Dalits and Social Mobility: A Discussion on the Dalit Middle Class

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Abstract: The spread of education, introduction of policy of reservations in government jobs and educational institutions and other Affirmative Action policies of the State have led to the emergence of a middle class from within the Dalit community referred to as the ‘Dalit Middle Class’ (Ram, 1995; Savaala, 2001; Pandey, 2011; Jodhka, 2012; 2015). This group constitutes the educated Dalits who have entered into modern occupations associated with the middle class. While these Dalits have undoubtedly secured occupational and economic mobility and have witnessed an improvement in class position, as literature highlights, their caste identity as ‘Dalits’ still continues to mediate their daily life experiences of ‘being the middle class’ and stigmatise their identity unlike the ‘mainstream middle class’. This renders the understanding of their social mobility as complex. It is the case of this Dalit Middle Class and their social mobility which the present paper takes up for discussion.

Through a review of literature, this paper argues that given that the considerations of caste are still at work as far as the relations and interaction between the Dalits and the larger society is concerned, an improvement in class position for these educated middle class Dalits may not necessarily lead to an improvement in their social status. Despite gaining an entry into the middle class fractions, many of them still face discrimination as well as resistance to their assimilation in the mainstream middle class. As the paper will show even if their class position improves, their caste identity intervenes in their relationships with others from the middle class and higher classes.

Along with this, the paper also emphasizes that to understand the complexity of the social mobility processes and experiences for groups like Dalits that have been marginalised, it is important that research on social mobility not only entails quantitatively studying the intergenerational shifts in occupation, education, income etc., but also qualitatively studying the processes, strategies and experiences of social mobility in terms of their interactions with others from their class and other classes. The latter specifically implies understanding social mobility in terms of the degree of social and ritual distance between the Dalit middle class and other non-Dalit middle class members as well as those from other classes.

KEY WORDS: Dalits, Dalit Middle Class, Social Mobility

INTRODUCTION:

Dalits in India constitute a significant proportion of the Indian population (16.2 %, Census, 2011), but as it is well documented, they have been one of the most socially discriminated group in India that has also been politically marginalized and economically vulnerable. However with urbanization, introduction of education and affirmative action policies, there has been a weakening of the caste-occupation link and considerations of purity and pollution, wherein the Dalits have experienced a relative change in their socio-economic conditions. Though, this change has not been uniform for all, but a very significant development in the contemporary times has been the emergence of the educated Dalits who have entered into modern occupations associated with the middle class. Rather these Dalits have been seen as the ‘new entrants’ to the middle class and have been called the ‘Dalit middle class’ (Ram, 1995; Savaala, 2001; Pandey, 2011; Jodhka, 2012).

When looked through the conventional approach of tracing social mobility, wherein mobility is examined by comparing social origins of an individual – examined in relation to his/her father’s social class, occupational status, income, or education – with his/her own attainments expressed in similar terms (Krishna, 2013), these Dalits in any case will be regarded as upwardly mobile, as the new members of the middle class. But a critical point that emerges through the existing studies (though a few), is that despite such occupational mobility and their entry into secular occupations, many of these ‘upwardly mobile Dalits’ not only experience discrimination at the workplace and
continued caste-based prejudices against their communities in the society at large (Jodhka, 2012), but also resistance to their assimilation in the mainstream ‘middle-class’ (Jodhka and Sirari, 2012). Such a situation, highlights how despite a move away from the traditional occupation, their caste identity mediates their daily lives making their experiences and identities stigmatised unlike the ‘mainstream middle class’ (Jodhka and Sirari, 2012). Thus there emerges incongruence between their class position and status (Weber, 1946). It is the case of these Dalits which the present paper discusses, unravelling through the existing literature, the complex nature of their social mobility into the middle class. In doing so, it also reinstates that the co-existence of two kinds of social hierarchies in the Indian context - caste and class structure, makes the study of social mobility particularly problematic (Naudet, 2008).

Having recognized that it is the supposed purity and impurity of the castes that has defined their ritual status in the traditional caste system, it is critical to also realize that ‘caste is not merely the opposition between the pure and the impure, but at a more fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources’ (Chakravarti, 2006, p. 21). In this sense caste system is a system of material inequality and entails an unequal and hierarchical entitlement of economic and social rights as well as privileges that are predetermined and ascribed by birth for each caste (Thorat and Newman, 2010). So, castes not merely hold a differential ritual status but most importantly a differential social and economic status that provides unequal economic and social rights and privileges to them. Thus disparities are observed between castes in the social and economic life. Moreover as ‘the economic and social rights are unequally assigned, therefore the entitlement to rights are diminished as one moves down the caste ladder’ (Thorat and Newman, 2010, p. 7). This therefore implies that privileges are concentrated at the top thereby leaving the castes at the bottom – the Dalits in particular, socially and economically deprived.

Over the years with urbanization, introduction of education and affirmative action policies there have been some changes in the caste system in terms of the weakening of the caste-occupation link as well as the purity-pollution considerations (Beteille, 2002; Shah, 2010). These changes in turn have critical implications for the Dalit social mobility. Social mobility as understood refers to the movement of individuals, families or groups through a system of social stratification. This movement may be upwards, downwards as well as
horizontal. Given that it is their traditionally associated occupation and the considerations of purity and pollution from which their lowly status accrues, for Dalits upward social mobility will entail movement upwards in the occupational hierarchy as well as corresponding improvement in status. However as the existing literature suggests social mobility in this sense has not been possible for all and to the same extent.

The educational disparities by the caste are persistent and Dalits still lag behind the non-Dalits both in terms of literacy and educational attainment (Deshpande, 2011). Uneven spread of education to some extent explain the fact that despite a weakening of the caste–occupation link for them, many Dalits 'remain disproportionately clustered in the lowest rungs: casual labour, agricultural labour and unemployed while the others dominate the more prestigious occupations' (ibid, p. 74). Being poorly paid, such employment further adds to their economic deprivation. The research on social mobility of Dalits suggests that ‘much of the mobility appears to be merely horizontal, from traditional caste occupations or agricultural labour in the village to insecure jobs at the lower end of India’s vast informal economy’ (Jodhka, 2015, p. 222).

For instance Kumar et.al (2002) in their study based on an analysis of the National Election Survey data show that while the Dalits are still found to be most highly concentrated in manual work, the upper castes are the least likely to be found in this work and mostly in the salariat2, consisting of executives, professionals, white collar employees and class IV employees, farming and business sectors. But at the same time, only some Dalits have managed to reach the salariat.

Majumdar (2012), in his analysis of educational and occupational attainments of the various social groups states, that the educational and occupational attainments is more among the ‘advanced castes’. His analysis suggests that the movement of the ‘excluded castes’ (including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs) in various occupational groups like the white collar, pink collar, blue collar is minimal as compared to the advanced castes (upper castes). So as he suggests upward mobility is more evident for the ‘Advanced castes rather than the ‘Excluded castes’.

Works like these and others (for instance Vaid and Heath, 2010; Thorat and Newman, 2010, Deshpande, 2011 etc.) largely seem to suggest that the Dalits are still concentrated in lower status occupations (manual work) in the occupational hierarchy, though with time they have shown some movement into other occupations.

Researchers have also traced the patterns of intergenerational mobility across caste groups. For instance, Deshpande and Palishkar (2008) study the intergenerational mobility among 4 generations of different caste groups in Pune city. In the analysis of their mobility across generations for respective occupational categories, they find that over four generations, Dalits are still not into higher occupations3 in large numbers. But at the same time a sharp decline across the four generations in the category of very low occupations is noted. In the case of upper middle occupations also, while the first three generations of the Dalits show a steady rise, there was a decline in the fourth generation. Similarly, while the second generation of Dalits experienced upward mobility in the case of middle occupations, the mobility rates were low for the third, which were now increasing for the fourth generation now. All these patterns suggest how while there has been a decline in the proportion of Dalits engaged in the lowest occupations, there has also been a corresponding rise in the numbers of those engaged in lower and lower middle occupations. Thus upward mobility of the Dalits remains limited given that it is found largely within the low range occupations as compared to the other caste groups. Kumar et al (2002) report of a continuity of class positions of fathers and sons and conclude that the ‘dominant picture is one of continuity rather than change.’ (Kumar et.al, 2002, p. 4096). Thus, caste indeed works to block those located at the lower end of caste hierarchy’ (Kumar et al, 2002, Thorat and Attewell, 2007; Thorat and Newman, 2010; Vaid and Heath, 2010 cited in Judge, 2015, p.222).

So as far as the inter-generational mobility of Dalits is concerned, while for a large proportion there is no stark upward shift in ‘higher status occupations’ for them across generations, but at the same time there has been shift away from the lowest occupations for some. So as it emerges from the preceding discussion, only a very small proportion has been able to enter the middle and higher end occupations in the occupational

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2 The class schema used by Sanjay et.al (2002) included 4 main groupings. These were the Salariat, Business class, manual labourers and agriculture.

3 For the purpose of analysis of intergenerational occupational mobility the researchers classify occupations into upper or higher, upper middle, middle, lower middle, poor or low and very poor or very low. These occupational categories as they state ‘implicitly refer to ideas of status attached to various occupations, opportunities for generating wealth and requirement of knowledge skills/technical skills or mere physical labour’ (Deshpande and Palishkar, 2008, p.67)
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The size and characteristics of the middle class remains much debated and different connotations and definitions of the middle class exist. Among the different characteristics, occupation remains important to define middle class. Middle class, in this respect can be understood as a complex heterogeneous and dynamic category composed of multiple fractions that have entered a range of ‘white collar salaried occupations’ in both government and private sector from elite managerial and professional positions to lower-level, white-collar jobs and include technicians as well as owners of small business (Nambissan, 2009).

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hierarchy. It is in this context that the discussion of the Dalit middle class comes up.

The small, but a significant proportion of educated Dalits entering occupations associated with the middle class have been seen as recent entrants to the middle class’ and are referred to as the Dalit Middle Class (Ram, 1995; Savaala, 2001; Pandey, 2011; Jodhka, 2012; 2015). As mentioned earlier also, the rise of the Dalit middle class is associated with the spread of education and most importantly the reservation in government jobs and institutions of higher education.

In 1972, Roy Burman considered the ‘New Middle Class’ as ‘a section of people belonging to the scheduled casts who avail of the reservation facilities and belong to the families of marginal farmers’ (Roy-Burman, 1972, p.3 stated in Ram, 1988). Nandu Ram in 1988 used this term for ‘salaried persons of the Scheduled Castes who have adopted a life style and achieved a socio-economic status and thereby a class position different from the earlier ones’ (Ram, 1988: 119). While these scholars include only the members of the Scheduled Castes, some like Saavala (2001) and Pandey (2011) make this category inclusive of other groups as well. As Saavala (2001) defines it ‘the middle class people who originate from lower caste backgrounds and whose relative economic security is of recent origin’ (Saavala, 2001, p.295). Another phrase used for these Dalits is the ‘subaltern middle class’ as Pandey (2011) refers to it. As he puts it, the subaltern middle class refers to the ‘middle class groups that emerge from and remain in various ways tied to long stigmatised lower class and under class populations’ (Pandey, 2011, p. 15). In his work he includes both the upwardly mobile Dalits and African-Americans while discussing the category.

An important observation about the Dalit middle class has been that given that the middle class comprises of different fractions, the Dalits have entered the lower middle class in significant numbers, while few have managed to reach the upper fractions (Hunt, 2014). Further, it is only some members from some caste groups like Chamars, Jatavs, Mahars and few others who have cornered most benefits accruing from reservations and other provisions (Nambissan and Sedwal, 2002), that have come to comprise this new middle class.

What makes these Dalits, ‘new’ or different from the old middle class is their distinct recent origins. These Dalits are the new entrants to the already existing middle class, though they may be found in the lower fractions of the class. These new entrants to the middle class need to be differentiated from the ‘new middle class’ that is seen to have emerged in the times of liberalization in the 1990’s. This new middle class is ‘not new in terms of newness of its social base’. Rather it comprises of the ‘upper echelons of that class, and its ‘newness’ is constituted through its identification with a new economic sector – the private sector’ (Fernandes, 2000 cited in Deuchar, 2014). Thus what makes these new entrants (Dalit middle class) different from India’s otherwise new middle class is that it has a broader social base than the other.

THE DALIT MIDDLE CLASS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY:

The engagement of Dalits in the occupations commonly associated with the middle class, when seen through the conventional approach of studying social mobility that involves comparing an individual’s father’s social class, occupational status, income, or education with his/her own attainments expressed in similar terms (Krishna, 2013), clearly suggests an upward shift of these Dalits in the occupational hierarchy and their move away from the traditionally associated occupations. However this observation only suggests a change in their class position. But as the existing literature suggests, this change in class position has not been congruent with the improvement in status for many of them. As studies, though a few, that trace the qualitative experiences of mobility for these Dalits suggest, the caste identity of the Dalits intervenes and mediates their class status as the new entrants to the middle class. These highlight the ways in which the caste identity of the occupationally mobile Dalits still interferes with their interpersonal relations with others of their class and their participation and interaction in the spheres of social life. These spheres include the workplace, family and community, neighbourhood etc. In all these cases, the Dalits have traditionally been excluded to engage equally with the higher castes. As the following discussion shows, for these Dalits, achieving the middle class identity does not mean that the caste identity now no more interferes in their interpersonal relations with the other members of their class and becomes insignificant. Rather it is their caste identity as a Dalit which defines their experiences of mobility into new class. Also what becomes important is the way these Dalits respond
to such an exclusion and intervention of caste identity.

An early attempt to understand mobility of the educated Dalits has been made by Nandu Ram (1988). His study looks at the social mobility among Scheduled Caste government employees (where such employment is associated with the middle class) in Kanpur. Along with examining the intergenerational occupational mobility, he also explores the nature of their inter-personal relationship with Non-Scheduled castes. This is looked on certain basis like attendance of ceremonies by Scheduled Castes and Non-Scheduled Castes, taking meals/refreshments and entering kitchen of acquaintances (Ram, 1988). He found that while many respondents and acquaintances attended ceremonies at each other’s home, some occasionally had refreshments from acquaintances and vice-versa, but a large number never entered each other’s kitchen. Thus a distancing between Scheduled Castes with Non-Scheduled Caste in the private realm of the home is evident here. Also as Ram (1988) found, both they and their acquaintances had reservations in their interactions and each other’s free acceptance because of their caste background and the stigma attached to it. Thus the caste identity of the respondents mediated their relations with the Non-Scheduled castes.

Kamble (2002) in his study on untouchability in urban settings in Mumbai looks at the ways in which Dalits face segregation in residence areas and at work place. Stating the testimonies of middle class Dalits working as government servants and lecturers, Kamble establishes how they faced prejudices especially around their reserved status though covertly. As the respondents shared, the Non-Scheduled Castes officials were of the view that ‘people from the quota are incompetent’, which was communicated to them indirectly. Further they were also watchful of the respondents and their ‘competence to work efficiently’.

Patel (2008) in her study among the government office employees in Delhi and other states, also reports of jokes and comments being cracked in government offices on inefficiency of the Dalits, lack of class and culture specific tastes and even subordinate’s disregard for them etc that explain how the Dalits are stigmatised in the office sphere as well. Their identity as a Dalit and the associated prejudices mediated their relations with colleagues.

Hunt (2014) in her study of the Dalit literature also recognises how as Hindi Dalit writers have disclosed in their writings, caste based discrimination is also experienced in cities wherein keeping one’s caste anonymous temporarily is possible. She also discusses the case of middle-class Dalits in Delhi, ‘who face discrimination in workplace, where the colleagues constantly ask intriguing questions until caste identity is known and landlords refuse to rent to those belonging to the Dalit castes’ (Hunt, 2014, p. 10)

Jodhka (2015), in his study on the Dalit middle class urban activists working in and around Delhi, among other aspects reports of experiences of subtle and not so subtle forms of discriminatory situations they experienced in the urban context. He classifies them into 3 categories, including ‘denial and untouchability, devaluation and humiliation and institutional and cultural bias’ (Jodhka, 2015, p.194). The intervention of caste identity on their mobility into the middle class becomes explicit from his observation that ‘Even when some of them would like to forget their caste origin and be a part of the urban-middle class social setting, they find it hard to swim in the difficult waters of caste prejudiced social spaces’ (ibid, p.224)

Studies like these very well substantiate the fact that social mobility cannot be merely seen in terms of enhancement in occupational status. The impact of caste on the interactions of Dalits with others of their class and caste as well as their participation in various spheres of social life will have to be understood to look at the social mobility of the group comprehensively.

A closely related aspect that the available literature also reveals is that given the kind of inter-personal relations between the mobile Dalits and the others, there can be different responses of the Dalits to their mobility as the Dalit middle class and with respect to their relations with other members of the middle class and other classes. One of the identified responses is that of ‘Passing one’s identity as non-Dalit’ in public sphere. This practice of passing was noted not only in the early studies on Dalit middle classes like that of Isaacs (1965), Ram (1988) but even in the recent times . For instance Pandey (2011) discusses how the Dalits may engage in adoption of neutral caste names, use of first names, using more respectable surnames etc in an attempt to hide their caste location and background.

Savaala (2001) through her study among the middle class Scheduled Caste (SC) group the Malas in Hyderabad adds a further dimension to this aspect of passing. She highlights how even if the middle class Dalits may hide their caste identity, they may adopt strategies for identity formation. As she argues, ‘even if the cultural identification of the new middle-class people is ambivalent (in the sense that they have to face questions concerning their identity which higher caste people might not), their situation is not necessarily as bleak and hopelessly problematic as we are led to believe…… tendency to conceal identity and ‘pass’ should nevertheless not close our eyes to other strategies of identity formation that are adopted by middle-class SCs.’ (Savaala, 2001, p. 296). She reports of the Malas ‘passing’ their identity and adopting Hindu rituals that have been traditionally denied to them. But she
takes her analysis further to describe other strategies of identity formation that are adopted by middle-class SCs. Their strategies are not only those concerned with not being revealed and not being identified, but also active ones, aimed at creating a new type of identity. She reveals a number of different strategies other than concealing one’s jaati, to gain recognition as middle class. These included idea of the light skin colour, cleanliness, neat way of dressing, healthy appearance, courteous manners and ability to speak English. However the most important factor in passing as a middle-class family was the choice of residence outside the basti.

Further she also reflects on their practices to engage in Hindu upper caste rituals. What she argues most crucially is that these rituals are not adopted in an attempt to mimic upper caste Hindus. Rather they give their own meanings to it. These practices were not only performed to bring auspiciousness to the family, but through these rituals they also engage in ritual gift-giving which is a way of manipulating social tensions in urban areas. They interpreted Hinduism in a way that they create a low caste- casteless Hinduism, wherein the concept of auspiciousness and not purity-pollution come to define Hinduism. So, these SC’s viewed these rituals differently than mimicking them in their attempt to become the middle class.

A contrary response to passing can be not hiding one’s caste identity. Mobile Dalits could also identify with their own caste as well -what Ram (1988) refers to as ethno-identification. As he found in his study, some SC’s identified with their caste and disclosed it. Interestingly, they wanted to demonstrate their ‘achievement’ given the traditionally low status of the caste group and maintained their loyalty with their caste (Ram, 1988).

Naudet (2008) through her ethnographic work among upwardly mobile Dalits in different Indian cities asserts that experience of upward social mobility for Dalits may not be characterised by a tendency to forget the group of origin, or feel ashamed of it or be marked by sentiment of guilt on abandoning the group . Rather what she highlights is how ‘the perpetuation of a link with the group of origin (i.e the caste group) seems to completely shape the experience of mobility’ (Naudet, 2008, p. 414). Interestingly she reveals that the preservation of the links with the group of origin is often presented as a moral obligation, in terms of the ideology of paying back to the society. Works like these open up the need for the analysis of the experience of Dalit mobility to explore their relations with the caste members not only in terms of a tension between the group of origin and the group of arrival, but also directs our attention to see and look at factors that help reduce these tensions.

Judge’s (2012) study of Chamars in Punjab also brings forth how the mobile Dalits rather than hiding their identity may be assertive of it. The Chamars in Punjab have been most mobile through education, modern occupations, and international migration. As he finds, they have begun to assert their caste identity post 1970’s. Judge identifies three features of such assertion. First, there is a trend in publicly displaying their identity (for instance presence of graffiti like “Putt Chamaran De” (Sons of Chamars) on vehicles. As he notes, this is not simply a reflection of identity assertion, but an effort to create counter-structure, because such a trend was exclusively found among the dominant Jats. Secondly, the Chamars seek to maintain their caste identity by sticking to caste endogamy and thirdly instead of fighting exclusion, they have begun to emerge as a socially exclusive group, which has enabled them to exclude themselves from the other Dalit groups. Thus what is reflected here is a sense of self-worth and a lack of feeling of being defensive of their caste identity in these Chamars.

Similarly, the Dalit Activists in Jodhka’s study (2015), as he documents very proudly asserted their identity and fought for rights of Dalit individuals. As he states, they ‘felt strongly committed to their communities’ and to many this was a ‘way of paying back to them’. The post modern times has witnessed a strong articulation of dalit identity as evident in collective mobilizations and at the level of the individual in the day to day life. Further even the growing Dalit writings and narratives for instance that by Valmiki (2003) , Jadhav (2003),Kamble (2008), Kumar(2010) and others have emerged as articulations of the Dalit self.

So the discussion above shows how for the occupationally and economically mobile Dalit middle class, caste identity may cast its shadow on their interpersonal relations with the other members of their class as well as their acceptance by the latter. As it emerges through the literature, an upward movement in the occupational hierarchy as well as a change in their class position need not effect a corresponding change in the way society perceives them and their identity as members of the middle class.

**CONCLUSION:**

Given the disadvantages which the Dalits have suffered from, both in the past and the present, the emergence of the Dalit middle class is a very significant development. However, as discussed, it cannot be seen as signalling a complete change in the socio-economic position of the Dalit community. This is so, firstly because only a miniscule of Dalits comprise this group and secondly as the paper has highlighted, their movement away from the traditional occupations into those associated with the middle class, does not necessarily imply a change in their social status, wherein still the caste identity of many of
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them, comes to mediate their experiences of being the part of the middle class. However the response to such mediation may vary. Further what also emerges from the discussion is that any inquiry into social mobility especially for such disadvantaged groups like the Dalits, will not only require an inquiry into their movement across the class structure, but will necessarily have to also understand whether and how caste identity shapes their experiences as members of a class. Their acceptance into the class fractions they enter will need to be seen in terms of their interaction and participation in different spheres of social life and in what ways they may continue to be excluded.

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