
Caste from Field to Factory: Dalit Labour and Agrarian Transition in Neoliberal North India.

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Résumé

India is rapidly changing from an agrarian society to a society dominated by non-agricultural economic activities. The high economic growth has meant increased wealth for some, but this transition has also created an army of lowly-paid seasonal migrant labour from the countryside, and little by way of 'decent work' in industry and services.

This paper asks the question, what does this structural transition mean for Dalit low caste labourers in and from the countryside in North India? How do their fates and development trajectories compare to those of the main landed classes and castes? To answer this demands detailed insights into agrarian change in India and the growth of work outside farming. It also involves investigating how these processes are permeated with class and caste. The paper argues that neoliberal capitalist expansion in India is shaping the way dominant agrarian castes and urban capital oppress and exploit labouring Dalits, that caste and class is being reconstituted by the manner in which accumulation of capital in agriculture and in other sectors is developing. Neoliberal growth has led to increasing inequality as village-centred, rural, oppressive and exploitative caste and class relations have been replaced by nationwide oppression and exploitation, while the Dalits have remained at the bottom of both the old and new hierarchies. For most Dalit rural labourers, the best they can hope for is informal, insecure and poorly paid seasonal migrant work in the non-agricultural sector. At the same time their old masters, the landowning castes, have secured themselves good jobs and some have become full-blown capitalists in the modern non-agricultural economy.

The paper transcends barriers between agrarian and labour studies, Dalit studies and class-based studies. It is based on longitudinal fieldwork over 25 years in two villages in west and east Uttar Pradesh in North India, and on insights from fieldwork in various urban labour contexts.

Mots-Clés: Agrarian change, India, labour, Dalits

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