



Identity and public policy

The demand for Caste Census:

1. Some political parties have demanded that caste be enumerated in the Census. Actually, the demand amounts to one of counting the Other Backward Classes, for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes are already counted.
2. The demand has been accompanied by the argument that the efficacy of public policy for enhancing well-being across the population is tied to the enumeration of Indians by their caste.
3. One approach to assessing this argument would be to compare development outcomes in States where political parties have adopted caste-based mobilisation with those in States where political programmes for ending deprivation have taken the social-democratic route, without resorting to identity politics.
4. Tamil Nadu would be an example of the former, while Kerala would be an example of the latter. A comparison of the developmental experience of these States would therefore be instructive.

Findings along three variables

1. As the availability of data across social groups is limited, we focused on three variables. These were adult literacy, infant mortality and consumption. Each of these indicators is related to one of the three components of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.

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Identity-based public policy may not be as effective as one based on a universalist approach

PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN & ROHITH UNNIKRISHNAN

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Findings along three variables

As the availability of data across social groups is limited, we focused on three variables. These were adult literacy, infant mortality and consumption. Each of these indicators is related to one of the three components of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index. Having chosen the development indicators of interest, there are two ways in which we may assess the difference made to the condition of the least well-off in a population, in this case the SCs, by differently driven social programmes. For any indicator, we may focus on either the impact made in terms of its distribution among groups or the absolute level achieved by a cohort.

In a comparison of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, for consumption – a proxy for income – the gap between the general population and the SCs is greater in Kerala than it is in Tamil Nadu but smaller when it comes to the other two indicators. However, when it comes to the absolute level achieved, the SCs of Kerala are better-off than the SCs of Tamil Nadu on all the three indicators. Interestingly,

they are also better off than the general population of India, i.e., they have superior consumption, literacy and infant mortality outcomes. This is striking. At the same time, the exercise also revealed a hazard when focusing on relative standing alone. We found that for more than one indicator, the distance between the SCs and the general population is far lower for the country as a whole than it is in at least one of the two States considered, even though the State concerned registered a superior level for the same indicator. This leaves us veering towards the maximin principle in evaluation, according to which that policy is preferred which maximises the position of the worst off in a society. Now, Kerala will be chosen as better performing, for the most disadvantaged have higher indicators there. Though we could do with more analysis and the use of controls to arrive at a definite conclusion, this evidence at least suggests that identity-based public policy may not be as effective as one based on an identity-less or universalist approach that is the hallmark of a social democracy.

Women's empowerment

Though we are already in a position to say something about the potential of information on the caste status of individuals in the elimination of deprivation, we take our investigation to another field before concluding. It has been known for decades that gender inequality exists in India. Knowledge of low literacy and high infant mortality among females has, however, done little to spur countering public policy that will ensure women's empowerment. Returning to the two States of our study, Kerala greatly disappoints when it comes to women's empowerment, and lags behind Tamil Nadu on labour force participation, the proportion of female legislators and judges, and crimes against women. Counting the number of women through a census has proved insufficient to eliminate the deprivation and inequality they face. Politics and not the availability of information drives public policy.

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2. Having chosen the development indicators of interest, there are two ways in which we may assess the difference made to the condition of the least well-off in a population, in this case, the SCs, by differently driven social programmes.
3. For any indicator, we may focus on either the impact made in terms of its distribution among groups or the absolute level achieved by a cohort.
4. In a comparison of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, for consumption — a proxy for income — the gap between the general population and the SCs is greater in Kerala than it is in Tamil Nadu but smaller when it comes to the other two indicators.
5. However, when it comes to the absolute level achieved, the SCs of Kerala are better off than the SCs of Tamil Nadu on all three indicators. Interestingly, they are also better off than the general population of India, i.e., they have superior consumption, literacy and infant mortality outcomes.
6. This is striking. At the same time, the exercise also revealed a hazard when focusing on relative standing alone. We found that for more than one indicator, the distance between the SCs and the general population is far lower for the country as a whole than it is in at least one of the two States considered, even though the State concerned registered a superior level for the same indicator.
7. This leaves us veering towards the maximin principle in evaluation, according to which that policy is preferred which maximises the position of the worst off in society.
8. Now, Kerala will be chosen as better performing, for the most disadvantaged have higher indicators there.
9. Though we could do with more analysis and the use of controls to arrive at a definite conclusion, this evidence at least suggests that identity-based public policy may not be as effective as one based on an identity-less or universalist approach that is the hallmark of social democracy.

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3. Returning to the two States of our study, Kerala greatly disappoints when it comes to women's empowerment, and lags behind Tamil Nadu on labour force participation, the proportion of female legislators and judges, and crimes against women.
4. Counting the number of women through a census has proved insufficient to eliminate the deprivation and inequality they face. Politics and not the availability of information drives public policy.

MSP is not the way to increase farmers' income

Augmenting farmers' income will require investment in animal husbandry, fisheries and fruit and vegetable cultivation. The private sector needs to be incentivised to create value chains.

Irrigation and stability of Agricultural incomes:

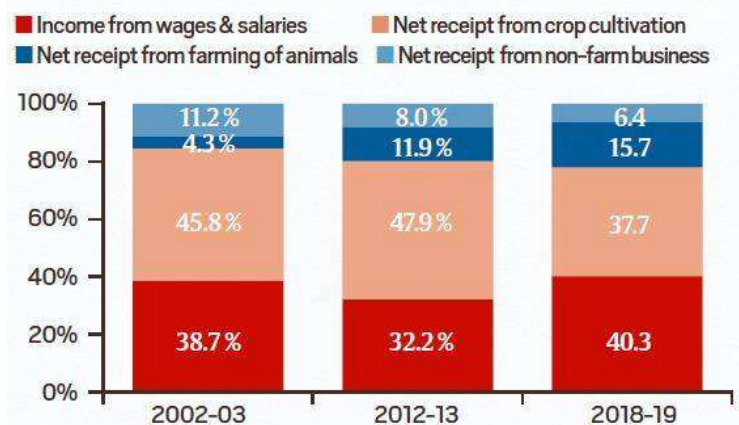
For example, Punjab with almost 99 per cent irrigation cover, will have a much more stable income than say Maharashtra with just 19 per cent irrigation cover.

Components of farmers incomes:

1. What is the policy message that one can derive from comparing three rounds of the Situation Assessment Survey (SAS) of agricultural households conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO) – 2002-03, 2012-13 and 2018-19? The figure gives the changing composition of farmers' real income.



COMPOSITION OF FARMERS' INCOME



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2. What is clear from this comparison is the following: One, the share of income from rearing animals (this includes fish) has gone up dramatically from 4.3 per cent in 2002-03 to 15.7 per cent.
3. Two, the share of income from the cultivation of crops has decreased from 45.8 per cent to 37.7 per cent. Three, the share of wages and salaries has gone up from 38.7 per cent to 40.3 per cent.
4. Four, the share of income coming from non-farm business has come down from 11.2 per cent to 6.4 per cent.

Increasing the farmer's income:

1. What these survey results indicate is that the scope for augmenting farmers' incomes is going to be more and from rearing animals (including fisheries).
2. It is worth noting that there is no minimum support price (MSP) for products of animal husbandry or fisheries and no procurement by the government. It is demand-driven, and much of its marketing takes place outside APMC mandis. This is the trend that will get reinforced in the years to come as incomes rise and diets diversify.
3. Those who believe that farmers' income can be increased by continuously raising the MSP of grains and government procurement, irrespective of the fact that grain stocks with the government are already overflowing and more than double the buffer stocking norms, are living in the past — and advocating a very expensive food system. That will fail sooner or later.

Wisdom lies in investing more in animal husbandry (including fisheries) and fruits and vegetables, which are more nutritious. The best way to invest is to incentivise the private sector to build efficient value chains based on a cluster approach. The government has started working in this direction, but much more needs to be done.

Grain diplomacy

It can be symbolic of a new India — that Delhi, with its food abundance, will not let anyone starve in South Asia.

PL-480:

1. There was a time when the US used food aid as a powerful diplomacy tool to contain hunger-induced



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discontent that, it feared, could trigger communist revolutions in underdeveloped countries.

2. Successive post-World War II administrations made the Food for Peace programme, better known as PL-480, a cornerstone of US foreign assistance. India alone imported nearly 24 million tonnes (mt) of wheat under PL-480 during 1964-66.
3. The US even supplied some 9.1 mt of subsidised wheat and corn to the Soviet Union in 1973, whose ideological significance wasn't lost on anybody.
4. For the US, food shipments, on concessional or outright grant terms, served both as a bulwark against communism and a means to relieve its massive farm surpluses.
5. John F Kennedy estimated that it cost 20 cents a year to store a bushel of wheat and 38 cents to ship the same grain to India. Exporting grain-free, then, was cheaper than stocking beyond two years.

Indian Moment for PL-480:

1. The same opportunity — what Kennedy called “turning our great agricultural abundance into a blessing, for ourselves and for all the world” — presents itself, albeit in a smaller manner, to India today.
2. At 90.41 mt as of September, the country's public stocks of wheat and rice were the highest ever for this date, with the new paddy arrivals from October only going to add to these.
3. Moreover, the stock pileup has taken place, despite a record 93 mt-plus grain offtake from the Central pool during 2020-21, much of it given out free/near-free post the pandemic.
4. With government agencies procuring over 103 mt last year, the quantities flowing into the Food Corporation of India's warehouses are far in excess of that going out.
5. The “carrying cost” — interest, storage and other expenses — of the excess buffer has been estimated at Rs 5,589 per tonne for 2021-22.
6. Clearly, there is economic as well as the diplomatic sense in donating or bartering this surplus grain abroad.

Neighbourhood:

1. Afghanistan is now facing an acute food crisis from a combination of prolonged drought, regime change and associated instability. Sri Lanka, too, is grappling with food shortages, worsened by dwindling foreign currency reserves.

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2. What stops India from offering, say, 2 mt of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian aid and one mt of rice to Sri Lanka against payment in local currency similar to that under PL-480?
3. Wheat can only be eaten or, at worst, diverted as animal feed. There should be no moral compunction, hence, in supplying it even to a regime that India cannot recognise.
4. Grain diplomacy — a simple message that nobody in South Asia shall starve while we are here — can be symbolic of the New India: One that cares and matters to the world.

PM Modi's US visit sets the stage for transcending differences between the two nations on bilateral, regional, global issues

India's own emergence as a major economic power makes it a critical player in shaping the outcomes on these issues. Delhi's closer partnership with Washington will in turn boost India's global strategic salience.

India- US strategic partnership:

1. Although there were no major announcements made during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States, the stage has been set for transforming India's partnership with America, advancing Delhi's Quadrilateral partnership with Canberra, Tokyo, and Washington, and boosting India's global impact.
2. The three levels of Indian engagement with the US — bilateral, regional, and multilateral — are no longer in separate compartments, reinforce each other.
3. Having transcended some of their traditional differences on bilateral, regional, and global issues during the last two decades, Delhi and Washington are now free to frame their bilateral relations in more ambitious terms — as a partnership for regional stability and global good.
4. Bilateral defence cooperation, Indo-Pacific regional balance, vaccine development, and mitigating climate change now cut across bilateral, regional, and global domains.

Bilateral issues:

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1. This does not mean Modi and the US President Joe Biden are neglecting urgent bilateral agenda on conventional issues such as trade— in the end the sinews of any partnership.
2. Although the politics of trade have become a lot more complex in both countries, the two leaders have agreed to resume their trade dialogue.
3. Beyond trade, Modi and Biden addressed several other areas ripe for deeper cooperation — homeland security, energy, higher education, and technological cooperation.
4. The bilateral discussion on terrorism inevitably brings in the enduring challenges of cross-border terrorism promoted by the Pakistan army. Modi and Biden have also to come to terms with the consequences of Pakistan's success in bringing the medieval Taliban back to power in Afghanistan.
5. The interests of India and the US appear to be in convergence on both issues, but Delhi should not underestimate the continuing leverage of the Pakistan army, backed by China, as a "regional spoiler" if nothing else.

Global security issues

1. Although Afghanistan remains a key area of continuing concern for both India and the US, both sides are now looking at the bigger challenges emerging in the Indo-Pacific, driven by the rise and assertion of China. That is where the first in-person summit of the Quadrilateral forum comes in.
2. Delhi and Washington have found a new comfort level in the shared understanding that the Quad will not be a military coalition. That has allowed them to focus on a very expansive and consequential non-military agenda of providing public goods across the Indo-Pacific.
3. This allows the Quad to offer a credible alternative to China on a range of issues — from health to telecommunications and infrastructure development. It also undercuts Beijing's propaganda branding the Quad as "Asian Nato" and enhances the forum's acceptability and sustainability in the region.
4. The issues to be taken up in the Quad — pandemic management and climate change are not merely regional issues, but global and inevitably figured prominently in Modi's address to the United Nations General Assembly along with the question of terrorism.

To be sure, there is much distance to be covered in building a global consensus on these issues. But India's own emergence as a major economic power makes

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