

**Credit, Caste and Institutional Inclusion:
An Assessment of NABARD-Supported
Interventions for Scheduled Castes in
Rural India, 2021-22 to 2023-24**

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Abstract

Getting access to institutional credit is essential for investment, livelihood development and economic upliftment in rural India. However, access to credit remains socially biased. The ability to approach a bank, satisfy eligibility requirements and secure finance for sustainable livelihoods often depends on land ownership, collateral, occupational status, institutional linkages and caste relations. Using data from the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, supplemented by financial information from NABARD and Government of India publications, this paper examines the participation of Scheduled Castes in credit, development and infrastructure programmes during 2021–2023. A descriptive and comparative analysis distinguishes capital- and asset-intensive interventions from livelihood, skill and collective-action programmes. The findings reveal persistently low Scheduled Caste participation in most capital-intensive schemes, generally below three per cent, while participation in selected developmental programmes ranges from about sixteen to over twenty-five per cent. These patterns are interpreted through the concepts of asset-based exclusion, institutional embeddedness and administrative invisibility. Rather than equating programme participation with developmental impact, the paper argues that aggregate credit expansion alone cannot demonstrate equitable inclusion. It recommends standardized social-group reporting, application-to-disbursement tracking, inclusion-sensitive district credit planning, stronger institutional facilitation and a pathway linking capacity-building with productive credit, asset formation and sustainable enterprise.

Keywords

Scheduled Castes, NABARD, Rural credit, Financial inclusion, Social exclusion, Institutional embeddedness, Rural development.

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1. Introduction

The expansion of formal banking in rural India is one of the most significant institutional changes in the country's post-independence development experience. The physical outreach of finance has improved significantly with measures like branch expansion, priority sector lending, self-help group and bank linkage, and specialized development finance. However, merely being near a bank does not guarantee access to productive credit. For example, a household may have a bank account but still not be able to secure a good loan, meet the requirements of collateral, draw up a bankable proposal, or bear the financial risk associated with the business. The difference between financial presence and financial access matters greatly in the case of SCs, who are still struggling economically.

Caste in rural India does not simply denote cultural identity. Historically, it has organized labor, settlement and access to resources, among many factors. Even though the state of these issues has changed due to migration, activism, policy arrangements, and even globalization, caste is still linked with class (Deshpande, 2011; Mosse, 2018; Srinivas, 1962). In this sense, banks and other lenders operate in a field where their procedures seem to be similar, with the situation still potentially leading to inequality in their effects depending on the initial wealth and institutional borders of different groups of potential borrowers.

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has acquired a unique position in this context. NABARD is the apex development bank dedicated to agriculture and rural developments in India. It impacts rural credit through its refinance, institutional development, credit planning, infrastructure funds, promotional activities and capacity building initiatives. It is not, however, a direct retail lender in most of its operations. Consequently, an assessment of NABARD and social inclusion must distinguish its own developmental interventions from credit delivered through banks, state governments, cooperatives and other partner institutions.

This paper examines reported patterns of SC participation in selected NABARD-supported interventions from 2021-22 to 2023-24. Its concern is not simply whether funds expanded, but whether the design and delivery of different programme categories created comparable opportunities for historically disadvantaged households. The central argument is that credit inclusion depends on the conditions attached to entry. Schemes built around land, scale and pre-existing project capacity tend to favour already embedded actors, whereas group-based

livelihood and skill programmes can lower initial barriers. The latter, however, produce durable empowerment only when participants are able to move from training and mobilization to adequate productive finance, market access and asset creation.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

2.1 Caste, Assets and Rural Economic Opportunity

Classical rural sociology showed that caste relations are reproduced through material institutions as much as through status and ritual (Desai, 1979; Srinivas, 1962). In today's agricultural economies, land serves both productive function as well as a clear indicator of credit worthiness. Those who do not own lands or who do not have proper titles on their lands will have problems not only in providing collateral, but also in showing capacity of repayment in classical bank terms. The notion of caste as a system of various levels of inequality discussed by Ambedkar comes into play here, as exclusion takes place not at one point, but acts regarding the dynamic accumulation of education, property, social contacts and self-confidence through generations (Ambedkar, 2014).

Caste and economics still remain interconnected as confirmed by more recent studies. Thorat and Newman (2010) show how so-called free markets still perpetuate discrimination and social practices in favor of certain castes. In a similar vein, Deshpande (2011) warns against the assumption that caste inequality is a thing of the past as it has less and less meaning as the economy grows. Another researcher, Mosse (2018), believes that caste is flexible enough to adopt new economic realities.

2.2 Formal Credit and Unequal Access

Rural banking significance in the process of development is well understood. According to Burgess and Pande (2005), the expansion of rural branches led by the government contributed to poverty reduction, thus demonstrating the potential of public banking for broader distribution. However, aggregate expansion of the institutions does not show who is applying, who got approval, how much was received and whether this amount was enough for the purpose of the investment. Kumar (2013) indicates that the differences in agricultural lending amounts based on caste is the result of processes taking place on both sides: the borrower and the institutions. There could be several factors behind low application level such as lack of knowledge; perceived rejection; poor documentation; or history of difficult relations with the institutions. Later on, loan approval, as well as the amount granted, could depend on the armchair of assets of the borrower, the assessment of risks and discretion of the institution.

The policy framework acknowledges this issue. According to the RBI guidelines, attention should be given to the credit flow to SCs and STs, lending to them should be promoted and associated with social-group reporting in the context of recent advances in the priority sector (Reserve Bank of India, 2016). The National Strategy for Financial Inclusion also emphasizes the necessity of using

meaningful electronic data for ensuring future interventions (Reserve Bank of India, 2019). The existence of gaps, however, moves the analytic task from a simple observation of the presence of policies to a question of implementation quality, measurement, and accountability.

2.3 NABARD, Collective Institutions and Developmental Finance

NABARD's developmental role extends beyond refinance. Its work with self-help groups, producer organizations, watershed institutions, livelihood programmes and rural enterprises can create organizational capacities that conventional loan appraisal often assumes rather than builds. Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness helps explain why these collective arrangements matter. Economic action is situated in social relationships; membership in a credible group or producer institution can transmit information, reduce transaction costs and mediate interaction with formal agencies.

However, inclusion in a training programme and inclusion in productive capital are not the same achievement. Capacity-building may improve skills without overcoming the financing gap required for equipment, working capital, storage, processing or market expansion. A serious assessment must therefore examine whether developmental programmes function as bridges to mainstream finance or remain parallel, low-value spaces for poorer beneficiaries.

2.4 Research Gap

Three gaps motivate this study. First, financial inclusion is frequently measured through account ownership or aggregate credit growth, leaving the distribution of productive credit across social groups insufficiently examined. Second, limited attention has been paid to variation in SC participation between different categories of NABARD-supported interventions. Third, scheme-level administrative evidence is rarely connected to sociological explanations of asset-based exclusion, institutional embeddedness and caste-mediated access. This paper addresses these gaps through a comparative reading of official scheme information. It deliberately treats missing caste-disaggregated data as an institutional finding rather than a neutral absence.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

The study has five objectives: to map NABARD-supported interventions relevant to SC welfare; examine year- and scheme-wise patterns of participation; compare capital-intensive schemes with developmental programmes; identify structural and institutional barriers; and propose an equity-sensitive framework for rural credit planning.

1. What patterns are visible in SC participation across NABARD-supported credit, infrastructure and developmental programmes during 2021-22 to 2023-24?
2. Does SC participation differ between capital-intensive interventions and livelihood-, skill- and collective-action programmes?

3. How far can differences in participation be interpreted through land ownership, collateral, scale, documentation and institutional embeddedness?
4. Does the available administrative information provide an adequate basis for monitoring social inclusion?
5. What reforms can connect developmental participation with productive credit and durable asset formation?

4. Analytical Framework: From Formal Access to Substantive Inclusion

The research considers inclusion as more of a process rather than a singular state. Even if a program has a formal procedure for including citizens, it could still not work for certain households. Effective inclusion can be defined as an access to program for eligible citizens who can benefit from it. The stage of development is vital: the loan only empowers when it is used in productive use as source of income or employment.

Four concepts help explain interpretation. Asset-based exclusion conveys how land and collateral requirements eliminate a large pool of borrowers. Institutional embeddedness denotes households' connections with banks, cooperatives, self-help groups, producer organizations, and extension systems. Occupational stratification signals the continued concentration of disadvantaged households in informal, low-return, or traditionally stigmatized employment. Lastly, administrative visibility relates to whether institutions keep track of social groups' applications, approvals, rejections, amounts, and outcomes.

Table-1: Operational Framework for assessing Substantive Credit Inclusion

Analytical Dimension	Meaning	Observable Indicator
Institutional accessibility	Ability to obtain information and complete procedures	Outreach, assisted applications, documentation support
Eligibility	Capacity to meet entry conditions	Land, collateral, project scale, margin money, credit history
Financial access	Actual receipt of usable finance	Applications, sanctions, disbursement, adequacy of amount
Institutional embeddedness	Connection with mediating organizations	SHG, JLG, FPO, cooperative or extension membership
Developmental conversion	Translation of finance into durable benefit	Income, assets, jobs, enterprise survival, repayment
Administrative visibility	Capacity to monitor equity	Caste-disaggregated application-to-outcome data

Source: Author's analytical framework based on Granovetter (1985), Sen (2000) and Silver (1994).

5. Data Sources and Methodology

5.1 Data Sources

The study uses secondary and administrative evidence. Its principal source is scheme-wise information furnished by NABARD to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes concerning programmes relevant to SC beneficiaries for the period 2021-22 to 2023-24 (NABARD, 2024d; National Commission for Scheduled Castes, 2024). The analysis is supplemented by NABARD annual reports and statistical statements, the All-India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey, RBI reports and regulatory guidance, and documents of the Department of Financial Services (Department of Financial Services, 2025; NABARD, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Reserve Bank of India, 2023). The administrative record is used for scholarly analysis; views and interpretations are those of the author.

Since the data was not initially interpreted and processed into the household impact database, the study maintains clear difference between households and individual beneficiaries, between projects and amounts approved, transferred and refinanced. These elements cannot be consolidated without caution. In particular, refinance obtained through the intermediary institution is not regarded as equivalent to a standard retail loan issued to the SC family.

5.2 Method

The research employs a descriptive and comparative approach. The interventions are categorized as follows: (a) infrastructure-based funds, investment funds, and capital-heavy programs; and (b) programs in the area of development, livelihood, capacity-building, and collective action. Wherever the number of beneficiaries is available, the participation rate of the SC is determined by the formula of SC beneficiaries by the total number of beneficiaries multiplied by 100. And whenever financial data is available, the SC financial share is mentioned as a separate comparison. The research compares the participation mode in different forms of programs and gives explanations through the framework used in Table 1. The causal claims are not made as a result of the analysis, as it can only indicate uneven participation and the possible mechanisms of participation.

6. NABARD's Institutional Position in Rural Development

In India's rural credit system, NABARD plays a unique role by having financial, developmental and supervisory responsibilities. As a financier, NABARD offers refinance facilities and manages funds for and provides assistance to investment projects in sectors like agriculture and rural infrastructure, among others. NABARD's developmental functions include supporting the creation of institutions, promoting the idea of self-help groups, financial literacy programs, and encouraging various activities that can lead to enhanced income-earning opportunities. Planning activities can be found in the works of NABARD as seen with the Potential Linked Credit Plans and local banks. (NABARD, 2024a, 2024b).

The aforementioned roles should be recognized separately. In the case of an infrastructure fund, the immediate borrower or the entity implementing the project may be a state authority, bank, cooperative or project company; in this case, the degree of socioeconomic effects may not be clear from the data related to funding. Meanwhile, in the context of programs aimed at improving people's livelihood, the beneficiaries may be defined directly. It has to be mentioned that comparison of percentages across different programs may lead to incorrect conclusions unless the research unit is determined. Therefore, patterns discussed in this study may be seen more as indicators of administrative participation in the process than as strictly comparable measures of household credit incidence.

7. Findings: Uneven Inclusion across Programme Types

7.1 The Central Data Constraint

The most important finding is that there is no regular caste-specific data on key credit flows, including agricultural loans. This makes it impossible to analyze how the scheduled castes access crop loans, short and long-term agricultural loans, and other similar loans. There is more to this than just an absence of data. If it is not possible to gather application, sanction, disbursement, and rejection data by social group, it means that inequalities become difficult to identify in administrative terms. Overall increase in the volume of lending can be characterized as inclusion even when it is unclear from which groups this increase has taken place.

The reporting system created by RBI makes it clear that it is feasible to track lending by social group (Reserve Bank of India, 2016). The task is to develop a unified monitoring system for all the processes through which NABARD helps finance reach the borrowers. A reliable system would be able to identify individual borrowers while separating the credit from NABARD's refinancing.

7.2 Capital-intensive and Infrastructure Interventions

The administrative documents used in this study indicated that several capital-intensive measures, such as agricultural marketing and irrigation projects, food processing, and fisheries funds, had a very small visible participation of scheduled castes (SCs). The highest participation was seen in some RIDF- and FPO-related projects, although the meaning of being a beneficiary differs in these programs. It must be noted, however, that these findings do not mean that infrastructure does not benefit SC communities; rather, they signify that the participation of SCs or financial impact seemed limited.

The architecture of any programme provides an explanation of the pattern. Large projects require scale, technical know-how, land or organizational ability, and risk management over time. SC households are far less likely to take these routes if they are landless, marginally landholding, or engaged in insecure livelihood. Therefore, ostensibly caste-neutral project criteria could generate social inequalities in participation since the start of the projects themselves would be unequal.

7.3 Developmental and Promotional programmes

Different case studies illustrate the difference between the pattern of the two types of livelihood and enterprise development programmes and watershed movement initiatives, as well as off-farm producer associations. News confirms that the SC's involvement in the indicated country ranges from about sixteen to over twenty-five per cent. This style of action diminishes entry barriers through training, building groups, doing local mobilization, and institutional support. This form of intervention also creates human and social capital before expecting beneficiaries to self-manage their finances.

This relative success is significant but needs to be interpreted cautiously. Having a large share of beneficiaries in a training program with low financial input does not equal having the same share of investment funding. Inclusion should be measured by reach, volume, adequacy and stability of financial support. If these factors aren't taken into account, it is possible for marginalized segments of the population to be adequately represented in terms of capacity building as well as underrepresented in terms of funding instruments creating productive assets.

Table-2: Comparative Pattern emerging from the Administrative Evidence

Programme category	Reported SC participation pattern	Likely institutional explanation	Interpretive caution
Capital-intensive infrastructure and investment	Generally low; often below 3% in the reported records	Land, scale, technical preparation, margin and risk-bearing requirements	Project benefits and direct beneficiary credit are not always comparable
RIDF- and FPO-related interventions	Relatively better than several large investment funds	Public investment or collective institutional route	Final social incidence requires clearer beneficiary tracing
Livelihood, skill and promotional programmes	Approximately 16% to over 25% in selected programmes	Lower entry barriers, group participation and handholding	Participation does not by itself prove income or asset outcomes

Source: Author's analysis of NABARD information furnished to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. Percentages are reported ranges; scheme-level denominators should accompany any subsequent numerical table.

8. Discussion: Credit is Not Socially Neutral

8.1 Asset-based Exclusion

The divergence between programme categories supports a basic proposition of rural sociology: institutions encounter social groups at unequal starting points. Landlessness affects more than household income. It restricts collateral, reduces the scale at which an enterprise can be imagined and weakens the evidence a borrower

can present to a risk-averse lender. Occupational concentration in casual labour further produces irregular cash flows that do not fit standard repayment models. The resulting exclusion can occur without an explicitly discriminatory rule.

This does not eliminate the possibility of institutional bias. It clarifies that observed disparities may combine unequal endowments, application behaviour, procedural friction and discretionary decision-making. An adequate monitoring system must therefore capture the entire pathway from awareness and application to sanction, amount, utilization and repayment.

8.2 Institutional Embeddedness and Collective Action

The comparatively wider SC presence in group- and livelihood-oriented programmes illustrates the value of institutional mediation. SHGs, JLGs, FPOs, cooperatives and community organizations can help potential borrowers interpret schemes, assemble documents, build a transaction history and negotiate with formal institutions. They also reduce the isolation of first-generation entrepreneurs. In Granovetter's (1985) terms, they embed economic action in relationships that make information and trust available.

Yet collective participation should not become a ceiling. Poorer households should not be confined to micro-scale activities while larger individual and corporate actors access investment finance. The policy objective should be graduation: a credible route from mobilization and skill development to working capital, technology, processing, storage and market expansion.

8.3 Administrative Invisibility and Accountability

The inability to disaggregate major credit flows limits both diagnosis and correction. A financial institution cannot know whether a neutral-looking scheme is substantively inclusive if it does not record who applies, who withdraws, who is rejected, who is sanctioned a smaller amount and who receives the funds on time. Missing data thus become part of the mechanism through which inequality is normalized.

The correct answer is not merely a target identification. It's a social inclusion performance measurement system that tracks scheme, location, gender, caste, purpose of loan, degree of application success, amount sanctioned, and repayment status. Such data should be used for learning purposes and not just for compliance. It can tell whether low participation stems from outreach, eligibility issues, appraisal issues, disbursement problems, or post-disbursement problems.

8.4 Participation is not Outcome

A key distinction made in the paper is between participation and developmental change. The count of beneficiaries gives an indication of reach but gives no indication of changes in income, assets and mobility. A robust outcome framework would measure enterprise survival, employment created, loan repayment performance, productive assets created and informal borrowing. This

distinction also helps explain the new title of the paper. Evidence shows patterns of access and inclusion by institutions but does not substantiate any causal claims about development. Future work at the beneficiary level can build on the analysis of participation to assess impact.

9. Policy Framework for Equity-Sensitive Rural Credit

9.1 Standardize Social Inclusion Data

NABARD and its partner organizations should create a unified data dictionary that includes received applications, approved applications, rejections, approved amounts, amounts disbursed, outstanding amounts, and repayment information. The number of beneficiaries and financial shares should be published separately. The reasons for rejection should have a standardized coding system while at the same time privacy measures should be in place to protect the identity of individual borrowers.

9.2 Integrate Inclusion into District Credit Planning

Possible Linked Credit Plans and district credit plans should set measurable inclusion indicators based on the demographic, occupational and asset profiles of SC households. Planning should focus on local constraints such as landlessness in one district or weak producer organization coverage in another instead of imposing a uniform national remedy.

9.3 Create a Credit Progression Pathway

The participants who have finished their training for businesses and skills need to receive assistance so that they can create their projects, raise the needed capital for the starting costs, and get funding afterwards. This may imply not only the training but also a link to the incubators, loans, support from technological and insurance firms, etc.

9.4 Strengthen Facilitation and Grievance Review

Dedicated facilitating arrangements in SC concentrated districts will help with processes, documentation and project formulation. Clear denials and timely appraisal should be provided by banks as far as the reasons for rejection are concerned. Analysis of rejection trends can help in finding out genuine viability issues as compared to avoidable procedural hurdles or irregular assessments.

9.5 Measure Quality, not only Reach

An inclusion audit should assess the general amount received for each beneficiary, timing, sufficiency, recycled credit, survivability of business ventures and asset formation. It must also provide gender-wise, region-wise and livelihood-wise disaggregation of results. Finally, a programme that has a large number of beneficiaries, but low funding should not be assessed similarly to a project providing sustainability in economic progress.

Table-3: Proposed Social Inclusion Monitoring Matrix

Stage	Core indicator	Equity question
Outreach	Eligible persons contacted; assisted applications	Are excluded groups receiving usable information?
Application	Applications by social group and gender	Who applies, and where do potential applicants drop out?
Decision	Sanction and rejection rates; reasons	Are similar applications treated consistently?
Disbursement	Amount, timeliness and adequacy	Does sanctioned finance reach the borrower in usable form?
Utilization	Asset or working-capital use	Can the borrower deploy credit productively?
Outcome	Income, jobs, survival, repayment, informal debt	Does participation generate durable economic improvement?

Source: Author's proposed monitoring framework.

10. Limitations and Agenda for Further Research

The limitations of this study lie in the nature of its administrative data. The information on different castes is not equally available in all the major sources of refinance and credit. The records do not always have information on the number of applications approved, and loans disbursed and there is no uniformity among the different schemes with regard to the amount loaned. There is also no household-level evidence on the income, formation of assets, repayment of loans, and the survival of enterprises. Therefore, the estimated shares cited in this study need to be treated as measures of participation and not of impact.

Next, the research should integrate administrative monitoring with beneficiary surveys and comparative district case studies. Interviews with applicants, bankers, NABARD officials, SHGs, and producer societies would highlight points of procedural bottlenecks. A panel design that studies the same beneficiaries before and after the intervention would also allow real assessment of development conversion. State, gender, and sub-group approach would also bring out inequalities unnoticeable in the aggregated SC category.

11. Conclusion

Being in a position to bring together finance, planning, and rural institution building gives NABARD the ability to shape financial inclusion in India. However, the analysis in this paper shows that there are flaws in this internal structure. The SC participation seems to be wider in terms of specific employment, training, and participatory projects as opposed to the well-defined, visible participation in many asset- or capital-heavy projects. This trend reflects the unequal distribution of lands, security, access to the market, and information available in rural areas.

The lesson that can be learned from the policy is that development programs should not supplant conventional credit. Rather, development programmes should

function as steps towards conventional credit. Training programs, in the absence of subsequent financial support, could enhance skills, but not change the ownership of resources. Increasing the availability of general refinancing, without tracing its social implications, could serve to enhance rural credit while perpetuating existing inequalities. Inclusive development entails intentional linking of capabilities with credit, markets, and resources.

Hence, the transition from formal neutrality to material equality is obligatory. By implications, this necessitates the evaluation of credit seeking and loaning, the basis for refusal and total disbursements, and transformations and beneficiaries' presence as well. Also, it requires comprehension that accreditation boundaries may have an uneven outcome, as households come to institutions with distinctive social and economic statuses.

The main conclusion is simple: the amount of credit that flows to the rural economy is just one indicator of financial inclusion. It is equally important, however, to consider who has access to the financial system, who gets sufficient productive finance, through which institutions and with what long-term implications. By incorporating these questions into its data, strategies and programming NABARD can move from increasing rural finance to reforming the distribution of resources.?

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