

A STUDY ON DALIT IDENTITY, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA

Ankush Kumar*; Ankit Kumar Bharti**

*Senior Research Fellow,
PhD,
Centre for Political Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA

**Senior Research Fellow,
PhD,
Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA

DOI: 10.5958/2278-4853.2022.00379.2

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Dalits today are not only passive participants, now they have a systematic programme. In the era of globalization and liberalization, they are not only restricted to the government job, but now they are also increasingly venturing into other forms of occupations, professions and as a result, they are forming a new form of Dalit identity based on their occupational shift accrue significant levels of achievements in socio-economic and politico status but not as compared to the caste Hindus. Dalits seem to have slowly made an entry into the professions and occupations of modern times, this happened out of the rigorous social, economic and political interventions, which enabled social and economic mobility. Several policies induce by the states' such as reservation in education and subsequent employment in particular help in the upward social and economic mobility of Dalits. Dalits face the question of identity both at the social-collective level and at an individual level. Regarding mobility, their reference point is individual and collective, consisting of Dalit identity and ideology which further leads to the agenda of Dalit empowerment and hence makes them identify with both.

KEYWORDS: *Increasingly, Venturing, Systematic, Dalit Empowerment, Political Interventions.*

INTRODUCTION

Dalits today are not only passive participants, now they have a systematic programme. In the era of globalisation and liberalisation, they are not only restricted to the government job, but now they are also increasingly venturing into other forms of occupations, professions and as a result, they are forming a new form of Dalit identity based on their occupational shift accrue significant levels of achievements in socio-economic and political status but not as compared to the caste Hindus. In contemporary times several caste groups aim to harness similar objectives and goals of education, employment and mobility on the socio-economic and occupational ladder. Consequently, individuals compete for the same kinds of positions belonging to the different

castes. “Occupational mobility is an indicator of both social and economic mobility. Sociologists take occupation, income and education as the determining variables of the class positions of the individuals and the families.”(Judge, 2008)

To protect the interest of the marginalised and weaker section of society Ambedkar favours the role of the state. In his book ‘States and Minorities’ published in 1947, Ambedkar emphasised that key and basic industries in a country should be owned and run by the state. Corporations should be established by the state. To provide the equitable distribution of wealth, he proposes the obligation on the state to plan and secure the economic life of the people. “The internal social structure factor that led to the upward and downward mobility in Hindu society was the dispersion and the concentration of the property.”(Silverberg, 1968)

Dalit identity, Social Stratification and Mobility in India:

Dalit leaders believe that ‘dalit term’ or category provides a sense of self-assertion and self-pride. It is a gateway to help to reach the level of cultural identity. Now there is no feeling of shame about being Dalit. ‘Dalitness’ provides the energy for confrontation and increases the possibility of becoming one total being. (Bharati, 2002, pp. 4339-40)For “Dalits, identity is a concept not limited to relation and experience of oneself with others. Still, it is a matter of positive mutual recognition, self-respect and dignity like any other human being on this planet.” (Kumar, 2021, p. 158)Traditionally the system of caste is a non-competitive character, which means each caste has its predefined occupation and none of them is allowed to voyager in others’ occupational territory. Though a little flexibility or some degree of social mobility was found to be allowed for non-Dalit shockingly it was ardently impossible for Dalits to move upward in the hierarchy of caste (Pillai, 1976)

Occupations do not change in a makeshift way, as there is a certain relationship between economic change and the rise of new occupations that requires a definite and certain skill. Industrialisation and capitalism are attributed to making occupational changes that broke the hereditary and traditional character. In India, caste and occupations have a close relationship to the extent that even the names of caste reveal the nature of the traditional and hereditary occupation. There is a difference between caste mobility and class mobility; caste mobility deals primarily with the enhancement of status, on the other hand, class mobility deals with economic upliftment.

Social mobility can be described as a movement from one stipulated social position to another. Social mobility is considered within the framework of occupation, income and economy. Social mobility can be classified as horizontal and vertical mobility. Horizontal mobility refers to the movement where the social recognition or status inter alia doesn’t change with respect to the movement on the economic scale. The individual and the group undergoing the horizontal social mobility don’t find any desired altercation in their social receptivity and they are still considered as their prior social recognition, irrespective of their economic shifts (if any). Vertical mobility refers to the movement or shift of a group or an individual between positions of unequal status. Vertical mobility is also referred to as upward and downward mobility.

The struggle against the caste system goes back to the Buddha’s time and the bhakti movement time for an egalitarian society. It rejected the practice of untouchability and the caste system. During colonial rule, the emergence of the social reform movement against the rigid caste system

raised the hope for the downtrodden. While advocating the important role of education for scheduled castes to achieve social mobility. Vishwanathan and Reddy argued that the dalit community have not monopolized the socially valued skills and the economic profits. Both suggested that they utilize education as the means for economic independence through the entry into the modern occupations to generate the profit for economic independence.”(Vishwanathan, 1985)

“Within the caste system, the inequalities are not merely religiously ordained but are a consequence of the unequal distribution of privileges and power in a society. Accordingly, the higher castes have control over the scarce goods or have access to the privileges and the power.” (Pimpley, 1990) The emergence of new secular occupation and access and the policies of affirmative action’s did lend a helping hand to some marginalized Dalits in terms of social and economic opportunities; therefore, this developmental Endeavour also reflects a shift in Indian society from caste-based social reform to the class-based. Now the new occupational structure lays greater emphasis upon the values of achievements and less on ascription. The calls to dismantle the developmental state proposed by Nehru gained strength during the phase of 1990s when India shifts towards the system of capitalism. The system of capitalism promised to realize the economic potential of India and the freedom of markets is the ultimate condition of liberty from the control of the state and it was a prerequisite to achieving the vision of development and prosperity that the Nehruvian developmental state had failed at.

In the shift toward capitalism, the role of the state is reduced to obsolete. “The market forces would control the project of creation of wealth while allowing the prosperity to trickle down to the citizens at the lowermost rung of the economic ladder. Even though in the age of the markets the role of states has never been rendered obsolete.” (Kaur, 2016) The intervention of the state was even seen as a necessary course correction to contain ‘out of control’ markets and as an instant to rethink the idea of unrestrained capitalism. It is a condition where we are witnessing the state although as a reluctant agent when it is effaced within the small state, big market in neoliberal discourse.

In the age of the market, this reluctant state becomes visible, particularly in the influential discourse of what is known as ‘Dalit Capitalism’ where the accumulation of capital appears as the mode of the Dalit resistance against the oppression by the upper caste. The idea behind Dalit capitalism is to promote the social inclusion of Dalits through the free-market path that requires access to financial credit and opportunities for business enterprises and eventually levels out the disadvantages. “The inspiring stories of Dalit millionaires who turn the harsh conditions into opportunities are increasingly invoked to showcase the business entrepreneurship as the tool of social empowerment.”(Kapur, 2014)

The entrepreneurs are presented as the agent of social mobility to overcome the traditional and the static pre-modern norms through the liberal infusion of the free market and the financial credit among the historically marginalised and excluded from society. “The entrepreneurship and Dalit business are not just about the lack of credit flows but the main question is about that how the caste-based prejudices and the discrimination based on the traditional sayings of ritual purity and pollution shape and outline the exchanges of goods and services in the contemporary market forces.”(Prakash, 2015). In the age of markets, the caste-based old prejudices are transformed into the questions of individual qualifications, skills and the capabilities of Dalits to carry out

managerial tasks or enter into any other profession that is unrelated to their caste. So, in an era of liberalisation, the translation of caste prejudices into the market-responsive language signals the limitations of the market itself as the liberating force. The argument here is not about dismissing the phenomenon of Dalit Capitalism, but rather drawing attention to the social restrictions and the barriers that constitute the markets too. To celebrate capital as human emancipation now, it has become challenging to explain away the constraints and the inadequacies as the inequality grows in different parts of the world.

About Dalit capitalism, much of the educational progress among the Dalit and the social and economic mobility was initiated by the reservation policy led by the state in the public sector. The phenomenon of the emergence of the Dalit middle class is also an outcome due to the continuous state policies over some decades. (Jaffrelot, 2008) The work of Piketty calls to bring the state back to play the role of social leveller at the moment when the gap of wealth stock increased even in the middle of the ruins of the financial crisis.

Dalit Entrepreneurs in Urban Markets:

Despite the superficially conflicting views on the role of the state, there is no challenge to the fact that in India the economic growth over the last two decades has not significantly benefitted historically depressed groups and the Dalits. Kannan's viewpoint is that "irrespective of levels of economic development and the political regime in the state or region, the poor are more likely from the historically deprived sections of society." (Kannan, 2009)

The advent of the neoliberal economy with the professed goal to make a profit and economic growth before the group identity has led scholars that post-liberalization the capitalist economy in India is the ultimate weapon to eradicate discrimination and social exclusion in a caste hierarchical society of India. The liberalization of the Indian economy has given rise to the 'New Middle Class' and along with the expansion of the new middle class, there has also been a simultaneous rise in the economic mobility of Dalits. Many scholars distinguish the Dalit middle class from the new middle class because of the incongruences between the class and social status. (Srivastava, 2015) "The middle class belonging to the Dalit community are not only relatively new contestants to the middle class, they are better understood as the subaltern middle class where they emerge from and also remain tied in various ways with the stigmatised lower caste." (Pandey, 2010). With the erosion of the caste-based economy, there may have been changed in the relations of the production but the social divisions manage to be visible in newer ways and the flow of capital flourishes in such manifestations.

Despite the economic upliftment and securing the secular occupation, the caste identity continues to hinder the lives of Dalits from the mainstream middle class. Regarding the upward Dalit mobility, it is argued that the social environment of middle-class Dalits is still different from the community of other origins and they are yet to fully integrate into the culture and social recognition/acceptance of mainstreamed middle class which is by and large dominated by the high caste. And also, the middle-class Dalit faced specific problems such as recent or newly acquired economic statuses. Therefore, it can be inferred that in the case of a Dalit, social mobility doesn't correspond to economic mobility. Dalits who struggle and eventually manage to find a way towards socially and economically mobilities are not recognized and fully assimilated

and accepted similarly into the cultural and social realms of other caste groups which otherwise are in the Hindu social system.

The Dalit also have opted for the mainstream middle-class occupations. The policy of reservation helped the historically marginalised sections of society to raise their living standard and enter into the new arena of life and the occupations which are predominantly controlled by the caste Hindus. The representation of Dalit in modern occupations has been minuscule in all population scales. The dalit middle class have also shown inclination towards the occupations of the mainstream middle class. At the same time, Dalit youth today are equally or more driven by the aspirations to become entrepreneurs, businessmen and independent professionals. The upward mobility of Dalits faces the question of identity both at the social-collective level and at an individual level. Regarding mobility their reference point is individual as well as family aspirations intersect with their observations of Dalit identity and ideology and the agenda of Dalit empowerment and hence make them identify with both.

“Dalit middle class is both the vehicle and the stabilizer of Dalit identity and ideology. The middle class of Dalit play a role in modernization among the Dalit because as a catalyst they assist and inspire the Dalit to emerge as the self-asserting individual with the consciousness of the community.”(Sachidananda, 1974) Post-independence, Dalits seem to have slowly made an entry into the professions and occupations of modern times, this happened out of the rigorous social and political interventions, which enabled the social, economic and political mobility induced by the states’ policy of reservation in education and subsequent employment in particular.

The Dalit Middle Class and the Experience of Mobility:

The engagement of Dalits in modern occupations is commonly associated with the middle class; it is seen through the approach that is conventional to study the social mobility where it involves and comparing the father’s occupational status, education, and social class with his attainments in the similar terms.(Krishna, 2013) The upward shift in an occupational hierarchy helps Dalits to move away from the occupations that are traditional in nature where it only suggests that this change only in his class position but the shift of class has not been congruent with the socio-economic improvement for many of them.

The caste identity of Dalits mediates and intervenes in their status and class position as the new entrants to the middle class. The caste identity of occupationally mobile Dalit still intervenes with their social status and interpersonal relations in their social life. The workplace, neighbourhood and the community are the spheres where Dalits have traditionally been excluded from society to engage equally with the upper castes. Dalits who have attained the status of middle-class identity, somehow it does not mean that their identity of caste no more interferes in their social relationship with their own class members. Rather it is the identity of caste as a Dalit which expresses their experience of mobility into the new class, now what becomes important is the way of dalit responding to such intervention of caste identity and the social exclusion.

The year 2016 has been observed as Ambedkar’s 125th birth anniversary across the country and the world. The following year that 2017 it has been marked as the centennial jubilee year of his entrepreneurial start-up because he had launched his own start-up in 1917 but despite putting his exceptional ingenuity and hard work into the business, he could not succeed in the long run it

was not successful due to the social bias and subsequent rejection against the downtrodden low caste. Some associations of Dalit entrepreneurs such as the Bahujan Udyog Federation, New Mumbai, Bahujan Entrepreneurs Network (BEN), Buddhist Industrial Manufactures & Trade Associations (BIMTA), in Aurangabad, Buddha International Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BICCI), Mumbai, Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), Pune have made their presence through the business expos, trade fairs and negotiations with the government as well as collaboration with the corporate.

The presence of Dalit Entrepreneurs heralds a new discussion on Dalit capitalism in academia as well as the corporate. Capital is arguably considered an effective weapon to fight against the social system of caste. The idea of capitalism to fight against caste is a novel idea but it is quite challenging at the same time. Some of the challenges faced by the Dalit entrepreneurs are persisting with the system of caste hierarchy induced social structure along with the cultural practices and correspondingly beliefs extra.

“Social scientists argue that the delinking of occupation and the caste has gained a momentum in secular spaces such as the offices, industries in India theorizes that the tenacity of caste has become a myth.”(Bateille, 2012) Dalits were denied equal opportunity in social life, no hereditary wealth, least opportunities in the corporate sector, and caste identity extra, so it is also difficult to become an entrepreneur. “The experiences of the Dalit entrepreneurs and the available literature show that the Dalit entrepreneurs have to face the caste identity hurdles in their entrepreneurship as the notion of caste persists in Indian society.”(Indurkar, 2015)

Economic Mobility of Dalits and challenges:

From 1980 onwards the economic position of Dalits has shifted from traditional occupations to modern occupations. There is improvement in pay, working conditions and working hours. They came out of the agricultural and bonded labour into the other kind of work and for better opportunities in jobs, they migrate from the village and shifts in the part attributed to the changing and improving the economy. In the neoliberal age, economic growth allows the state government to invest more to ensure the full welfare of the poor. Welfare measures for Dalits have been introduced in different parts of the country and important measures are the provision of subsidised food through the Public Distribution System, basic household provisions and the employment guarantee scheme in 2005.

Despite the inadequate provisions, problems of caste discrimination, implementation of social policies and corruption within the system, in some measure, the social and economic welfare programmes have contributed to the rise in the living conditions of Dalits and the life changes in some parts of the country. “Although not linked to the age of liberalisation as such the affirmative action policy and the education have a considerable impact on the deprived section but even though Dalits are still lagging.”(Chalam, 2007) Now with advanced opportunities in an era of globalisation, the greater section of the Dalit population can read and write, and many Dalits now have a chance to escape the traditional occupations and occupational destiny of their parents. Education armed the Dalit with the confidence to come out of the professions of exploitative nature like labour discrimination and bonded labour and to seek the better option of employment. The majority of educated Dalit youth did not find a job due to not matching their

education, it is now regarded as a transformative potential and engendering the sense of claim altogether absent earlier.

Due to the reservation policy, Dalits have access to reserved places in the government sector job and get state employment which begin to constitute a new class i.e., middle-class Dalits. On the other hand, at the same time, there are severe criticisms of the system of reservation because critiques argue that reservation provided benefits to the already privileged and the self-perpetuating Dalit elite. The state sector was rapidly shrinking due to the liberalisation and privatization and thereby largely reducing the number of public sector jobs available to the beneficiaries. Due to the privatization, the role of government is shrinking so many are realising that it is the energy is being wasted on the struggle for a fair share in public sector resources when the state is rolling back. There is a serious concern about the Dalits when the private sector is growing and it leads to the Dalits would cut and drift from the growing sectors of the economy and they become marooned in low-waged work. The agriculture and wage labour.

For Dalits to succeed in a free market without capital in the economic, social, political and educational spheres is not possible, and similarly without the affirmative action policies to ensure the historically marginalised section the equality of opportunity would push back the Dalits all over again. (Sukhadeo, 2007) Inequality has increased in the post-reform period where the growing economy is resulting in a wider gap between the rich and the poor.

Challenge of Marginalisation and Social Mobility of Dalit:

The story of economic mobility cannot be separated from the story of social mobility. Dalits are continuously under-represented not only in the private sector and business enterprises but are also under-represented in the prestigious professions due to the lack of social skills and attributes requisite in high-earning businesses and professions. They are debarred from the industrial networks also. As the studies of 'enterprise culture' shows that it is not a matter of qualification, but it is also a matter of culture, exposure, attitude, confidence, manner and body language extra. These values are characteristics of the privileged class due to education in private schools and personality development courses so it means that forms of distinction led to success in economic growth and development that are out of Dalits' reach all over again. This brings us back to Pierre Bourdieu's view who shows how the forms of cultural distinction are wielded and influenced by the educated and middle class in French society as the main principle of mechanisms for class reproduction. (Bourdieu, 1984)

It is no coincidence that things are happening and enabling the elites to be a success in the new economic era and it continually eludes the Dalit. It is not only difficult for Dalits to obtain qualifications and well-paid jobs they also face pressure from the transition itself. Naudet argues that socially mobile Dalits are in a dilemma between the obligations and the attachments towards their determination for the original community and the desire for social legitimacy in the new group.

Unlike the upper caste students, the upward mobile Dalit cannot depend on financial support from their families not only this they often bear the burden for the sustenance of their family while they are studying. Those who are succeeding and moving in the class position often report that feel the psychological shame that restricts them from full adaptation to the new site while they also feel the uncertainty towards the community they left behind. Naudet¹ (2008) suggests

that this tension presents a major challenge for the socially mobile Dalit. The experience of upward mobile Dalits may help account for the persistence of the caste endogamy even among the Dalit middle class who have the opportunity of marrying into those families that are unconcerned about the caste.

Neoliberal discourses dovetail with the idea of laissez-faire in surprising ways. One of the aspects of neoliberalism for Dalits pertains to the construction of poverty itself. Gooptu² (2009) examines the discourses of neoliberalism where she shows how the poor are responsible for their failure. She shows how the poor in urban areas including Dalit are both represented as and coached to be 'entrepreneurs', which means self-maximising individuals who make something themselves based on their initiative, so in this context, poverty is reduced to a problem of individual attitude rather than the inequalities produced by the liberalisation and privatization.

Gooptu argues further that in framing the poor in this way so the development agencies and the state de-politicise the problem of poverty and step down from the responsibility for ameliorating the widening and deepening stratification. In 1966, Srinivas predicted that as more and more Dalits become educated and seek better enforcement of constitutional rights then the clashes at the local are likely to increase. Although there are laws to protect the Dalit from the ultimate form of discrimination and on the one hand casteism is open abuse and it may be decreasing day by day. However, it resurfaces the critique of those policies and the laws that helps the Dalit.

CONCLUSION:

The emergence of new secular occupation, access and the policies of affirmative action's did lend a helping hand to some marginalized Dalits in terms of social and economic opportunities; Moreover, this developmental endeavour also reflects a shift in Indian society from caste-based social reform to the class-based. Therefore, it further pushes the socio and economic mobility of Dalits and forms a new Dalit identity. These mobilities are also pushed and induced by the states' policy of reservation in education and subsequent employment in particular. Now the new occupational structure lays greater emphasis upon the values of achievements and less on ascription. In the age of markets, the caste-based old prejudices are transformed into the questions of individual qualifications, skills and the capabilities of Dalits to be able to carry out managerial tasks or enter into any other profession that is not related to their caste. So, in an era of liberalisation, the translation of caste prejudices into the market-responsive language signals the limitations of the market itself as the liberating force. The shift in the occupation of the Dalits brings tangible (material betterment) and intangible (gain dignity and self-respect) changes which create conditions for economic and social mobility. Furthermore, the mobility has been constructing a new dalit identity based on their occupation shift and transporting change in class and status.

However, despite the economic upliftment and securing the secular occupation, the caste identity continues to hinder the lives of Dalits from the mainstream middle class. Regarding the upward Dalit mobility, it is argued that the social environment of middle-class Dalits is still different from the community of their origin and they are yet to fully integrate into the culture and social recognition/acceptance of mainstreamed middle class which is by and large dominated by the high caste. The upward mobility of Dalits faces the question of identity both at the social-collective level and at an individual level. Regarding mobility, their reference point is individual

and collective, consisting of Dalit identity and ideology which further leads to the agenda of Dalit empowerment and hence makes them identify with both. The Dalit middle class further engaged themselves in redefining and sustaining the Dalit identity and its ideology.

Works Cited

- Bateille, A. (2012). The peculiar tenacity of caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41-48.
- Bharati, S. (2002). A Term Asserting Unity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4339-4340.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (R. Nice, Trans.) Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Chalam, L. (2007). *Caste-Based Reservation and Human Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Indurkar, C. (2015). The emergence of Dalit entrepreneurship and debate on Dalit Capitalism. *Indian Journal of lifelong Learning and Development*, 14-27.
- Jaffrelot, C. (2008). Why Should We Vote? The Indian Middle Class and the Functioning of the World's largest Democracy. In P. Jaffrelot, *Patterns of Middle-Class Consumption in India and China* (pp. 35-54). Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Judge, P. (2008). Understanding the Paradox of change among Dalits in Punjab. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49-55.
- Kannan, K. (2009). Dualism, Informality and Social inequality: An Informal Economy Perspective of the Challenge of Inclusive Development in India. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 1-32.
- Kapur, D. (2014). *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs*. Delhi: Random House India.
- Kaur, R. (2016). Snakes and Ladders: Rethinking Social Mobility in Post-Reform India. *Contemporary South Asia*, 229-241.
- Krishna, A. (2013). Making It in India: Examining Social Mobility in Three Walks of Life. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38-49.
- Kumar, A. (2021). Dalit Identity, Cultural Assertion and Mobilisation in Jammu. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 156-161.
- Pandey, G. (2010). *Subaltern Citizens and their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*. New York: Routledge.
- Pillai, D. (1976). *Aspects of Changing India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Pimpley, P. (1990). Social Reforms for the Untouchables: Some Issues for Examination. In R. Prasad, *Social reforms: An Analysis of Indian Society*. Agra: Y.K Publications.
- Prakash, A. (2015). *Dalit Capital: State, Markets and Civil Society in Urban India*. New Delhi: Routledge Publishers.
- Sachidananda. (1974). *The Harijan Elite*. New Delhi: Thomson.
- Silverberg, J. (1968). *Social Mobility in the Caste system in India*. Netherlands: Mouton.
- Srivastava, A. (2015). Dalit and Social Mobility: A Discussion on the dalit Middle Class. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 127-134.
-

Sukhadeo, T. (2007). Caste and Economic Discrimination: Causes, Consequences and Remedies. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4121-24.

Vishwanathan, G. (1985). *Scheduled Castes: A Study in Educational Achievement*. Hyderabad: Scientific Services.