

Indian economic miracle bypasses rural poor

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A study of disadvantaged groups in rural India - which make up over 24 per cent of the population - has shed light on why the country's economic success has largely passed them by.

The researchers from The Universities of Manchester, Delhi, Harvard and the International Fund for Agricultural Development used survey data to examine the plight of former "untouchable castes" and disadvantaged tribes.

Legislation in 1950 entitling untouchables - as well as a number of tribal communities - to places in educational institutions and government employment was hailed as a major breakthrough in affirmative action.

But Dr Katsushi Imai from The University of Manchester said: "Despite glowing accounts of how well the Indian economy has performed in recent years, these traditionally disadvantaged groups- known as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes- remain mired in acute poverty.

"Indeed, our analysis confirms a higher incidence and a higher intensity of poverty among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes relative to the rest of India.

"This disparity shows poorer levels of education and land ownership as well as lower income gains resulting from land and education.

"While some of the disparity may be caused by elements of discrimination and lower quality of education; location in remote,

inaccessible areas with limited infrastructure and limited market access cause poverty and inequity to persist.

"We find this worrying: it's clear that ethnic groups and castes remain mired in poverty."

The data from the survey revealed:

- Among the scheduled tribes, about one-third were landless
- The majority of scheduled castes - about 62 percent - were landless.
- All groups had limited access to irrigation, with large majorities enjoying little or no access.
- About 69 percent of individuals from scheduled tribes belonged to households without an adult with primary education
- About 65 percent of scheduled castes belonged to households that lacked an adult with primary education.
- In scheduled tribes, 44 percent of the households were poor
- In scheduled caste households, 32 percent of the households were poor
- In non-scheduled households, 19 percent of the households were poor.

Dr Imai added: "One issue that our analysis highlights is that identity could have a potentially important role in perpetuating deprivation.

"We suggest that policy cannot be limited to enhancing the endowments of the schedule castes, scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged groups but must also address the issue of lower returns or income gains.

"The relative importance of caste and tribal affiliations, together with mistrust of the reward and belief systems, must be dealt with when designing any affirmative action.

"Providing employment and training facilities outside a poor neighbourhood would avoid the negative interactions with the

individuals who do not wish to conform.

"The strengthening of rural infrastructure and increasing market access would facilitate mobility, intermixing of different groups, and expand opportunities for more productive employment.

"And it is imperative that those from socially excluded groups are protected against a sense of alienation or loss of identity in pursuing an activity that conforms to the dominant culture."

The paper is available from the website of the Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester at www.bwpi.manchester.ac.uk/resources/Papers/index.html .

Source: University of Manchester

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