

plicated the experiences of Asians in the Americas. For instance, in Chapters 2 and 4, the lives of Asian slaves seem to be shaped more by their condition of enslavement than by their place of origin. I would appreciate further insights into how the divisions created by slavery affected the formation of the racial categories. Nevertheless, book offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the lived experiences of Asians who crossed the Pacific in the early modern period. Readers interested in slavery, immigration and racial formation – both historically and in contemporary contexts – will undoubtedly find this work enlightening and thought-provoking.

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SUKHADEO THORAT / S. MADHESWARAN / B. P. VANI, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment Discrimination and Its Impact on Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 340 pages, \$120.00. ISBN 978-0-1988-7225-2

The role of social identities in influencing occupational choice has been the subject of research worldwide. In Western labour markets, contributors to the edited volume by Anthony Heath and Sin Yi Cheung<sup>1</sup> have demonstrated that most second (and later) generations of ethnic minorities (of non-European descent) experience “ethnic penalties”. That is, ethnic minorities suffer a disadvantage in terms of social networks, which subsequently contributes to their inability to secure salaried employment. Such an account has been lacking in the Indian context, which is widely known for its historical social inequality based on the caste system. The book under review, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment, Discrimination and its Impact on Poverty*, is a timely intervention. It engages in theoretical debates on discrimination with academic rigour and intellectual depth and examines macro-level empirical trends in India, with a particular focus on the scheduled castes (SCs) or untouchables vis-à-vis the upper castes. Moreover, as the authors themselves note, this is probably the first study to estimate “the impact of employment and wage discrimination on the income and poverty of the SCs” (p. 271).

In its eleven comprehensive chapters, the book provides a thorough theoretical and empirical examination of discriminatory practices in the labour market and their impact on employment, wages, occupational choice and poverty. The two chapters that follow the introductory chapter provide a detailed review of the

1 Anthony Heath / Sin Yi Cheung: The Comparative Study of Ethnic Minority Disadvantage. In: Anthony Heath / Sin Yi Cheung / S. N. Smith / B. Academy (eds): *Unequal Chances: Ethnic Minorities in Western Labour Markets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 1–44.

theories that deal with the “sources of discrimination, motives behind discrimination, labour market conditions which make it possible to discriminate, consequences of labour market discrimination on [the] income of the discriminated groups, and policies to overcome discrimination” (p. 33). Theories suggest that personal characteristics (caste, race, gender and religion) that are unrelated to an individual’s productivity are also valued in the market. Furthermore, societal norms and beliefs, which are never determined by objective criteria, also play a crucial role in hiring and determining wages. In the US context, Black theorist William Darity has argued that it is essential to examine the factors that lead to “the emergence of norms, discriminatory or secular” (p. 42). The norms of racial identity, Darity argues, are motivated by “economic gains to those who practice racial discrimination” (p. 42).

The authors then discuss the research of scholars such as George Akerlof, Wilbur Scoville, Deepak Lal and B.R. Ambedkar on theories of caste and economics. Unlike in the Western context, religious texts in India provide justification for caste-based beliefs and prejudices. One of the major highlights of this book is the discussion of Ambedkar’s ideas on caste and economy, which have been largely ignored, especially by economists. Ambedkar argued that Hindu religious texts converted caste norms into legal codes and defined and fixed the occupations of castes (groups), rendering them hereditary and permanent from birth. Penalties were imposed for violations, and rewards were given for adherence to caste norms. The idea of “graded inequality” is central to the assignment of occupations and property rights to each caste, and to the entitlements they enjoy (pp. 52–54). Graded inequality emphasises that groups are “[not] only different but unequal in status, one standing above the other” (p. 53). The untouchables occupied the lowest position in the caste hierarchy, with no rights at all. Untouchables were denied the right to education, employment (except manual labour) and property (land and enterprises).

Has the position of untouchables changed since 1950, when India adopted a constitution based on liberal democratic principles? The authors address this question in the empirical chapters, using unit-level data from the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) of 2004–2005 and the Periodic Labour Force Survey of 2017–2018 (pp. 88–89). The econometric exercise demonstrates that when SC’s exhibit similar attributes such as “age, education, number of dependents, job and social security”, their employment chances are “less compared to equally-placed higher-caste individuals” (p. 265). As a result, higher castes dominate occupations such as legislators, senior officials and managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals, and clerks. In contrast, SCs are concentrated as “elementary occupations, plant and machine operators, assemblers, craft and related trade workers, service workers, and shop and market sales workers” (p. 242).

The authors find graded inequality in wage earnings across the caste groups. At the all-India level, the average real daily wage in 2017–2018 was ₹169. However, it was ₹142 for the untouchable regular salaried workers, followed by ₹163 for Other Backward Castes (OBC) and ₹202 for upper castes (p. 187). Thus, “wages reduce as we go down the caste hierarchy from higher castes to OBC and further down to the SC, who are at the bottom of the caste ladder” (p. 190). Of course, there are variations – irrespective of wage quantiles, “[the] caste-based wage gap, as well as discrimination, [is] lower in the public sector” (p. 239). In the public sector, the wage gap attributable to discrimination is more significant at lower levels, which the authors attribute to recruitment by private agencies (p. 299). In contrast, the wage gap attributable to discrimination in the private sector is more pronounced in higher income groups, suggesting that “SC employees face caste-related constraints in moving to higher positions” (p. 285). This means that despite having similar qualifications to the higher castes, SCs face a “ceiling” (p. 285). The persistence of discrimination is a cause for concern, given that the vast majority of India’s workforce is employed in the private sector.

While SCs exhibit higher levels of unemployment than upper castes and OBCs, the gap is exceptionally high at the higher secondary and graduate levels (p. 150). Furthermore, SCs are more likely to experience open discrimination and under-employment than any other group in Hindu society (p. 150). The study shows that discrimination in hiring, wages and choice of occupation has a direct impact on per capita consumption expenditure. This is highest for the higher castes and decreases significantly as one moves down the caste hierarchy. As for poverty, “it increases as we move down in the caste hierarchy from higher castes to middle castes, the OBC, and to the SC” (p. 281).

The study demonstrates that the legacy of the caste system continues to haunt the SCs, who face discrimination in employment, occupational choice and wages. To correct the imbalances, the authors recommend state interventions: improving higher education opportunities for SCs, allocating land to SCs, affirmative action in the private sector and transparency and quotas in contractual jobs in the public sector.

The book is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the role of caste in shaping livelihood outcomes. However, it has one limitation: it does not engage with the extensive literature on caste, labour market discrimination and occupational choice produced by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists. Nevertheless, the book is extremely useful for social scientists, advocacy groups, public policy practitioners and policy makers interested in understanding the contemporary workings of caste-based inequalities in society, the economy and politics.