

CASTE IDENTITY AND ACCESS TO SERVICES: FINDINGS FROM A STUDY CONDUCTED IN JAFFNA



Image courtesy - Gayathri Lokuge

Executive Summary

Very little is known about how water, sanitation, and education services are delivered to and accessed by people in the North, or about how class and caste dynamics come into play in access to basic services. In the absence of such knowledge, it is difficult to understand how such marginalised groups may build resilient livelihoods. The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), through funding from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, conducted a study among two oppressed caste settlements in Jaffna to shed more light on this issue. The methodology included semi-structured interviews with community members, government officials, and service providers, further complemented by informal discussions and observations.

The study found a strong correlation between the location of one's residence and caste identity. While government officials presented a culture of poverty rationale to fault these

communities' 'inability' to move out of poverty, there was also an understanding that structural inequalities were impeding progress across generations. Although access to water was not a major issue, lack of access to toilet facilities have pushed women, men, and children to defecate in the open. Similarly, although school enrollment was adequate, the experience of schooling was poor, with many unable to access better-quality schools.

Therefore, the link between caste identity and location determines access to both sanitation and education facilities in these two settlements. It is critically important that the government, including local authorities, addresses these concerns, especially by ensuring access to legal documents to the land occupied by oppressed castes, so that both settlements have access to basic services that other communities may take for granted.

Introduction

Since the end of the war in 2009, concerns regarding access to basic services, such as water, sanitation, and education, particularly in the war-affected Northern region, have received scant attention. Moreover, caste-based discrimination complicates provision of and access to services among traditionally marginalised communities. Understanding such nuances is important, since a lack of access to good quality service delivery can inhibit the capacities of women, men, and children to build safe and resilient livelihoods, reinforcing long-standing systemic marginalisation and chronic poverty.

Caste-based discrimination is a punishable offence in Sri Lanka under the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act of 1957; nevertheless, caste remains a potent force which is rarely discussed as a concern within the public discourse. The reasons vary but include the fact that caste appears to be subsumed by broader ethnic markers (initially adopted by the British administration in census data). Further overshadowed by Tamil and Sinhala nationalist discourses, caste is politically sensitive and, thus, difficult to openly address. Hence, the absence of any form of affirmative action to counter caste-based discrimination: in fact, it is argued that the Sri Lankan welfare state and its free education and healthcare mitigate, even eradicate, such social disabilities, ruling out the need for affirmative action.

CEPA delved further into this issue, via a study among two settlements of the “oppressed” caste — identified as those occupying the lowest social tier - exploring how caste identity shapes access to services.

Approaches

The study involved extensive field research. During the initial phase, the location selected for the study was an underserved coastal settlement situated in close proximity to Jaffna town, within the Jaffna Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division. Data was collected between September 2013 and January 2014. In total, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women, men, and children in the community, senior officials in the Divisional and District administrations, as well as with service providers. These were further complemented by numerous informal discussions with community members and observations of daily negotiations to access water and sanitation facilities. These allowed to compare and contrast the rhetoric and the gap between what was being portrayed as fact and people’s lived experiences.

The same methodology was utilised in phase two with a rural, underserved community in the Achchelu DS Division. Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted over two weeks, alongside observations and informal discussions.

Findings

In general, location and livelihoods were found to carry strong caste affiliations, especially among those who continue to engage in traditional caste-based occupations. Government officials and services providers articulated that a culture of poverty - poverty as an inherent way of life - pervades such communities. More importantly, however, they acknowledged that multiple structural injustices, such as lack of land ownership, poor housing and poor services, impoverished the community across generations.

While there was access to water within the settlements, ending dependence on neighbouring communities, some water access points continue to be mediated along caste lines. Both settlements lack toilets, compelling women, men, and children to defecate in the open. With no deeds to the land occupied, people cannot access aid that requires such documentation - a prerequisite to access donor led funds or such projects provided by the state.

Regarding education, the high dropout rate at the secondary level among girls and boys demonstrates that access to schools must not be measured solely by enrollment but also by the experience in school. Children drop out for multiple reasons, ranging from failing examinations at Grade nine; the high opportunity cost of staying in school compared to the contribution they could make towards the household economy; fear of caste-based discrimination experienced in mixed-caste schools; and, parents' inability to afford additional tuition classes. The link between livelihoods, location, and schooling impedes access to better quality education,

with the location of residence read synonymously with caste identity. School teachers formed generalisations consistent with the upper-caste/class narratives about oppressed caste groups, thus assuming that low-caste parents were irresponsible about and dismissive of their children's education. Furthermore, schools acquired a class and caste identity if they tended to serve students from particular localities.

Conclusion

Caste identity continues to determine one's access to quality education, particularly among sanitation workers. The association between location and caste underpins access to services, especially for people with no land deeds. Class and gender are also identity markers along which oppressed caste groups are marginalised, particularly elderly women living alone.

Implications and Recommendations

Access to basic services, education, water, sanitation and the like, are viewed as universal in the Sri Lankan welfare state. But as the cases studied indicate, caste identity continues to be a barrier for some oppressed castes in accessing these services. To ensure that such underserved caste groups have access to the same level of services, the following recommendations are proposed :

Education

- Integrate discussions on caste-based discrimination in teacher training sessions.

Workshops should be held by the Ministry of Education to gauge views and perceptions on the prevalence and nature of caste-based discrimination in schools, including attitudes prevalent among teachers and other authority figures.

Land tenure

- Ensure the land tenure of residents of the communities is secured by issuing proper documentation.

This in turn would grant the residents permission to construct toilets or to access aid which requires proof of residence.

Water and sanitation

- Assess the gaps in access to water and sanitation facilities in both settlements and take action to provide sanitation facilities.

This would help ensure the safety and dignity of women and children, in particular, who are otherwise forced to defecate in the open.

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The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) is an independent, Sri Lankan think-tank promoting a better understanding of poverty-related development issues. CEPA believes that poverty is an injustice that should be overcome and that overcoming poverty involves changing policies and practices nationally and internationally, as well as working with people in poverty. CEPA strives to contribute to influencing poverty-related development policy, at national, regional, sectoral, programme and project levels.

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