

Castes, untouchability and social success in India

Jules NAUDET

Even if India is a caste society, social mobility is not impossible. Many years of positive discrimination policies and struggle have enabled some Dalits—the caste name of the so-called Untouchables—to escape their condition. Jules Naudet bases his work on his study of Dalits who have become senior civil servants, tenured university teachers or senior executives in order to focus on the bonds that connect them to their original background. .

Defining social mobility in the Indian context is a particularly difficult exercise. As Max Weber reminds us in *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*¹, castes are a special case of status groups (*Stand*). In contrast to the frequent cases where social honour is directly connected to class position, the notion of caste modifies the relationship between social status and class. According to Weber, castes are a closed status group in the sense that they impose highly constrictive professional, religious and social obligations. Here it is not class—defined by the possession or non-possession of material goods or professional qualifications of a certain type—that defines status, but rather the status given at birth that defines class.

In such a situation, social mobility is extremely difficult to achieve for an isolated individual. Only the group as a whole can see its status evolve. It is for this reason that India is often presented in the continuity of the work of Pitrim Sorokin (the first theoretician of social mobility), as the archetype of a *closed society* where status is assigned, in opposition to an *open society* where status is acquired.²

¹ Max Weber, *Hindouisme et Bouddhisme*, translated and presented by Isabelle Kalinowski and Roland Lardinois, Paris, Flammarion, coll. Champs, 2003, p. 123.

² Pitrim Sorokin, *Social Mobility*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1927.

Sorokin's binary typology, however, is misleading for Indian society is not completely closed. It is undeniable that there has always been a strong congruence between caste and class, but this congruence has never been perfect. Since the independence of India, and particularly due to the policies of "reservations" (a government policy imposing quotas), the dissociation between caste and class has actually increased even if the congruence still remains very strong. The secularisation of the country, moreover, has entailed the delegitimation of the use of the criteria of caste in the common sense. Although this delegitimation remains relative, it has nevertheless created a breach in the principles guaranteeing the Indian social order. The Indian theodicy, that Weber described as the "the most consistent ever produced by history"³, has been rivalled by an ideology of merit according to which the value of the individual no longer depends on his birth, but on his professional success.

The consequence of these two developments thus leads to a blurring of the definitions of status. While caste is a closed status group in Weber's sense, status in India is not only defined by belonging to a caste. It also depends on the prestige of one's occupation. There thus exist in India two scales of value of social status, where status is defined by the ritual purity of one's caste, as well as the prestige of one's profession. These two scales of social status are independent and possess their own logic. The assessment of an individual's status thus depends on the use of one scale or the other and is profoundly relative. The factors liable to influence this assessment are innumerable and, what is more, it is practically impossible to systematise them. The predominance of caste as a principle of assessment of status could vary in a more "structural" way, depending on the trajectory and the contexts of socialisation encountered (a residence in a rural or urban environment, the type of academic institutions frequented, university attendance, parental profession, age, etc.), but this predominance can never be completely stabilised. Since different contexts produce or uphold different legitimacies, the individuals, who are subjected to the effects of symbolic domination, are tempted to vary their criteria of judgement depending on these different contexts and do not necessarily mobilise the same scales of assessment in their families, in their district, at school, in their work place, on public transport, etc.

³ Max Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

This duality in the definition of social status necessarily has an impact on the manner in which people, in particular emerging from “lower castes”, might experience their social mobility. This ambiguity was highlighted in our investigation into the experience of social mobility in India. Anil, the son of a landless worker from a small village in Gujarat was born into a caste of weavers traditionally considered as “untouchable” and is now a graduate of an Ivy League university and a consultant for an international firm. He is respected at work, has the esteem of his colleagues; however, he does confess, with great hesitation and a certain shame, to his fear of returning to the village of his birth:

“When I go back [the situation of the people there] is very bad and I am still...when I go back, I still remain... It is quite a contradiction in me. When I go back I still... As far as the higher caste people are concerned, I still remain as a lower caste person. Even though I am a big guy in Mumbai where my caste doesn't matter, when I go back, I become the ‘untouchable’, and that I don't like.”

This interview extract reveals all the contradictions of social mobility in the Indian context. What is also striking in Anil's story is that although he was born into an extremely poor and socially stigmatised background, he has managed to reach an extremely prestigious and well-paid professional position. His situation, however, remains an exception in regard of the rest of Indian society.

The issue of “lower castes” in India

The abolition of untouchability may well be inscribed in the Constitution, which was written under the aegis of Ambedkar and promulgated in 1950, but caste remains the structuring principle of Indian society. In fact, this principle has not just survived, it has actually taken new forms in order to adapt to new socio-economic realities.

Since 1951, caste has not been included in Indian government censuses, and only so-called “scheduled” groups are. These groups include: *scheduled castes* or SC, a category that includes castes traditionally considered as “untouchable”; *scheduled tribes* or ST, a category bringing together a whole collection of groups that supposedly form the aboriginal population of India and are also considered as “untouchable”; the *other backward classes* or OBC, a category that mainly includes castes from the *shûdra* category (low castes, traditionally restricted to subaltern tasks, but not considered as “untouchable”). The members of these three categories benefit, according to different modalities, from “reservation”, or positive

discrimination policies in the public sector, in higher education and in politics (i.e. special seats are allotted to them in elections).

Today *scheduled castes* represent more than 16 % of the Indian population, and *scheduled tribes* roughly 8 %⁴, together making a total of 24 % of the Indian population. The evaluation of the population of the *other backward classes* has given rise to a number of debates between specialists (because the limits of the group are hard to evaluate). It probably amounts to roughly 36 % of the population⁵.

Today many members of the OBC are still heavily discriminated against on the basis of caste, but the members of SC and ST categories suffer far more from this discrimination as they continue to be victims of the practice of untouchability, in particular in rural environments. A recent study carried out on a sample of 565 villages in 11 different States shows that, in one tenth of these villages, people considered as untouchables still do not have the right to wear shoes, new clothes, or sunglasses, nor do they have the right to use an umbrella or own a bike⁶. In half of the villages studied, these people do not have free access to the community infrastructures providing drinking water. Similarly, more than 40 % of schools practice untouchability during school meals forcing children from SC and ST groups to sit separately from their classmates. Police statistics, which do not account for all crimes, show that every week, among the SC and ST populations, thirteen people are murdered, five of their houses are burned down, and six people are kidnapped. Every day, meanwhile, three women are raped and eleven people attacked; a crime is committed against a member of these groups every eighteen minutes⁷.

It is on the basis of this experience of extremely violent discrimination that many members of these groups, in particular the *scheduled castes* group, have developed a strong political identity. This heightening in political awareness became more acute in the interwar period under Ambedkar's impulsion⁸. Ambedkar was the first "untouchable" to have studied in the United States and England and he was the main author of the Indian Constitution. He

⁴ Source: *Census of India 2001* (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_Glance/scst.aspx).

⁵ Source : *National Sample Survey* (NSS), 1999-2000.

⁶ G. Shah, H. Mander, S. Thorat, S. Deshpande, A. Baviskar, *Untouchability in Rural India*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks (Calif.), Sage Publications, 2006.

⁷ Narula, Smita, "Equal by Law, Unequal by Caste: The "Untouchable" Condition in Critical Race Perspective" *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, vol. 26, 2007, p. 46.

⁸ See Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar : leader intouchable et père de la Constitution indienne*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2000.

was also the initiator of a movement against the caste structure. This movement continued beyond the death of Ambedkar in 1956, and today is the structuring force behind the struggle against discrimination. It is known as the Dalit Movement, and the term *dalit*, from the Marathi language, literally means “the broken and oppressed”. The Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, then Ambedkar, from the 1930s, were the first to use this term to designate the members of formerly untouchable castes in the public sphere. The term became genuinely popular, however, from 1973 with the publication of the *Dalit Panthers* manifesto. From its inception the term *dalit* with its implications of struggle was eminently political and today is often used as a politically correct term to refer to all formerly untouchable groups (but still victims, through the fact of their untouchability). The use of the word is often subject to debate in the social sciences but here we will not hesitate to use it, because, as we shall see, it reveals much about the way the people in our study define themselves in the Indian social space.

The experience of social mobility among Dalits

There are very few studies around today providing quantitative evaluation of social mobility in India. The few studies available⁹ reflect the difficulty of analysing social mobility as a function both of class and caste. These studies, however, reveal the role played by “reservation” policies” to enhance chances for upward mobility among Dalits.

Our research work is based more on a qualitative approach of social mobility and is composed of some fifty interviews with Dalits from poor backgrounds, who have attained high positions of responsibility in universities (as researchers or lecturers in the humanities and social sciences), in the private sector (as graduates of prestigious institutes such as the IIT and IIM) and in the Indian civil services.

The most original result of our work is that it would seem that, unlike the results of American and European studies on the experience of social mobility in western countries, the way that identity adapts to a new social status does not seem to be a real problem. On the contrary, an analysis of the narrative processes of these people’s life trajectories reveals that the radical change of social status takes place without any deep sense of transformation or

⁹ See in particular Sanjay Kumar, Anthony Heath, Oliver Heath, “Determinants of Social Mobility in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, n°29, 2002; R. Deshpande, S. Palshikar, “Occupational Mobility: How Much Does Caste Matter?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, n°34, 2008.

adjustment of identity. This observation is all the more striking as the scope of the success trajectories studied is such that one might expect adjustment to the new status to be far from easy. It could indeed be tempting to assume that Durkheim's thesis of anomie as a consequence of rapid social change would apply to India more than elsewhere. Many of the people I interviewed effectively grew up in slums, in mud huts, and are familiar with poverty, hunger, humiliation, discrimination, and caste-based racism founded on the total denial of all human values. And these same people, through their own efforts and success at school, are now in positions that offer them great social prestige as well as the material comfort that their parents would never have dared dream of.

However, these personal stories, despite the rareness of such vast ascension, do not seem to entail real problems of adjustment. Let us be clear here: such vast social ascension is exceptional from a statistical point of view and is definitely far from easy. The difficulty of such ascension can be seen in the example of one man who is today a professor at the highly prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and who, during an entire year of college, was economically constrained to sleep on the street, study under the light of a street lamp and to depend on his classmates for pen and paper.

When we talk of a relatively easy adjustment to their new status, what we mean is that in the narratives of their success these individuals only very rarely mention a feeling of double absence, disconnection, shame or betrayal regarding their group of origin. At the same time their narratives are not blatantly centred around a celebration of their success. This should be underlined, since the tension between the group of origin and the group of arrival is often mediated by arguments such as: 'I don't see why I should feel bad about achieving success. I only fulfill what is most valued in this society: success and progress!' But this is absolutely not the type of perspective experienced by Dalits in their upward social mobility.

Of course, the registers of narration of the social success of these people are extremely diverse, but we can nevertheless distinguish one recurrent feature in practically all the interviews carried out. Most of the people encountered construct the narrative of their success on their Dalit identity. We could even go further and affirm that it is their Dalit identity that constructs their experience of upward mobility.

'Paying back to society'

The interviews revealed just how strong loyalty to the original group is. When the interviewer asks interviewees whether or not their social success implied that they broke away or distanced themselves from their group of origin, they were generally surprised, if not outraged, by such a hurtful question. Answering yes to such a question would amount to breaking a taboo, and interviewees were generally prompt to emphasize the strength of the links that they have preserved with their village or slum. It is particularly revealing to examine the speech register which is used here: the preservation of the links with the group of origin is often presented as a moral obligation, as something imposed from the outside rather than as a personal choice. This is the reason why a clear majority of the upwardly mobile Dalits interviewed decided to set up schools, micro-credit organisations, libraries, scholarship systems and so on. Such enterprises are in keeping with the ideology, notably defended by the political leader Kanshi Ram, that upwardly mobile Dalits need to ‘pay back to society’.

Dinesh Bhongare, professor of psychology at Mumbai University, uses such terms to talk about his own activities:

“In addition to my profession, I have [stressed by the interviewee] to involve myself in some other social activities. I cannot altogether ignore this social responsibility. So, I am conducting some guidance programmes for socially disadvantaged people, helping them, organizing some social awareness programmes, community programmes, counselling, etc. That kind of activities we conduct. Our priority is not earning money. So compared to other professors we are compelled to organise these kinds of activities. We cannot compromise on this.”

In addition to the symptomatic sliding from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’, this excerpt shows clearly how social commitment obeys a moral imperative. The personal dimension of the commitment fades away and makes room for the identification with a group that ultimately motivates and guides the moral standpoints as well as the actions (*‘we are compelled to’*) of the individual. It is the Dalit collective identity that dictates the modalities of action, and this caste identity informs all aspects of the narration of the life story.

The success of the people interviewed is an individual success. One person or their family is the beneficiary of this mobility, yet these individuals talk of their mobility as though it was the whole community that had been upwardly mobile through their success. And while some recognise the individual nature of their success, they still situate their individual ascension in the framework of the history of their group. Thus when these people are asked about what they believe are the causes of their success, many reply without any hesitation that

their success can be explained by the struggles led by Ambedkar. Not only did the teachings of Ambedkar enable their parents to assimilate a certain ethos of success that structured their education and pushed them to put a high premium on education, but Ambedkar is also at the origin of the “reservation” system in education and the civil service without which these people would never have achieved such mobility. The figures of Ambedkar in particular and the Dalit movement in general are always present and inform their self-narration.

In their interviews many people mention their first contacts with the Dalit movement, the importance that this encounter has had throughout their lives, and how it deeply affected their socialisation. The conversion of one or several members of the family to Buddhism (some converted on the anniversary of Ambedkar’s own conversion) is a recurring feature in the interviews and is often invoked as an example of the precocious familiarization with Dalit ideology. In a poor Dalit family, conversion is a powerful event for at least two reasons. Firstly, it symbolises a rupture with the Hindu tradition that their ancestors had followed for centuries. Such a rupture is not at all straightforward as it implies a radical questioning of the daily practices and the way people perceive their life in the physical and metaphysical worlds. The conversion of friends and family is an event all the more momentous in the life of a Dalit for being fraught with difficulties. The difficulty of conversion is often more marked among women on whom the conversion is generally imposed by their husbands. Furthermore, conversion as Ambedkar imagined it, marks the start of a process of deculturation and of disincorporation from the incorporated Hindu social structures. Conversion symbolises entrance into a new identity that is less religious than social. In the biography of his family, Narendra Jadhav, a very high-ranking Dalit civil servant, tells of the ceremony of the conversion of Ambedkar to Buddhism:

“In one sensational declaration, he announced that he would no longer follow the Hindu ritual set down for the anniversary of his parents death. He swore to follow the great principles of Buddhism: knowledge, honesty, and compassion towards our fellow men. My body shuddered, the moment was so emotionally charged. Tears streamed down my cheeks, I felt light irradiating from Babasaheb [a name often given to Ambedkar]. I will never forget this day, nor this speech, nor the moment when Babasaheb asked us to all get up. We all arose with pride, our shoulders straight, our heads high. Babasaheb was our leader and our saviour, and he was going to guide us to a life of happiness where castes no longer existed, and where equality existed for all. [translated from French]”¹⁰

¹⁰ Narendra Jadhav, *Intouchable : Une famille de parias dans l’Inde contemporaine*, traduit par Simone Manceau, Paris, Fayard, 2002, p. 265.

The incorporation of a Dalit identity, centred on the struggle against caste oppression, happens in several ways. While people from the *mahar* caste were more exposed to the Ambedkarist movement and thus integrated earlier into this political identity, the definition of the Dalit identity cannot be limited to an Ambedkarist and *mahar* identity. In line with writers as diverse as Gail Omvedt, Kancha Ilaiah and Ghanshyam Shah¹¹, we believe that being Dalit above all means refusing the social order of the Brahmanic order. There are diverse ways to be Dalit, and there are nuances in positioning, and different social journeys, but the common basis is the decision to inscribe the struggle against domination at the centre of social identity.

Education, social mobility, and the collective identity of Dalits

The specificity of this struggle against domination is to place a special emphasis on education. Dalit identity, although based on subordination, can be described as an identity built around an ethos of mobility. In particular it posits the project of social mobility at the heart of group identity even though this group happens to be socially dominated. The very broad diffusion within some ex-untouchable castes of Ambedkarist ideology, embodied in the slogan, “*educate, organise and agitate*”, set off a fairly improbable process: many families completely bereft of cultural capital started to place great value in their children’s education in an almost devotional manner, enabling them to succeed at school and thus in society. But Dalit and Ambedkarist ideology is not limited to promoting education. It also dictates the adequate behaviour once successful, in particular by setting as a moral imperative the necessity to “pay back to society”. Social mobility is programmed into the Dalit identity. Unlike the situation in Europe and in the United States where the upwardly mobile person is caught in identity conflicts that are not easy to deal with, the upwardly mobile Dalit has at his disposition a kind of ideological toolkit that efficiently helps him to minimise the force of these identity conflicts.

As the sociologist Nicolas Jaoul shows, the Dalit ethos of mobility relates directly to the Gramscian notion of the “organic intellectual” who acts as a link between the institutions and the subalterns¹². Gramsci’s call “to raise the intellectual level of ever growing strata of the

¹¹ Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2006; K. Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva. Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy*, Calcutta, Bombay, Samya, 2005; Ghanshyam Shah, *Dalit Identity and Politics. Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks (Calif.), Sage Publications, 2001.

¹² Nicolas Jaoul, *Le Militantisme dalit dans la région de Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Genèse et transformations d'une entreprise de représentation communautaire*, thèse de doctorat, EHESS, 2004.

populace, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element, which means working to produce *elites* of intellectuals of a new type, which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset”¹³ could well have been that of Ambedkar or any other Dalit leader. In fact some passages of Dr. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* develop the same idea¹⁴.

We do have to be careful however not to succumb to the pitfall of idealising socially mobile Dalits’ disinterested dedication to the collective struggle. Personal interests do not of course dissolve through attachment to the group of origin. This ethos of dedication and commitment masks a position of domination on the part of the socially mobile within the Dalit community. In the context of a society that is still structured by caste relationships, it is extremely difficult, and in some contexts impossible, for someone who has emerged from a caste considered by some to be “untouchable” to assimilate into dominant groups still dominated by so-called upper castes. Breaking off relationships with the original group in an attempt to integrate perfectly into the destination group is an extremely risky gamble that can result in isolation, leading rather to humiliation than symbolic benefits. We might therefore put forward the hypothesis that upwardly mobile Dalits work out a simple rational calculation that consists in preferring to be dominant among the dominated rather than be dominated among the dominant. Indeed one of Nicolas Jaoul’s arguments shows in particular how high ranking Dalit civil servants only started supporting the Ambedkarist movement when Dalit political figures within the Uttar Pradesh government were in a position to guarantee that this support would not harm their careers¹⁵. This commitment may mask gentrification; it may also be the mark of a paternalist attitude more in keeping with a process of “charitable action” than of a revolt against injustice; either way, commitment to the Dalit cause is a sign of a very special way of managing the individual challenges posed by the experience of upward mobility.

This brief glimpse¹⁶ of the issues raised by the experience of upward mobility in India enables us to grasp how, despite a radical change in professional status, caste identity continues to structure the way people situate themselves in the social space. Whereas social

¹³ Antonio Gramsci, « Les cahiers de la prison », in *Textes*, Paris, Éditions sociales, 1983, p. 155.

¹⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi*, Jullundur City, Bheem Patrika Publications, 1971.

¹⁵ Nicolas Jaoul, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ For more details see Jules Naudet, “Paying-back to society”: upward social mobility among Dalits”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 42, n° 3, 2008.

mobility generally implies a strong process of individuation, of loss or confusion of belonging, this does not seem to be the case with the Dalits who experience this kind of mobility. We therefore see that the distinction discussed in the introduction between a social status defined by caste and social status defined by profession can be found in the way that Dalits experience their success. It would in fact seem that the reason for which caste identity is considered as structuring is that, despite their success, people continue to consider upwardly mobile Dalits as “untouchables”. The weight of this stigmatised identity often means that they prefer investing their efforts at social recognition within a caste group with which they share an experience of discrimination rather than towards a peer group with which they share certain class attributes, but who are always tempted to define them by their caste identity.

Translated from French by Jonathan **Sly** (revised by **Jules Naudet**)

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 13 March 2009

© laviedesidees.fr