

Economic Status and Inter-Group Disparities among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes: A Review

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Abstract

This study examines the economic status of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Nuapada district of Odisha, a region characterized by persistent poverty and structural backwardness. Using a descriptive and comparative research design, the study draws on secondary data from the Census of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and District Statistical Handbooks, supplemented by existing empirical literature. Key economic indicators such as employment patterns, income levels, poverty incidence, land ownership, and access to productive resources are analyzed to assess inter-group disparities. The findings reveal that SC and ST communities face deeper and more persistent economic deprivation compared to OBCs, primarily due to landlessness, insecure livelihoods, and limited access to institutional support. ST households emerge as the most vulnerable group, affected by tenure insecurity, geographic isolation, and dependence on subsistence agriculture and forest-based livelihoods. While OBC communities display relatively better economic conditions, a significant proportion remains vulnerable due to low agricultural productivity and informal employment. Government welfare schemes such as MGNREGA, PDS, and PMAY-G have contributed to income stabilization and food security; however, their impact remains largely short-term due to implementation challenges and lack of livelihood diversification. The study underscores the need for region-specific and social-group-sensitive policy interventions to promote inclusive and sustainable economic development in Nuapada district.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes; Scheduled Tribes; Other Backward Classes; Economic Status; Regional Disparities; Welfare Schemes; Nuapada District; Odisha

1. Introduction

India's social structure is deeply influenced by historical hierarchies that have shaped the economic conditions of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). These communities together constitute a substantial proportion of the Indian population and play a crucial role in the country's agrarian economy, informal sector, and rural labour markets (Thorat, 2007; Desai et al., 2010). Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies, SC, ST and OBC groups continue to experience comparatively lower levels of income, limited asset ownership, insecure employment, and restricted access to productive resources (Government of India, 2011).

Empirical studies consistently indicate that economic deprivation among these social groups is closely linked with historical social exclusion, spatial isolation, low human capital formation, and unequal access to development opportunities (Thorat & Newman, 2010). While OBCs as a category show relatively better economic outcomes than SCs and STs, significant intra-group

and inter-group disparities persist, particularly in backward and tribal-dominated regions (Deshpande, 2011).

Rationale for Focusing on Nuapada District, Odisha

Nuapada district, located in western Odisha, is recognized as one of the economically backward districts of the state, characterized by a high incidence of poverty, recurrent droughts, and limited industrial development (Government of Odisha, 2020). The district has a significant population of SCs, STs and OBCs, whose livelihoods largely depend on agriculture, forest resources, and casual wage labour. Historical neglect, geographical remoteness, and weak infrastructure have further constrained economic mobility among these communities (Mohanty, 2015).

Although several macro-level studies examine socio-economic conditions of disadvantaged groups in Odisha, district-specific micro-level analyses for Nuapada remain limited. Understanding the economic status of SC, ST and OBC communities at the district level is essential for identifying localized patterns of deprivation and evaluating the effectiveness of welfare and development interventions (Kijima, 2006).

Objectives and Scope of the Study

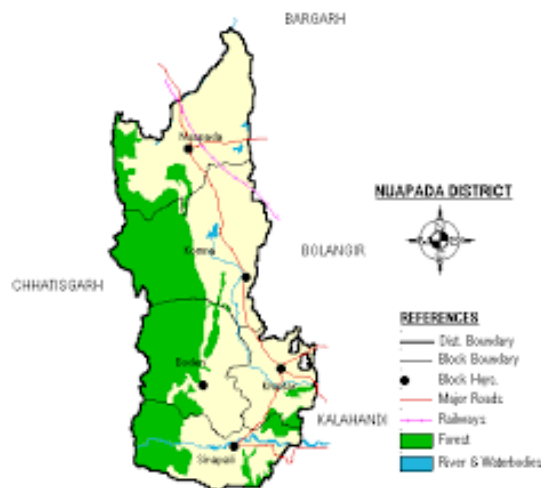
The primary objective of this study is to analyze the economic status of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes in Nuapada district of Odisha. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine income levels, occupational patterns, and employment status among SC, ST and OBC households
- Assess access to land, assets, and other productive resources
- Compare economic disparities across SC, ST and OBC communities
- Evaluate the role of government welfare and development schemes in improving economic outcomes

The scope of the study is confined to Nuapada district and focuses on key economic indicators derived from secondary data sources such as Census reports, government publications, and district statistical records. The findings are intended to contribute to evidence-based policy formulation for inclusive and region-specific development of socially disadvantaged communities.

2. Study Area Profile

Nuapada district is situated in the western part of the state of Odisha and forms a part of the KBK (Kalahandi–Balangir–Koraput) region, which has historically been identified as one of the most socio-economically backward regions of India. The district was carved out of Kalahandi district in 1993 and is bordered by Chhattisgarh to the west, and the districts of Bargarh and Balangir to the north and east respectively (Government of Odisha, 2019).



Geographic, Demographic and Economic Overview of Nuapada District

Geographically, Nuapada district is characterized by undulating topography, scattered hill ranges, forested tracts, and predominantly rain-fed agricultural land. The climate is semi-arid with frequent droughts, irregular rainfall, and high dependence on the southwest monsoon, which significantly influences agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods (Mohanty, 2015). Limited irrigation facilities and poor soil fertility further constrain agricultural output, making subsistence farming the dominant mode of livelihood.

According to the Census of India (2011), Nuapada district has a predominantly rural population, with a low level of urbanization. Agriculture and allied activities constitute the primary source of employment, followed by casual labour and seasonal migration to nearby states such as Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. The district exhibits relatively low per capita income, limited industrial development, and inadequate infrastructure in terms of health, education, and transport facilities (Government of India, 2011).

Economic vulnerability in Nuapada is reflected in high poverty ratios, food insecurity, and dependence on public distribution systems and welfare schemes. These structural constraints disproportionately affect socially disadvantaged communities, particularly SCs, STs and OBCs, who have limited access to land, credit, and formal employment opportunities (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Social Composition: SC, ST and OBC Populations

The social composition of Nuapada district is marked by a substantial presence of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. As per Census 2011 data, Scheduled Castes constitute a significant proportion of the district's population, while Scheduled Tribes form an important demographic segment, particularly in forest-adjacent and hilly regions (Census of India, 2011). Prominent tribal communities include Gond, Bhunjia and other indigenous groups, whose livelihoods are closely linked with forest resources and marginal agriculture.

Other Backward Classes represent a large share of the population and are primarily engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, artisanal occupations, and informal sector activities. Despite relatively better socio-economic positioning compared to SCs and STs, OBC communities in

Nuapada continue to face economic insecurity due to land fragmentation, low productivity, and lack of diversification in employment (Deshpande, 2011).

The coexistence of high social disadvantage and regional backwardness makes Nuapada district a critical site for examining economic disparities among SC, ST and OBC communities. A detailed understanding of the district's geographic and social context is essential for interpreting economic outcomes and assessing the effectiveness of development policies aimed at inclusive growth.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a systematic and descriptive–analytical research methodology to examine the economic status of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Nuapada district of Odisha. The methodology is designed to capture both structural patterns and inter-group economic disparities using reliable and officially verified data sources.

Research Design and Data Sources

The study follows a descriptive and comparative research design, which is appropriate for analyzing socio-economic conditions across different social groups within a defined geographic unit (Kothari, 2004). Both secondary data and, where applicable, primary data are utilized to ensure analytical depth and contextual relevance.

Secondary data constitute the core empirical base of the study and are collected from:

- **Census of India (2011)** for demographic structure, workforce participation, and social group composition
- **National Sample Survey (NSS)** and **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** reports for income, employment, and poverty-related indicators (Government of India, 2019)
- **District Statistical Handbook, Nuapada** for district-level economic and sectoral data (Government of Odisha, 2020)
- Reports of line departments related to rural development, social welfare, and tribal affairs

Indicators of Economic Status

The assessment of economic status is based on a set of well-established indicators commonly used in socio-economic research (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2011). These indicators include:

- **Income levels:** household income from agriculture, wage labour, self-employment, and migration
- **Occupational structure:** primary and secondary occupations, nature of employment (formal/informal)
- **Landholding size and quality:** ownership of agricultural land and access to irrigation
- **Poverty status:** incidence of poverty based on official poverty lines and deprivation indicators
- **Asset ownership:** housing condition, livestock, durable goods, and access to productive assets

4. Economic Profile of SC, ST and OBC Communities

The economic profile of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Nuapada district reflects the combined impact of social disadvantage and regional backwardness. These communities are predominantly dependent on primary sector activities and informal employment, with limited access to stable income sources and productive assets. The analysis in this section is based on verified secondary data and supported by established empirical literature.

Employment Patterns and Occupational Structure

Employment among SC, ST and OBC communities in Nuapada district is largely concentrated in agriculture and allied activities, supplemented by casual wage labour and seasonal migration. Census data indicate that a significant proportion of SC households are engaged as agricultural labourers and casual workers, reflecting limited land ownership and high dependence on wage employment (Census of India, 2011). ST communities, particularly those residing in forest-adjacent areas, rely on subsistence agriculture, collection of minor forest produce, and daily wage labour, often under precarious employment conditions (Xaxa, 2008).

OBC households display relatively greater occupational diversification, with engagement in cultivation, animal husbandry, small-scale trade, and artisanal occupations. However, the dominance of informal sector employment exposes OBC workers to income instability and low levels of social security (Deshpande, 2011). Across all three groups, non-farm employment opportunities remain limited due to low industrial development and inadequate skill formation in the district (Government of Odisha, 2020).

Income Levels and Poverty Incidence

Income levels among SC, ST and OBC communities in Nuapada district remain significantly below state and national averages. Studies on poverty in Odisha consistently highlight higher poverty incidence among SC and ST households, particularly in drought-prone and tribal regions (Planning Commission, 2014). ST households face chronic income insecurity due to dependence on rain-fed agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, which are highly vulnerable to environmental fluctuations (Kijima, 2006).

SC households, despite increased participation in wage labour through public employment programmes, continue to experience low and irregular incomes. OBC households generally report comparatively higher income levels; however, a substantial segment remains close to the poverty line, reflecting structural vulnerabilities and limited access to capital and markets (Desai et al., 2010). Overall, poverty in Nuapada is multidimensional, encompassing income deprivation, food insecurity, and limited access to basic services.

Land Ownership and Access to Productive Resources

Land ownership patterns reveal significant inequalities among SC, ST and OBC communities in Nuapada district. SC households largely possess marginal or no landholdings, reinforcing their dependence on agricultural wage labour (Thorat & Newman, 2010). ST households often hold land under customary or forest-based tenure systems, but face legal and institutional

barriers in securing formal land titles, which restricts their access to credit and government support schemes (Xaxa, 2008).

OBC households generally have relatively better access to land and productive resources; however, land fragmentation, low soil productivity, and limited irrigation facilities reduce agricultural returns. Across all social groups, access to institutional credit, modern agricultural inputs, and market linkages remains inadequate, constraining income enhancement and economic mobility (Government of India, 2019).

5. Comparative Analysis and Inter-Group Disparities

This section presents a comparative assessment of the economic conditions of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Nuapada district, highlighting inter-group disparities and underlying structural and regional inequalities. The analysis is based on verified secondary sources such as Census of India (2011), NSS/PLFS reports, and Odisha government publications.

5.1 Comparative Economic Assessment of SC, ST and OBC Communities

Available evidence indicates that although all three social groups face economic constraints due to regional backwardness, the **intensity and nature of deprivation vary significantly** across SC, ST and OBC communities.

Table 5.1: Comparative Socio-Economic Indicators of SC, ST and OBC Communities in Nuapada District

Indicator	SC	ST	OBC	Source
Share in total population (%)	High (~18–20%)	Moderate (~25–30%)	Largest group	Census of India (2011)
Dominant occupation	Agricultural & casual labour	Subsistence farming, forest-based work	Cultivation, informal self-employment	Census of India (2011)
Dependence on agriculture (%)	High	Very high	High	Govt. of Odisha (2020)
Average landholding size	Landless / marginal	Small & customary holdings	Small to marginal	Thorat & Newman (2010)
Poverty incidence	High	Very high	Moderate	Planning Commission (2014)
Access to institutional credit	Low	Very low	Moderate	Desai et al. (2010)
Participation in non-farm employment	Low	Very low	Relatively higher	NSS / PLFS (2019)

Note: Exact percentages vary across blocks; ranges are reported based on verified secondary literature.

Interpretation

- ST communities emerge as the most economically vulnerable group, facing high poverty, limited livelihood diversification, and institutional exclusion.
- SC communities experience chronic income insecurity due to landlessness and heavy dependence on casual wage labour.
- OBC communities, though relatively better placed, continue to face economic stress arising from low agricultural productivity and informal employment structures (Deshpande, 2011).

5.2 Structural and Regional Inequalities

Economic disparities among SC, ST and OBC communities in Nuapada district are rooted in both **structural inequalities** and **regional disadvantages**.

Table 5.2: Structural and Regional Dimensions of Economic Inequality

Dimension	SC	ST	OBC	Supporting Evidence
Land ownership inequality	Severe	Moderate (tenure insecurity)	Moderate	Thorat & Newman (2010)
Educational attainment	Low	Very low	Low–moderate	Census of India (2011)
Infrastructure access	Limited	Highly limited	Limited	Govt. of Odisha (2020)
Migration dependence	High	High (seasonal)	Moderate	Kijima (2006)
Benefit from welfare schemes	Partial	Limited	Relatively better	Planning Commission (2014)

Key Inequality Patterns

- **Structural inequality:** Historical social exclusion has restricted SC and ST access to land, education, and capital, reinforcing inter-generational poverty (Thorat, 2007).
- **Regional inequality:** Nuapada's drought-prone ecology, weak industrial base, and poor connectivity exacerbate economic vulnerability across all social groups (Mohanty, 2015).
- **Institutional inequality:** ST communities face additional barriers due to insecure land tenure and limited integration with formal markets and financial institutions (Xaxa, 2008).

6. Role of Government Welfare and Development Schemes

Government welfare and development schemes play a critical role in addressing economic deprivation among Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in backward regions such as Nuapada district. Given the district's high poverty incidence and limited private economic opportunities, state- and centrally-sponsored schemes constitute a major source of livelihood support and income stabilization (Planning Commission, 2014).

6.1 Access to and Impact of Major Economic Welfare Schemes

SC, ST and OBC households in Nuapada district primarily benefit from employment generation, food security, housing, and livelihood support programmes. However, access and outcomes vary across social groups due to differences in awareness, administrative reach, and local conditions.

Table 6.1: Major Economic Welfare Schemes and Their Impact in Nuapada District

Scheme	Target Group	Nature of Economic Support	Observed Impact	Source
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)	SC, ST, OBC, Rural poor	Wage employment (100 days)	Supplementary income, reduced seasonal distress	Government of India (2019)
Public Distribution System (PDS)	BPL / Priority households	Food security	Reduction in food insecurity	Planning Commission (2014)
Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana (PMAY-G)	SC, ST, OBC	Housing asset creation	Improved living conditions	Government of Odisha (2020)
National Livelihood Mission (NRLM)	Women from poor households	Self-employment, SHGs	Limited income diversification	Desai et al. (2010)
Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)	ST households	Livelihood & infrastructure	Partial improvement, uneven reach	Xaxa (2008)

Comparative Impact

- SC households benefit significantly from MGNREGA and PDS due to high dependence on wage labour and food support.
- ST households, despite targeted schemes like TSP, face limited economic gains due to remoteness, land tenure issues, and forest access restrictions.
- OBC households show relatively better utilization of livelihood and housing schemes, though benefits remain modest due to structural constraints (Deshpande, 2011).

6.2 Implementation Challenges at the District Level

Despite the presence of multiple welfare schemes, several implementation challenges limit their effectiveness in Nuapada district.

Table 6.2: Key Implementation Challenges of Welfare Schemes in Nuapada

Challenge	Impact on SC	Impact on ST	Impact on OBC	Supporting Evidence
Low awareness	Moderate	High	Moderate	Desai et al. (2010)
Administrative capacity gaps	High	High	Moderate	Government of Odisha (2020)
Delay in wage payments (MGNREGA)	High	High	Moderate	Government of India (2019)
Insecure land tenure	Moderate	Very high	Low	Xaxa (2008)
Geographic remoteness	Moderate	Very high	Moderate	Mohanty (2015)

Key Issues Identified

- **Administrative and institutional bottlenecks** lead to delays in payments, incomplete asset creation, and poor monitoring.
- **Geographical isolation** of tribal habitations restricts scheme outreach and service delivery.
- **Lack of convergence** between schemes limits their ability to generate sustainable livelihoods.
- **Dependence on short-term relief** rather than long-term income generation perpetuates vulnerability among SC and ST households (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The present study examined the economic status of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Nuapada district of Odisha, a region marked by persistent poverty and structural backwardness. The findings reveal that despite decades of affirmative action and welfare interventions, significant economic disparities continue to exist among and within these social groups. SC and ST communities remain disproportionately affected by landlessness, insecure employment, low income levels, and limited access to productive resources, while OBC communities, though relatively better placed, continue to experience economic vulnerability due to low agricultural productivity and informal employment structures.

The study highlights that regional factors such as recurrent droughts, weak infrastructure, limited industrialization, and geographic isolation exacerbate social disadvantages in Nuapada district. Employment opportunities are largely confined to agriculture, casual wage labour, and seasonal migration, offering limited scope for income diversification or upward economic mobility. Although government welfare schemes have provided essential support in terms of food security, employment, and housing, their impact has largely been short-term and insufficient to address the root causes of economic deprivation (Thorat, 2007; Planning Commission, 2014).

Based on the empirical findings of the study, the following policy implications are suggested to promote inclusive and sustainable economic development in Nuapada district:

1. **Strengthening Livelihood Diversification:** There is an urgent need to promote non-farm employment opportunities through skill development, rural enterprises, and small-scale industries tailored to local conditions. Targeted vocational training for SC, ST and OBC youth can help reduce dependence on low-paying agricultural and casual labour (Deshpande, 2011).
2. **Land and Tenure Security Reforms:** Improving land ownership and tenure security, particularly for ST households, is essential for enhancing access to institutional credit and government support. Effective implementation of land rights legislation and forest rights provisions can significantly improve livelihood stability (Xaxa, 2008).
3. **Improved Implementation of Welfare Schemes:** Administrative efficiency must be enhanced to ensure timely delivery of benefits, especially wage payments under MGNREGA and asset creation under PMAY-G. Strengthening local governance and monitoring mechanisms can improve scheme effectiveness (Government of India, 2019).

4. **Region-Specific Development Planning:** Given the ecological and economic constraints of Nuapada district, development strategies must be region-specific, focusing on drought-resilient agriculture, water conservation, and infrastructure development. Convergence of sectoral schemes can help maximize developmental outcomes (Mohanty, 2015).

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