

Caste and Class among the Dalits

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Are the Dalits moving away from a tradition-sanctioned life of stigma, discrimination, and violence? One way of answering the question, according to many scholars, is to study how many Dalits are wriggling out of their caste identity and entering class. Caste is understood, for the purposes of this essay, as birth-based and primordial, immutable, and immobile, whereas class is more of an economic category associated with urban industrial society. Therefore, membership in a caste is preordained, while one can choose one's class. In fact, it is possible—though rare—for someone to move from the top class to the bottom one or vice versa during a lifetime. The way caste and class are defined in the preceding two sentences may be questioned or dismissed as lacking in clarity. However, the purpose of the exercise is to show the chief contrast between the two: one's caste as well as a caste's place within the system cannot be changed; but membership in a class is flexible in the sense that those seeking entry can gain it by fulfilling certain conditions, though class may also be rigid—an upper class can never become lower, and the underclass will be the same everywhere.¹

There is widespread interest among scholars and policy makers in understanding the dynamics that engender better living conditions for the Dalits. There are about 201 million Dalits in India, according to the 2011 census. Officially known as the scheduled castes, the Dalits were known in the first half

of the twentieth century as the depressed classes or Harijans. “Untouchables” is a more accurate appellation, as it transcends time and space: all over the world, the Dalits are known as the former untouchables. Moreover, they are untouchables due to custom and religion. But the law, enacted after India became independent in 1947, not only abolished the practice of untouchability but accorded full citizenship to the Dalits.

The history of the past six decades has been punctuated by several landmark laws and public policy initiatives, including an extensive program of affirmative action in the form of job and educational quotas. These efforts were meant to end the social and economic disabilities that the Dalits suffered due to their identity, and also to help them achieve parity with other groups. “In other words,” write Loren Demerath, N. J. Demerath, and Surinder Jodhka—who call the idea behind the whole enterprise a “simplistic and evolutionist view”—“the ‘closed’ and ‘hierarchical’ structure of caste was to give way to an ‘open’ system of stratification based on individual achievement and merit.”² This essay is meant to study exactly that.

Such a journey from caste to class must be seen as epoch making. But any attempt to understand that journey, or exodus, confronts hurdles that are more demanding than the original question. Even if one sets aside the question on how useful the caste-to-class approach will be, one suffers from the paucity of empirical studies that can have somewhat wider currency. A few area studies, undoubtedly useful, will give us at best a vague picture. The caste-to-class move of Dalits, being a relative issue, can be evaluated only in relation to other groups by a study of long-term social and economic trends.

This essay does not delve into the rich and extensive literature on caste, class, whether they are the same or different, and so on. Nor does it deal with the issue of ideology or culture-specific values. For example, Henri Stern warns us of the dangers of “Western ethnocentrism,” which idealizes class “in terms of the ‘objective’ aggregate economic position of individuals” and of the tendency to “confuse the study of change with the study of structures” and declares his belief that “caste and class belong to two different universes”³ and hence not fit to compare. In contrast, Andre Beteille takes a more nuanced view that caste and class “resemble each other in some respects and differ in others.”⁴ Irrespective of academic debates on whether caste and class are similar or they belong to different universes, the fact remains that the Indian state made its value choice when it sought to delegitimize caste in all its forms. For the “lower castes” whose backwardness is attributed to their caste, any betterment of their condition is treated as acquiring a new identity that either replaces their caste identity or becomes too predominant to ignore.

There are four points about caste and class among the Dalits that deserve our attention: we need to understand the links between caste and class; economic and social change reflecting change in social structures tends to vary across space and time, and that variation needs explanation; similarly, we should explore intra-Dalit variation in terms of change and mobility; and finally, we need to investigate how Dalits have fared relative to others. This essay will strive to explore these four points. The final section is devoted to highlighting the importance of how public perceptions and media imagery feed on each other to the detriment of the Dalits.

Is Class Relevant in a Caste-Ridden Society?

In a cartoon published in the *Indian Express* on April 1, 1978, the famous cartoonist Abu Abraham had one of his characters quip, “We shall need a commission to decide whether the atrocities are on Harijans or on peasants who happen to be Harijans.”⁵ Did it matter to the people who were subjected to violence which label had been used to trigger or justify the violence? It might as well be that Abraham was having a dig at his communist friends, who would reject caste as irrelevant to understanding India. However, more often the “class is irrelevant” school enjoyed popular support and academic respectability. Ironically, both viewpoints have rarely been advanced to benefit the Dalits or other victims of caste. In fact, most of the scholarly debate on caste falls, to borrow a medical analogy, into pathology and stops short of therapeutics. Can we use a cartoon published in 1978 to answer a contemporary question?

The Abraham cartoon serves as an appropriate metaphor in two respects even today. First, the reality on the ground still defies scholarship. Most viewpoints claim vindication by citing some recent official data or a research report. The ideological positions include only caste matters, only class matters, and caste is class. A stray incident is enough for people to debate whether caste—or class—is waning or reemerging. Two incidents that took place almost simultaneously in 2007 will, if considered in isolation from one another, lead one to arrive at two diametrically opposite conclusions on caste.

In assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in that year, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit party, was voted into power as a result of the party’s success in enlisting the support of the Brahman electorate, even though it was clear that Mayawati, leader of the BSP, would become the chief minister, which she did. The phenomenon, known as the Dalit-Brahman alliance, may have a narrow historical or political context or may even be transient, but it

should never have happened in a caste-ridden society. What lessons, then, can one draw from the UP experience? Is caste no longer relevant? Is UP, of all places, an exception? No doubt the UP example is subject to a diametrically opposite interpretation: castes are too preoccupied in accumulating political power to be diligent about following the rules of caste. However, the fact that Brahman voters helped make a Dalit the chief minister is indicative of broader changes sweeping the country.

The other incident is that the Gujjars, a middle caste, unleashed a violent agitation in Rajasthan demanding they be given scheduled tribe status. If considered in isolation, this event would lead us to believe that caste and caste wars are all that happen in India.

Which of these two incidents, taking place during the same year in two northern states with a common border, is to be taken as representative of today's India? They cannot be brushed aside as isolated incidents and hence exceptions, because enough evidence can be found in the country to support either viewpoint.

On one hand, insistence on class is due to the concept's universality in the sense both scholars and policy makers will be comfortable with it. However, class formation has been a difficult historical phenomenon in predominantly peasant societies everywhere. Even the term "class" did not come into currency in Europe prior to the late eighteenth century.⁶ It should not be a surprise, then, that India, still more than two-thirds rural, still contains identities that are local, variegated, and contradictory.

Second, as a result, scholarship on caste (or class) has been of little value to policy making in India, especially insofar as mitigating the condition of Dalits and other poor groups is concerned. An area study or a survey may be useful in academic terms, but it lacks wider applicability. This is not because scholarship on the subject is found wanting. In fact, seminal works on Indian society are legion. But public policy, being a blunt instrument, requires social categories that are applicable to larger geographical areas, if not to the whole nation.

Yet another aspect that puts in doubt the relevance of the study of the caste-to-class movement of Dalits is the question whether the movement is linear in the sense of being, at least, not easily reversible. I further explore below the ironical situations in which Dalits are identified in both caste and class terms. A Dalit officer, Dalit politician, and Dalit doctor are some of the day-to-day contradictions we confront. Having the first Dalit president, the first Dalit chief justice, and so on are undoubtedly moments of pride for

the whole country as they symbolize certain progress. But can they be called part of a caste-to-class movement? The quibble is about identity. Michael Schumacher is a legendary Formula One champion. Nobody would even notice the etymology of his last name, which evolved from the profession of shoemakers. Maybe we are a couple of centuries too early to raise the issue of class among the Dalits. Even the target group thrives on the caste identity. M. N. Srinivas underscored what would be needed to eradicate the caste system (which must precede the emergence of class): “The moral to be drawn is that an ideological attack on caste which is not backed up or underpinned by a mode of social production ignoring or violating caste-based division of labour, is totally inadequate. A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions, based on new principles, and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation *for a considerable time* in order to uproot the caste system” (emphasis added).⁷

That being the case, what do scholars say about the links between caste and class? The majority opinion during the past five decades has been that there is a positive correlation between caste and class. In other words, members of upper castes tend to be found predominantly in upper-class positions, such as highly educated professionals, managers, and other leadership positions; members of the middle castes (Shudras) in middle-class positions, be they small and medium cultivators or other agriculturalists; and the Dalits are found in disproportionately high numbers in semiskilled and unskilled occupations. The so-called mobility or occupational shift usually takes place within a certain band, which cannot be called across-caste and across-class movement.

For example, one of the earliest studies on class-caste relation, by Edwin Driver, was based on interviews conducted among 1 percent of the male heads of households in Nagpur District to find out “the relation of caste to occupational structure in urban and rural Central India.”⁸ According to Driver, nearly 59.7 percent of Dalits (members of the scheduled castes) in rural areas and 78.3 percent in urban areas were found in the bottom two occupational categories, semiskilled and unskilled. He also found “a positive association between positions in the caste and occupational hierarchies. . . . The pattern in the urban area is more internally consistent. As one descends the caste hierarchy, the percentages of professionals and managerialists decline, the combined percentages being: 39.4 for Brahmans . . . 4.1 for Scheduled Castes.”⁹

Sanjay Kumar, Anthony Heath, and Oliver Heath¹⁰ came to the same conclusions in 2002 as Driver did in 1962, in their study based on the National Election Study of 1996, conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. The total number of respondents was 9,614, from 432 sampling points in 108 parliamentary constituencies. The study found that, in terms of mobility, 67 percent of the respondents remained stable, 19.4 percent experienced upward mobility, the condition of 6.6 percent of the respondents deteriorated, and 7 percent experienced horizontal movements.

Kumar and his coauthors acknowledge the past impact of caste in enabling members of upper castes to enter the privileged classes and assert that “upper caste membership still gives a statistically significant advantage.” But in a curious U-turn, they write: “*Our suspicion* is that the class inequalities described in this paper are to be explained primarily by the resources—financial, educational, and social—that the members of different classes possess and should not be ascribed to caste” (emphasis added).¹¹

Comparing sample data collected for the National Election Study in 1971 and 1996, the same authors in a subsequent study¹² sought to answer three questions: how mobile Indian society was; specifically, whether it became more mobile during the years between 1971 and 1996; and how much the relationship between caste and occupation had changed. Their conclusion was: “Another consistent pattern is for Dalits to be the group that is most highly concentrated in manual work. . . . Overall, both with father/son class mobility and caste-class mobility, the dominant picture is one of continuity rather than change.”¹³

Anirudh Krishna has been able to deliver what is by far a definitive message based on a field survey about caste.¹⁴ According to his fieldwork, conducted in the late 1990s in sixty-nine villages in the adjoining areas of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, “caste continues to be a primary source of social identity in these villages, people live in caste-specific neighborhoods, and the clothes that they wear reveal their caste identity. Yet insofar as political organization is concerned, caste no longer has primary importance. Non-caste-based political entrepreneurs are more successful than others in delivering economic benefits and providing avenues for greater political participation, these findings show, and villagers associate with these entrepreneurs regardless of caste or religion.”¹⁵

Krishna identifies three factors in the emergence of these new leaders (*naye neta*): the spread of education in rural areas, a vast expansion of public programs in the countryside, and intensified political competition among major parties. This is a new phenomenon that took shape during the 1980s

and 1990s: “More villagers by far consult the *naye neta* for diverse tasks involving party politics, market brokerage, and interaction with government officials than any other type of leader.”¹⁶

Krishna is justifiably cautious in not assuming that the phenomenon is generalizable beyond the surveyed areas. However, three inferences and a conundrum are inescapable. The first inference is that the newly emerged leaders truly fall into the category of class. They are not merely a new generation of educated leaders who replaced old, illiterate caste elders within their respective castes. They are also secular, in the sense that services are sought and rendered without reference to caste. Second, this ought to be celebrated as a peaceful revolution insofar as the Dalit emancipation is concerned. Having a 22 percent share in the population of surveyed villages, the Dalits accounted for 26 percent of the new leaders. This discrepancy can also be noted among Other Backward Classes, who constitute 41 percent of the population in the villages under survey and providing 49 percent of the new leaders. The over-representation of leaders belonging to Dalit and OBC groups in these villages came at the cost of upper castes and scheduled tribes. Third, if such a transformation could take place in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, where society is more conservative, then surely caste must have become politically less relevant in other parts of India. As for the conundrum, Krishna makes it clear that this is a political phenomenon and that caste retains its salience in the social sphere. This only begs the question, what is happening to caste? This also reminds one of what Barbara Joshi wrote more than a quarter-century ago:

Upper caste citizens often argue that while some of them may have retained old cultural forms once expressive of prejudice—such as exclusive food exchange patterns—most have changed the content of their attitudes about low status castes, so that prejudice is not really a problem in other social interactions such as those affecting employment. Many Scheduled Caste individuals have come to suspect that the reverse is more nearly true: that in many cases a few details of the cultural idiom of prejudice have changed, while the content of prejudiced attitudes has remained the same, and that many higher caste individuals who no longer complain about sharing a tea stall with Scheduled Caste customers will still consistently choose a non-Scheduled Caste job applicant over a Scheduled Caste applicant.¹⁷

Which of the two versions that Joshi mentions is true with regard to Rajasthan?

Is Caste Reasserting Itself?

The so-called reemergence or reasserting of caste cannot be overstated. The incidents warranting such a prognosis are dramatic (such as the Dalit-Brahman political alliance in UP), violent (for example, atrocities and Gujjar agitation in Rajasthan for scheduled tribe status), routine (such as the state assembly polls), and banal (such as the sprouting of new caste parties like the Praja Rajyam Party in Andhra Pradesh in 2008). But how does the persistence of caste help its chief victims? There are obvious reasons why even Dalits cling to caste identity.

Since 80 percent of the Dalits live in the countryside, they have no option but to be identified by their caste. The 20 percent who migrated to urban areas are theoretically free to be identified by class. Urban Dalits can be divided into two groups: one is the educated people working in the government, thanks to affirmative action; the other is the urban underclass living in the slums. And any statistical nuances will, being negligible exceptions, have little impact on the picture overall.

Ironically, affirmative action appears to have locked members of the community into an inferior status. A group of Dalits who, however small in numbers, are in a position to become a class are being induced by affirmative action not only to keep but to brandish their Dalit identity. This is ironical because affirmative action was designed in India to, first, compensate the Dalits (and the scheduled tribes) for the past injustices they suffered and, second, bring them to parity with other sections. As a policy instrument, it is too ineffective as it could benefit only a fraction of the community, and Ross Mallick rightly questions “the appropriateness of affirmative action for community betterment.”¹⁸ Moreover, given the way it operates, its beneficiaries find themselves in a contradictory status of economic independence and social inferiority.

Despite overwhelming statistical certainty that affirmative action will benefit a very few, the Dalits are conditioned to maintain their scheduled status in anticipation of its future utility. This tendency at times leads to situations in which the Dalits themselves demand retrograde policies. Such an incident took place a few years ago in Delhi. The Delhi State government decided to recognize those Dalits who had moved to the national capital from other parts of the country as members of scheduled castes if they fulfilled one of a few simple requirements. Given the local nature of caste, the government had been following a sound policy of not recognizing those Dalits who set-

bled in states other than their own. This might be unfair to, for example, the children of Dalits migrated because of economic distress. But the Delhi decision was taken at the behest of Dalit employees. Yet another irony is that it goes against B. R. Ambedkar's advice to his people to migrate to urban areas for anonymity.

The reassertion of caste is, in fact, the assertion of "lower castes." This is old news, going back almost a century to backward class movements in the south. Dalits appear to have joined this trend in a more transformational way, with wider implications. It is difficult to answer the question of what triggered it. Probably the process Ambedkar set in motion reached a definitive stage, insofar as Dalits are concerned. First, it is no mere political phenomenon. Second, Dalits' awareness that being Dalit is nothing to be ashamed of is obvious across states. The two big Dalit subcastes in Andhra Pradesh, the Malas and Madigas, have started to add the caste name to their names. Ramaswami Mahalingam reports a similar story from neighboring Tamil Nadu: "[Dalits] are proud of their identity and demand social respect. For instance, middle class Dalits in Tamil Nadu proudly mention their caste in the marriage invitations (e.g., 'Narayana Pariah cordially invites you and your family to grace the occasion of his daughter's marriage')."¹⁹ Such assertions of equality and self-respect do invite a backlash that draws its inspiration and legitimacy from the caste ideology. Prem Chowdhry explains succinctly how, in Haryana, the emerging Dalit middle class creates "a sense of insecurity and resentment" among the upper castes:

Altogether, an entry into new professions, the availing of employment opportunities along with reservation of seats in the elected bodies like the gram panchayats, legislative assembly and the parliament has thrown up a considerable number of Dalits as a distinct middle class category, albeit a highly differentiated and layered one. Noticeable in public arena, this class . . . is primarily responsible for creating a sense of insecurity and resentment among the upper caste groups. Clearly, despite the emergence of a middle class among the Dalits, the caste ideology continues to play an important role in the reproduction of relationships and behavioral patterns.²⁰

Therefore, the Dalits themselves appear increasingly not to care much about how they are perceived by others from an outlook frozen in the past.²¹ The tricky part as always is whether exceptions are advanced as rules or rules are dismissed as exceptions.

Who Determines One's Class?

The issue of job quotas for Dalits and tribal people in the private sector became a major national debate in 2004 when the United Progressive Alliance government included it in its common minimum program. The ensuing debate was acrimonious enough to attract the attention of even the Western media. The *Guardian* carried a story with a twist. The headline declared, "Untouchables in New Battle for Jobs," followed by a more illuminating deck: "India's lowest class raises its sights from the gutter"²²—And the icing on the cake is a color photo of Arvind Vaghela that occupies almost a quarter of a page. A postgraduate student of Dalit economics who had no job and lost his father, Vaghela had no option but to take up his father's job—that of a municipal road sweeper in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Vaghela's is a story full of pathos, and most readers of the *Guardian* must have felt sorry for him: fate had been cruel to him. But the photo the paper chose to carry—along with a story essentially about Dalits' demand for jobs in the private sector—depicts Vaghela with a scarf covering the lower half of his face and holding his broom in the manner of a freedom fighter holding his national flag upright! It would not have been a very pleasant sight for the British corporate bosses with operations in India. Not known for lacking class consciousness, they might have dreaded the prospect of having to offer jobs to Vaghela and his fellow Dalits.

This is not a case of the Western media dishing out familiar negative stereotypes on India.²³ The correspondent who filed the story is a British-born Indian, without a whiff of prejudice. I have presented the episode as it epitomizes the problem of popular perception and media imagery, and how they feed on each other. For example, it is not just the international media that routinely qualify "Dalits" as "former untouchables" or "untouchables" make their stories accessible to their readers or viewers. Even the Indian media find it difficult to come up with imagery that does not perpetuate negative stereotypes. Moreover, for most media commentary on Dalits, which has to do with atrocities or poverty, the appropriate visual representations will be the community's abject poverty and squalor. One cannot blame the media for doing what they do, and therein lies the problem.

The image etched on most people's minds of a Dalit is either a shoemaker sitting on the roadside or a scavenger. Immaterial are the facts that only a fraction of even Chamars and Valmikis (whose respective caste-stipulated occupations are leatherworking and scavenging) stick to their ancestral call-

ings and that these are only two of the hundreds of Dalit castes in India. A majority of Dalit castes have no supposedly polluting occupations attached to them and are, in tradition and lifestyle, essentially the touchable “lower castes.” It is undeniable that Dalit identity carries with it the connotation of impurity, both in the ritual and the physical sense. Moreover, all Dalits may not be found in unclean occupations, but most people in unclean occupations are believed to be Dalits. Ashwini Deshpande captures the problem thus: “However, at a deeper level, to gain insight into the nature of change in the caste system, an investigation into ancient occupations that have survived changes in economic structure (i.e., priests in temples, scavengers, traditional money-lenders, and the whole spectrum of agricultural jobs) is required. Are these jobs still performed by castes to whom they were traditionally allocated, or is the reshuffling of the deck total, i.e. the modern occupational structure is randomly distributed across castes? *It is likely that we may find more continuity than change*” (emphasis added).²⁴

Therefore, the caste-to-class movement of Dalits may not amount to much in the estimation of non-Dalits. This has been attested by many Dalits who made it into class: though they successfully overcame hurdles, they could never shake off their Dalit identity. Decades before the Government of India even attempted (and failed disgracefully) to abolish manual scavenging, a horrendous curse of untouchability and an oft-used image for Dalits, the writer E. M. Forster opined in 1956: “No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables, no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians, but simply and solely—the flush system. Introduce water-closets [flush toilets] and main-drainage throughout India, and all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear.”²⁵

Is it possible to eliminate the stigma and shame of being Dalit when society’s perception of Dalits remains shaped by centuries-old history? Here Mahatma Gandhi was partly right in asserting that untouchability was a caste Hindu problem. It is caste Hindus’ ideology and perceptions that need changing. In other words, Dalits’ smooth journey from caste to class will be possible only on the day when caste Hindus are willing to treat, to use Ambedkar’s expression, the individual as the unit and determine his or her merit and class status.

The Dalits followed on their own two routes to escape the stigma of their identity. One was through religious conversions, and the other was education. Conversions to non-Hindu religions might have met the spiritual needs of the converted but failed to raise their social standing. Take the case of Dalit Christians, the one group whose members allegedly escaped caste discrimination:

they have not been able to escape their caste identity even after a couple of centuries. While demanding affirmative action benefits for Dalit Christians, the National Coordination Committee for SC Christians distributed a pamphlet among members of Parliament, which highlighted the identity issue thus: “Except for the (wrong) records in the revenue offices he [the Dalit Christian] is a Dalit in every sense of the word; viz., ethnically, lineally, racially, socially, economically, culturally, vocationally, geographically, relationally, contextually, and emotionally. HE CONTINUES A FULL DALIT EVERYWHERE EXCEPT IN THE IGNORANT MIND OF THE EXECUTIVE.”²⁶

In contrast, education has enabled many Dalits to move up both in social and in economic terms. The state’s failure, in general, to provide quality education to a large group of people meant that whatever education the Dalits received restricted their mobility. Thus, many Dalits for a couple of generations after independence moved away—thanks to affirmative action—from village life and traditional occupations but moved into petty government jobs not far from their villages. As long as someone’s roots are firmly in the village, any newly acquired class status remains an appendage to his or her caste identity. That has been the broad change that has taken place in the country.

Class in the mere sense of an economic category mostly, but not entirely, based on one’s profession will be effective in enhancing the status of Dalits, but the change will be commensurate with how many those Dalits are in higher or leadership positions within their class. The current class, the Dalit bourgeoisie, is still small in numbers and, even worse, it is ensnared in government service, effectively cutting itself off from providing leadership to the community. The next step in their liberation will have to be the emergence of an elite or intellectual class actively engaged with the others in a process of accommodation and acculturation. Naomi Hossain and Mike Moore have very effectively defined the intellectual class: “They are the people who make or shape the main political and economic decisions: ministers and legislators; owners and controllers of TV and radio stations and major business enterprises and activities; large property owners; upper-level public servants; senior members of the armed forces, police and intelligence services; editors of major newspapers; publicly prominent intellectuals, lawyers and doctors; and—more variably—influential socialites and heads of large trades unions, religious establishments and movements, universities and development NGOs.”²⁷ Consider the above list. The Dalits enjoy adequate representation among ministers and legislators and a modest presence among upper-level public servants, lawyers, and doctors. They are completely absent from the other positions of influence. Their adequate representation among ministers

and legislators—the lawmakers and rulers—has been rendered ineffective by virtue of their dependence everywhere on non-Dalits to get elected.²⁸ But the silver lining is that, among the categories that Hossain and Moore mention, many influential ones require for admission only quality education and some middle-class moorings. It is inconceivable that an elite class of Dalits will not emerge from among the third and fourth generations of urban Dalits who number, according to the 2011 census, more than forty-seven million.

Conclusion

Joshi cautioned against “generalizations about the Scheduled Castes, for the category covers a large number of diverse groups.”²⁹ Since then, things got further complicated in unexpected places like UP (with the Dalit-Brahman entente) and Rajasthan (with its village transformation, according to Krishna). Politically, at the national level, the Dalits ceased to be a vote bank for a single political party when they realized that neither of the two national parties has any incentive to espouse their cause.

But field surveys, census data, and so on cannot be combined to provide a broader picture. This is not peculiar to the Dalits alone. Linguistic, subcaste, regional, and religious diversity renders India complex. However special the Dalits’ case may appear to be, they share the ups and downs of the whole country. For example, since 1991 as the poverty rate started coming down for most groups, Dalits experienced the same trend.³⁰ India’s long-term economic future depends on urbanization and industrialization, and these are the promising links in the Dalits’ emancipation.

One coincidence, if it is one, is that large numbers of Dalits (and tribal people) are in the so-called laggard states, such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and UP. Though there are significant differences among the Dalits across subcastes and region, those differences are not related to class. For example, the Mala-Madiga conflict in Andhra Pradesh is now being seen as a fight over splitting the job quotas, but this is only the latest phase of their decades-old antagonism.³¹ A similar trend of conflict or estrangement can be found between Mahars and Mangs in Maharashtra and between Chamars and Valmikis as well as Chamars and Pasis in UP. Therefore, differences based on regions, subcaste, or religion are too varied to be amenable to comparison.

The story of Dalits vis-à-vis non-Dalits is no less complex. Debashis Chakraborty, Shyam Babu, and Manashi Chakravorty report that they tested “the hypothesis that atrocities are triggered in areas characterized by upward

mobility among the Dalits, and not in the poorer areas,”³² and found the hypothesis to be true. In simple terms, attempts by Dalits to migrate from caste to class are met with resistance and violence.

Thus, an attempt has been made in the preceding pages to figure out what is happening to the Dalits in terms of both caste and class: how far the caste-to-class framework is relevant; why generalizations are not possible; how the Dalits regard themselves; and how non-Dalits perceive the community. In sum, class may not be a useful tool for measuring or understanding the progress of Dalits unless we modify its definition to such an extent as to blur the distinction between caste and class—something that some Marxists have accomplished with their argument that caste is class in Indian terms. Ramkrishna Mukherjee argues: “Thus, it is that we should not look at caste as a ‘new avatar.’ . . . Class structure has cut across the caste hierarchy, forming new alliances and antagonisms. . . . Today, in India, caste in class depicts the reality, and not caste *per se* or caste and class.”³³

While measurable factors like education, professional status, and income can be employed to classify people into groups (classes), membership in a class depends not only on merit (one cannot become a doctor without a medical degree, for example) but also on acceptance by other members. This is not a new argument: historically, minorities in many countries suffered nonacceptance at one time or the other. For example, though Jews and Catholics were never subjected to violence in the United States—at least on the scale of the Dalits in India—they were not welcome into its hallowed spaces, either. The case of African Americans has more similarities with that of the Dalits. Ironically, in India, history does not always follow a linear progression; on cultural matters, people there tend to run in circles.

NOTES

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1. For the complexities of defining “class,” see Patil, “Should ‘Class’ Be the Basis for Recognising Backwardness?” 2733; Stern, “Power in Modern India.”

2. Demerath, Demerath, and Jodhka, “Interrogating Caste and Religion in India’s Emerging Middle Class,” 3813.

3. Stern, “Power in Modern India,” 65–67.

4. Beteille, *Caste, Class, and Power*, 187.

5. Abraham, *Arrivals and Departures*, n.p.

6. R. Smith, “Anthropology and the Concept of Social Class,” 467.

7. M. Srinivas, “An Obituary on Caste as a System,” 459.

8. Driver, "Caste and Occupational Structure in Central India," 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 29.
10. Kumar, Heath, and Heath, "Determinants of Social Mobility in India."
11. *Ibid.*, 2987.
12. Kumar, Heath, and Heath, "Changing Patterns of Social Mobility."
13. *Ibid.*, 4095–96. See also Pankaj, "Engaging with Discourse on Caste, Class and Politics in India," 338.
14. Krishna, "What Is Happening to Caste? A View from Some North Indian Villages."
15. *Ibid.*, 1190.
16. *Ibid.*, 1175.
17. Joshi, "Ex-Untouchable," 221.
18. Mallick, "Affirmative Action and Elite Formation," 346.
19. Mahalingam, "Essentialism, Culture, and Power," 739.
20. Chowdhry, "First Our Jobs Then Our Girls," 440–41.
21. Sarah Beth reports that the (Hindi) Dalit writers, a small but articulate group in the community, find themselves caught between their urban middle-class status and the Dalit identity that they proclaim through their autobiographies. See Beth, "Hindi Dalit Autobiography," 554.
22. Randeep Ramesh, "Untouchables in New Battle for Jobs," *Guardian*, October 2, 2004.
23. Karla Hoff and Priyanka Pandey report how the mere public revelation of "lower-caste" students' caste identity had adversely affected their performance, which is known as "stereotype threat" ("Discrimination, Social Identity, and Durable Inequalities," 208).
24. A. Deshpande, "Recasting Economic Inequality," 382.
25. Quoted in Morris, "Caste and the Evolution of the Industrial Workforce in India," 130.
26. Quoted in L. Jenkins, "Becoming Backward," 42.
27. Hossain and Moore, "Arguing for the Poor," 1.
28. Babu, "India's Liberalisation and the Dalits."
29. Joshi, "Ex-Untouchable," 196.
30. For example, see Sundaram and Tendulkar, "Poverty among Social and Economic Groups in India in 1990s."
31. The Mala-Madiga rivalry was so intense that even efforts to rope in Ambedkar to bring about a reconciliation failed. See Mendelsohn and Vicziany, *The Untouchables*, 113.
32. Chakraborty, Babu, and Chakravorty, "Atrocities on Dalits," 2479.
33. Mukherjee, "Caste in Itself, Caste and Class, or Caste in Class," 1761.