

Social Mobility Under British Raj And After: Some Observations

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Abstract

Social mobility, movement of people up and down in social ladder is a universal phenomenon. All over the world, people move vertically or horizontally in the social hierarchy. It is through social mobility it is possible to study equality of opportunity in the light of gender, race, ethnicity, birthplace, sexual orientation, class, fertility. Based on the chances to engage in upward mobility process, one can classify society into open & closed or flexible & rigid. In the ancient Indian society under Varna system there was movement of people in the social hierarchy. Only a few individuals with help of their talent and rare traits used improve their social position. However, collective mobility or group mobility was more or less absent. Individual mobility and collective can be achieved only when group boundaries are permeable. However, with the evolution of caste system in the place varna system this social flexibility is lost and many restrictions were imposed on upward mobility of low caste Hindus. However, during the British Rule in India, there were radical changes in the opportunity structure. The introduction of secular education in the place of theological education, formal education in the place of informal education, urbanization, urban ward migration, introduction of railway lines and mass transit facilities helped the some downtrodden communities to improve their social status. Political emancipation in 1947 started a new era in the life of marginal communities. For the first time in the history, state through its constitution helped the mobility of marginal communities and new channels of upward mobility were provided to marginal communities. This paper examines the caste mobility in the light of historical factors.

Key words

Upward social mobility, opportunity structure, group permeability, Social ladder

Introduction

Social mobility is as old as Indian society itself. However, studying mobility in caste-ridden Indian society is a recent phenomenon. Only in very recent years social scientists started to examine the phenomena of social mobility within the Indian caste system. In the classical comparative sociological view of social stratification, Indian society was usually presented as “frozen,” or closed, at the polar extreme from open, Western class systems. Four decades back, a group of Indians in 1961 met to present papers and hold discussions concerning research on the topic “**Social Mobility in the Caste System in India.**” Since then, many scholars took interest in examining the mobility in caste ridden Indian Society.

In a seminar conducted in 1961, scholars namely **Burton Stein** took part. He was from University of Minnesota. He studied and presented paper on mobility among Sudras in the **Srivaisnava** sect of medieval South India. **Y. B. Damle**'s (Sociology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology) applied **Reference Group Theory** to contemporary urban mobility in caste. **Edward Harper** famous anthropologist of Bryn Mawr College has analyzed the social consequences of an unsuccessful low-caste movement in the Malnad, South India. **William Rowe** presented a case study of a contemporary caste mobility movement in North India, that of a Sudra group which claims status as **Chauhan Rajputs**. Studying social mobility in plural society having history of sharp structured inequalities like ours is not an easy task. Access to mobility channels may vary with ones caste, religion, nativity, cultural barriers or support, fertility and size of the family, restrictions on marriage, literacy and educational level, nature of social structure, rise of new professions, state support and many other factors.

Objectives of the Study

The Objectives of the present paper are:

- to examine social mobility in caste under British Raj ;
- to throw light on social mobility after 1947 in the light of factors namely commodification of land, liberalization of education, constitutional safeguards. LPG, radical land reforms, introduction of Panchayat raj system etc

Discussion and Analysis

Social mobility within caste in the past-Ancient and Medieval period

Caste Mobility during the Ancient Period

During the ancient period of Indian history there were many restrictions on upward social mobility. All the channels of upward social mobility were by and large were denied to low caste Hindus. They because of their birth were not permitted either to get education or to become literates. This educational disability and structural barriers disabled them from entering new jobs or professions that secular education can confer. Even in the absence of education and literacy one can enter many jobs with help of appropriate skills. However, there was strong social opposition to enter the jobs meant for upper caste Hindus. Any attempts towards educational and occupational mobility were opposed by Upper Caste Hindus and the caste system. Hence, upward mobility process was almost negligible if not completely absent.

Social Mobility under British Raj: Glance at Factors

Let us examine the role commodification of land, means of transport and communication, liberalization of education in caste during the colonial rule.

1. Commodification of land: Under the British Raj, land became a saleable commodity and this had far-reaching consequences for mobility. It helped the members of low caste to buy land and become upwardly mobile and those who lost their rights to lands suffered downward mobility.

2. Introduction of modern means of communication: The introduction of new means of and communication served to dilute the restrictions and inhibitions associated with caste or imposed by caste. It helped the downtrodden to come out of the caste system and Jajmani system and migrate to cities in search of secular job.

3. Liberalization of education-Emergence of new Channel of upward mobility: The British rule provided fresh avenues for upward social mobility altering the nature of pre-existing institutions such as schools and colleges. They liberated educational institutions from the clutches from the religion. They permitted not only downtrodden and also the women to get education and training. With modern education many of them located mostly in urban areas entered secular professions. The British recruited such educated low caste Hindus in army, bureaucracy and law courts. They recruited members on the basis of merit and thus gave chances for upward mobility and ascend up in social hierarchy. They in fact weakened the caste system and relaxed restrictions laid on occupational choice.

In the initial stage, Upper Caste Hindus took the advantage of new economic opportunities generated under the British rule. They took modern education and entered many sectors of bureaucracy and economy. With the passage of time other vulnerable sections of the Indian society followed their foot prints of course with social resistance.

4. Policies adopted by the British Rulers and Opportunity structure created by them: Bailey mentioned how the prohibition policy adopted by the British resulted in the relative prosperity of Ganjam and Board Distillers. Similarly, Srinivas cites the examples of Noniyas of Western U.P. and Kolis of Surat coast who benefited from new employment opportunities created by railway, road and canal constructions. The Telis (oilmen) all over eastern India became wealthy on account of larger market and trade of oil.

5. Westernization and Sanskritisation: Westernization, imitation of the western life style accelerated the upward mobility process in many ways. It was a desirable mechanism of attaining mobility. It generated upward mobility of high caste Hindus. It must be noted that westernization did not begin and end with British rule. It provided tracks which furthered and accelerated the mobility process. The westernization process continued even after our political emancipation in 1947.

5. New Legal System and state safeguards to Untouchables: The British politically integrated the whole India into a single administrative unit. They introduced uniform legal system. They established civil courts operating on the principles "equality before law." They in fact challenged the supremacy of the caste

rules and regulations and power of Panchayats. The Caste Disabilities Removal Act and Abolition of Slavery were a great leap forward towards upliftment of Lower castes. These laws were efforts in the direction of bridging the gap between lower and higher castes. Thus, the British removed the great hurdles coming in the way of upward mobility.

6. Religious conversion as a channel to upward mobility: Buddhism, Jainism and later Sikhism which are the sects of Hindu religion have disregarded, the rigidities associated with purity and pollution were redefined. They have fought against the prevalent inequities and established a new egalitarian order within the sects.

Similarly, the Christian missionaries during the British rule proselytized the most oppressed castes they extricated the untouchables from a life of misery and exploitation and provided them education and health facilities. This enabled them to find new employment opportunities and attain higher status and prestige than before. Through religious conversion many Dalits improved their social and religious status. They moved up in social hierarchy. It is because of this reason in North East many non religious tribes improved their social status. Today some of the North East states have very good literacy rate.

Census operations during the colonial rule too helped upward mobility process: Recording jati identities in census enumerations from 1891 to 1931, many middle and low castes made efforts to get themselves registered as members of the twice-born varnas. These claims reached a peak in 1901 census when **Herbert Risley**, the Census Commissioner, tried to rank all castes. Hundreds of jatis tried to ensure a higher rank by claiming high varna titles. For example, the **Kurmi cultivators of Bengal** wanted to be Kurmi Kshatriyas; the Teli (oil-pressers) wanted to be called Vaishyas. Evidence was offered from myths and history for each claim.

In 1921 census, all **Nadars** declared themselves as 'Nadar Kshatriyas'. Today, the Nadars have become one of the most economically and politically successful community in the south. All these examples show how lower castes used politics, achieved political power and caste solidarity, and ultimately high social position in society.

7.Social Reform Movements-Demand for upward mobility channels : The educated liberal reformers such as **Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshb Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda** in their endeavor to reform the caste ridden Indian society strove hard to abolish evil practices such as sati, child marriage, human sacrifice, untouchability etc. To alleviate oppression and elevate the status of lower castes, they tried to infuse elements of rationality and modernity into Hindu religion. The new religious movements namely Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Brahma Samaj were egalitarian and were against disabilities and discrimination based on caste. They have played an important role in imparting education and modern knowledge to Dalits and Women. Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. **Ambedkar** fought restlessly for the upliftment of the untouchables and women. All these radical transformations generated large scale upward social mobility among Dalits and women.

8. Migration: Migration helped some low caste Hindus migrate to urban centers and search for a new job other than caste occupation.

Social Mobility in Contemporary India-

After Political Emancipation in 1947

After independence, India accepted democracy as the system of governance. Democracy that we have accepted is based on four pillars namely equality, liberty, fraternity and justice. It is because of these pillars of democracy many disadvantaged or vulnerable sections comprising of SCs, STs, OBCs and women got opportunities to ascend up in social hierarchy.

1. Constitutional safeguards and upward mobility process India

The movement of people between social classes is one of the ingredients of a properly functioning democratic and pluralistic system. Indian constitution stood firmly to give equal opportunities to all subaltern groups comprising of untouchables, tribes, minorities and women. With help of constitutional safeguards, SCs, STs and minorities and women became upwardly mobile. However, at the same time we can say that such channels of upward mobility were denied to the citizens who are living in monarchy, dictatorship and theocratic regimes. Constitution allowed the SCs, STs and Women to enter the educational institutions and study the courses of their own choice. Hence, the role of constitution in promoting upward social mobility cannot be underestimated.

Positive discrimination policy adopted by the state helped SCs, STs and minorities, women and OBCs to take up many jobs in government sector. According to Government statement, the subaltern groups improved their representation in the government jobs. The central government in gave following information to Supreme Court. It was cited in The English newspaper, Times of India. According to these figures, a total of 1,23,155 people work in the 19 ministries of the central government. Of these, 15.34 percent of Scheduled Castes (SC), 6.18 percent of Scheduled Tribes (ST) and 17.5 percent of Other Backward Classes (OBC) are employed. It because of reservation facility many SCs, STs and OBCs became upwardly mobile and improved their social status. Some seats are reserved in Lok Sabha for the members of the Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As per the order issued by the Delimitation Commission in 2008, 412 are general, 84 seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and 47 seats for the Scheduled Tribes.

According to the Department of Personnel and Training (DOPT) report, the representation of the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) in public sector jobs was one percentage in 1935, while they cumulatively represented more than 60% of the population. Special provisions were made in the constitution for the SC and ST communities under Articles 16(4), 16(4A), 16(4B) and 335 to ensure their fair representation in the public sector.

Out of a total of 30.87 lakh employees, only 3,37,439 employees are women (The Indian Express: Nov 06.2022). Women constitute roughly half of the Indian population. Now they are entering all sectors of economy. Like SCs, STs and OBCs they too are also enjoying the benefits of positive discrimination policy. Govt. not only in jobs but also in educational institutions gave reservation to SCs, STs, OBCs and Women. It is because of this reason SCs, STs and Women have entered many jobs that were denied to them during the past.

2. Land Reforms and Upward Mobility process in Agrarian India

The introduction of land reforms in the 1950s which aimed at abolishing the intermediaries, such as the Zamindars and providing land to the tiller generated vertical mobility - both upward and downward. While some tenants could buy surplus land and become upwardly mobile, others were thrown out by the Zamindars who claimed to be the cultivators. This resulted in the pauperization of the landless labourers; land reforms were also a source of downward mobility for the Zamindars. They lost their right to extract taxes and share from the cultivators which was a source of their wealth. They were left with fragmented holdings which could not support their feudal lifestyle. Similarly land reforms have been a motor force affecting mobility. Ceiling of holdings have proved a blow to the status and prestige of Zamindars and boon for peasant cultivators who have attained ownership rights ii) Adoption of Reforms: Whenever efforts are made at reforming the society it generates opportunities for mobility.

3. Introduction of panchayat raj system and upward mobility of SCs, STs OBCs and Women in politics

The introduction of Panchayat Raj System and universal adult franchise started a new era in the life of subaltern groups of India. The principle of universal adult franchise, adoption of Panchayat Raj System has altered the distribution of authority and power in agrarian India. These measures not only strengthened the hands of the weaker sections but also restricted the monopoly of upper castes over political structure.

4. Green Revolution and upward mobility process in agrarian India

Green Revolution programme launched by the government in 1960's has also altered the pattern of inequalities in the villages. The green revolution emphasized the use of High Yielding variety seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and labour saving agricultural implements for increasing agricultural productivity. However, these agricultural inputs have to be used with irrigation facilities. A new class of 'Progressive Farmers' emerged as a response to Green Revolution. The farmers who are rich invested huge amount of money on resources like tractors, pump sets, power threshers etc. These progressive farmers invested reaped huge profits. They are a distinct class who are different from the small farmers and from the agricultural Labourers. Unfortunately, small and marginal farmers lagged behind rich farmers and they just became the silent spectators of green revolution. Green revolution thus reinforced social inequality. The status of some farmers changed because of green revolution. Some small farmers the losers of green revolution sold their land to rich landlords and jointed the rank of landless agricultural labors. Green revolution thus fostered upward and downward mobility in agrarian India.

5. Industrialization and urbanization-Two prominent factors of upward mobility process

Industrialization, establishment of industries has contributed to social mobility in caste ridden Indian society. Even during the colonial rule, many low caste Hindus hailed from rural area migrated to cities and entered the industrial sector. Industrial sector all over the world has absorbed the people coming from agricultural sector. The impact of industrialization has become wider and rapid with the liberalization process of 1991. Not just liberalization, even privatization and globalization together have created new opportunity structures for intergenerational and intra-generation social mobility process. In 2023, 35.6 million people were employed in manufacturing sector. Industrialization according to scholars is associated with increasing absolute and relative mobility. It has helped many lower class people to assume the status of non-agricultural middle class. In India, majority of migrants coming from rural areas are either unskilled or semi skilled. The industrial sector not only accommodated these migrants but also helped them to move up in social ladder. In India people irrespective of their caste background entered the industrial sector and improved their social status. Agricultural labors coming from primary sector too entered the industrial sector.

Industrial sector has expanded phenomenally after independence. India witnessed the growth of iron and steel, textiles, automobiles, electronics industries. The class of industrialists has emerged.

Urbanization and upward mobility process: Urban society always comprised of entrepreneurs who included traders and shopkeepers. These classes have flourished and expanded with of cities and towns and cashed on the rising demands of new goods and services in them. This class would include entrepreneurs running restaurants, marriage bureaus, video libraries and other like property dealers, grocers, laundered, dry cleaners, vegetable renders who are a direct link between suppliers of goods and service and consumers. A large number of people have become wealthy by joining this rung of class structure in the cities while some have diversified and expanded in their traditional occupations and arts such as Dhabi's taking to dry clearing and barbers opening beauty parlors. Others have established absolutely new enterprises and other consumer durables, travel agencies etc. Professional Classes have undergone vast changes in its nature and complexion on account of the changes introduced under the British rule and after independence.

6. Political mobilization-Formation of political party and entry into politics: Rajni Kothari and Rushikesh Maru have given examples of some middle and lower castes and economically depressed communities of cultivators in Gujarat who federated together into a common organization in the late 1940s and the 1950s for achieving political power. After winning elections against the Congress, they were 'accepted' into the Kshatriya fold. Thus, politics worked as a cementing force for them.

7. Religious conversion helped some communities to improve their status: Some Mahars were converted to Christianity while some joined the **Kabir and Ramadi panths** (sects) which stressed equality. In 1936, under the leadership of **Ambedkar**, their temple-entry attempt turned into political movement, rejecting Hinduism altogether. In 1937, **Ambedkar** established Independent Labour Party which gave majority of tickets to **Mahars**. Since then, through the Republic Party as well as through Parliament and Vidhan Sabha elections of 1946, 1951 and 1956, the **Mahars** have established themselves as an important political force in Maharashtra politics.

8. Decline in fertility and upward mobility: All over the West there was a gradual decline in fertility rate. This decline has contributed to upward mobility. In countries like China fertility decline can be explained in the light of state intervention. In some countries fertility declined as a response to urbanization, literacy, education and empowerment of women.

The Total fertility rate (TFR) has declined from 2.2 (reported in 2015-16) to 2.0 at the all- India level, according to the latest National Family Health Survey of India OR NFHS- 5 (phase 2) released by Union Health Ministry. According to survey it was 1.6 in urban areas, 2.1 in Rural area.

India's fertility rate has been declining rapidly in recent decades. Today, the average Indian woman is expected to have 2.2 children in her lifetime, a fertility rate that is higher than rates in many economically advanced countries like the United States (1.6) but much lower than India's in 1992 (3.4) or 1950 (5.9).¹

Every religious group in the country has seen its fertility fall, including the majority Hindu population and Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain minority groups. Among Indian Muslims, for example, the total fertility rate has declined dramatically, from 4.4 children per woman in 1992 to 2.6 children in 2015, the most recent year for which religion data is available from India's National Family Health Survey.

Muslims still have the highest fertility rate among India's major religious groups, followed by Hindus at 2.1. Jains have the lowest fertility rate (1.2). The general pattern is largely the same as it was in 1992, when Muslims had the highest fertility rate at 4.4, followed by Hindus at 3.3. But **the gaps in childbearing between India's religious groups are generally much smaller than they used to be.** For example, while

Muslim women were expected to have an average of 1.1 more children than Hindu women in 1992, the gap had shrunk to 0.5 by 2015.

P. Ramesh, in his *An Analysis of Fertility Differentials among Caste Groups in Andhra Pradesh* writes: Fertility has been much higher and contraceptive use much lower among SC and ST compared to other caste groups. The decline in fertility either because of state intervention or because of conscious efforts of people and resultant small family size in majority of the cases has contributed to upward mobility. Mobility in India can be analysed in the light of fertility and family size.

Conclusion

Generally there was a strong resistance to upward social mobility in caste ridden ancient Indian Society. Under monarchy, there was little encouragement to move upward in social ladder. In ancient India, king was obliged to protect caste system. Social norms were against the occupational mobility.

It is the political apparatus that is in a position of promoting or demoting the mobility process. In the absence of state support the individual initiative and hard work can play some role if there was no social resistance to mobility. Individual factors along with favorable structural arrangements always play important role in upward mobility. During the British rule for the first time political structure stood in favour of promoting social mobility indirectly. They can be called latent functions of British rule. They just introduced secular education and liberalized it from the clutches of religion. This opportunity was tapped by some downtrodden communities. They, with these opportunities moved up in social ladder. In the same way urbanization, industrialization initiated by British Raj helped the low caste Hindus to change their occupation and improve their status. However, after 1947, social mobility took place because of state intervention. It directly and aggressively promoted social mobility in Indian society. Legislation passed by the state and constitution carved by it played pivotal role in making them upwardly mobile.

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