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CASTE, CLASS AND PUBLIC POLICY IN INDIA:
Historical Trajectory and Contemporary Issues

Abstract:
Caste is the most widely used unit for analysing Indian society. During the last century it has become the sole indicator of deprivation in framing and implementing public policy, which aims to redress socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination. Concomitantly, Indian politics is increasingly organised along caste lines. Politicians and intellectuals of all ideologies hail the politics of caste identities and the public policy based on caste. They claim that these are genuine moves towards equality. However, the protagonists of caste-based politics and public policy simply have not validated their assertions with solid evidence. They offer only small-sample surveys that can be grossly misleading in the context of a huge country characterized by monumental diversity. Moreover, these studies typically pool the castes into a few large groups. Such lumping together is likely to obscure the real picture.
My paper makes first use of the huge mass of quantitative evidence available in the census reports of the period from 1901 to 1931. It investigates the three most important issues relating to caste. First, it analyses the empirical links between the ritual and economic status of castes at the province/state level, while treating each caste separately. Second, it investigates whether the caste system has been rigid. Third, it evaluates the justification for the use of caste in public policy. My findings strongly contest the conventional wisdom.

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