

HIGHER EDUCATION ITS IMPACT ON DALIT STUDENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Dalit 'is the name adopted by the people of the untouchable Indian group to reflect and distinguish them. "Dalit" includes the defenseless part of Indian society, living on the outskirts of the city, such as Adivasis, landless workers, laborers, permanent residents, and nomadic tribes with criminals and women. Not only for the untouchables but for all the social and financial backwardness in the nation's founding process. The term 'Dalit' is taken separately by various researchers. Emerging literature on Dalit student activism explores the ways Dalit students position themselves with regard to other student groups and the broader caste structure. However, less attention has been paid to intragroup relations and dynamics within the community of Scheduled Caste (SC) students. This article explores the emerging differentiation and boundary-making among the SC students, thus contributing to the ongoing discussion on differences and divisions within the larger Dalit community. Focusing on symbolic boundaries, morality and socio-political backgrounds, I discuss the actual conflict between two SC students, in which they debated the moral dictate of the Dalit movement of "paying back to society." Though both students seem to have internalized the moral demand, their perspectives on how to implement it differed. One student I shall call Raju advocated that paying back should be done through political action; the other student, Devan, argued that artistic expression is an equally legitimate way to "pay back to society." The two protagonists also had substantively different relations with regard to the Dalit student organizations that advocated for political activism and "paying back to society." For Raju, Dalit political activism served as a main avenue for personal upward social mobility, while Devan viewed political activism as a restrictive imposition limiting other legitimate means for "paying back to society." I argue that symbolic boundaries between students cannot be reduced to class or caste distinctions, but rather that they are based on differing ideological and moral alignments. While acknowledging the influence of Ambedkarite ideology in forming students' moral views, this case study shows that SC students do not espouse a single ideology or moral stance regarding modes of political activism, which brings out tensions that arise at the intersection between Dalit movement's ethics and multiple individual moralities. The paper also describes two different ways students may imagine their social mobility.

Keywords: Dalit, Caste, elite, Students

Introduction

This article presents an analysis of a debate between two students of so-called "untouchable origin" during which they discussed the moral dictate of "paying back to society." Among Dalit activists, "paying back to the society" is a common explanation for why they engage in Dalit student activism. Such altruism is not solely a Dalit idiosyncrasy, but should rather be seen as reflecting a broader Indian moral concern (Bornstein 2012; Copeman 2011; Jeffrey and Dyson 2014; Srivatsan 2019). Srivatsan has shown how *sevā* (social service), "the keystone of ethics of modern India" (2019:24), has reoccurred in different contexts by various forms in the postcolonial Indian history. This research also highlighted how through *sevā* (social service) hierarchical relations were maintained and altruism used as a means of domination. Contradicting the predominant image of youth in the global South as entangled in "predatory patron-client networks," Jeffrey and Dyson showed how Indian youth in Uttarakhand engaged in "generative politics," by "channeling their energies and time into serving...others," and thus generating new social and political relations (2014: 967-68).

Between 1983 and 2000, improvements in access to education for all of India have been made, although the difference between education rates for Dalits, especially females, and those in higher castes remained constant. In the seventeen year period, enrolment rates for Dalit boys grew from only 47.7% to a meagre 63.25%. When compared to those males in upper castes, enrolments jumped from an already relatively impressive 73.22% to 82.92%. Even poorer results were observed

when looking at the female Dalit enrolment rate, which inched from 15.72% to 32.61%, when compared to their upper-caste counterparts whose enrolment climbed from 43.56% to 59.15% (Desai & Kulkarni). The education gap can also be understood to translate through the entire schooling system, with the proportion of Dalit to non-Dalit success remaining at a constant low rate through primary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling. Although large improvements have been made to increase enrolment rates in India, statistics show that there has been little progress in decreasing the education gap between castes.

Dalit social responsibility ethics, while resonating with the broader Indian cultural values of altruism, also have their own characteristics and logic rooted in the Dalit movement's history and ideology. The idea of "paying back to society" was introduced by Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. It was based on the vision of the broader Dalit community, which encompasses different ex-untouchable groups. Kanshi Ram suggested that having benefited from the quota scheme, upwardly mobile Dalits should reciprocate and work for the betterment of the community. This idea was intended to help overcome the prevalent caste-centrism and competitive division among the SCs while encouraging social responsibility. Naudet argued that "paying back to society" has become a central ideological reference of Dalit social mobility (2008, 2018).

Social responsibility ethos has been a major source for classification and social categorization among Dalits since the beginning of the Dalit movement. In his speeches Ambedkar made a distinction between the "illiterate masses" and the "educated few" whom he denounced for not engaging in social service (Ambedkar, cited in Yengde 2019:155). Kanshi Ram in *The Chamcha Age* (1982) distinguished the "genuine and real fighters" and "chamchas," stooges of the upper caste Hindus, as different categories (p.90). Recently, Dalit scholar and activist Suraj Yengde critiqued the Dalit middle class in *Caste Matters* (2019). He identified several Dalit "categories" according to their different levels of social responsibility. He identifies various Dalit middle class types such as "Token Dalits," "Elite Dalits," "Salaried Hypocrites" and "Self-Obsessed Dalits." A significant and common characteristic of these groups is that they do not overtly embrace Dalit identity or view of caste refraining from contributing to the Dalit community and movement, instead prioritizing personal goals. Yet, Yengde also makes note of another group, the "Radical Dalits" who, proud of their Dalit identity, see the world through the lens of caste and actively engage in political struggle. Hence, we can see that throughout the history of the Dalit movement there has been ongoing concern about the "not-paying-back" members of the community and that movement leaders and community organizers actively reproduced social categorization based on social responsibility attitudes.

I will present an ethnographic vignette of two students debating over which means for "paying back to society" are most legitimate. This debate reveals key elements of how categorization figures within micro-contexts. It shows that although "paying back to society" among SC students is a strong structuring moral demand, there are multiple ways in which SC youth perceive, relate to, and enact it. While discussing the conflict, I look at the dynamic relations between the symbolic boundaries revealed by the two students, the way each morally positions himself vis à vis the Dalit community and movement. I also analyze their respective subjectivities in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds and personal moralities.

I will show how the above mentioned differences take the form of symbolic boundaries among the students. Symbolic boundaries are the "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont, Pendergrass and Pachucki 2015: 853-54). They are assumed to precede and to be "a necessary, but insufficient condition" for the emergence of actual social boundaries (p.169). The latter are governed by concrete rules that distinguish and separate one group from another, while the former are less tangible, essentially conceptual and notional. Contributing to the literature that explores the link between boundaries and morality within social movements (for a literature review see Lamont and Molnár 2015:853-54), I will show how categorization takes place among SC students—"non-activist middle class Dalit" and "Ambedkarite"—and how students draw lines between themselves based on class and, most importantly, relation to the Dalit movement.

The question of morality becomes particularly relevant in the context of cultural and societal change. Such contexts produce "moral breakdowns" (Zigon 2007) or "moral torments"

(Robbins 2004), as people are forced to respond to particular ethical dilemmas and to match contradicting value systems (Zigon 2007:140–43). Some of the SC students on university campuses, as individuals or as a group, have been experiencing intense cultural transformations; illiteracy to literacy, social isolation to social exposure, political socialization through various trajectories. All these changes necessarily affect, but do not determine their moral outlook and likely create a favorable climate for moral dilemmas.

Drawing on Weber, Robbins suggested to view society as constituted of distinct and incompatible mor

Zigon's approach provides a means for me to examine the moral views of SC students more comprehensively. Instead of viewing morality in terms of totalizing moral discourses and normative uniformity, Zigon urges readers to conceptualize morality in terms of "assemblages," "unique conglomeration(s) of various aspects of diverse and often contradictory discourses, as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions" (Zigon 2014a:18). Departing from the idea of a society composed of separate moral-value spheres (Robbins 2007), Zigon suggests that "every social context has multi-aspectual moralities that are themselves pluralistic" (2009:263) and that "plurality forms the very 'stuff' of moral experience" (Zigon and Throop 2014:12).

The counter-cultural discourse illustrated by the Dalit movement asserts a distinctiveness and uniformity of ethics and moral code, as if Dalits constitute a moral-value sphere that is different and, in a way, autonomous from the dominant Hindu cultural morality (Garalytė 2015). Existing research on the Dalit middle class and social mobility suggests that these views are internalized to a significant extent, though not absolutely, among the SC members who identify with the Dalit political project. Naudet has argued that Dalitization—the internalization of Dalit counter-culture narratives and resistance to caste domination—has become the cultural repertoire upwardly mobile Dalits most often draw upon as it allows them to "succeed without betraying" (2018). Srinivas agrees that the Dalit middle class fosters a separate identity, a "product of protest ideology" referring back to B. R. Ambedkar (2016:220). While acknowledging the influence of Ambedkarite ideology in forming students' moral views, I distinguish a plurality of moralities within the SC student community and demonstrate how students, "consciously and creatively find a way to be moral" (Zigon 2009:263). Devan's case in particular deviates from the accepted unilineal identity development trajectory of Dalitization (Charsley 1998; Ilaiah 2009; Naudet 2018, Yengde 2019) revealing the moral dilemmas that may surface during Dalitization. In addition, through this case study, there is opportunity for a re-evaluation of the uniformity of the social experience of untouchability (Guru and Sarukkai 2013) as a key factor in determining Dalitness.

Contributing to the understanding of ethical and moral life in South Asia (Blom and Jaoul 2008; Pandian and Ali 2010), this case study shows that students envision various moral ways to climb the social ladder, and how they deal with the moral dilemmas arising from social mobility. Summarizing existing sociological research on social mobility, Naudet states that "[t]he memory of the group of origin is always present and causes the upwardly mobile person to be torn between his attachment to his group of origin and his desire to recognize the social legitimacy of his new group" (2008:416). However, he also argues that "this question of the tension between the group of origin and the new group does not play the structuring role in the Indian context, that it does in Western sociological literature" (2008:416). This case study, in contrast, brings out tensions that arise at the intersection between Dalit movement's ethics and multiple individual moralities. I argue that in the case of SC students, moralities should not be reduced to social categories (e.g. Dalits) or ideological claims (e.g. "paying back to society") but instead should be considered taking into account their complexity and their actual everyday manifestations in line with the "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010; Das 2012) and phenomenological approach (Zigon 2009, 2014a, 2014b; Zigon and Throop 2014) rather than through explicit ethical discourses, codes and rules.

Dalit Activism on Indian University Campuses

Changes included the expansion of the reservation policy to Other Backward Classes, economic libera Scheduled Castes have been guaranteed reserved seats in governmental education institutions by the Constitution of India since 1950; however, their visibility within universities has grown gradually. While the emergence of other student political groups goes back to the time of the Indian

independence movement (Altbach 1968; Shah 2004; Wilkinson 2020), Dalits as political actors with distinct political identity, started mobilizing on campuses in the 1990s, when Indian society and politics underwent significant systemic changes. In the context of these broader shifts, various Dalit and other lower-caste student organizations came into being, mobilizing on caste identity and for improving the political climate of some Indian university campuses. These new caste identity-based organizations began and continue to defend the constitutional rights of ex-untouchables with regard to education, lobby against caste discrimination, and fight for public representation of this recently politically recognized and defined group.

Early scholarly accounts of the Indian student movement and campus politics barely mention Dalit and caste issues (for a literature review see Shah 2004), and Dalit political activism came to popular and scholarly attention only recently. SC students on Indian university campuses have been mainly analyzed in terms of their experience with caste discrimination and inequality in the field of higher education (Desai and Kulkarni 2008; Pathania and Tierney 2018; Ovichegan 2014, 2015; Pandey and Pandey 2018; Sen and Gundemeda 2015). Meanwhile, Jeffrey (2008, 2010) analyzed Dalit student mobilization in Uttar Pradesh where Dalits asserted their moral superiority with regard to the dominant Jat student groups, and attempted to gain symbolic control of the university space.

The idea of Dalit counter-culture emerged on Hyderabad university campuses (The University of Hyder

What received more academic attention is the Beef and Asura counter-culture politics through which Dalit students challenged dominant Hindu practices and beliefs and expressed their cultural distinctiveness and autonomy (Gundimeda 2009; Garalytè 2015; Pathania 2016). Dalits and caste issues also appear episodically in other ethnographic accounts that look at overall campus political culture (Kumar 2012; Martelli and Parkar 2018), while Pathania looked at Dalit student participation in the Telangana movement on the Osmania University campus (2018). All these works largely explore the ways in which Dalit students position themselves with regard to other student groups and the broader social caste structure; less attention has been paid to SC intra-group relations and dynamics and the ways SC students perceive and relate to the Dalit political activism. Ovichegan (2014, 2015) showed the distinction between economically affluent, “creamy-layer” Dalits, and economically weaker SC students (2014:368). However, his analysis does not take into consideration the role of the Dalit movement and campus politics in determining intra-group ideological differentiation. Drawing on the notion of symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass and Pachucki 2015), this article explores the emerging differentiation within the SC student community at the intersection between caste, campus politics and social movement experience, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit students as a socially and politically heterogeneous group.

Conclusion

Despite “paying back to society” being a significant moral demand of the Dalit movement, there is an apparent complexity of moral views and multiple social mobility imaginaries evoking tensions among SC students. Dalit moral order, centered on “paying back to society,” is a political project that is debated and differently defined, protected by some and threatened by others. Also a center of moral gravity, it is defining symbolic boundaries within the Dalit community. These boundaries are porous and implicit, but nevertheless real in establishing if not hard divisions, at least separateness of interest and goals. While discussing the student encounter, it was inevitable to address “paying back to society” as a “totalizing moral discourse” (Zigon 2014a:18) and to recognize its structuring effect. Of this pervasive normative ideological claim, none of the students, no matter their background or economic status, appears completely free. However, we could see how students disagreed over which means of “paying back to society” is more moral and legitimate; through this disagreement the plurality of moralities becomes apparent.

Following the creation of the Caste Disabilities Removal Act, the British government attempted to increase Dalit school attendance through methods which took into consideration the sensitivity of the caste society. Because the Dalit children were often harassed when they attended schools, the British chose to propose alternative teaching methods, rather than directly addressing the caste issue. One proposed alternative was the use of night schooling for Dalit children. In this

manner, children would not need to worry about attending school with members of upper castes, but would still face dangers of travelling without daylight to and from school. Another proposed solution was the use of all-Dalit schools. This solution eliminated the dangers associated with night-time schooling, but also did not help to decrease hostility between the classes. These two methods combined resulted in a 4% primary enrolment rate for Dalit children by 1931, 81 years after education was first opened to all citizens on India. Of these Dalit children, 93% were attending all-Dalit schools. A problem occurred when there were insufficient all-Dalit schools at which children could pursue secondary education. Only 1% of all students at the time ever made it past primary education (Nambissan 1012). It was because of this, that when the British handed over control of the country to India in 1948, the Indian government began thinking of new ways to increase access to education.

I began this article by discussing how the Dalit movement has been reproducing social and moral categorizations and then, through ethnographic vignette, I presented how this categorization played out in an actual social situation among students. One can consider social and moral categorization among Dalits as being descriptive, mirroring existing socio-economic differences in society. However, categorization can be also understood as being prescriptive, reifying the not yet firmly established differences and boundaries and predetermining how individuals will perceive and relate to each other. In this case, the discussed students' interaction was largely shaped by the prescriptive categorization, which has been instrumentally maintained by the Dalit movement. Raju and Devan reproduced and applied to each other existing categories—community oriented Dalit activist vs. opportunist middle class Dalit—without realizing that their moral views, at the core, were not that incompatible. They both support and follow the Dalit code of moral conduct, “paying back to society,” in disagreement simply over the nature and the form of giving. This interaction demonstrates how predetermined categorizations either of each other as individuals or of those established as “Dalitist” do not account for the multiple moralities and differing ideological alignments within the group as a whole.

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