

Caste and Economic Mobility: A Longitudinal Study of Dalit Communities in North India

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Abstract

Caste is one of the prominent and longest and well established social stratification in India and it has had a tremendous impact on the lives and prospects of people economically. This review paper is a critical analysis of the trends, hindrances, and enablers of the economic mobility of the Dalit people in North India with the searchlight on longitudinal studies carried out in the last 20 years. Based on national survey data, scholarly research literature, and assessments of policy analysis, the paper identifies a small amount of educational progress and vocational diversification among the Dalits mostly in the urban setting. Nevertheless, such achievements are un-equal and can vary under burdensome structural discrimination, landlessness, and inadequate recruitment to social capital. The paper also tests the effectiveness of affirmative action, welfare programs and grassroot movements in facilitating upward mobility. Although there is a certain improvement, caste can still have its overwhelming impact on the path of economic development and the level of intergenerational mobility remains low in many places. The paper ends with recommendations of policy implications and research gaps, which demand higher-level studies that are more nuanced, intersectional, and regionally disaggregated longitudinal studies to inform inclusive development strategies.

Introduction

The caste system has historically structured Indian society into rigid hierarchical groups, with Dalits formerly known as "Untouchables" occupying the lowest rung of this social order. Even after all the constitutional protections and over 50 years of affirmative action the caste system still determines access to education, jobs, land, and social capital. In rural and urban areas in North India, traditional caste hierarchies have so saturated institutions, ways of thinking and social life, that the question of how Dalits have fared in terms of economic mobility is central to explaining general trends in inequality and social justice.

The economic mobility, especially intergenerational one, is a central indicator of the social progress and the efficacy of development and inclusion policies. In the context of the marginalized groups, such as Dalits, upward mobility is not just a material development but change in the social status and dignity. Mobility is however not a uniform process and it usually tends to be mediated by region, gender, availability of education and discrimination.

The purpose of the review paper is to investigate the scope and the character of economic mobility within Dalit communities in North India and pay special attention to the knowledge provided in the longitudinal studies. The paper will aim at presenting a more holistic picture of the issues that have either favored mobility or stalled it by performing the synthesis of the findings presented in the academic literature, in national surveys, in policy evaluations. It also explores the role of structural constraints, policy interventions, and community-led efforts in shaping Dalits' economic trajectories.

Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of the economical mobility of the Dalit population in North India issue will prove the point that it will demand the multidisciplinary approach to theoretical approach that is synthesized within such fields like sociology, economics, and developmental studies. In this part, the author identifies major models through which researchers have examined the topic on caste and mobility, and the relation of these concepts with the exemplification of the inequalities prevailing even after modernization and changes in policies.

In India, caste is a strong institution functioning beyond occupation and economic classification as it determines identity, the association of people and the availability of an opportunity. Louis Dumont, M.N. Srinivas among others have highlighted the process of carrying on caste norms using socially constructed institutions and rituals. Within this framework, the mobility in the economy is not only defined by the individual effort or education level, but also constrained by structure in that it reduces Dalit access to land, capital, and networks to high status.

Education and acquisition of skills are said to play a major role towards upward mobility thus human capital theory. Although this is true in a number of situations, its application in the caste stratified societies is minimal. Indian longitudinal surveys indicate that despite having achieved comparable educational levels as higher-caste individuals, the Dalits still have unequal chances of employment or job outcomes since the labor market is discriminatory based on caste. This implies that human capital construction ought to be investigated with social stratifications processes.

The theory by Pierre Bourdieu offers useful analysis of the reproduction of the inequality. His ideas of habitus (dispositions acquired within a social context that are internalized to the individual), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, behaviors that are valued in dominant society) and social capital (access to networks and relationships) are quite applicable. Dalits can lack in all the three fields and this tends to hinder the achievements of their education or income into long-lasting mobility or social recognition.

Created by Amartya Sen, the capability approach also changes the perspective of how people refer to income and resources accumulation abasing on the freedom that people have to lead the life they appreciate. Economic mobility in the case of Dalits must be viewed in a much larger context of social and cultural restrictions on actual freedoms, i.e., the freedom to live without fear, to freely enter public places, to get decent jobs, etc. In this method, qualitative aspects of mobility are emphasized such as dignity, voice, recognition.

Caste does not work alone. The intersectionality theory, which was first conceptualized in the field of feminist studies, is useful in elucidating the interaction of caste, gender, class, and regional variables that define the formation of mobility experiences. In a typical example, the disadvantages Dalits women bear tend to be even more pronounced when they fall under the demands of patriarchal cultures of their communities and the society at large. This system will allow viewing mobility trajectories in a more sophisticated and comprehensive way.

Patterns of Economic Mobility Among Dalits

The trends on economic mobility of the Dalit communities in the North India, according to the longitudinal and cross-sectional data collected in the last twenty years, show a rather puzzled and unbalanced situation. As much as the visible gains in some areas (educational attainment, occupational diversification and rural-urban migration) have been observed, they are usually tenuous, context specific and not evenly distributed across the region or among Dalit subpopulations.

Increment in access to education has emerged as one of the most important drivers of Dalit upward mobility especially since the implementation of education interventions like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and post-matric scholarships. Survey longitudinal evidence such the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) shows that younger generations of Dalits have experienced higher schooling levels than their parents. But even after these enhancements, Dalits tend to comparison fail with higher classes of caste when it comes to the quality of education offered as well as when it comes to moving to higher education ranks. This restrains them with regard to access of high paying formal-sector job.

The Dalits have significantly changed their occupation which was mostly present in the traditional occupations under the caste system (e.g. Leatherwork, sanitation, agricultural work) to manual/semi skilled jobs especially in the urban areas. Some Dalit people and families have been able to escape the caste order in the countryside by migrating to cities including Delhi, Lucknow and Jaipur through this, they acquire the ability to earn new income. Still, a significant number of them is found at low-paid, unstable, and informal workplaces with few chances of long-term mobility.

Intergenerational comparisons give indications of small but highly significant upward mobility of Dalit families on terms of income, land ownership and education. Nonetheless, this mobility tends to be relatively confined to the initial-generation gains with possibilities of not being presently transferred to succeeding generations. Caste-based exclusion has remained a dominant barrier to access to credit, markets and job networks that further constrain the potential of Dalits to consolidate or move ahead.

In the states of North India, variations in economic mobility trends among the Dalits are vigorously documented. Compared to most of other states, in Punjab literacy is relatively high among Dalits, and there is a large government employment, also contributing to improved mobility. By contrast, mobility has been diminished in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where caste systems are strongly embedded, bureaucracy is weak and there is less government spending on education and jobs. The differences between these regions highlight the nationalities of the regional specificities of social, political, and institutional settings.

There is an emergence of a very small and highly visible Dalit middle classes, particularly in the urban and semi-urban regions. It covers business owners, government officials and professionals. While this signals progress, many within this group report facing "everyday casteism" and social exclusion, suggesting that economic advancement does not always translate into social equality or full integration into mainstream society.

Barriers to Economic Mobility

Although some improvements are evident, Dalit communities remain unable to achieve de facto economic mobility because barriers to such movement are persistent and overlapping. These obstacles do not only exist in material terms, but are embedded in architectural discrimination, past disengagement and distorted opportunity distribution. This part analyses the most critical barriers to upward mobility which are identified in longitudinal studies and sociological research.

Caste norms are the main form of discrimination which exist both in the village and city. The Dalits also face discrimination in areas of work, residence, credit facilities and in schools and colleges. Research has captured how hiring is discriminative in the private sector with the caste usually acting as an implicit exclusion factor. In other cases, Dalits are forced to accept less well paying or esteemed jobs or they are victimized in the workplace as is seen through harassment and isolation.

Land, an old-fashioned indicator of richness, and independence in the Indian countryside, remains mostly unavailable to Dalit families. NSSO and SECC add that most Dalits are landless or marginal landowner. This does not only reduce their earnings in the farming industry but also restricts their access to loans, education and economic shocks. Women in the Dalit family are also hindered in land rights due to inheritance laws and social norms in the family, adding to the complex problem.

Although the Dalits are taking up school education in higher numbers, they have a problem accessing high-quality education. The schools in the Dalit dominated regions are usually characterised by bad infrastructure, unprofessional teaching, and discrimination in the classroom. Low retention levels and the low access to higher education centers limit their long-term mobility. Also, the humiliating attitude of educators and classmates continues to support the sense of rejection and inferiority in Dalit students.

In India, access to employment, business deals and credit can easily be channelized through caste networks or networks of kin. Dalits who were previously outcasts in such powerful networks usually do not have the kind of social capital needed to move upward. This especially passes the mark in the urban informal economies in which networks are key in attaining a job or a business opportunity. Dalits are also alienated in competitive spaces because of the absence of mentors, references and community capital.

Most Dalits in the workforce are concentrated in the informal sector where wages are low, job security is low and there is no form of protection provided. They easily find their place either in unstable or exploitative jobs, even in urban places, where Dalits have made relocation in search of good opportunities. Such occupations seldom result into long term earnings, or even across economic generations, living standards.

Dalit women have a two-level existence of caste and gender discrimination. They are underrepresented in political and economic leadership, overrepresented in low paid domestic and manual work and they have restricted access to education. Should their communities be patriarchal, their movement is further limited by those constants, and this likely prevents them the right to relocate and decisions, generally held in common and contributing to the limitation of their resources.

Role of State and Policy Interventions

Indian state has positioned itself at the center stage in trying to resolve the issue of caste-based discrimination and bring social and economic mobility to Dalit population in the form of a variety of constitutional guarantees, affirmative actions, and welfare programs. Although such interventions have been helping to record significant advances, especially in education and public employment, their overall effect is not balanced, being constrained by structural malfunctions, gaps in implementation and regional variations.

The Indian Constitution which defines and bans caste based discrimination both explicitly under Articles 15, 16, 17 and 46 enforce educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes (SCs). The removal of untouchability (Article 17) and the requirement of affirmative action in education, public sector and legislatures (Article 16(4)) prepared the way to institutional assistance to Dalits.

One of the most effective dams belonging to Dalit has been reservations in the fields of employment in the public sector, in universities and colleges which are institutions of high learning and in the introduction of reservations in elections to positions of power. Such policies have made it possible to have a middle-class Dalit who has access to urban life, as well as government employment. Nevertheless, literature shows that the gains of reservations are in excess to supposedly better of subgroups among the Dalits leaving the majority at the margins.

Besides, the development of the post-liberalization India with the rapid expansion of the private sector is out of the scope of the reservation policies. Dalits who aim to obtain jobs in this industry are subjected to caste discrimination which is out of control, low salaries and they are locked out of executive positions.

Welfare programs by the government such as SC Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, Pre-Matric Scholarship, and Hostel Facilities to SC students have eased entry into school education and college education among youth of Dalits. Programs such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Right to Education Act (RTE) have increased the access to basic education. Nonetheless, the dropout rates of Dalit students are high and this is caused by poverty, discrimination, and the absence of academic support.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and a similar structure, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) have attempted at enhancing the livelihood and life circumstances of Dalits in the context of rural settings. Although MGNREGA has been able to secure wage stability in most of the SC-controlled areas, its effectiveness is ruined by lack of timely payment, corruption, and caste-based discrimination on quota-based work slots. Equally, land redistribution schemes and entrepreneurship loaning are limited.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989, is one of the most important acts that help in ensuring that Dalits are not subjected to violence and disparities. Although this has resulted in increased awareness and reporting to the authorities, conviction rates are still low but cases are usually hindered because of social and legal challenges. A poor implementation negates the deterrence power of such laws.

Couple of critiques point out the fact that though the state policies are being progressive in their formulation but are majorly ineffective due to their bad implementation, capture by elites, absence of accountability mechanisms. Further fluctuation in the efficiency of bureaucracy, political resolve, and citizen involvement has made the situation uneven throughout the region. The greater the rigidity of castes-based hierarchies, the weaker the implementation is, especially in many states of North India, which increases the risk of social deprivation.

Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

Although theorization of state-led initiatives has formalized the contribution that these efforts have made towards advancing Dalit rights, the civil society organizations (CSOs), grassroots movements, and Dalit-led collectives have remained an important force that has sought to end the caste-based oppression and extend economic opportunities. These actors have been organizing issues of dignity, access to resources, political representation and legal justice, and where neither the state nor the market adequately cover, they (the actors) have been the ones filling in the breach. Such movements have been empowering yet controversial in North India where hierarchization of caste systems is deeply rooted and usually violently religious.

Dalit movements, and especially those that were informed by the ideology of Ambedkar, have always prioritised self-respect, education and socio-political emancipation. Actors, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh and the regional Dalit outfits in Bihar and Rajasthan have organized around representation and rights to generate such political spaces that reflect Dalit agency. The movements have brought about a politically aware Dalit electorate and Dalit leaders, and are part of the assertion of identity and slow alterations in social dynamics.

Several North Indian based NGOs have devoted their attention toward this section of disadvantaged citizens by providing legal services, educating, providing livelihood training and community development. Such groups as Navsarjan Trust, Dalit Foundation, and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) have promoted awareness of the issue of discrimination and the need to change the policy. Most of these organizations specialize in providing skill development, access micro loans and entrepreneurship training, leveraged on the Dalit part of the toolkit that can be used at the grassroots toward economic mobility.

Women Dalits, who have always been on the fringe even within their own Dalit movement, have started to come out strongly through own women autonomous groups and feminist-based NGOs to fight intersectional injustices. Movements like the Dalit Women's Self-Respect Yatra and groups such as All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) have brought attention to issues of gender violence, labor rights, and political exclusion. All these initiatives have expanded scope of mobility by focusing on material and symbolic aspects of inequality.

In most villages and peri-urban settlements, Dalits have organized neighborhood federations and cooperatives as well as informal unions to negotiate collectively wages, land rights and government benefits. Such bottom-up initiatives are less popular but frequently play an essential role in developing economic resiliency and mutual support. Locally based monitoring of welfare schemes, advocacy of school infrastructure and campaign against manual scavenging have resulted in concrete local changes.

Besides celebrating their successes, grassroots and civil society movements encounter a number of problems. These are lack of finances, political counter-retaliation, co-optation by the ruling parties as well as divisions within the sub-caste and gender lines. Furthermore, the decline in the space of the civil society observed in the recent years, including the surveillance, restrictions of the foreign funds, and intimidation of the rights activists has limited the efficiency of numerous rights-based institutions.

Conclusion

Advancement and continuing obstacles characterize the growth path of economic mobility in Dalit societies in North India. Longitudinal and empirical statistics indicate that as much as there have been improvements in Dalits in education, urban work, and representation in political processes, these gains are still not uniform, weak and highly dependent on structural and cultural foundations.

Caste remains a potent factor of determination of economic performances and in most case eclipses the value of education and skill acquisition. There is some hope of intergenerational mobility among Dalits but caste-based discrimination, landlessness, inability to get access to quality schools and social exclusion reinforced this poorer grade. These challenges are further worsened by the inability of the state interventions to penetrate because of their ineffective application and institutional discriminative nature.

Meanwhile, the vital use of grassroots movements and civil society initiatives have been key to the establishment of alternative empowerment and resistance spaces. It broadly encompasses possible new Dalit middle class that is more politically aware and new leaders among Dalit youth and women which further promises to much more seismic shift, particularly when endorsed by inclusive and accommodating policies.

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