(86 per cent in the case of India, according to NCEUS (2006)) in the category of 'socially excluded'. The type of income support that the European countries with well-founded welfare state provide will require "an incomparably higher level of fiscal commitment in relation to resources" as it would have to be given to over half the population in these countries as compared to around ten per cent in industrialised countries (Osmani, 1991). And application of the criterion of lack of, or vulnerable and unprotected, employment would again qualify a large majority (over 80 per cent in the case of India) of workers to be "socially excluded".

Viewing social exclusion in terms of poverty is, no doubt, more meaningful, particularly if measured in a multi-dimensional mode. But here again the estimates of the socially excluded may turn out to be too large to be operationally meaningful. Use of income based poverty may yield more manageable estimates but that would be a rather limited approach to the concept. More important, poverty is an outcome, not a symptom of social exclusion. At the same time, social exclusion is, but not the only cause of poverty; nor is poverty the only outcome of social exclusion. It is not logically correct to identify one with the other.

## II. Caste Based Social Exclusion and Discrimination

Social exclusion based on caste is by far the most common among its various forms practised in India. Discrimination against certain caste groups is generally a practice observed in Hindu society though in its broader interpretation which identifies *dalits* as the excluded groups it could be seen among other religious groups as well. Exclusion of ethnic groups commonly

identified as scheduled tribes is of somewhat different nature as the basis of exclusion here is not one's position in caste-hierarchy, but cultural and geographical isolation.

Caste system has been a mechanism for social and economic governance of Hindu society since ages. It divides people in social groups with pre-determined and ascribed rights and responsibilities in public sphere. It envisages a broad division of labour in social and productive functions. A person belongs to a group by birth and heredity, not by any acquired attributes.

The most distinctive feature of the caste system is that it is hierarchical. It identifies castes as higher and lower, and superior and subordinate. Corresponding to them are superior and inferior occupations. Social exclusion of lower castes from occupations and activities seen as superior and respectable, and unfavourable (forced) inclusion in inferior and often "polluting" ones thus has been an integral part of the caste system and practised over centuries. Customary rules and norms were set to implement the system which were reinforced with religious and ritual sanctions (Scoville, 1991).

The severity and rigidity with which the caste hierarchy and division of labour is practised have, no doubt, got greatly reduced in modern times, particularly over the past 50-60 years, during which both legislative and policy actions have also been taken to eliminate certain most despicable forms of exclusion (e.g. untouchability) and to provide preferential treatment for capacity enhancement and socio-economic development of the identified disadvantaged castes. The scars of long period historical discrimination and exploitation are still visible in their endowment disadvantage; and, discrimination is still practised in several covert ways in different spheres of economic, social and political activities. In economic spheres, result of these processes is seen in terms of differential access to resources such as land, capital and credit, and to employment especially in better paying and more respectable occupations and positions. In rural India, for example, according to a study (Thorat, Aryama and Negi, 2005), only 16 per cent of the scheduled Caste households owned land, as against 41-percent of those

from other castes; only 28 per cent of the former owned some kind of capital while the figure for the latter was 56 per cent. About two-thirds of the SCs subsisted on the basis of (casual) wage labour, while among other castes this category accounted for only one-third.

The end result of social exclusion and discrimination of all kinds is seen in terms of levels of living of the excluded groups. Even though the basis of exclusion is different in the case of Scheduled Tribes and Muslims, they also are found to suffer from similar disadvantage as the Scheduled Castes as indicated by the summary statistics indicating levels of living, namely, the incidence of poverty. Percentage of persons living below poverty line of household expenditure (Head Count Ratio-HCR) is much higher among them others. According to estimates for 2009-10, STs have the highest incidence of poverty at 32.2 per cent followed by SCs at 30.3 per cent, as compared to 17.7 per cent among other castes (Table 1) Muslims have higher incidence of poverty than Hindus though they seem better off than SCs and STs. It, may also be noted that poverty has declined most among Muslims, followed by other Hindu castes but least among STs, followed by SCs.

**Table 1**  
**Incidence of Poverty by**  
**Social Groups (%)**  
**(Expert Group Meth)**

Group	1993	1999-	2009
Scheduled Castes	4	3	3
Scheduled Tribes	4	4	3
Others	3	2	1
All Hindus	3	2	2
Muslims	4	3	2
All	3	2	2

Source: Thorat and Dube (2012)

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